

OUR SPIRITUAL ENEMIES

How our culture is out to get us

by Johan D. Tangelder

T.S. Eliot's (1885-1965) poem *The Waste Land*, published in 1922, describes his contemporary world as spiritually dry and barren, inhabited by people who have lost the knowledge of good and evil. The poem mirrors an age in which faith has been shattered and foundations crumbled. It also speaks to our time. Our Western society has become neo-pagan; it is a civilization in decline.

The slogan of the 1789 French revolution *Ni Dieu Ni Maître* (No God, no Master) has touched the very foundations of society. Man became the measure of all things. This world for him is the alpha and the omega, the beginning and the end, the only reality man will ever experience. Religion has become marginalized and privatized. God has been banished from public education, courts, and governments. Truth is often understood only in terms of what it means to each person.

A Spiritual Wasteland

As I see it, Christians are being shaped by this world's wasteland mentality. Professing Christians have told me that they have no time for private devotions. Accustomed to fast food and quick fixes, they also expect spiritual fast food. No wonder so many are starving spiritually, not because of lack of spiritual food, but because they are no longer used to eating solid spiritual food. They don't take the time to study the Bible, to meditate on it, and to inwardly digest it. Consequently, they are less certain about their faith and their relationship to God than previous generations.

Individualism

Today, rampant individualism seriously undermines the sense of community. In 1835, Alexis de Tocqueville, in his oft-quoted book *Democracy in America*, made a prediction that has – by and large – been fulfilled:

No power on earth can prevent the increasing equality of conditions (in the United States)...from leading every member of the community to be wrapped up in himself...And no one can foretell in what disgrace and wretchedness they would plunge themselves lest they should have to sacrifice something of their own well-being to the prosperity of their fellow creatures.

Individualism has led to a crisis of commitment. People do not take seriously anymore their obligation to others and to God. Denominational loyalty has eroded. There is unprecedented indifference towards established churches, especially among youth. It is closely linked to the spirit of self-realization, self-help, and self-fulfillment. Christians are circulating from church to church, searching for a good program for their kids, music that suits their taste, and a message that meets their psychological needs.

When spirituality is seen as a private affair, focusing solely on the salvation of one's soul and personal welfare at the expense of the body of Christ, it becomes truncated. In short, individualism leads to a spirituality best described by the book of Judges: "In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as he saw fit" (21: 25).

Television

Television has created a desire for instant gratification. It bombards the viewers with trivialities, caters to the insatiable lust for sensationalism, distorts the ability to reason and analyze, intensifies the appeal to emotions, and leaves little time for quiet reflection. The effect on prayer and the Christian community is easily imagined. It also breeds superficiality and shallow thought.

Television has impacted the mission approaches of churches. Some denominations have accommodated their doctrine and liturgy to the wishes of church shoppers, who are accustomed to screen images, and entertainment. They try to compete with popular culture on its own terms; but in the process they are in danger of losing the integrity of the Gospel. *In All God's Children and Blue Suede Shoes*, Kenneth Myers argues that popular television culture "encourages a mood of expecting everything to be immediate, a mood that deters greater depth and breadth in other areas of our lives, including our understanding of Christianity and our experience of obedient faith."

Liberal Theology

Liberal theology has emptied pews, undermined "the faith of our fathers," and left little room for personal piety and godliness. Liberal church agendas are occupied with so-called relevant concerns such as the environment, social issues, and psychological well-being rather than with the sinner's need to be reconciled with God.

Liberal theologians, influenced by German New Testament scholar Rudolf Bultmann (1884-1976), take the simplistic view that our secular age has made us so rational that we no longer need to pray for a miracle, or to believe in the literal bodily resurrection of Christ, his accession, and return in glory. They claim that the gospel must be "demythologized" of all "mythological" ideas and reinterpreted to make it understandable for modern man. No wonder many give up on the Christian faith after being subjected to such distortions! Why bother with a church which shreds the Gospel? While liberal theologians declare that modern man can no longer believe the historic Christian faith, tens of thousands flock to fortunetellers, desperately gamble, consult horoscopes, join weird sects and cults, or indulge in witchcraft. How ironic!

Technology

As science advances so does technology. It is impossible not to recognize the profound changes in our world that have been brought about by the rapid development of the techniques of war and of medicine. The impact of technology has boosted man's self-assertion and pride. There is now the belief this world's problems are solvable solely through human ingenuity. Peter Berger observed that, "there is the assumption that all human problems can be converted into technical problems, and if the techniques to solve certain problems do not as yet exist, then they will have to be invented."

