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# Contemporary Values and their Danger for Christians

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*G Wyn Davies*

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All evangelicals share a deep regret that there is now an increasingly acute tension between the values commonly held in our society and those eternal values, deriving from the character of God, which are at the very heart of the Christian faith.

In order to show the nature and extent of this tension, I first propose to briefly review four major factors which have given rise to the world-view which currently dominates the way people in our society generally interpret their environment and experiences. Until the Renaissance both Christians and non-Christians believed that there were certain absolute truths, and absolute values deriving from them, which made it possible to judge what was right and what was wrong. However, a stupendous change in thinking has been taking place since that time for the reasons I will now indicate.

## **What caused the change**

**First, scientific methodology separates facts from values.**<sup>1</sup> David Hume, the Scottish Enlightenment philosopher, highlighted the logical gulf between facts and values and many of the founders of modern science, Newton, Kepler, Galileo, decided that systematic analysis and experimentation to discover the structure and working of the created world was better done without taking into account its Creator and His values and purpose. Subsequently, the growth in scientific knowledge has resulted in facts being regarded as immutable and, although incomplete, as sufficient in themselves to describe and explain everything that exists. By contrast, values are increasingly seen as variable because they are regarded as wholly a matter of human choice. Nevertheless, values too can be described and explained in scientific terms and therefore, not only is there no need to introduce God to explain what is, but there is simply no room for Him in the closed world of materialistic science.

**Secondly, the theory of evolution teaches that everything is in a process of development, of becoming.** Consequently nothing is permanent, including human behaviour and values which are viewed as generated and conditioned by the culture and time in which they occur. It is argued that what is esteemed and constitutes value, results from "biological wisdom."<sup>2</sup> In other words, what is valued is what was found advantageous to the animals who were our evolutionary ancestors. And so God by this reasoning also is excluded from the moral realm: the sole determinants of moral value are the individual and the community in a particular place and a particular age. For example, the significance and form, and indeed the very existence of marriage is seen as wholly determined by the value placed upon it by a particular culture at a particular time.

**Thirdly, liberal theology became a dominant trend in the 19th and into the 20th century.** It claimed that "theology must be formulated in the light of advancing knowledge in philosophy, the sciences and other disciplines" and many of its advocates regarded Christianity "as not distinctively and exclusively unique, but rather as one 'religion' among others, and sometimes as one cultural movement among others."<sup>3</sup> As a result, large sections of the Christian church lost confidence in the reliability of divinely revealed Scriptures and in the unchangeable validity of eternal values derived from the

character of God, as well as in the possibility of salvation through a divine, crucified Redeemer. This loss of confidence was recently demonstrated by the failure of the 1989 Seoul Conference of the World Council of Churches even to affirm humanity's unique status as the sole bearer of the Divine image.<sup>4</sup> Since such uniqueness cannot be deduced solely from the nature of creation, it can be held with confidence only by those who trust the Biblical accounts of the creation, incarnation and redemption as being historically true and there revealing, amongst other things, the uniqueness of human nature.

**Fourthly, the first and second world wars and, in particular, the unleashing of the devastating power of nuclear weaponry spawned a spirit of pessimism and impermanence.** This was encapsulated in a slogan I saw some years ago on a school wall in Euston: *Why bother? Tomorrow the bomb!* This, together with other aspects of this century's continuing, frightful history of man's inhumanity to man, has led many to embrace existentialism. At the heart of existentialism in its different forms is the rejection of belief in rationalism and in scientific and technological idealism - because they are perceived as having generated as many problems and more serious dangers than they have solved - and a turning away from the external world to seek knowledge and meaning and hope inside one's own head. As a result, self-discovery and self-fulfillment are the goals of much contemporary humanistic psychology, including counselling theory and practice. Moral values are perceived as solely a matter of personal choice, serving the goals of self-esteem and self-fulfillment. Consequently, consciousness enhancing drugs, homosexual relationships and self-assertion, amongst other things, are counted just as morally acceptable as are helpful deeds and comforting words.

