

TRADITIONAL MORAL VALUES AND DESTRUCTIVE BEHAVIORS

By Nick Gier, Professor Emeritus, University of Idaho

Read chapters from Gier's book *God, Reason, and the Evangelicals* at www.class.uidaho.edu/gre.htm

Also of interest is *The Virtue of Non-Violence* with excerpts at www.class.uidaho.edu/ngier/vnv.htm.

A Moscow, Idaho columnist recently wrote a piece entitled "Destructive Behaviors Cost Our Society." In it he proposed the following experiment: "Divide Americans into two groups. Those who want to live by traditional moral values will live in one area, and those who want to reject traditional moral values will live in another area."

This conservative predicted that after 20 years the moral traditionalists would be far better off because they would not have to pay for the social costs of the socially destructive behaviors of the "immoral" group.

This experiment has actually been running for decades in the Southern United States where traditional moral values reign supreme. Evidence, however, does not support the conservative theory: social costs have been much greater in the South than in more liberal states.

The columnist claims that \$15 billion a year is spent on treating sexually transmitted diseases, but the top six states for cases of syphilis, Chlamydia, and gonorrhea infection are Louisiana, Mississippi, Georgia, Arkansas, South Carolina, and Alabama.

The Bible Belt also leads the way in teen pregnancies and births, which, according to our conservative columnist costs the nation \$148 billion annually. We have become accustomed to faulty statistics from the right, so I will offer a more accurate (but still alarming) 2004 annual estimate of \$9.1 billion from Advocates for Youth. That amount comes to \$1,430 for each child born to a teen mother that year.

In 2005 the U. S. national average was 40 teen births per 1,000 for girls 15-17. The average for 11 southern states was 54, but only 25 for the liberal New England states. If one deletes African-Americans and Hispanics from the calculation, the figure is 40, but the national average then drops to 26. Significantly enough, in 2009 only 14 of 1,000 teens gave birth in Canada, a nation that has more progressive views on sex education and contraception use.

Drug abuse costs society an incredible amount. One of the most destructive is methamphetamine, but the highest rates of abuse are found in Oregon, Idaho, Montana, Wyoming, Arizona, New Mexico, Nebraska, Arkansas, and New York. The lowest rates are found in liberal New England.

The abuse of prescription drugs has become just as great a problem. Traditional value states also rank high here as well: Nevada, Arizona, Iowa, Kentucky, Tennessee, Oklahoma, Arkansas, Louisiana, Washington, and Rhode Island.

The psychological and financial costs of divorce are also very high, but in 2009 Southern women split from their spouses at a rate of 11.1 per 1,000, while only 7.5 of their Northeastern sisters did.

The U.S. has the highest incarceration rates in the world, and once again the Bible Belt has the record. There are 554 prison inmates per 100,000 in 13 southern states, but only 240 in six New England states.

Rick Perry boasts about traditional justice in Texas, where 648 per 100,000 are imprisoned and where in 2009 one in a million were executed, almost as many as the 1.5 per million that China did in the same year. Let's focus on Texas just a bit more. In 2009 teen births in Texas were 63 out of 1,000 girls, while just across the border the Mexican rate was 64 in 2005. One might counter that women marry earlier in Texas, but 91 percent of Lone Star pregnant teens were unmarried in 2008. The fact that Perry has passed the strictest abstinence laws in the nation makes this statistic even more embarrassing.

Even with Perry's "Just Say No" campaign, 52 percent Texas teens were sexually experienced by 10th grade in 2009 compared to 41 percent nation-wide and Massachusetts at 40 percent. At 6.1 percent Lone State girls younger than thirteen are more sexually active than the national average at 5.9 percent and Massachusetts at 5.4 percent. All data are from the Center for Disease Control.

What does it look like in the rest of the world? In 2009 the number of teen births for young women ages 15-19 was 1.8 per 1,000 Confucian/Buddhist South Koreans, 2.5 in Confucian Hong Kong, 4.9 in Buddhist/Confucian Japan, and 5.2 in Confucian Singapore. European teen birth rates range from 4.1 for Swiss girls to 39.3 for Romanian teens (2006-2009 data). The average for 36 European nations (including a declining Russia and conservative Poland) was 15.4 teen births per 1,000. By 2008 the U.S. rate had risen to 41.5.

