

## Liberalism's Failure

by Johan D.Tangelder.

At the state capitol in Madison, Wisconsin, the confessing atheist organization, Freedom from Religion Foundation, put up a sign next to the Christmas tree:

“In this season of the Winter Solstice, may reason prevail. There are no gods, no devils, no angels, no heaven or hell. There is only our material world. Religion is but a myth and superstition that hardens hearts and enslaves minds.

On the backside of the sign they put the admonition, “Thou shalt not steal.” But why would these atheists invoke the eighth commandment God gave on Mount Sinai if they don't believe in the supernatural? The Freedom of Religion Foundation symbolizes the spirit of our times. For the first time in history people envision preserving moral standards and civilization while discarding God and absolute truth. They even call for an up-to-date morality that is good for all mankind. But who determines what is good? And while wringing their hands in anguish about the moral crisis of our times, they issue pious calls for greater responsibility. We are told to be responsible for ourselves, for our families, for our neighbors, for welfare people, for the homeless, for the exploited in the Third World, etc. Yet we are not told to whom we are responsible! To whom are we accountable for our actions?

The rapid deterioration of morals in our society demonstrates the utter failure of this postmodern view of morality. It has reached the point that it permits almost everything, believes in almost anything, and stands about for nothing - except a flabby relativism. Authority is no longer respected, all rules are considered oppressive, individual rights and special interests are supreme values. Discerning Christians have noted the ongoing success of the media in *normalizing evil*. In popular culture, movies and rap music impoverish the soul with their steady diet of sex-oriented, violence prone, and mindless entertainment. When Christians protest this quantum leap into immorality, they are ostracized and even ridiculed. We have come to the point where a person who believes in absolute truth, or right and wrong,

is considered odd and in need of updating his/her education. This leads to the questions: how can anyone expect to maintain moral absolutes without any reference to God? Can Canada's liberal government lay a solid moral foundation for a just and righteous society when it ignores God? Why this break with our Christian heritage with its consensus on moral standards? To understand the shift in moral standards we should look at the ideas that are shaping the public.

## **Liberalism**

Liberalism is the molder and shaker of our times. I am not referring to Canada's liberal party only, but to liberalism as an ideology that has integrated itself in education, politics, and in our social institutions. How prevalent and powerful is liberalism? Although it is only one of the numerous ideologies asking for our allegiance, it claims to have realized its objective. In his controversial book *The End of History*, Francis Fukuyama thinks that he can see the end of political ideologies and the victory of liberalism, which means the victory of the ideals propagated by the French revolution.

Liberalism has total faith in the autonomy of man. The individual is considered "sacred," the unique bearer of human dignity. The Gospel of divine revelation and salvation is unnecessary. No external intervention or directions are needed for moral choices. Liberalism is unwilling to turn for guidance to tradition, the Scriptures, church, or the family. All external moral absolutes are seen as systems of slavery created by others to deny the individual's supreme and ultimate autonomous freedom. We must look within ourselves for guidance to make the right choices. We are left to our own devices as we chart the course of life. This view is not new. It is rooted in the thought of Rousseau, who didn't accept external authority for morality. He wrote that each person has the capacity and the right to live under laws that he lays down for himself. Hence, he insisted that if people are to act morally, they must live under laws that each one accepts.

Liberalism puts its trust solely in man's individual conscience. Man must create his own meaning and purpose in life through his own choices and experiences. He must choose his own lifestyle from the supermarket of lifestyle choices available to him. Of course, he must also respect the free lifestyle choices of his fellow human beings. This means, as someone wrote, that depriving a person of

opportunities or of the ability to use the options to live one's own preferred lifestyle, is a way of causing him harm. As the word itself indicates, liberalism focuses primarily on individual freedom. It promotes liberty over virtue. It is secular in spirit and suspicious of tradition. It is respectful of private conscience and privatized religion. Liberalism insists that "private faith" must not be the ground of public policy. Religion and policy may not be mixed. Policy making must be based on "public reason." David A.J. Richards, Professor of Law at New York University (who sought to purge American thought and culture from its religious roots) put it this way:

"Fundamental political morality rests upon a neutral theory of the good or persons, which is compatible with broadly pluralistic lifestyles and forms, and the most fundamental right of persons is their right to equal concern and respect, compatible with a like respect for all, in defining their own visions of the good life."

In other words, human beings determine what is right and wrong.

Between 1789, the year of the French revolution, and 1914, the beginning of the Great War, most Western intellectuals shared the immensely potent belief in inevitable human progress. Liberalism still firmly believes in the inevitable progress of mankind as the result of the so-called "proven" process of Darwinian evolutionism. In its conceit, it suggests that the world can be mastered by scientific and technological advancement, and by the liberation of individuals from the repressive restraints of religion and tradition. The future is bright. A kingdom-of-heaven-on earth is forecast, more glorious than anyone can imagine. Obviously, this faith in progress is a false religion, blindly believed and fervently proclaimed.

