

## Signs of a culture in decay

Much has been written about the moral decay of western culture. It hasn't just been in recent years either. For many years, people have decried the decadence and hypocrisy of our affluent, individualistic western culture. Mahatma Gandhi was once asked what he thought of western civilisation. He replied, "I think it would be a great idea". In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, nothing seems to have changed. We are as self-interested as ever, we have never been richer and we have never been so unhappy. We are still a culture in decay.

In June last year, the New Economics Foundation produced the 'Happy Planet Index', a measure that addresses the relative success or failure of countries in supporting a good life for their citizens, whilst respecting the environmental resource limits upon which all our lives depend. Of the 178 countries included in the report, none of the wealthy G8 countries ranked in the top 60. The best was Italy which ranked 66<sup>th</sup>. Australia ranked 139<sup>th</sup>. We need not be surprised when we see such a ranking. Consider some of the following indicators that our culture is in a serious mess.

One of the FM radio stations in Melbourne last year had a section called 'Moral Dilemma', where listeners could ring in with their own moral quandary which would then be discussed on radio. At times the issues that people rang in about weren't overly significant, however one day someone rang in and said that they were married but had fallen in love with someone else at work and he was so lovely and sweet and what should she do? Thankfully someone else rang in and said that she should get as far away from this man as she could and sort things out with her husband. However I shook my head when another woman rang in and proudly stated that she too had been married, had also met another man at her work, there was a bit of flirting, and now they're happily married and she has found her 'soul mate'. The sense of insecurity in relationships that this type of behaviour breeds is truly frightening. In their defense, the comperes of that radio show made pretty clear that they did not condone that sort of behaviour.

Recently there commenced another TV game show called 'The Con-Test'. An article previewing this show appeared in the TV Guide of one of Melbourne's newspapers on 4 February. The article contained the following quotes from the show's host – "There's nothing more fun than watching Aussies lie through their teeth to pinch \$50,000...there's a great voyeuristic thrill you get from this game". Apparently now, one of our cultural values includes watching others lie to each other to see how much money they can grab. If there is nothing more fun than that, we are a bored society indeed.

There are other examples from TV and radio. However the fact is that most teenagers today spend more time in front of the computer than in front of the TV. This includes playing an assortment of PC games. Next time you walk into a shop that sells PC games, estimate the percentage of them that are what is known as 'shoot-em-up' games. If the figure is below 80% it is low. It is very very difficult to find a good game where the objective is not to kill, lie or manipulate your way to victory.

An online example showing the moral morass of our civilisation is from the rapidly emerging world of what is known as Web 2.0. 'Second Life' is a virtual reality world on the Internet where you can create your own character and be anyone you like and meet other people via their characters. But here's the real jaw-dropper. Part of living in this virtual world involves buying virtual products such as t-shirts, furniture, even property, for real money. Read that again. The products you buy are virtual products with real money. You don't get a real t-shirt, or real furniture, or anything real sent to you in the mail. You pay for it with real money via your real credit card. When I was first shown 'Second Life', I asked the person who was showing me, who the money goes to, and he said, "to geniuses". Geniuses indeed. The geniuses are the people who created Second Life and they are making literally millions out of the loneliness and desperation of people who put themselves into a virtual world in an attempt to escape reality. I then asked why people would pay for stuff that isn't real, and I was told that it is all about having a web presence and having a sense of identity and increasing your status. I feel sad when we spend our money like this in a desperate attempt to gain an alternative identity. I cannot help but think of the One who said "what will it profit someone if they gain the whole world yet lose their very self?". This applies both to the 'geniuses' mentioned above as well as those willing to give away their identity in search of a new one. When people are desperate and lonely, there will always be someone close by to exploit it. One good point of this though is that a Spanish NGO which works with homeless people has established their own presence in 'Second Life' to raise money for their charity. Their slogan is 'Give a second chance to someone in their first life'.

The online revolution has also seen an exponential surge in sex addiction, with pornographers marketing their products quite brilliantly to lonely people, both men and women. It is like having a sex shop in your room at home, and it's often free. On top of this is the phenomenon of cybersex addiction, which sees people

spend literally hours at a time online looking for the next sexual hit that will take away that loneliness for just a little while. Anonymous sex is now the drug of choice for many more people via the proliferation of online chat rooms. Many a marriage has been destroyed by the ease with which an addiction of this type can take hold of one's life.

