

From the Kitchen

7 March 2012



How do we reach a decision about what is morally acceptable and what is not? To what extent are such decisions made on an individual basis and to what extent are they foisted on us by others?

Until quite recently (given the span of two thousand years since the time of Christ), the Church in Europe has been the arbiter of what is permissible behaviour and permissible thought (and it reached much further afield than Europe with imperial colonisation). Much of the law was, or was based on, ecclesiastical law – the law of the Church.

For as far back as we are able to delve, it seems that those who taught and interpreted the will of the deity or deities also set the rules of behaviour. It is only in relatively recent times that there has been any semblance of a separation of Church and State. Yet even now, in Australia as in other countries, we seem to find it difficult to have that separation be complete. Ditto in countries where the majority of the populace is Muslim or Jewish. Maybe this is a trait of all Semites (all decedents of Shem, the son of Abraham).

Maybe we are willing to accept much of what the Church tells us is moral behaviour because much of it makes sense. After all, the central tenet of much of moral teaching is a variation of “treat others as you would have them treat you”, along with “try and do no harm”. Who could really argue against these? Some people have suggested that we should be able to do away with all our proscriptive laws if only everyone would abide by the two simple rules.

I have been prompted to think about all this by the PayPal ‘censorship’ I wrote about last week.¹ That company’s moral outrage seems to be limited to written work about rape, incest and bestiality in the context of eroticism. Rape is taboo under the ‘two simple rules’ for obvious reasons. Incest is taboo because most societies recognise that sex between closely related people can lead to the birth of genetically compromised individuals. Bestiality? Apart from possibly being cruel to animals, it is the ‘yuck’ factor.

What strikes me is that PayPal has not sought to restrict the purchase by its customers of books depicting erotic stories involving sexual violence (other than rape) or works depicting violence without sex, including murder. Why is PayPal not outraged at these? Assault and murder are illegal almost everywhere, while bestiality is not.

What about other art forms, such as film and electronic games? Violence is the staple of many of these, including extreme and gratuitous violence. I would also ask why the Australian film censors will rate a film ‘R’ because it contains a graphic sex scene, but will rate a film depicting more violence that I feel comfortable watching as ‘M15+’ or even ‘PG’.

One could argue that parents will make sure that children and teens watch and read only such material as is suitable, given their age and upbringing. Unfortunately, while this may once have been the case, it no longer is. The internet and people’s access to it has changed that. However, it is still not up to unrepresentative businesses to play that role. What this situation – everything available to anyone at any time – calls for is a change in educating

children, at home and at school, in how to deal with material they do not understand or are shocked or disturbed by. It is possible. I know of families in which the children are allowed to read anything they like, with the proviso that they frequently have discussions with their parents about what they are reading and how they relate to it. This teaches them to be curious and discerning. This approach is particularly constructive in the environment we have now in which children may stumble across violent or sexual material at any time. It is akin, in an important way, to parents who do not teach their children to not talk to strangers, instead teaching them to not go anywhere with strangers. And, when more than 90% of perpetrators of child sexual abuse are already known to the children they prey on, teaching them to tell at least three adults when someone does something to them about which they are puzzled or uncomfortable or fearful, can do more to help them be safe than censorship can ever do.

In an increasingly bewildering world in which ever more people and businesses vie for an individual's attention, it is increasingly important to teach children how to learn to navigate safely through it.

1. [From the Kitchen #145](#)