

ABSOLUTE STANDARDS —WHY NOT?



by Pierre Spoerri

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WE, THE GENERATION of the late 20th century, should be the freest since man started to walk the earth. More than 80 peoples and nations have been freed from the yoke of colonial rule since the second world war. Much of the exploitation of the past has been ended, and working people, previously ignored, now have a powerful voice in the affairs of their industries and nations. A more just distribution of wealth has enabled millions of people—at least in some countries of the West—to spend less time at work and on household duties and more on leisure and travel.

On a different plane, laws through which the state controlled people's private lives, such as those that made divorce difficult and abortion a criminal offence, have been revised. When the Pill was introduced, it too was hailed as a liberator—the means to sexual satisfaction without consequences. And one could continue the list of actual or so-called liberations, which our century has brought.

But why, in spite of all this talk of freedom, do so many of us still not feel free? What has gone wrong?

There are many possible profound answers to these questions. I shall advance a purely personal one. To our generation who were children and teenagers during World War II

and in our early twenties in the absorbing post-war era, the concept of absolute moral standards seemed logical. As there were physical laws governing the material universe, we accepted that there were spiritual and moral laws without which man could not live a meaningful life. For us there was no question that the standards of absolute honesty, absolute purity, absolute unselfishness and absolute love, of which Frank Buchman spoke, were right, and corresponded to Christ's Sermon on the Mount. The only question was, were we going to decide to reshape our lives according to these standards or not?

Many today do not take it for granted that such moral laws exist. But several aspects of modern life are causing people to turn to clear standards again. Among them are:

1. The danger of using double-standards in judging world affairs. After his escape from Cambodia the Eastern European Bureau chief of the magazine *Time*, David Aikman, gave one example of this:

'In the West today, there is a pervasive consent to the notion of moral relativism, a reluctance to admit that absolute evil can and does exist. This makes it especially difficult for some to accept the fact that the Cambodian experience is something far

ence, you learn what needs to be checked, and who can be trusted. On occasion, I did not hesitate to back a guarantee for a million dollars on the strength of a single telephone call.

Honesty, however, does not necessarily denote absolute honesty. One of my former partners told a group I was training for management, 'Absolute honesty is not merely not telling lies to people, important though that is. It means being so professionally expert that you know everything you tell them is the exact truth.' He added, 'You also have to see that the staff who feed you information are equally expert and exact.'

I attempted to be absolutely honest for most of my business life and still do. I don't find it easy. It needs application. In fact I need a time of quiet thought every day when I get up, to keep me on the rails. After several business letters had to be re-drafted to reflect my true feelings and sometimes even the true facts, my secretary said rather acidly, 'I wish you would change your mind before you dictate, and not after.'

You must be ready to say no. A man I respected told me to reply to a claimant,

NEW WORLD NEWS

Vol 27 No 18 24 March 1979 8p

worse than a revolutionary aberration. Rather, it is the deadly logical consequence of an atheistic, man-centred system of values.'

2. The increase of grey areas everywhere: while students in many countries follow 'accepted procedures' and do what one used to call 'cheat' in examinations, taxpayers in as many countries know that the authorities no longer expect them to declare their income honestly.

One of the men closest to former President Nixon, Jeb Magruder, tells how when he took a summer job as a student the foreman taught him how to cheat systematically on the assembly line. In the courtroom, after Watergate, Magruder said, 'Somewhere between my ambition and my ideals, I lost my ethical compass. I found myself on a path that had not been intended for me by my parents or my principles or by my own ethical instincts.'

In the aftermath of Watergate, American industry began to admit that millions had