We truly live in an age of increasing loneliness where we can have people all around us but not be connected to anyone in reality. Someone has called it 'the lonely crowd'. Recently I read a review in a Melbourne newspaper about a new book called 'Affluenza' (not the book of the same name by Clive Hamilton). This book, by Oliver James, highlights "the problems generated by a prosperous, consumer-oriented economy and its cultural ramifications". The book talks about Sam, who "earns US\$20million per year, will inherit about a billion dollars, lives in a Manhattan apartment, five storeys hollowed out to one flowing space, and orders the delivery of teenage 'models' over the phone like a Chinese meal". His 'best friend' says Sam is "cruel, isolated, paranoid and terminally bored – a human black hole". James says that "as the gap between professional and working class wages widens, a hitherto unprecedented supply of goods and services has become available to a numerically significant class of people. The result has been a spread of a particular type of unhappiness involving uncontrollable envy, isolation, perpetual dissatisfaction and a sense of internal deadness, spreading among large groups of the newly wealthy". James goes on to say that "applying Erich Fromm's distinction between lives dominated by either 'having' or 'being' – once you become dominated by the former, self and others become commodities rather than people". What a contrast to the words of Jesus - "I have come that they may have life – life in all its fullness".

By now you may think I am being a bit extreme. After all, 'Moral Dilemma' and 'The Con-Test' are just games and a bit of fun. And you don't have to watch or listen if you don't want to. Stop being so serious and lighten up. However, as far as I can tell, no one asked for these shows to be put to air (just like no one in Melbourne was asking for more pokies in the late 1990s, but that's a different story). There is also clear evidence from research that such PC games as mentioned above do indeed have a psychological impact on our young people. When these factors are taken into account, it is not just a bit of fun. It is the future of our society that we are talking about. It really is that serious.

Despite all the evidence showing us otherwise, we still fall for the lie that happiness is found in having the most and looking out for number 1. The prevailing mood of the day could be summed up in an old bumper sticker that some readers may be familiar with. It says 'He who dies with the most toys wins'. When I first saw that, I thought that someone should make a bumper sticker saying 'He who dies with the most toys still dies'. Possessions cannot give us eternal life and they cannot save us. Never have and never will.

One of the pastors at my church, Dr. John Smith, has often reminded us that research by American psychologist Martin Seligman shows that the rate of depression in affluent societies such as the United States and Australia has risen tenfold since the Second World War. It has not doubled or even tripled, but risen tenfold. At the same time our societies have never been richer. Seligman goes on to say that "in the past, when we failed, as fail we must, there was spiritual furniture we could fall back on for consolation. Our relationship to God, our patriotism, extended families and community. Systematically in the two generations in which depression has increased so drastically, we've seen a waning of all these spiritual furnitures". We live in a day when the old story of the one who builds their house on rock compared to the one who builds their house on sand is as relevant as ever. The old hymn puts it so well: 'On Christ the solid rock I stand. All other ground is sinking sand'. Consider also the words of Jesus when he says that one cannot live on bread alone but by every word that comes from the mouth of God. We don't need all this other stuff to find ourselves. Jesus really is the only one who can transform us into people who care more about others than about ourselves. This is what gives us true freedom.

Life works best when we live by love. This culture needs to be saved by love. I need to be saved by love. It is only by the love and grace of God that our society will be saved and transformed from the tragic moral collapse that we are currently experiencing. However, while it is easy to sit here and write about the ills of society from the comfort of my computer chair, I cannot judge, for I too am guilty of believing the lie that happiness is found in things, and that I will only be satisfied once my needs are met. I fall for it regularly. Thank God that we have One who has shown us otherwise, One who came to "save us from ourselves and our despair" to quote the words of that great prophet Keith Green. Thank God too that we have the example of many throughout the ages who have dared to take up their cross and follow this One – people like John Chrysostom, St Francis of Assisi, John Wesley, William Wilberforce, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Haralan Popov, Martin Luther King and Mother Teresa, just to name a few. Then there are the many millions of others, the unnamed ones, those who go quietly about their lives in service to Jesus but who don't get noticed. I want to be like that. I want to be saved by the grace of God. I need it. I want to be saved and be a part of the solution to the cultural decay around me, and not a contributor to it. God give me the grace and love and courage to

live for You, to be transformed day by day into Your likeness as You work Your miracle of grace in me.

*by Nils von Kalm*  
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