Liberalism is wrong about its optimistic and naive view of human nature. They ask, "How can progress be stopped when man is basically good at heart?" Michael Novak points out that the rosier liberal view is that the world is ultimately harmonious, so that all persons of goodwill must end up on the same side of important issues. This liberal spirit of confidence in the goodness of all mankind has even infiltrated churches. Rev. Phil Wogaman, pastor at Foundry Methodist Church, in Washington, D.C., the church attended by the Clintons, spent a great deal of time and energy defending his best known

parishioner after the Monica Lewinsky scandal. He even wrote a book entitled *From the Eye of the Storm: A Pastor to the President Speaks Out*. You would think that a pastor would speak out about sin, evil, remorse, judgement and repentance. This was not the case. Wogaman called upon the president to be decent and fair, to grow morally and spiritually. He showed an abiding confidence in the infinite possibilities of the human spirit. Womagan's defense of Clinton reflects more the teachings of the French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-78) than the Gospel. It was Rousseau who developed the belief in the fundamental goodness of human nature. He thought that children in their natural state could be counted on to develop natural virtues. They are made evil by their society. Hence, children should be shielded from the corrupting influences of civilization. In his satirical poem *Creed*, the English journalist Steve Turner, sums up this faith in man's goodness.

We believe that man is basically good.

It is only his behavior that lets him down.

This is the fault of society.

Society is the fault of conditions.

Conditions are the fault of society.

Rousseau's theory had a tremendous appeal. The American inventor and statesman, Benjamin Franklin (1706-90), sported a beaver cap when he visited France, to demonstrate his affinity with Rousseau's philosophy and nature itself. The voyages of the explorers Captain James Cook (1728-29) and Louis Antoine de Bougainville (1729-1811) to the South Seas, were partly inspired by the hope of finding "the Noble Savage." However, can anyone still have faith in moral progress and in the natural goodness of man at the end of one the bloodiest centuries in history? Are the "progressive" intellectuals blinkered? Have they not learned any lessons from history? Why do they ignore the unpleasant facts of history? Why do they still cling to their optimistic view of man? Their faith in materialistic evolution has led them to regard sin and evil as illusions. And today even churches don't say much about the reality of sin. Denunciations of slums, lack of shelters for the homeless, and insufficient aid for the poor are more common than the denunciations of sin. But ample evidence is offered by history, literature, and the

morning newspapers that we are prone by nature to hate God and our neighbor (Lord's Day II, q.a.5). An extreme example of moral depravity is Michael Bakunin (1814-76), the Russian founder of the Anarchist Movement in Spain. He was once driving through Germany, and saw some men setting fire to a house. He at once jumped out of his carriage, and enthusiastically helped them, without asking whose the house was or why they were setting it on fire. That the house stood was sufficient justification in his eyes for demolishing it. In the past hundred years, two world wars have been fought. Man has been seen to be capable of individual and collective barbarism, destruction, and degeneracy on a colossal scale. It is an age of Stalin's Gulags and Hitler's Jewish Holocaust. We are not witnessing today a triumphant march of moral progress but a dramatic moral regression. When in 1956 C.S. Lewis considered the modern mind set, he wrote, "the barbarism on which we now seem to be entering [may] prove to be the last illness, the death-bed of humanity."

### **What if God doesn't exist?**

The moral crisis of our modern secular society should not surprise Christians. It is attributable to the fact that God is no longer publicly recognized as the source of moral norms. If man is enthroned, God is dethroned. When God is declared dead, something or somebody else is going to take His place, whether relentless consumerism or a Hitler. If the authority of God is rejected, man's authority becomes the norm. If God doesn't exist, all hope is lost. In his philosophical writings, the atheist French philosopher Jean-Paul Satre (1905-80) concurs with this. He admits no moral law, no eternal purpose, no rational universe, no absolute truth. Man is condemned to be free. And this freedom is dreadful. What are the consequences of the denial of God's existence, for that matter, practical atheism, living as if God doesn't exist? If God's existence is denied or ignored, moral absolutes are impossible. Apart from God, the world has no meaning and is without universal binding moral standards. Who says that we may not steal the sign posted next to the Christmas tree in Madison, Wisconsin? History and experience tell us that man cannot create absolute values, virtues, and norms. Dostoyevsky observed that if there is no God, "everything is permitted." As atheistic evolutionists buried God, they also buried with Him moral absolutes, which are essential for an ordered society. Ideas always have consequences.