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Million dollars guaranteed

by Frank Ledwith
who worked for
48 years in insurance
in the City of London

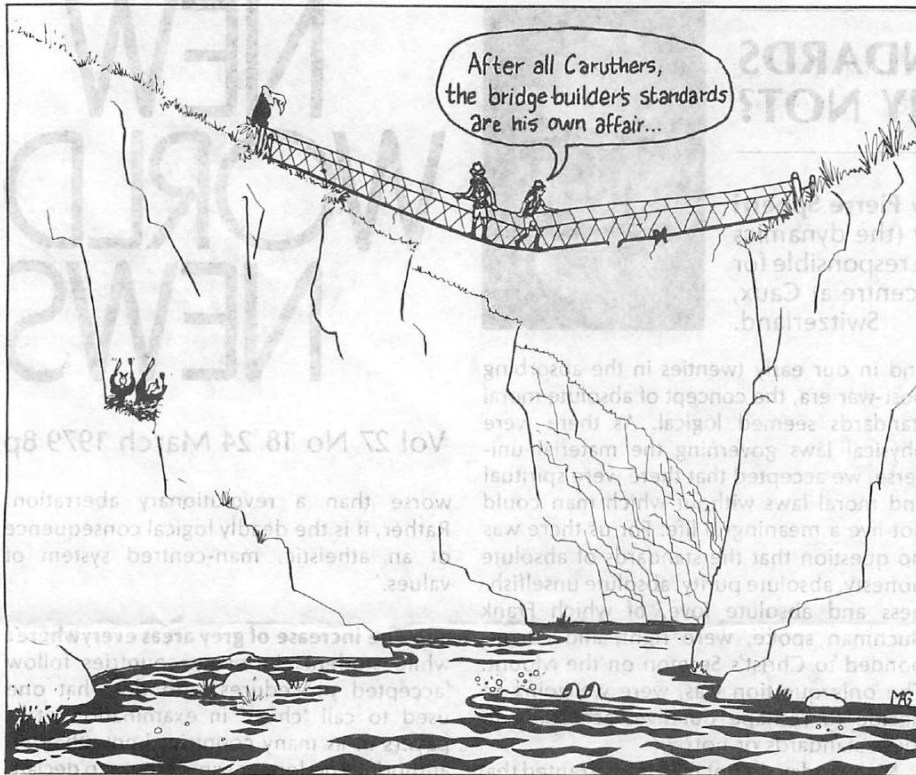
'DO YOU KNOW why I want as little as possible to be put into writing?' asked a man who was pressing me for something over £900,000. I considered my answer carefully. Then I said, 'Yes I do. You think that you are more likely in that way to get more than you are entitled to.' He patted me on the shoulder and said, 'Clever boy'. He seemed a little crazy as well as crooked, but he knew from then on that he would only get the small sum which was clearly due. And that was all he got.

An unusual event. Honesty in business is more common than people think. If everything had to be checked, there would be little time for doing business. With experi-

saying that the cargo of a ship we were dealing with was damaged by a hurricane—for which the shipowner was not to blame—when in fact the ship was unseaworthy. I nervously refused. He said, 'I'll do it, then'. When the answer to his letter came, he threw it over to me, saying, 'We'd better do it your way after all'.

You must also sometimes say no to yourself. It's so easy to stretch one's expenses claim, and equally easy not to put in a fair day's work. They seem minor issues. But multiplied, they are enormous, and the failings of 'the bosses' in such fields are often used to inflame the class war. I have had constantly to watch myself on these things.

One can also do far more than one imagines to construct a network of honest people, inside and outside one's own place of work, by setting an absolute standard, and expecting and encouraging the same for everyone. It makes business much easier if the other man knows you look to him for absolute honesty, and will react if you don't get it. And if he knows you will stick to it, too. Absolute honesty then becomes a tool for producing a saner society.



3. The premise behind most modern economic policies—that constant economic growth would answer unemployment and inflation and bring prosperity and happiness to all—is being questioned in rich and poor countries alike. The West is rediscovering that man does not live by bread alone—while the urgency of providing even bread for the poor people of Asia and Africa increases with their population.

4. Life has become so complicated. Einstein worked once for two years on a formula explaining one of the aspects of the universe. The longer he worked, the more complicated the formula became. In the end, he crossed out all he had written, saying that God's laws are always simple. If his formula had become so complicated it could not correspond to God's laws. Today world affairs—and often our daily lives—seem so complex that modern man finds it hard to accept that God's truth is simple.

5. Pressure seems to have become the inevitable companion of responsibility. This is especially true for those in public life, but we all experience it to some extent. Outside pressure often finds an echo in the pressure that results from inside forces like ambition, a drive for power, or vanity. Pressure makes some men and women hard. Others, even Christians, become indifferent, apathetic and dull.

It would open up interesting fields of study if one started to examine how absolute moral standards apply to each of these aspects of modern life. Another approach is to look one by one at the four standards which we learnt from Buchman.

Absolute honesty—using the past to prepare the future. We in Europe have a rich history. We also have many things in our past of which we are ashamed. They have left wounds, on us and our neighbours, which are not yet cured.

The TV screening of *Holocaust* in Germany and France provoked waves of discussion everywhere. Only honestly faced truth can make us free, however painful the process of facing it may be. A small sense of honesty seems to result in a small sense of reality and even a small understanding of history.

Cardinal Hume writes in *Searching for God*, 'The more we are conscious of our weakness, the more we become the object of God's mercy. The more we realise we are in debt, the more God will enrich us.'

