



TEN COMMANDMENTS & HUMAN RIGHTS

Walter J. Harrelson

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The Ten Commandments and Human Rights sets out to evaluate the importance of the Ten Commandments for the life of faith today. The general thesis is that the commandments are immensely important not only for Jews and Christians, but for all persons seeking to find or to reaffirm a moral foundation for their life and for the life of their children, their religious community, and their society. The fact that the commandments are put negatively is immensely important, for it means that the community that claims these commandments and builds on them has to work out for itself the positive import of not having other gods, not worshipping idols, not profaning the sabbath, not killing and stealing, and committing adultery. Put negatively, these commitments become the groundwork for a humanly free and responsible search for the will of God for individual, family, and corporate life today and in any day. It is true that the commandments originate in ancient Israel, are central to the faith of prophets, priests, and sages, and are claimed and made foundational by Jesus for the Christian community. But these commandments also share much with, for example, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which has been presented by the United Nations for adoption by all the nations of earth. The Ten Commandments and Human Rights seeks to show how to avoid moralistic use of the Ten Commandments in religious life today while still affirming that there are absolutely foundational prohibitions that can and must guide the moral life of all peoples. The Ten Commandments need very little revision in order to become such a foundation for a free and responsible life today.

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