Take My Yoke Upon You: A Response to Faulconer's The Law, the Law, the Law, and the Law

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I am grateful to be able to respond to Faulconer’s address, The Law, the Law, the Law and the Law: Submission, Absence, or Organization. I found it fascinating. His primary purpose was to teach the audience that engaging with diverse friends requires more than understanding their beliefs. It requires understanding their being-in-the-world. His final statement was, “I don’t have to believe that the other person may be right. I need only see that the view of the other person makes sense even if I believe it is wrong.”

As a response to Faulconer, let me a) briefly comment on his address, b) respond to the hypothetical question of my own construction of divine law, and c) illustrate how that might play out in the resolution of a moral dilemma. I do so to flesh out some of the implications of Faulconer’s ideas.

Faulconer aptly chose to illustrate his thesis by taking a small, but exquisitely salient, slice of people’s being-in-the-world. He chose people’s experience with the sacred and their religion as a symbolic ordering of their experience with the sacred. He chose an even thinner slice, divine law, as conceived in several religions; Judaism, Islam, Traditional Christianity, and Mormonism to instruct the audience. His descriptions of Judaism, Islam, and Traditional Christianity emerged from Rémi Brague’s (2007) The Law of God: The Philosophical History of an Idea. Faulconer omitted a lengthy description of Brague’s discussion of the destruction of the idea of divine law that emerged in modern secularism. I suppose, however, that his final statement could equally be extended to those that do not perceive anything sacred in their being-in-the-world. Our response to religious diversity can be the same whether our friend perceives the sacred or not.

The novel aspect of Faulconer’s address that went beyond Brague’s text was his description of Mormonism’s conception of law. That was his own. While I was fascinated by all of the religious conceptions of divine law, I was most intrigued by Faulconer’s description of Mormonism and law. I think he is essentially correct (Fischer, 2005). However, my observation is that not all Mormons would articulate divine law in their lives as Faulconer has. I have observed Mormons that seem to hark to Judaism’s brand of submission. I have observed Mormons that seem to hark to Islam’s brand of submission and yearn for a total integration of religion, ethics and state. I have observed Mormons that seem to hark to Traditional Christianity’s brand of conscience and faith over the law. I have observed Mormons that hark to ordinances, covenants, and relationships within a progressively nested set of alternative laws. The implication, of course, is that simply knowing that someone self-identifies as “Mormon” doesn’t mean that they will

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order their being-in-the-world according to Faulconer’s ordinances, covenants, and relationships. This observation in no way invalidates Faulconer’s primary point. It is extremely helpful to understand how people experience the sacred and how their sense of divine law (or the absence thereof) captures their being-in-the-world. It is a very salient variable.

What would I say if asked to explain my (Mormon?) conception of divine law and how it plays out in my life? I would say:

One of the tragedies of ancient Israel’s experience with God was their worship of the golden calf. At the exact time that the Israelites were receiving sacred covenants from God, they feared and fashioned an idol. It was at this time, with great irony, that God called them stiff-necked. The scriptures continued to use the term “stiff-necked” throughout the Old and New Testaments, the Book of Mormon, and the Doctrine and Covenants. But what does it mean? Stiff-necked refers to the behavior of an ox that resists accepting the yoke. In order for a yoke to be properly placed, the ox must bow its head. If it arches its neck backwards by stiffening its powerful neck muscles, it can be described as stiff-necked. To accept the yoke, it must bow its head in subjugation and then labor. Indeed, the vast majority of references to a yoke in the scriptures seem to indicate that a yoke represents subjugation and an arduous toil (see Deuteronomy 28:48).

If the Judaic understanding of law as submission that requires bowing the head and an arduous toil, then Jesus’ admonition to take his yoke can be confusing and refreshing. Jesus entreats us to “Take my yoke upon you and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light” (Matt; 11:29–30). The Traditional Christian understanding of the yoke would hark to the idea that Jesus will carry the burden. The Traditional Christian view is that although humans are perpetually sinful they can be saved in their sins by declaring faith in the Savior. I have always been impressed by Mohandas Gandhi’s reaction to Traditional Christianity’s approach to law, sin and redemption. He concluded that “I do not seek redemption from the consequences of my sin. I seek to be redeemed from sin itself, or rather from the very thought of sin. Until I have attained that end, I shall be content to be restless” (Gandhi, 1948, p. 108).

Is Gandhi’s hope for redemption from sin altogether actually possible? And if so, how? At this point my Mormon interpretation emerges. Yes, Jesus entreats me to accept His yoke, but the yoke is not a single yoke, it is a dual yoke. The yoke symbolically represents priesthood ordinances and covenants received in the temple. Each of the saving ordinances of the priesthood transmits specific powers to my being-in-the-world. Baptism provides power to be clean. Confirmation and the Gift of the Holy Ghost provide power to be enlightened. The Sacrament refreshes both of those ordinances. Among other powers, the endowment provides power to be protected and free from bondage to Satan. Celestial Marriage provides power to procreate in the eternities. Each of the saving ordinances also involves a covenant. Each of the ordinances and covenants leads progressively to exaltation: to be redeemed from sin altogether. It is important that the yoke of covenant is a dual yoke. It creates a relationship with God in the process of continual refinement that can result in exaltation. We will pull together.

When confronted with Kohlberg’s most familiar moral dilemma, The Case of Heinz, my religious construction of law guides my resolution of the dilemma. Most of us are familiar with The Case of Heinz. In short, Heinz’ wife has a terminal illness that can be treated with a new medication. Without the medication, Heinz’ wife will die. The local pharmacist has developed the new medication but will only sell it for an exorbitant amount that is beyond Heinz’ ability to pay. Should Heinz steal the medication? Why or why not? In Kohlberg’s moral development model, it doesn’t matter whether the medication is stolen or not. What matters is the logic behind the final decision to steal or not to steal. When confronted by this dilemma I responded as follows:

I know that I would not steal the medicine. Although stealing the medication would save my wife from death at this time, it would damage my integrity, damage my resonance with God, and violate the covenants I have made with God. We are all going to die. My wife and I have received ordinances and made covenants with God that are designed to perpetuate our relationship in the eternities. Stealing the medicine would temporarily save my wife but could damage my eternal relationship with her and my God.

Furthermore, I believe that keeping my covenants benefits the entire ecology. Although my affective response to the situation is that I feel very angry at the pharmacist, (I don’t really feel love for him in this situation) I believe that maintaining integrity with my covenants, especially in the face of my personal hurt and anger, will ultimately
benefit the entire ecology. A society advances in goodness according to the individual integrity of each member. I know that I would not steal the medicine.

However Kohlberg might score this response, it is clear that my conception of divine law, ordinances, covenants, and eternal relationships are a dominant part of my solution to the dilemma. To ignore that would seem to misunderstand me. I think that Faulconer’s conclusion and this particular slice of our being-in-the-world are indeed most salient. It is a sadness in my life that in my training and in my practice, I was somehow expected to ignore those very important aspects of people’s lives. I hope that current training and practice are much more comfortable with such issues. My thanks to Dr. Faulconer for his powerful illustration of the concept.

REFERENCES