Honesty becomes a liberating experience when we start calling things by their right name. It seems a fashion nowadays to take the sting out of words in order to avoid having to face unpleasantness. Hate, for instance, becomes aggression. Hate is a personal feeling for which I can be responsible. Aggression is an instinct about which I can supposedly do nothing. This was recognised as early as Confucius who said, 'If we allow words to be robbed of their true content, it will not be long before we are robbed of our freedom.'

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been paid out to foreign customers to secure orders. The latest figures indicate that in the past 20 years 527 firms made such 'questionable payments' totalling between 300 and 400 million dollars. One wonders how big the sum would be if European and other

firms were included as well.

Many people ask themselves how to cope with similar grey areas in personal life. The Pill and free abortion, for instance, seem to have side-effects in the field of health, social life and demography which nobody is yet able to assess correctly.

Emerging from the clouds



by Edward Peters

MY INSTINCTS AND EMOTIONS are like a herd of wild stallions. I can lock them up and keep them captive, or I can let them run wild. Or I can harness their power.

Repressing the sexual urge is often based on fear and kills spontaneity. Indulgence doesn't satisfy either. Behind the soaring rates of divorces, abortions and unwanted babies often lies misery and emptiness.

I tried both repression and indulgence but neither gave me freedom. In purity I found an alternative which showed me why there is passion inside me.

It began with a drastic reappraisal of my daily habits and life style. Eliminating lurid magazines, books and films freed my mind for creative use. More difficult was to straighten out the selfishness I saw in my relationship with several people. I did these things because I believed they were right,

Only later did I understand that when I am wholly preoccupied with one person, I ignore others around me.

When I went head over heels in love with one girl, her attention and affection became almost the only thing that mattered to me. The more preoccupied I became, the less contented I was. Then I felt in my heart God clearly saying that this girl was not the one I was meant to marry. This I found desperately painful to accept. But when I did I felt as though I was seeing the breathtaking view from a plane emerging from the clouds. I began to appreciate others for what they are.

The challenge of purity throws a spotlight on my true motives. Being genuinely interested in other people, instead of calculating how I can get the most out of them, helps to cut across my ambition to be successful and popular.

Temptations hurtle at me every day. The devil is like a travelling salesman who always manages to present the same old wares as exciting and new. I know that the best way of dealing with him is to tell him to get lost when I first see him at the garden gate, instead of waiting until he is in the front hall.

Purity isn't genuine if it is simply self-control. My nature always demands satisfaction. Dealing with it by myself is no more successful than taking on Liverpool Football Club in the Cup Final singlehanded. But God completes the team. He is neither repressive nor permissive. He offers a third way.

Absolute purity—source of energy and freedom. If you want to shock someone today, just say you have accepted the principle of purity as a standard for your life. I personally have come to enjoy provoking this reaction. Firstly because I find little evidence to support the claim that impurity brings happiness in the lives of those who have espoused it. Secondly, my own experience has been that periods of true freedom and creativity are always linked to the search for purity.

Finally, everyone who has eyes to see will recognise where nations and civilisations who have made permissiveness their first law are heading. William Rees-Mogg writes in his book, *An Humbler Heaven*, 'The energy of a man depends on the life of the idea that is in him. The energy of a nation depends on the energy of the life that is in a nation. This is the true libido, the psychological force which moves the human and social frame.'

An additional field of study could be what effect purity—or the lack of it—has on relationships, even excluding all sexual aspects of the question. So many are confined in the prison of what their group, class or race thinks and are unable to develop convictions of their own. Irving L. Janis' new book, *Victims of Group-think*, illustrates the way such relationships can affect important political decisions.

Absolute unselfishness—the only way to a new economic order. The German theologian, Hans von Keller, wrote recently that one of the most important tasks for European Christians today is to discover what to do with wealth. It would be hypocritical, he added, to regard our wealth as a disaster. He also warned of the temptation to flee into poverty just to satisfy our bad conscience.

In such fields as development, ecology, and the transfer of resources there are no simple solutions available. Paper plans are relatively easy to draw up. But they often fail because no new economic order can ever work without a force that deals with selfishness in individuals as well as in nations. Democratically elected leaders feel they cannot afford to demand sacrifices from their voters. They will only find the way to do this as they accept sacrifices themselves and learn how to express the needed changes in terms of the vision of a new world.

