

Reflections

Lawrence P. Grayson

On the Importance of Culture

When Alexis de Tocqueville studied America's experiment in democracy, he perceived the necessity of an essential precondition for it to be sustained. A basic moral conviction was needed to provide foundational limitations for the country's institutions and democratic mechanisms. This would allow the country to maintain national cohesion while regulating freedom in a society possessing a communal devotion to freedom. Fortunately, this moral conviction existed as the founding Americans shared a faith in an Almighty God and a belief that man has an inviolable dignity because he is created in the image of God. This dignity and the unalienable rights that flow from it were antecedent to the laws promulgated by the state. Without those shared moral beliefs, the governmental institutions could not work with fairness and justice, and a government of the people – a people who possessed all of the human foibles of self-concern, including venality, greed, envy, pride – could not survive.

In time, these beliefs and the actions they shaped in daily life were reflected in the art, music, literature, artifacts, and social mores of the country. This formed a substrate of collective conscious and unconscious beliefs, values, and social forms that guided the thoughts and behaviors of the people. In short, they formed the culture of the nation -- a culture rooted in the tenets of Christianity.

This culture served America well for about two centuries. Although the outward manifestations changed over time, the underlying moral beliefs remained the same. Today, however, those beliefs and the associated foundational strictures are being eroded, as God is being excluded from public awareness and treated as irrelevant to public life. Personal freedom in many instances is unfettered, resulting in gross abuses to human dignity. Abortion is legal and widespread, divorce is rampant, cohabitation acceptable, unmarried sex pervasive, Christian beliefs mocked, and there are movements for the acceptance of euthanasia, legalized drugs, same-sex marriages, and parity for alternative lifestyles, among other "modern" social trends. One is reminded of the latter days of the Roman Empire, when there were no inviolable norms and every type of licentiousness and moral decadence was accepted. The traditional religions were merely facades, useful for state functions, but void of spirituality. All that counted were man's desires and the pleasures of the moment.

In America today, as former Cardinal Ratzinger reminds us in his book, *Values in a Time of Upheaval*, three values underlie the national mores: freedom, science, and progress. The first and most fundamental is freedom. This is the nation's distinguishing mark and underlies everything else. There is freedom of religion, which leads to the religious neutrality of the state; freedom of expression in speech and in the press; freedom to form political parties; freedom from unwarranted searches and seizures of one's property; freedom from being deprived of life, liberty or property without due process of law; freedom from slavery and involuntary servitude; freedom to vote and elect national representatives. The concept of freedom, however, has grown from an ordered liberty in which freedom is balanced by moral constraints to an unrestricted ability to do whatever one wishes.

Science, the second value, and its applications have brought significant benefits to mankind in meeting basic human needs through understanding and harnessing the forces of nature. But science too must be subject to moral criteria. In today's society, the guiding principle is that man's capability determines what he is permitted to do. Once the ends are demonstrated, they quickly become rights to be granted. Any restraints on science are in opposition to freedom, which is the supreme value. But man has knowledge of how to do many things. He can build weapons of mass destruction, clone human beings, manipulate stem cells in medical research, and farm human organs for the purpose of transplantation. Although each of these activities is justified to meet a societal need, they often run counter to human dignity and basic human rights. They denigrate people and if carried further may reduce man to an object dispensable for the good of society.

Progress, the third standard, has been a key value, especially since the beginning of the industrial age. With the introduction of scientific management, manufacturing productivity increased. As production grew and profits increased, the concept of progress spread to other industrial and business sectors, then to the military and government, and into the political arena. It was not long before it became an ideal for human behavior. Progress, however, brought with it a secular philosophy, focusing on material gain and technological advances. Prosperity in this world for the individual or for the group has become the sole conscious aim. The concept of progress was indifferent to religion, separated from tradition, and detached from the reason for our existence. Like freedom and science, progress, as beneficial as it can be, must be pursued with moral aims and limits.

We are living in a period in which our culture is changing. As we focus more on material ends and eliminate God from the public sphere, there is a growing and significant incompatibility between Christian principles and a great deal of our social practice. America, in spite of its enormous economic success and global influence, is hollowing its spirit. The communal moral values that have provided the foundation for democracy are waning. Once we recognize this, we must task ourselves to reinvigorate, even on a small scale, in our own families, in our own communities, the general ethical and religious forces of our culture.



A view of America's changing culture. Left: Mosaic of the Immaculate Conception at the Basilica of the Shrine of the Immaculate Conception, created 1930; Right: Painting titled "The Holy Virgin Mary" (purposefully blasphemous) displayed at the Brooklyn Museum of Art, created 1996.