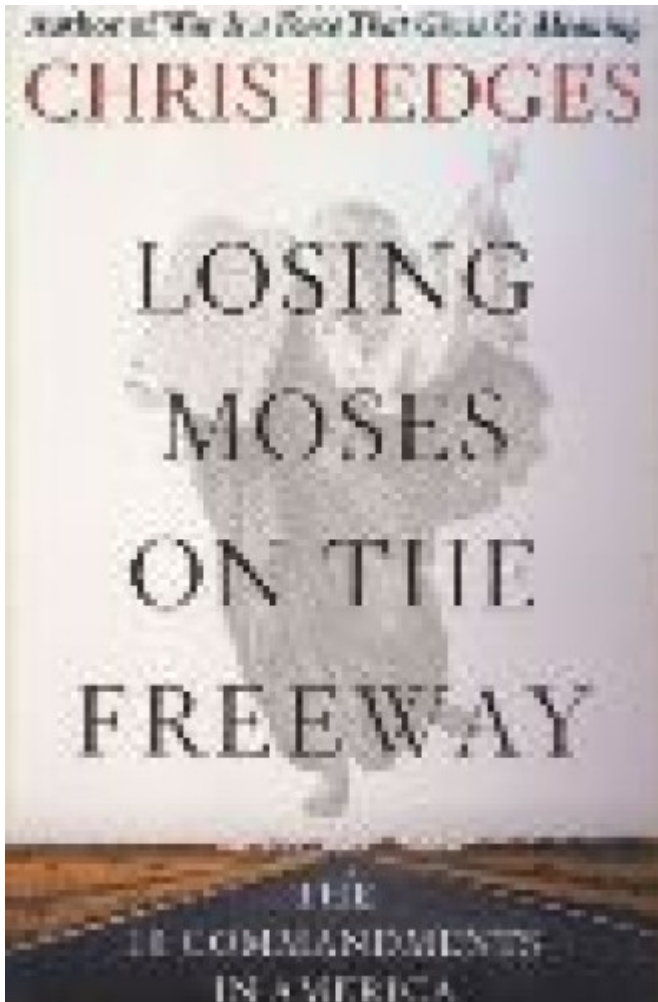


Rules of the road

by [Lillian Daniel](#) in the [June 27, 2006](#) issue

In Review



Losing Moses on the Freeway: The 10 Commandments in America

Chris Hedges
Free Press

Far from the grandstanding around stone tablets in front of an Alabama courthouse comes *Losing Moses on the Freeway*, a refreshing reflection on the ten great Mosaic laws that is muted yet monumental in its own right. This whiff of reason amid the ranting comes from, of all people, Chris Hedges, once an embittered young seminary graduate who left Harvard Divinity School, with no hope for the church and even less for humanity, to pursue a journalist's glory in the world's killing fields. A former war correspondent and the author of the hard-hitting *War Is a Force That Gives Us Meaning*, Hedges now turns his attention to something that proves to be even more meaningful.

Perhaps in search of a positive alternative to the force of destruction that captured the first half of his career, Hedges, the son of a minister and now a father himself, reflects instead on the Ten Commandments. For readers who are weary of seeing those commandments tossed back and forth like hand grenades in the culture wars, this book is like a balm in Gilead, a serious, level-headed reflection on life in the fast lane from a seasoned sojourner whose travelogue is worth reading.

Hedges does not promote posting the commandments outside buildings or on walls; he does not demand that they be recited or adopted as groupthink or group therapy. Instead he redirects the intellectual traffic around those tablets. Refusing to use the Decalogue as a rule book or a how-to manual, Hedges stands under them as a disciple schooled in the ugliness of death as well as the beauty of life. He turns a jaded journalist's eye toward the stories of real people, and there reveals the promise of the commandments as well as the pain of the broken word.

Hedges inks out unforgettable characters, real people who have appeared along the way in his series on this subject in the *New York Times*. The idol worshiper he discovers is one quirky example of Hedges's refusal to match any commandment to its stereotype. She is Beth, a Barnard College dropout whose entire life is devoted to following the band Phish around the country from one identical concert to another.