These wider aspects of the effects of selfishness interest me. But I have to deal daily, in myself, with a more immediate aspect of the problem, which Rees-Mogg describes as the 'rock-like selfishness which almost all of us have'. Cardinal Hume writes, 'We need to be freed from our self-seeking, from the wrong kind of ambitions, from being trapped within our limitations, from thinking we are right and others wrong.... We need to be freed.'

The philosophy that self-fulfillment is not only the right of each individual but also the shortest road to freedom is widely accepted today. Men and women who live joyously and passionately for something that is much bigger than themselves challenge its validity.

Absolute love, the basis of it all. We are all experts on the subject of love, at least in the theory of it. Why is it then, that this commodity is at a premium in so many crisis areas and in so many marriages and families?

One reason may be that we take almost for granted that love, even of the depth Paul described in 1 Corinthians 13, will fall into our laps like a gift from heaven, if only we ask for it.

When some of us met Carlo Carretto, an Italian who after a meteoric career in Catholic organisations joined a religious order in the Sahara to find a new basis for his life, he spoke to us about love. He explained that the three Greek words for love, eros, philia (love in friendship) and agape (unselfish love), were meant to be a natural sequel. The world today is hypnotised by eros, while it does not realise that the lack of philia and agape is destroying society from within.

Love means growth. Love, forgiveness, reconciliation, are gifts of God, certainly, but they are gifts which demand a readiness to be received.

All these standards are interdependent. Absolute honesty without love, for instance, is often cruelty—love without honesty remains sentimental moonshine.

Two final questions should be raised, even if they cannot be answered in full:

1. 'Should it be one's aim to live according to absolute moral standards?' Certainly it is sometimes people's aim, but it is not meant to be so. The standards are a way, not an aim.

The aim, as spelled out by Frank Buchman, is remaking the world according to God's purpose. The temptation will always be to chose a lesser aim for oneself. Whenever I have consciously abdicated from being part of a force called by God to remake the world, my standards become lower. It does not need to be so, but it was so in my case.

2. 'Does trying to live according to absolute moral standards put an unnecessary strain on people because they are unattainable?'

Again I prefer to speak from experience, rather than to advance theories. Standards are for me a precondition for a life guided by an inner compass rather than by external circumstances. There are two ways in which I have found that absolute standards lead to freedom. One is the repeated experience of reaching my own limits—an automatic result of choosing absolutes as guidelines. Each time, when I reach the point of not knowing how to continue, God comes from the other side and helps me.

Von Keller wrote of the 'tremendous liberation' of not having to distinguish 'between big and small decisions'. Absolute standards and complete dedication to God's aims mean that one's life—in big things and small things—has become a whole. In this lies the difference between the conventional, tepid, unimaginative way of life many of us seem to have accepted and the 'glorious liberty of the children of God', which has been promised to us. There is nothing more liberating than to know—short-term, middle-term and long-term—what one is meant to use one's life for.

Nothing to steal

by Irene Massey from Eire



THERE IS A PLACE in the New Testament where Jesus says, 'When a man hits you on

the cheek, offer him the other cheek too; when a man takes your coat, let him have your shirt as well. Give to everyone who asks you; when a man takes what is yours do not demand it back. Treat others as you would like them to treat you.'

When I re-read these verses I found myself rebelling against them with everything I had. Was there nothing I could call my own and keep for myself?

I thought of the burglary we had had in our flat. I have very few possessions of value. What I had then that burglar took—my mother's engagement ring, a gold medal I had won at school. If I could have got my hands on the burglar, I would have hurled him down the five flights of stairs to our flat. Which counted most to me—the burglar or my possessions? Did Jesus mean I should put the thief before the goods he took?

The truth of Jesus' words went still deeper. All I possess belongs to God—not just goods, but also my feelings and reactions. This cuts at my deepest self-will—the right to be treated the way I want. When my will is crossed, I get hurt. Hurt soon turns to hate and bitterness, which I know are destructive. The cure lies at the root of those sins—in giving up that right to be treated aright. It asks that at the moment of my own greatest need I put the other person first. That takes God's grace and power—and makes laying down my life for His will a reality.

Unprisoned

ANWAR SADAT, President of Egypt, has described politics as 'the art of building up a society wherein the will of God is enacted'. In his book *In Search of Identity* (Collins, 1978) he tells of his experiences in prison in 1947-8, which led him to this concept:

Now in the complete solitude of Cell 54, the only way in which I could break my loneliness was, paradoxically, to seek the companionship of that inner entity I call 'Self'. It was not easy. There were areas of suffering which kept that 'Self' in the dark, shadows which troubled my mind and accentuated the difficulty of self-confrontation.