Today the combined influence of these four factors is profound and pervasive amongst both academics and the British people in general. Carl Henry concludes that the effects are far wider, stating that: "The twentieth century in which evangelicals proposed to win the world for Christ in a single generation has in fact become the age in which religious atheism swept millions of persons into its ranks and in which political atheism now rules half the world's population and much of its landmass"<sup>5</sup>. Secular humanism at its best dismisses a Biblical world-view and its related values as outmoded and irrelevant and, at its worst, and increasingly, considers the Christian faith as dangerously inhibiting to human progress and development. Reasons for this antipathy are not difficult to identify. For example, whilst some secular humanists may admit that religious belief and values helped human beings when their understanding of the natural world was rudimentary, they will also argue that since we now have a fuller understanding, we have come of age. We have reached maturity and can stand on our own two feet, facing up to the reality of a material, purposeless world, as well as our own meaninglessness.<sup>6</sup> And we can now take charge of our own actions - free from the constraints of the primitive beliefs and the imagined, absolute standards of religious creeds. Not surprisingly, given the rebelliousness and pride of a fallen human race, combined with belief in the perfectibility of human nature, the prospect of such absolute freedom and self-sufficiency attracts both scientific optimists and existentialists - and it is particularly resistant to the Christian message with its call to men and women to acknowledge their inherent sinfulness and their utter dependence on a crucified Saviour for forgiveness and regeneration. Secular humanism also poses a number of serious dangers for Christians because of the way it affects contemporary thinking about values and I now propose to examine some characteristics of this thinking and the dangers arising from it.

## **Characteristics and dangers**

### **Secular humanism advocates value turnover<sup>6</sup>**

In his *ESSAYS ON MORAL DEVELOPMENT* Kohlberg<sup>7</sup> argues that mature moral

reasoning involves out-growing externally imposed moral rules, as well as moral reasoning based on convention and social approval whilst moral maturity is marked by autonomous thinking. This poses a danger to Christians because it sees the abandonment of the moral thinking and especially a Divine-command morality, transmitted within the home, the church or the school, as a mark of an individual's maturity.

Whilst the media, popular music, advertising and peer-group pressure exercise a powerful influence on children and young people, education continues to play a strategic role in value formation and Christians in this country, as in many others, have played a prominent part in establishing and opening up education at all levels to the population at large. Teaching, along with medicine and nursing, was traditionally considered a calling when many other occupations were not so recognized and education has always attracted many able and committed Christians who have given of their best to the intellectual and spiritual development of their charges. For such reasons, Christian parents have continued to entrust their children to the general education system, believing that, even when Christian influence waned, it would still be neutral in matters of faith and conduct and positive in its effect in communicating knowledge.

*Today, I believe that such trust is ill-founded.* The behavioural sciences which inform so much of education theory and the training of teachers is heavily influenced by the positivist and humanist world-view whose development and perspective have already been outlined. All aspects and all levels of education are heavily influenced by it and it has bred an agnostic, antagonistic or pluralistic attitude to religion. The values and attitudes derived from secular humanism are inevitably communicated to pupils and students by the teachers' behaviour, as well as through the content and methods of their teaching. Therefore, not only can Christian parents no longer rely on schools and colleges to reinforce the Bible-based teaching of the home and church but they are competing against the secular world view and values which have infiltrated the content and methods of teaching. The dearth of Christian primary and secondary schools in many parts of the country means that parents and churches are waging an unequal struggle for the minds and hearts of their children whilst the absence of even one Bible-based higher education establishment of university or polytechnic status in this country is a major weakness in equipping the most able of our young Christians to think Christianly about their disciplines and to contend for their faith in their different fields.

The situation is not without hope, however. The number of Christian schools is growing and there is a Christian School Movement. On the other hand, nine out of ten children are likely to continue to attend state schools and the Education Reform Act, 1988 provides Christian parents with new opportunities to exercise an influence for good in the governing of schools. Christian teachers who are called to work in the state system have a crucial, if difficult, role to play and the work of organisations such as the Association of Christian Teachers and Christians in Education<sup>8</sup>, who support both teachers and others involved in education, should elicit both our prayers and support.

### **Secular humanism promulgates value diversification**

Whilst value turnover denotes the changing of values over time, value diversification denotes the changing of values to suit different people and situations. Since what is right is regarded as that which is determined by a particular individual or group in a particular situation, Fisher et al<sup>9</sup> argue that the highest stage of moral development entails tolerance, accommodation to the moral thinking of others and delight in the ambiguity of moral decision making and in experimenting with the definition and solution of moral problems. Values, like clothes, should be changed to match the situations, activities and people with which we are involved at a particular time and place and, we are told, such moral flexibility is essential to secure the integration and well-being of a pluralistic

society. Fisher and his fellow writers go on to claim that people who fail to behave and think in this flexible, relativist way will not be effective leaders and colleagues. On such reasoning, **Christians who adhere to absolute, eternal standards, revealed by God and transmitted through the Scriptures are disqualified from positions of leadership and responsibility in the world of work.** These views are now appearing in nationally respected management journals. If they become widely accepted, individual Christians will no doubt continue to be cherished for their integrity and diligence but if moral flexibility is amongst the factors included in leadership profiles and personality tests, then they will militate against the appointment and advancement of Christians to a number of posts. Christians are already experiencing discrimination in some situations and others may also have to face more limited career opportunities as the price they have to pay for their allegiance and witness to the Lord Jesus Christ.