With record low church attendance and far fewer who call themselves believers, Europeans have now moved to what some have called a "post-Christian" civilization. Significant, however, is the fact that these non-believing Europeans are obviously not

immoral people. Some sociologists have concluded that a strong secularized Christian morality still serves these societies well even though a majority of them are no longer believers. I'm certain that the same holds for American liberals who have been unfairly criticized for their lack of ethical standards.

Even though 4.2 million Finns are members of the Evangelical Lutheran Church, only 76,000 attend church regularly. Nevertheless, American teens give birth at six times the rate of Finnish young mothers, and only nine out of 1,000 Finnish women choose abortion for every 20 American women who do.

Advocates for Youth reports that the “percentage of the United States’ adult population that has been diagnosed with HIV or AIDS is six times greater than in Germany and three times greater than in the Netherlands.” With regard to sexually transmitted diseases “data from the Netherlands found that rates of reported incidence are considerably higher in the United States,” and the “prevalence of Chlamydia among young adults in the United States is twice that among young Dutch” (www.advocatesforyouth.org).

Returning to the original experiment above, we can see that the issue is not one of traditional morality, because some Buddhist and Confucian cultures produce far less socially destructive behavior than the American Bible Belt. Furthermore, the problem is not untraditional morality because high European cohabitation rates, for example, have not led to more socially destructive behaviors or reduced child well being. In fact, child well being is highest in those countries where unmarried couples are just about to top married ones. (In Sweden 56 percent of new borns belong to unmarried couples, and significantly enough the highest U.S. rates of cohabitation are on the West Coast and New England.) According to a 2001 UNICEF report, deaths from child abuse are highest in the U.S. at 2.4 per 100,000 and lowest in Germany at .8. Pro-family Texas has the highest rate of deaths (4 children per 100,000) and New Hampshire has the lowest at .35 .

Without much further study, I can only speculate about what the difference is. In my own research on the origins of religious violence, I have found that religious people who practice basic morality without insisting on one particular creed are far less violent than those who put orthodoxy over orthopraxis. Very few Asians attend Confucian temples, but hundreds of millions still practice the virtues of the great Master Kung. Similarly, great numbers of Europeans no longer go to church but they still live according to a general Judeo-Christian ethic.

When I look back at my own conversion to Christianity (one that did not last very long) I can now see that the main focus was on inviting Jesus into my heart. Far less

emphasis was placed on developing an ensemble of virtues that would guide me through a successful life. I was fortunate to have parents and teachers who instilled in me the virtues of moderation, self-control, thrift, and patience that have served me very well. Millions of non-church-going people have also learned the virtues from their parents and teachers.

My conversion may have temporarily saved me, but it did not make me moral, just as mere church going does not create better people. Asking for forgiveness and doing penance also does not necessarily lead to a virtuous life. Presidential candidate Newt Gingrich, who has switched religions as many times as he has changed spouses, claims that he is a more mature person now, but there are probably many Americans who may doubt that.

The virtue ethics section of my ethics course was, surprisingly, very popular with my students. For me I found religious conversion easy, but developing the virtues, as Aristotle reminded us, is a difficult, live-long project. People without the virtues will have trouble following the rules of civility let alone ethical standards. In an ideal society filled with virtuous people, there would be no need for laws and judges to enforce them. As I have argued in my published work on ethics, moral prohibitions are nothing but abstractions from our negative experiences with the vices and moral imperatives are likewise abstractions from the virtues that have led to human flourishing.

In 1979, when the late Jerry Falwell founded the Moral Majority in thirteen southern states, the name he chose did not necessarily conform, as we have seen, to the state of morality in that region. Furthermore, Falwell may have lost sight of an important passage from the Apostle Paul: "We have been released from the law so that we serve in the new way of the spirit and not in the old way of the written code" (Ro. 7:6).

Ironically, the Christian liberal Robert Alley understands Paul better than Falwell did. Alley once proposed that the true Christian seeks "to preserve rights in the name of love rather than impose right belief in the name of law." Is the Religious Right the new Pharisees who, like the biblical ones, excluded rather than included and preached a mere moralism and not true morality?

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