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## Friendly Freethinker: Smile, You might be on Spiritual Surveillance

By Chris Highland  
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I'll admit, when I'm driving and see a police car, I instinctually slow down. Even if I'm doing the speed limit, I react, sensing I might be caught doing something wrong. People say "if you're doing nothing wrong you have nothing to worry about," but that's not usually how we feel when we know "enforcement" is observing us.

For some reason a headline arrested my attention: "After traffic cameras went in, the city saw a 70% decrease in speeding." Give that some thought. No camera, speed up. On film, slow down. When people know they're being watched, and could potentially be punished for breaking rules, they tend to be awake and alert.

What about "spiritual surveillance"—the feeling that God is watching over your shoulder to catch you doing something wrong?

Makes me wonder, in the weeks, months and years before the biblical commandments were, as we say, dropped (literally dropped on Sinai), did people merely think it was okay to lie, steal, murder or dishonor their parents? Did it take written commands from above to change behavior in the community? There's something quite disturbing about that, from both an ethical and religious standpoint.

A friend of mine taught in a private school. Some of the stories of disrespectful behavior problems he faced on a regular basis would upset any thoughtful person. Often, when he would try some form of simple discipline as a consequence of bad behavior—like giving a low grade or removing a child from a field trip—he would get called in to the headmaster's office to meet with angry parents. The defensive adults would argue, denying their child would act like that and didn't deserve such harsh discipline. This went on for years. My stressed-out friend (an excellent teacher, by the way), was greatly relieved to retire from a long career as a schoolteacher. I relate this story to mention what I often said to him after hearing the latest classroom disruption by such "model kids." Aware of the legal and privacy issues involved, I told him they should try putting cameras in his classroom (installing cameras would never be allowed, though being "caught in the act" can be very educational, perhaps even help change bad behavior).

Another example happened recently to a family member. A bicycle was stolen from their front yard in broad daylight. Fortunately, a neighbor has a security camera that revealed who stole the bike, and, after confronting the young thief's parents (who at first denied the crime) with the fact their son was "caught on tape," the bike was returned. Without the camera footage the bike would be gone forever.

I'm not advocating more public surveillance. Yet, I think the issue can be instructive related to the troubling issue of religious "watchers." It seems to me a person of sincere faith would act "righteously" (or "uprightly," as the Bible puts it) without worrying that someone was looking over their shoulder with an eye for blessing or chastising. This makes me think of those old cartoons with an angel on one shoulder and a devil on the other. Which one do you listen to when making decisions or taking actions that might be good or bad? Of course this can all get clouded by imagination or superstition. Is someone actually watching? Where is the camera? Is there no privacy?

Jesus told his disciples he was adding one more command to the long list: Love one another. I've pointed this out before, and it still bothers my sensibilities: How can you command love? Following the reasoning used above, weren't the disciples loving each other before this command? If people aren't getting along, will it help if an authority—divine voice, sacred book, clergy—orders them to live peaceably and practice lovingkindness? As a parent, I know there are times when you have to firmly tell a child to "play nice" or "be fair" or "stop fighting!" Does that work with adults? Once again, if you are an adult believer, do you require an ancient scripture to command you to treat others nicely, to live in a loving manner, to "do no harm"? Does faith truly demand commands?

Speaking of divine demands, there are those who apparently believe if the Ten Commandments are hung on the wall of schoolrooms and courtrooms, everyone will shape up and act right. How realistic is that? What about placing a Bible in every public space—is there something magical about the book that the public—Jews, Christians, Muslims, Buddhists, Atheists—will all treat each other better because someone's scripture is on a table nearby? That makes no sense.

Are we the same person, do we act the same way, whether or not we're being watched?

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