Value diversification also puts Christians under pressure in their work situations in other ways, since the standards and expectations of others - be they customers, clients, colleagues or bosses - will often be different and conflict with those of Christians. For example, Professor Gareth Jones describes the problems like this in a medical context:

... the right decision for the patient in the opinion of the doctor, may not be the best decision for the patient in the opinion of the patient. In other words, the expectations of the doctor and those of the patient may come into a head-on conflict, perhaps on moral grounds or simply because of the different perspectives of the two... the ethical standards of the Christian working in medicine may come into open conflict with the very different ethical standards of some patients.<sup>10</sup>

There are many parallels affecting other professions and work situations. However, the pressure on Christians is made greater because when disagreements take place, in a pluralistic culture which has dismissed God-given moral absolutes, the right decision is not one which reflects such absolutes but one which accommodates the values and expectations of others. The prevalence of such problems makes the work of such organisations as the UCCF and its professional groups which provide opportunities for Christians to share and think through work-related issues particularly valuable. However, the local church also has a key role to play in demonstrating to members the relevance of Biblical principles and how to apply them to the complex and disconcerting moral dilemmas with which many have to face in their day to day work. I regret to say that my impression is that this is a largely neglected area in the teaching and pastoral ministry of evangelical churches.

### **Ellul argues the result of moral relativism has been value reversal**

By this he means: "the use of a word designating a former value as a means of identifying its exact opposite." Value reversal is a long-standing tactic in the spiritual battle for men's and women's minds and hearts. In the very first engagement when Satan tempted Eve (Genesis 3), his main appeal, then as now, was to freedom and especially freedom from God. Satan calls upon "the slaves of God"<sup>12</sup> - constrained and frustrated by His unreasonable prohibition - to go for freedom. He argues that by rebelling against God's commandment not to eat of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, they will both break God's tyranny and themselves become *as gods*: free to do as they wish. However, when they succumb to the temptation, they immediately discover that the freedom of which Satan speaks: the freedom of rebels, is opposite in its nature and its consequence to the freedom which they enjoyed as the viceroys of God!

During this century we are rediscovering the same reality. Freedom that "once was founded on a biblical consensus and a Christian ethos has now become autonomous freedom, cut loose from all constraints... Here is the reason why we have a moral

breakdown in every area of life.”<sup>13</sup> Autonomous freedom is the opposite in its basis, its ethos and its effects of the ‘glorious freedom of God’s children’ (Romans 8:21). The word freedom has consequently lost its substance: we cannot be sure what people mean when they use it - and the same applies to other value words. For example, erotic films and homosexual relationships are described as ‘pure’; ‘the quality of life’ is used to justify the killing of the unborn and it is argued that ‘human dignity’ is the basis of a right to kill the old and the handicapped.

However, value reversal is not confined to the secular sphere, for Christian terminology also suffers from it. For example, we can no longer be sure when theologians and church members speak of *salvation*, of *love*, or of *hope* that words hold their Biblical meaning for them, or something quite different and contradictory. Similarly, the term *evangelical* is now claimed by some who believe that the Bible is inspired and reliable only on spiritual matters - not in matters of scientific and historical fact. It is also claimed by those who acknowledge every aspect of Scripture is inspired but who claim in addition, direct revelation through present day channels. In both cases the term loses its value in that it now encompasses people whose views are the opposite of the *sola scriptura* position which it has customarily denoted. This is in itself a crucial issue for it is only if the completeness and total reliability of the scriptures are tenable and the truths and values it contains can be proclaimed as eternally reflecting the character of God, that we have a viable, sure foundation upon which we can resist and counter value reversal and other attacks on our faith which are now taking place.

