

Salt and Light Papers provide important information and analysis to help Christians and Churches to engage with 21st century social issues

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AFFLUENZA: A WARNING TO US ALL

Affluenza: How to Be Successful and Stay Sane

by Oliver James

400pp, Vermillion, £17.99

Affluenza is the term which psychologist Oliver James uses to describe a virus. More precisely he defines this virus as 'a set of values which increase our vulnerability to emotional distress. It entails placing a high value on acquiring money and possessions, looking good in the eyes of others and wanting to be famous.'

Although the above quotation may bring a number of well-known Bible verses to the minds of readers of *The Bulletin*, James himself is not, in fact, a Christian, but someone who portrays himself as an old-style left-wing intellectual with a social conscience and a touch of guilt associated with a privileged upbringing and education. Nevertheless, the book is a challenge to both the Christian and the non-Christian mindset.

Because James sees the world, and argues, from a secular standpoint, his analysis of what is wrong with it is always likely to be flawed. However, the God of the Bible operates through secondary causes and believers and non-believers can equally derive useful knowledge by carefully observing these causes, and their effects. The value of the book for the Christian is that James describes and examines a particular set of 'temptations' (although he doesn't call them this), providing us with insights into how our upbringing, attitudes and lifestyle affect our experience of these temptations, how our treatment of our children affects their experience of them and how our society works to promote and propagate them.

The book, unnecessarily long at 510 pages, is a mixture of digested and simply-presented social and psychological research, observation and detail derived from interviews with, in the main, affluent, and sometimes wealthy, disturbed and distorted individuals. The latter are clearly there to fascinate and to maintain interest, but carry the risk of seducing the reader into believing that these examples prove his thesis. This thesis, put crudely, is that the more like the USA a society becomes, the higher its rate of emotional distress. The particular, measurable characteristic of US

society he uses is income inequality – the ratio of the top 20% to the bottom 20% of incomes. He judges emotional distress to include depression, anxiety, substance abuse and impulsiveness. Measured by these criteria, the US heads the distress league table, but the UK and Australia are not far behind.

In the context of world issues, emotional well-being is not a priority concern for many people, particularly the well-being of the affluent middle-class or the super rich. However, in delineating his characteristics of well-being, and his range of sources and types of emotional distress, James exposes and traces a number of harmful trends applicable to society in general and consequently to us.

In James' model, personal values sit as a kind of regulator between income inequality and the resulting emotional distress, controlling the type and degree of distress. The *Affluenza Virus* attacks and controls these values.

James clearly despises the advertising industry, which he sees as feeding the Virus. Television is targeted as the key medium through which advertising does its insidious work, inevitably leaving the consumer permanently dissatisfied, or gratified only for the shortest possible time. Satisfaction (or contentment) would put the brake on consumption, leading to the stalling of economic growth.

Tackling the advertisers' preoccupation with appearance, as opposed to beauty, he states bluntly that 'Appearances and deceit are closely allied to advertising. Despite advertisers' protestations... their real objective is to promote consumption through purveying lies.' The logic is that advertising is necessary for economic growth, but that it amounts mostly to the purveying of lies to stimulate dissatisfaction, and this is bad.

Applying his analysis, shouldn't we then seek to stop this advertising and absorb the resulting economic decline and recession? But who wants recession, and anyway doesn't economic growth in developed countries lead to increasing numbers in the Third World escaping poverty and disease?

Focusing on education, James observes that the Virus society needs people with '...an exaggerated sense of the importance of work, a false need for things and an endless desire to consume, no deep feelings or convictions, standardised tastes, suggestibility and uncritical minds.' He believes our education system, with its focus on exam results, targets and fit-for-industry employees, contributes to producing people of this type. He majors a great deal on the effects on children of 'bad' parenting in this context. Much of this focuses on the middle classes, and particularly on girls whom he believes have suffered most because of the pressures on them both to achieve and to be attractive. He associates these characteristics with the feminist movement which he believes has been hijacked by employers to generate larger pools of potential employees. This favours employers as they seek those with high ability willing to commit to the company and to long hours of work.

Parents have bought into this notion of success, often seeking to fulfil their own lack of achievement, through their children, by driving them hard. Children will have learnt that the price of love is success, and imbibed the ethos of ‘work hard so you can get a good job and earn a good salary.’

In James’ Virus society many people differentiate themselves by *having* rather than *being*. An Australian study cited by James apparently shows that the *having* people have the following traits: they are eager to consume; wasteful of goods; have conventional tastes and views; are uncritical of themselves or society; have little insight; agree with the statement ‘having makes me more’; have a tendency to publicise and promote themselves; experience themselves as a commodity whose value is determined by possessions and the opinion of others. Allied to this is the myth that we can all be millionaires if we work hard enough.

Turning to the home, James tells us that strongly materialistic people are often using money and possessions to give themselves a sense of emotional security that they lack, dating back to childhood. They tend to have parents who are cold, over-controlling, harshly punitive and discouraging. Where childhood love is conditional on performance, and mum or dad only show affection if you are a winner, distress follows. He believes that parental divorce and separation is an important factor affecting Virus values, and that the increased materialism of the offspring of broken marriages is due primarily to the consequent decline in love and support, rather than to any increase in financial hardship.

Believing that ‘Virus infection is extremely harmful to the well-being of mothers,’ James devotes a chapter to the subject of ‘enjoying motherhood,’ strongly arguing for two parents and a mother who is free to spend time with her children. He has much to say on the merits of mothers staying at home to raise their children and offers the radical suggestion that parents should stick to smaller, cheaper homes (in contrast to the trend for continuous upgrade) to avoid the need for the mother to work full-time.

In the last chapter James launches what he calls *The Unselfish Capitalist Manifesto*. Although bordering on the ridiculous in places, it does stimulate thought on societal values and contains some interesting insights into the workings of our political masters, with whom he has had some contact. For example, citing a businesswoman considered to be a star in the New Labour galaxy he says: ‘One of the most worrying things that Rose [*not her real name*] told me... was how arbitrary are the processes of decision-making, how subject to the vagaries of group and individual psychology. You can have a very small group of like-minded people at a meeting to make a final decision... The one that finally gets chosen depends on all sorts of essentially emotional factors: one of the key players can be in a bad mood... sheer exhaustion might mean one person swings in favour of the line of least resistance, or worst of all, political expedience wins out.’ This, at least, reminds us to keep praying for those in power.

If even some of James' theories are true then perhaps it is no wonder that propagating Christian values and concerns in a society with 'no deep feelings or convictions... and uncritical minds' is so difficult. And perhaps the failure of Christians to engage adequately with the issues of the day may show that we too have caught something of the Virus.

This book will be personally challenging and is worth reading, but not all of it will be to the reader's taste, not least because the condition underlying the Virus values culture which the author identifies is not understood by the author. James brings into view a great deal of material that supports, and can be used to support, a Christian view of society, its problems and possible remedies, but we should recognise and avoid the danger of too readily using the research and James' insights to support our own positions without grounding them first in solid biblical arguments.

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The above was published in The Bulletin [July 2008]

Salt and Light Papers is a series of occasional papers on contemporary issues of social concern. It is published online by the Affinity Social Issues Team. Its purpose is to help Christians to think through questions of relevance to our place in the world around us. The views expressed by contributors are not necessarily endorsed by the Affinity Social Issues Team.

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