From there we find ourselves with Hedges traveling back in time to war zones around the world, where he lambastes religious leaders from the left and the right. "Pat Robertson traveled to camps in Honduras to support the contra bands, funded and backed by the United States, who were attacking Nicaragua. Many liberal religious leaders embraced the Sandinista government or the Salvadoran rebels," he declares, as the reader struggles to keep up, wondering, How did we get to

Nicaragua from the Phish concerts?

Hedges makes the connection for us. “To bless weapons and soldiers, something I once watched a Catholic bishop do at a military base in Guatemala, is to put faith in the idol of war, in the service of death. It is perhaps the most common and destructive form of idolatry, one that has left most religious institutions morally bankrupt.”

And then we are suddenly back at the Phish concerts, as Hedges pulls us along his own cultural fast lane, ruminating, so we have time to catch up, that “idols make us feel important. . . . Our idols give us a larger identity; allowing us to define ourselves through the group. . . . And our idols, if we do not let go, lead to spiritual death, a life so devoid of meaning that only slavish devotion to the idol keeps us from having to face our caverns of emptiness.” The people Hedges introduces us to are so recognizably real that we cannot help seeing ourselves in them, even if we have never lost ourselves at a Phish concert or taken a life with a gun.

But perhaps the most interesting character in *Losing Moses on the Freeway* is Hedges himself, a man whose spiritual life is in constant motion even as he reconciles himself to the end of a career chasing wars from one end of the world to the other. From the gripping first chapter, in which Hedges the naive divinity student attempts to rescue the violent youth who vandalize the Roxbury church he serves, to his account of reviewing the courage of his pastor father, now gone, Hedges remains his own best case study. Unwilling to flatter himself or us, Hedges is the right one to lead us unromantically into the ten laws, and perhaps to the promised land of greater understanding.

The most gripping chapter in the book chronicles the occasion of the author’s now-famous 2003 commencement address at Rockford College which began with the words, “I want to speak to you today about war and empire”; climaxed with the statement, “This is a war of liberation in Iraq, but it is a war of liberation by Iraqis from American occupation”; and ended with Hedges being booed, heckled and shouted down from the podium.

Interrupted by irate listeners who had been hoping for the usual commencement chatter using three jokes and a quote, Hedges’s pull-no-punches polemic provoked weeping, the angry spontaneous singing of “God Bless America,” and cries of “Go home!” and “It’s not your graduation” as he labored to continue his remarks. So

outraged was the audience that Hedges eventually had to sit down in midspeech, at which point he was escorted to a car by the head of campus security while diplomas were handed out to the stunned students.

What commandment was Hedges honoring here? This anecdote falls under the chapter heading “Family,” in which Hedges reminisces about his father the pastor, who in less public ways had taken brave stands throughout his ministry, and not without cost.

In honoring his father, Hedges writes about him: “Advocating civil rights, even in our town, was one thing. Opposing the Vietnam War was worse. I do not remember rousing sermons against the war; this was not my father’s style, but his opposition to the war was known. The cutting remarks I heard about him burned inside of me, fostering an anger that would see the son, unlike the father, searching out conflict and relishing the ability to strike back. I soon understood that you could not expect to be rewarded for moral choice. Such choice, in fact, generated anger and hatred.” And perhaps, we imagine, sent the son out to cover combat across the oceans rather than preach in small towns back home.

After that Rockford College speech, Hedges was mocked by Rush Limbaugh, criticized by Fox News and denounced by the *Wall Street Journal*. He was finally reprimanded by his employer at the time, the *New York Times*, for making public remarks that could undermine public trust in the newspaper. Yet somehow Hedges knew he was right to speak his piece about peace.

As if to explain this entire book as much as that one commencement speech, he says, “I am my father’s son. This is my inheritance. I will not squander it.”

This quirky collection of essays reminds us that the commandments are more than a list to be memorized. If we leave them behind like old news as we rush toward the new, we may later discover that we lost something valuable on the side of the road—something now worth turning around and pulling over for.

Losing Moses on the Freeway is that chance to pull over and seek out what has been lost. God’s word in the commandments is our inheritance, and Hedges has not squandered it.