#### **The result is an inevitable value conflict**

People’s basic world-view provides “the basis for their values and therefore the basis for their (moral) decisions.”<sup>14</sup> It may be argued that, of necessity, every thinking person holds one of two conflicting world-views, or at least, that they make moral judgements as if one of two world-views is true. As we have seen, the currently dominant world-view is materialistic: It begins with the impersonal - which may be mass, energy or matter, or all three in combination, plus time and chance. This inevitably leads to some form of ‘reductionism’, that is, everything which currently exists - including human beings - can only be properly understood by reducing them to their original impersonal constituents: mass, energy, or matter, plus time and chance. This in turn, just as inevitably, leads us to conclude that to talk about the *meaning* or *dignity* of human beings makes no more sense than to talk about the *dignity* or *meaning* of a pig - or, for that matter, a stone! All are made of the same substance, with the only real difference being that human beings are more complex. Whilst, therefore, it is possible on the basis of secular world-view to *speak* of all living beings as having equal value, it is but an equality of meaninglessness! In his paper *Man Against Darkness*, Stace puts it bluntly: “Nature is nothing but matter in motion” and “if the scheme of things is purposeless and meaningless, then the life of man is purposeless and meaningless too”.<sup>15</sup>

We have seen already that a secular world-view also leads to the conclusion that morality has no objective validity in that it cannot be derived from the real, material nature of things and people, and that it must therefore be a product of human imagination. Left in this position, we may *speak* about certain behaviour as being *right* or *wrong* but such words do not describe anything real, for there is nothing, and can be nothing, in the impersonal universe that corresponds and gives substantive and enduring meaning to such words.

The alternative world-view begins with the personal: with a Creator who designed, created and sustains all that there is, but who is different from it. A Creator great enough for such a task must at least be one who is infinite in His capacity to understand and create. The Judeo-Christian faith goes one vital step further in proclaiming that this

Creator has also revealed His presence and character through the creation, the incarnation, and the propositional statements of the Scriptures. Such revelation, the Christian maintains, reliably and truly discloses both God's nature and the nature of reality.

This world-view leads us to conclude that personality and moral consciousness are not just useful figments of the human imagination, but derive their existence and character from that of the Creator. The image of God in human beings gives them both uniqueness of being and uniqueness of value. Jacobs goes on to argue that, "If the nature of man can be defined by the theme of the image of God, his function can be qualified as the imitation of God."<sup>16</sup> In other words, the moral consciousness which human beings experience derives from the implanted image of God. From the self-revelation of God's character and will in the Scriptures we can derive moral standards which, since they reflect the true nature of reality, give an essentially unchanging content and meaning to the words *good* and *bad*. Living life to the full now comes to mean living in harmony with the Creator's revealed design and purpose for human beings, not by unaided endeavour but by the enabling of the Spirit of God.

**These two world-views are wholly irreconcilable, for if one is true, the other cannot be true.** Their perceptions of God, the origin and status of human beings, and of values and moral behaviour are in total conflict. For example, for the Christian, the Decalogue and the Sermon on the Mount are of prime and permanent significance, revealing what God calls His people to be in every age and culture. For the secularist, however, they are but fictions, maybe of historical interest but wholly inappropriate in concept and content for today and any attempt to prescribe or promote them is opposed because they are considered seriously to suppress human development and freedom.

Agreement is limited to the fact that human beings have moral consciousness and that without some regulation of human behaviour through the common acceptance or the enforcement of some moral standards, human societies would degenerate and disintegrate. For the Christian, the degeneration of individual and societal values and behaviour is an inevitable consequence of jettisoning faith in the one true God and in rebelling against His revealed standards and way of salvation. I am not aware of one example of a society, from the Roman Empire to Britain today, in which the rejection of Christian standards and their replacement by man-made values has resulted in that society improving its spiritual and moral health and advancing the welfare of its people. However, there are many examples of societies which have been transformed for good as a result of embracing the Christian faith and values.

## Naturalism today

Throughout this paper I have used the term 'secular humanism' to describe the prevailing world-view and values. It is secular in that it treats existence as wholly materialistic. It is humanistic in that some at least, argue for universal moral principles which for example, require the protection of the vulnerable and the poor. Secular humanism is now under attack not only from Christians but from naturalists who argue that its view of morality is logically untenable. Since nature is all there is, they say, the concept of universally valid moral principles is either wishful thinking or the residue of Christian belief and has no foundation in the real world. Furthermore, there is now plentiful evidence - if only from the media and any station bookstall - that both materialistic humanism and secular naturalism are being challenged by a mystical naturalism - or cosmic humanism as some have called it - which sees its roots in pre-Christian paganism. Its most widespread and influential manifestation is the **New Age Movement** which has been emerging since the 1960s and encompasses, amongst other things, pre-Christian folk religion, UFOs and the healing power of crystals, as well as the occult, reincarnation

