

Christianity Feels Like a Straightjacket

By Rev. David Bisgrove

One common objection to the Christian faith is the following: “Christianity, with all its rules and truth claims, is repressive to both individuals and communities. It is therefore an enemy to the freedoms of both.” Let me just concede up front that that can be true, but *only* when the resources and values of Christianity are misapplied.

Having granted that concession, the objection that Christianity and all its rules is like a straightjacket can sound something like this. “The Christian’s belief in absolute, one-size-fits-all truth that is objectively true for everyone is subversive to our individual and communal freedom. So saying something like ‘These beliefs and practices are right; and those are wrong’ – does two things:

- a. It divides communities rather than uniting them by creating boundaries that keep people out. In addition to being socially divisive, it also
- b. diminishes our humanity. For by believing in and trying to live by a fixed standard of rules (like the Ten Commandments) our humanity is diminished because it robs us of our freedom to determine our own path. To be human is to be *free* to discover who we are, to discover truth for ourselves.”

The first assertion that the Christian community’s absolute claims about God, morality, and history are essentially power plays that rob communities of true freedom, because they exclude other communities. Let me just take a moment to show you, however, that exclusivity of beliefs is not exclusive to the Christian community.

By definition, every community has particular beliefs and practices that are held in common by its members. For example, if you were on the board of a local political party and your political views changed, you’d be asked to step down. Would you accuse them of being intolerant or exclusive? No. You would recognize the situation as inherently incompatible.

If you reject Christianity because of the exclusivity of its beliefs, then at least acknowledge that what you’re doing is privileging your exclusive beliefs about what a spiritual community *should* look like over the beliefs of the Christian community. The issue is not whether a community is exclusive. Rather, it’s *which* community’s beliefs lead *its members* to treat people in all the other communities with respect and to work towards the greater common good of all people.

The second assertion is that Christianity limits human growth and potential because it constrains our freedom of choice. This idea is based on the premise that what it means to be truly human is to be free to choose our own path – to

determine truth for ourselves. New York City, for example, is full of people who moved here partly to shed the beliefs and values they grew up with.

According to Stephen Jay Gould, “We may yearn for a ‘higher’ answer—but none exists. This explanation, though superficially troubling, if not terrifying, is ultimately liberating and exhilarating. We cannot read the meaning of life passively in the facts of nature. We must construct these answers for ourselves....”¹ Gould is saying that what liberates humanity is to be free of constraints that dictate how I should live. To be truly human is to determine truth for myself.

In many ways this idea – that freedom is the absence of constraints – misses the complexity of what freedom is. Trains ride on tracks, and they run freely only as long as they remain constrained by the tracks. Swimmer Michael Phelps maintained an incredibly disciplined schedule when he was training for the Olympics, and only through surrendering his freedom did he unleash his potential.

So what’s the answer? Discipline and constraints liberate our full potential when they suit our nature, enhancing our abilities and skills. A fish is free only when restricted to water. The key, therefore, is not to simply avoid every kind of restriction and constraint, but to find the constraints that are liberating. If that’s true when it comes to vocations, hobbies, and sports, why wouldn’t it also be true for the spiritual realm?

As a young swimmer, Phelps needed rules and guidelines. His coach, Bob Bowman, was wise and knowledgeable enough to know what constraints and rules would liberate Phelps to become a great swimmer.² In some ways, that’s analogous to what God has done for us.

The fiction about Christianity is that the laws laid down in the Bible are bad for us, limit us, and oppress us. If you understand the Christian faith, however, you see that it is just the opposite. They are something to be celebrated. They provide the blueprint for unleashing our full human potential.

Perhaps the best example of this point is the biblical story of the Exodus. God gives the Israelites the Law *after* he has saved them from slavery, to protect them when they enter the Promised Land. In a sense, he gives the Law to protect them from becoming slaves again. Here is the point: The rules in the Bible – God’s laws – are an extension of his *love*.

¹ Stephen Jay Gould, from David Friend and the editors of *Life, The Meaning of Life: Reflections in Words and Pictures on Why We Are Here* (Little, Brown, 1991), 33, quoted in *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism* by Timothy Keller (New York: Dutton, 2008), 36.

² See Mark Levine’s article “Out There” in *The New York Times Play Magazine*, August 3, 2008. *NYTimes.com*: <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/08/03/sports/playmagazine/803PHELPS-t.html?pagewanted=all> (April 1, 2011).

When I hold my three year old daughter's hand as we walk along congested city streets, she experiences it as restrictive and constraining. She's not free to be the toddler she was meant to be! She doesn't recognize that if I were to grant her her freedom, she would die. What's my motivation as her father? Love.

That's the working analogy for how we are to receive God's laws. They are constraints that actually liberate us to be fully human.

We've been considering the claim that Christianity's exclusive views destroy the social fabric by creating boundaries between communities. I offer this response. *Every* community, by definition, has boundaries – commonly held beliefs. The real issue isn't the beliefs themselves, but which community's beliefs lead to humility, compassion, and the common good of all communities.

Related to this assertion is the belief that Christianity's exclusive truth claims rob us of our humanity, because they don't allow us the freedom to choose our own path. Notice that the underlying assumption is that there are multiple paths – all created equal – and that to impose rules or constraints on our behavior restricts our freedom to choose who we are. As we've seen, at least at some level this belief is based on an oversimplified definition of freedom.

Let me just propose one last thought for you. This entire discussion begs the question, "What is the ultimate freedom for the human?" What is our equivalent of "a fish in water"?

The answer is love. It's the primary subject of most poetry, music, and literature. We crave it. We long for the fulfillment, security, and sense of self-worth that come from loving someone and being loved in return. To love and be loved is to be human.

Our sense of human loneliness quite naturally drives us toward love relationships. We were made for them. We find fulfillment in them. They're also the ultimate illustration of surrendering our personal freedom to experience *true* freedom. You can't enter into a deep relationship and still make unilateral decisions. You can't be in a deep relationship and not allow the person you love any say over your life. In a sense, to love someone is to surrender personal autonomy; for a love relationship to be *healthy*, there must be a mutual loss of independence. The fact that we so often misunderstand this principle and instead objectify or "commodify" our relationships is the reason many of our relationships fail. We calculate our relationships along the lines of "What am I going to get out of this?" as opposed to the other way around.

It's hard to imagine loving something more than I love my daughters. It's also hard to imagine anything harder than loving them, because it's all about them all

the time. You are as happy as your unhappiest child. You completely surrender your sense of freedom for your children – and yet, I wouldn't trade it for anything.

This kind of love hints at the very heart of Christianity. In Jesus Christ, God himself surrendered everything out of love for us. Only because he surrendered himself, giving up his rights and freedoms on the cross, are we free to love at all. As you wrestle with your own spiritual journey and seek to better understand the Christian faith, consider how the true love of God is the ultimate ground of true freedom. It's where we discover who we are. It's the heartbeat of being truly human.

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