

Our Shameless Culture

Our Western culture still exists, but as a tottering ruin. Its structures are radically criticized, and many of its traditions rejected. Michael Lind's rant illustrates my claim. He argues that the Judeo-Christian tradition has contributed nothing to the development of a free, "tolerant, individualist, commercial society" in the West. He also contends that Christianity is plainly hostile to reason in its opposition to "feminism, gay rights, abortion, contraception, and freedom from censorship." A new post Christian - nihilistic culture is emerging that leaves the old one far behind. It is characterized by permissiveness, which is what most people mean by the word "freedom" today. No one has authority over us, they claim.

God has been removed from the public square. Christianity is under attack. It has become a minority view. It is no longer the victorious Christianity which embraced the world and which grew yearly in vast numbers. It is on the defensive and retreating. When God disappears from one's worldview, nothing has a fixed place anymore. Each individual is then considered autonomous, free to create his own truth and his own norms for morality.

Influenced by Darwinism and scientism, a human being is no longer viewed as the image bearer of God. He is considered no more than an animal, a natural thing. Some even seriously argue that human life is no more valuable than the life of animals. Media executive Ted Turner remarked in a speech that Christianity was to blame for having taught that humans are of higher value than animals. An editorial in *Wild Earth* magazine suggested that every problem on earth, whether social or environmental, is caused by humans, and the author concluded, "No matter what you're doing to improve life on Earth, I think you'll find that phasing out the human race will increase your chance of success."

But freedom from God comes at a price. A society which privatizes faith, cutting itself from God is like cut flowers in a vase. Someone wrote, "Set in water, cut flowers can flourish for a few days, beautifully; but they soon wither because they are cut off from the soil that alone can nourish them. Cut away from God our human social existence will wither."

In other words, our western civilization, great in its technology, great in its organization, great in its military might, great in its vast wealth is without an answer to the basic human questions. It is left to live in a world - hopeless, forlorn, desperate, frustrated, full of agony, believing that life lacks meaning and purpose. One pointed evidence that we are now living in a post-Christian culture is the loss of shame as a demonstrable consequence of the 1960s sexual revolution. Already in 1971 George Huntemann published a little book in Germany called *Revolution of the Shameless*. In it he told the story of shameless sex in our time.

Freedom from Taboos

For many people protests against the moral breakdown of society seem "irrational". They even wonder: "What after all is wrong with prostitution, homosexuality, lesbianism, pornography, or drugs?" But these questions reflect a culture of irreverence, of debunking and devaluing moral norms rooted in the Christian tradition. It has led to a constant breaking down of taboos.

Some decades ago, *Newsweek* featured an article, "The Permissive Society," in which it stated: "There is a shattering of taboos in language, fashion, and manners. It is part of larger disintegration of the moral consensus in America." With the disappearance of shame there has been a corresponding rise in vulgarity. Many taboos on language have also disappeared during recent years.

Norman Mailer, novelist, journalist and anti-Vietnam protester, wrote about conditions in the United States: "I have indeed many obscenities in my books. And I must, although I hate it. But such language is the only metaphor that can express the situation which has brought about Vietnam." The so-called bathroom humour, which is prevalent in modern entertainment, has a lowering effect upon society. It no longer distinguishes refinement of taste and snobbery; it reduces everything to its lowest common denominator. The obscene word or joke, the double meaning, is used with the intention to arouse the hearer's sensuality and provoke it to action, to act sexually even though only in the imagination.

The relaxation of moral standards is accompanied with the exaltation of sex. The ancient Greek goddess Aphrodite, the goddess of erotic love, has made a big comeback in the last generation or two. She used to be worshipped openly in the ancient world, either under that name or under her Latin name, Venus. Sexuality as such is not sinful, of course. It gives joy and delight, sustains the bond of a husband and wife, and propagates the human race. But worship sexuality, and one becomes its slave, unable to resist its demands, even when it impinges on the freedom and happiness of others. I am thinking of the many young people who have become victims of the sexual revolution.

Clearly, their attitude toward premarital sexual activity differs from what most parents allow. In North America many teenagers are sexually active. Researcher Su Yates commented, "for many kids, you're considered out of it if you're not having sex - it's a rite of passage." Hence, the essence of our shameless culture is unchastity. In Leviticus 18 unchastity is forbidden to Israel. Our shameless culture does more than tolerate unchastity, it demands it. It has even made sexuality a commercial commodity.

The Impact of the Media

In the course of three or four decades, television has changed the habits, knowledge, and the whole outlook on the world of a large majority of our Western society. It panders to the lower instincts and emotions and makes erotic relations dramatically attractive. It features R-rated programs with all their gore and foul language. There are very few expressions of human sexuality that television now regards as serious enough to keep

private that is to say, as inappropriate for use as a theme for programs or commercials. The advertisers, the dollar, and the consumers control their content. Consequently, there are no restrictions, economic or otherwise, only the occasional warning to parents that the "following program contains adult material ... etc." The latter only serves to ensure that more, not fewer children will watch. Taboos continue to be broken in the pursuit of audiences. It seems that little can shock viewers anymore, least of all intimate revelations about personal lives. Some shows do not hesitate to parade the most outlandish perversions, the most degraded appetites.