and new ideas about developing one's potential.<sup>16</sup> 'The fool has said in his heart. There is no God. They are corrupt, they have done abominable deeds, there is none that does good' (Psalm 14;1). In the first chapter of his letter to the Roman church, Paul describes a society beset by the frighteningly familiar moral corruption which results from the persistent and deliberate rejection of God's revelation of Himself and His standards; the exaltation of human wisdom; idolatry; the practice of immorality and depravity and the recommending of such practices as right, and a whole catalogue of viciousness. Every human relationship, that with God, the created world, other human beings and oneself, is corrupted in the name of superior human wisdom.

The tragedy of our day is that such immorality is widespread and largely approved of in our society and that it is nearly always possible to find someone, who in the name of the Christian church, will either publicly approve or excuse such degeneracy. Furthermore, there is a danger that even the evangelical constituency does not accept God's clear verdict on a nation like ours which deliberately rejects Him and opts for human wisdom and moral autonomy. Yet, Paul states clearly: 'And so, since they did not see fit to acknowledge God worthy of knowing, God gave them over to a base and condemned mind to do things not proper or decent but loathsome' (verse 28) and later 'Though they are fully aware of God's righteous decree that those who do such things deserve to die, they not only do them themselves but approve and applaud others who practice them' (verse 32).

## **A Scriptural response**

My task in this paper has been to provide an analysis of current values and their danger for Christians. I have sought to do so without disguising the catastrophic shift in thinking and behaviour which has taken place and which is bearing its fruit in broken families, broken vows and in much else, the casualties of which many of you meet all too often and no doubt seek to help. The danger is that such an analysis will cause dismay and despair and that is not my purpose. The One, True God is a 'God of hope' and the Good News of a crucified and risen Saviour is His message and His answer to men and women who, left to themselves and the influence of the prince of this world, always lapse into spiritual and moral darkness. In closing, therefore, I'm going to exceed my remit very briefly so that we can encourage one another through three responses to such a moral and spiritual crisis which the Scriptures indicate.

### **The first response is an unqualified confidence in the relevance and power of the gospel of Jesus Christ**

If we are to persevere undaunted, we have to be totally convinced that the gospel is the only sufficient barrier against the total breakdown of our culture<sup>17</sup> and the only sufficient source of spiritual and moral health in our society. We also need to be totally convinced that since our Lord had triumphed over the power of darkness and is willing to share His power with us, as He makes clear in issuing the great commission to His disciples (Mt 28:18-20) and in the sending of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost (Acts 2), *we can again see the day when our God is honoured and obeyed through the length and breadth of this land.*

### **The second response is a Christ-like compassion.**

Matthew tells us that when our Lord saw the harassed and bewildered crowds (9:36), 'He was moved with compassion' and bid His disciples to plead with the Lord of the harvest to thrust out labourers into His harvest'. And who can fail to hear His distress when, towards the end of His ministry, our Lord cries out 'O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, murdering the prophets and stoning those who are sent to you! How often would I have gathered your children together as a mother fowl gathers her brood under her wing, and you refused!' (Mt 23:38) It is so much easier, so much less costly for us to harden our

hearts against the indifferent, the opponents of the gospel and those whose lives are foul in word and deed. But we are called to have the heart as well as the mind of Christ. Our convictions are to be wedded to compassion! We are to cry to our God for this generation. And we are to reach out to it - speaking the truth to it in love.

### **Finally, there has to be confrontation**

In this spiritual battle, as in any other, we have three choices: cowardice, compromise or confrontation. The devil offered our Lord the way of compromise in the desert temptation (Mt 4:1-11) and when He set His face to go to Jerusalem and the Cross, he offered Him the way of cowardice (Mt 16:23) - and you can be sure he will make the same offers to us. But if we have something of the mind and heart of Christ then we will know that confrontation is what we are called to. Our Lord calls us to be salt and light (Mt 5:13-16) in this corrupt and dark generation that our lives and our lips might bear testimony to the fact that the way of wisdom and spiritual health is to be found in Him who is and who alone is 'THE way, THE truth and THE life' (Jn 14:6).

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- 16 For further explanation of NAM, see two articles in THE EVANGELICAL LIBRARY BULLETIN, Autumn 1990 which also include further references
- 17 Schaeffer *ibid*

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