It was thanks to an article contributed by an American psychologist to the *Reader's*

Self-love contains a deadly hatred of the truth.

Pascal

Going crazy?

The writer is a young graduate from North America

ABSOLUTE PURITY? Absolute craziness, was my reaction. Especially when I met a very attractive someone a week after I had decided to make a month's experiment with absolute standards. Honesty, unselfishness and love were alright, but purity was definitely one for the shelf. I had counted on not having to reckon with it within the one month time limit. No such luck!

I was tired of being alone, and the appeal of physical or emotional closeness was overwhelming. Purity made no sense to me. Years before I had decided that sex was fun, the mark of a mature relationship and that to repress it was not only wrong but damaging. In spite of the nasty names my mother called me for sleeping with my boy friends. I cared deeply for them and felt that sex was a natural and integral way of expressing that.

Joy

However my life was full of confusion, and I never seemed to be able to make decisions or think straight. Cynicism and disillusionment had taken place of enthusiasm. I had come to depend on deep emotional attachments for security and acceptance. But the idea of marriage alarmed me—I might miss

Digest that I succeeded in getting over my troubles. The gist of that article was that a shock may occur, at any stage in a man's life, which might make him feel that all avenues in front of him are blocked, that life itself is a prison cell with a perpetually locked door.

There is more than one key to this door. First, a man should clearly recognise the source of his trouble; secondly, he must have faith. There are always solutions to everything. What makes us think in this way is our belief that God created men to play the roles assigned to them. The God who has created us cannot be evil in any sense: He is

Give up yourself and you will find your real self. Lose your life and you will save it.

Submit to death—death of your ambitions and favourite wishes every day. Nothing that you have not given away will ever be really yours.

Look for yourself and you will find in the long run only hatred, loneliness, despair, ruin and decay. But look for Christ and you will find Him and with Him everything else.

Found in the notebook of Sir Theo Melcalfe, who died last month after working with Moral Re-Armament for over 30 years.

out on something if I gave up my freedom. This was why I had decided to leave my country, and now here I was in Europe, facing the same problem.

So what should I do now? I felt I had to include this relationship in the experiment too. Purity baffled me, but I felt on safer ground with honesty—after all many psychologists advocated it. I decided to give honesty a try.

I realised that I had been using subtle physical means to make an impression on this person, because I lacked confidence in my own personality. I had to be honest with him and tell him that I had been trying to control him.

When I did so—with shaking knees—he seemed rather taken aback. When we talked about purity, he was as puzzled as I was. But from somewhere I felt a new source of strength, as if I had touched firm ground. I found I was able to care for him, wholly free from any concern for myself—for the first time in any relationship I had ever had with a man. Even more surprising, I felt a completely new certainty and sense of security that even if we had no part in each other's lives, God would look after us each better than we

good and beneficent (contrary to God's image that a Sheikh in our village Quranic teaching school had drawn up—a mighty and frightening Being).

Ideally the relationship between man and God should be based not on fear (or punishment and reward) but on a much loftier value (the highest)—friendship. The Creator is merciful, just and loving: He is all-powerful because he created everything. If you have him for a friend, you will always have peace of mind under whichever circumstances.

The analysis contributed by that psychologist opened infinite horizons of love before me: my relations with the entire universe began to be reshaped and love became the fountainhead of all my actions and feelings. Armed with faith and perfect peace of mind, I have never been shaken by the turbulent events, both private and public, through which I have lived.

By obeying the truth, you have made your souls clean enough for your love of your fellows to be genuine.

1 Peter 1

could have looked after each other.

With that came a sudden burst of clarity of how great and perfect was God's love. Our feelings for each other were a reflection of that. I began to understand what purity and love could mean and how incredibly small and stunted my attitudes had been. Sex was not the means to a deep relationship, but the crowning joy of the part of God's love that people are privileged to give and grow in. But knowledge and understanding of such love could only come with one person, through all the ups and downs of life. I decided that since I wanted the most out of life I was going to reserve sex for the marriage commitment.

Yes

This incident took place over a year ago. I will not say that I have not sparked to anyone since then. At such times it takes an effort to realise that God has a better sense of choice than I have. The need to care is important, and blocking that is frustrating and damaging. But I find I have a choice as to how to direct my energies and that if I channel them to different people and new interests, it's funny how much more I get back than when I just want something for myself.

It's been a relief to discover that God's way makes sense. I'm always amazed that when God says 'no', it's only the means to a bigger 'yes'—much more satisfying than anything I could have dreamed up.