In youth-oriented films sex is almost always a principal subject, represented as a teenage obsession and, more often than not, the primary source of teenage identity. In *Dancing in the Dark: Youth, Popular Culture and the Electronic Media*, the authors observe that with few exceptions, teen films gratuitously exalt sex, picturing it as the chief goal and pinnacle of human experience. And they note that the larger issues of unwanted pregnancy, sexual disease, and social and emotional tragedies are ignored. But Christians should not be surprised about the developments in our culture. When there is no longer a fixed moral reference point by which to judge behaviour, everything becomes permissible, norms a delusion, and self-restraint without a purpose. As Raymond Aron said, "That God is dead means not just 'Everything is permitted' but also, and especially, 'Everything is possible.'"

What is Shame?

What is shame? It is an unpleasant feeling that overtakes us when we do something wrong or when we feel others see something in us they don't like. We may feel ashamed over humiliations experienced. Shame is born out of fear of people dishonouring our name. It is an emotion that makes us feel exposed. We prefer, then, to crawl far away to a place where no one can see us. At times we feel ashamed of doing what is right and then ashamed of not doing things which are morally wrong.

For example, Christian young people know that sexual promiscuity is wrong but most of their non-Christian friends think that they are odd to be so old-fashioned. Consequently, they feel ashamed of doing what is morally right in the sight of God. Many of us may feel ashamed when explaining why we are Christians. But the apostle Paul testifies, "I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ" (Romans 1:16). The apostle Peter, however, was ashamed of his Lord and denied Him (Matthew 26:69-75). But our Lord is not ashamed to call His followers - His brothers (Hebrews 2:11) But He also said, "If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when He comes in His Father's glory with the holy angels." (Mark 8:38) But if we are innocent of any wrong doing, we don't need to feel ashamed. "Keep your servant also from willful sins; may they not rule over me. Then will I be blameless, innocent of great transgression." (Psalm 19:13).

The idea of shame rests in part on keeping something secret. By hiding something we make it mysterious. Clothing gives us a sense of self-respect and identity. It is a means of keeping a secret, and if we are deprived of the means of keeping a secret, we are

deprived of the secret. The mystery has gone. When we think of "modesty" and "sobriety" (1 Timothy 2: 9), there can be no doubt that the motive for this lies in the realization that sex is a profound mystery. And this means that this mystery must be preserved and not allowed to degenerate. In the Bible, the removing of clothing from specific parts of the body is often portrayed as shameful. When the sons of Noah, Shem and Japheth, were told of their father's nakedness they took a garment and "laid it across their shoulders, then they walked backwards and covered their father's nakedness. Their faces were turned the other way so that they would not see their father's nakedness." (Gen.9:23).

Modesty is a moral quality. Our society cannot survive without the control of impulse and self-restraint. It needs a well-developed feeling of shame for the protection of chastity.

"All healthy men," G.K. Chesterton observed, "ancient and modern, Eastern and Western, know that there is a certain fury in sex that we cannot afford to inflame and that a certain mystery and awe must ever surround it if we are to remain sane."

The Root of Shame

Nowhere is the connection between' shame and nakedness better expressed than in the fall of Adam and Eve into sin. The moment Eve listened to the beguiling voice of the Serpent and ate from the tree of good and evil, she lost her purity. She also gave some of the fruit to her husband, and he ate. Their act of disobedience had consequences for creation itself. It is now under the bondage of corruption (Isaiah 24:46). From the moment they ate from the forbidden fruit their minds and consciences were defiled. They could no longer see things straight. They had lost everything.

In paradise Adam and Eve had lived in perfect harmony with one another and with God, in an atmosphere of trust and truth. They knew they were both naked and were not ashamed of it. (Genesis 2:25) Their nakedness and vulnerability posed no threat. But after the fall they looked at each other from a different perspective. They became anxious and felt alienated. They felt ashamed.

By transgressing God's law the harmony was broken between each other. They didn't feel safe anymore. They became afraid of God (3:8). They learned the antithesis between good and evil, modesty and immodesty, what is proper and improper behaviour. When they disobeyed God, the trust was broken. They lost their innocence. They saw their nakedness, and looked for cover and protection. In Adam's words, "I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid." (Genesis 3:10) Centuries later the psalmist wrote, "Oh that my ways are steadfast in obeying your decrees! Then I would not be put shame when I consider all your commands." (Psalm 119:5,6).

Conclusion

As I analyse our culture of shame, I am struck by the similarity of Paul's description of the last days and our time. He wrote to his young disciple Timothy: "There will be terrible times in the last days. People will be lovers of themselves, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, without love, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not lovers of the good, treacherous, rash, conceited, lover of pleasures rather than lovers of God." (2 Timothy 3: 1-4)

How should we react to all what we see and hear? It is difficult in a culture which is breaking down, to walk a straight path in obedience to the Lord; the temptations are legion for both young and old. But this is not a time for despair, our sovereign God has called us to bear witness for Him, to have a positive influence, to hunger and thirst for righteousness, and never to compromise our faith.

Johan D. Tangelder
March 2003