The Italian dictator Benito Mussolini justified his wars on his belief that it sped up the evolutionary process. The communist regime in China has murdered some sixty million since it came to power; it oppresses Christians and other faith communities. It also enforces a one child per couple policy, “normalizing” abortion.

## **Tolerance.**

How tolerant is liberalism? Tolerance has become an accepted social norm in our liberal society. Liberalism prides itself on its own tolerance. It sanctimoniously looks down upon those upholding opposing viewpoints, forgetting that tolerance itself is a moral choice. It confuses acceptance with tolerance. When you tolerate something you agree with then tolerance has no content. Everything seems to be tolerated today - except moral absolutes. People are called intolerant when they depart from the current dominant view of morality. The Canadian philosopher George Grant equated modern liberalism with tyranny. He wrote that the will of autonomous man has become supreme. It has power over ourselves and over the “quality of life.” He said that truth, beauty, and goodness have become simply subservient to it.

The liberal intolerance of the tolerant has become a frustrating and difficult test of patient endurance for Christians. If everyone is free to choose his or her own standards of morality, you would think that the Christian view would be acceptable as one of the choices. But this is simply not the case. For example, anyone who opposes lesbianism and homosexuality on Scriptural grounds is called homophobic. Dr. T.E.Rosier, connected with the Institute for Ethics at the Free University in Amsterdam, accuses the small Christian political party (Reformed Political Federation) of horrible shortsightedness in its attitude towards homosexuality. Rosier calls the attitude of orthodox Christians so reprehensible that he is inclined to state that it should not be tolerated in a democratic society. When eight Christian organizations in the USA decided to sponsor an ad campaign on television about overcoming homosexuality, the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD) immediately campaigned against the commercials. Christianity Today (Sept.6, 1999) reported that these commercials may never see the light of day because of the complaints by GLAAD. In response to the

Christian commercials, the Human Rights Commission (HRC) created its own TV ad campaign promoting acceptance of homosexuals. In the name of tolerance HRC and GAAL are intolerant of other viewpoints. They try to browbeat their opposition into silence.

## **The Failure of Liberalism**

It is evident liberalism cannot provide for absolute moral standards. This is clearly seen in the increasingly severe social problems, cultural cleavages, and impoverished public life that afflicts the public square. The basic question of the liberal is not “what is my responsibility?” but “What must or may the government do?” In practice, says Christopher Lasch, liberalism now means sexual freedom, women’s rights; denunciation of the family as the seat of all oppression; denunciation of “patriarchy.” To combat moral collapse troubled liberals propose more welfare service, more day-care centers, more social workers and guidance counselors and child development experts. In other words, liberalism has failed in its attempt to lay moral foundations for our society.

## **Revelation and Morals**

How should Christians react to the liberal mind set? I believe that we must show that the Christian position is more realistic and consistent in its recognition of the total depravity of man and that the destiny Scripture reveals for the repentant redeemed is far more glorious than that of all of its rivals, liberalism included. We must show that an orderly society cannot be based on the ever changing wishes and whims of trendy thinkers or on public opinion. Moral standards don’t change.

Man needs to change. He must turn to the Triune God. C.S. Lewis once said, “Really great moral teachers never do introduce new moralities: it’s quacks and cranks who do that.” I agree. There are multitudes of quacks and cranks in today’s society ever ready to change morality to suit the mood of our time. And why should anyone believe that the will of the Supreme Court in Canada or the U.S.A. is more relevant to moral decisions than the standards set by God? Liberalism cannot provide an answer. This brings us back to the fundamental question: if there is no God can we still have moral absolutes?

For the Christian the answer should be obvious. Moral knowledge requires specific knowledge of the sovereign God who revealed himself through the Bible, his written Word, and through his Son Jesus Christ. Moral absolutes come from God and are not man made. God is the Christian's ultimate authority. His will therefore is absolute. Hence, we are to obey God's revealed will. The book of Ecclesiastes concludes that our whole duty is to fear God and keep his commandments (12:13). We must not understand them to mean the Ten Commandments only. Ecclesiastes is telling us that we must conform to whatever God requires of us to do, whether these instructions are transmitted through parables, accounts of God's dealings with nations and individuals, his commands given to Moses on Mount Sinai, or the Sermon of the Mount.

## **Conclusion**

How then should we live in a liberal dominated society? Of course we may not surrender our convictions. This is not a time to throw up our hands, withdraw from the world, as though we no longer have a mission to be the salt and the light. We shouldn't feel embarrassed when we give public expression of what we believe is right and wrong, good and evil. Societies change. The Gospel doesn't. God's truth abides forever. We should not be identified with our prevailing culture. Take the example of the early church. Christians had a different morality from that of the surrounding cultures. Their pagan neighbors took notice and were powerfully attracted to the Christian lifestyle. It can happen again in our time!