Graig M. Gay, Assistant Professor at Regent College, Vancouver, B.C., suggests that an extreme form of faith in technology is the tacit denial of the reality of death. The quality of modern healthcare tempts us to put off thoughts of death. Gay claims this is probably linked to a kind of unconscious avoidance of religion and religious questions. I know this from my own experience. Years ago an elderly gentleman told me modern people are no longer as religious as previous generations because they grow much older – thanks to modern medicine. This man died some years ago. He too, went the way of all flesh. Technology cannot defeat death. Modern man tries to brush aside the reality of death; but, as Sir Walter Scott wrote, "And come he slow, or come he fast, It is but Death who comes at last."

Modern technology has its benefits, and I am thinking specifically of modern medicine; it has also led to moral and spiritual deterioration. In our technocratic welfare states many complain that no one cares for them and no one loves them. Loneliness is a depressing feature of our times. *The Church, Science and Technology*, a report of the Reformed Ecumenical Synod, Chicago, 1984, perceptively commented:

In the technicalized culture essential social ties are cut and replaced by artificial bonds. Therefore love cools off and sympathy and compassion disappear; estrangement and loneliness increase and people cry out in various forms of protest for love and compassion. If only we could hear the cry in the protest!

Feminism

Feminism has infiltrated churches. The new, politically correct translation of the New Testament by the Oxford University Press avoids the gender controversy by calling Jesus God's "child" instead of God's "son." I even saw a New Testament for feminists with all the references to God the Father altered to Parent. God is now called our parent or mother. In other words, God must conform to current fads and ideologies. Feminists say that we may not call God Father. They argue, "How can we call God Father if modern fathers are such poor examples?" Fathers are seen as obstacles. They cause trouble. Feminists point to the fact that many children grow up in fatherless homes, which shows that society can do without fathers. But this fatherlessness trend and its acceptance has had devastating consequences. As David Blanehorn shows in his provocative book *Fatherless America. Confronting Our Most Urgent Social Problem*:

For as our society abandons the fatherhood idea, we do not simply become "more aware" of children growing up without fathers. We also become "accepting of that." In a culture of fatherlessness, fatherhood becomes irrelevant.

When a church succumbs to feminism, spirituality becomes affected. Our very view of God is no longer shaped by revelation but by ideology. This was clearly demonstrated at the 1993 "Re-imagining Conference" sponsored by American mainline churches. Participants did not worship God the Father as revealed in the Scriptures but the goddess Sophia, "the Spirit of Wisdom, the Spirit of Re-imagining." Organizers of the event spoke of Sophia as the "eternal feminine."

Sound spirituality depends on our view of God. God does not model himself after earthly

fathers. Earthly fathers are called upon to conform to God the Father as He has revealed Himself through his Son Jesus Christ, who said, "Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father" (John 14:9).

Materialism

Wealth is not evil by itself but it is dangerous. The love of possessions can replace our love for God, imperiling the welfare of our souls. Jesus said, "I tell you the truth, it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God" (Matt. 19:23-24).

Christians are also tempted by the secular pursuit of happiness. They too often see the future from an economic perspective, and derive their identity and self-worth from their success in the world. Christian families too often promote a driven, acquisitive life style. And many are as stressed out as their secular counterparts. Climbing the social ladder seems more important than Kingdom service. This often shows in the career choice of their children. Robert Coles, a Christian psychologist who specializes in working with children, notes,

Very little is asked of a lot of American children with regard to compassion and thinking of others. The emphasis is on using psychology to cultivate the individuality and self-importance of the child. One sees that in home after home. Children are encouraged to look out for themselves and get what they can. Very little emphasis is put on pointing the child's eyes, ears, and even heart and mind, away from himself or herself and toward others.

When the spiritual tone is strong and vital, money is no problem. The Christian life is not a matter of having but of being alive in Christ. Christians, who are tempted by the awesome power of possessions, can find spiritual encouragement in Agur's prayer: "Give me neither poverty nor riches, but give me only my daily bread. Otherwise, I may have too much and disown you and say, 'Who is the Lord?' Or I may become poor and steal, and so dishonor the name of my God" (Prov. 30:8,9).

The Demonic Powers

I have referred to several enemies of Biblical spirituality; but the most powerful and destructive enemy originates in the kingdom of darkness. The devil and his servants are busy at work trying to lead astray the people of God. Yet, many Christians either deny the existence of Satan or underestimate demonic powers. Therefore Abraham Kuyper's warning is still appropriate:

Not to believe in the existence of Satan and his influence is extremely dangerous, for this is just the attitude that will allow Satan to capture your heart. It is a form of backsliding and evidence of a weakening faith so that even in the church of Christ and in the proclamation of the gospel these demonic powers are increasingly ignored.

The demons are subject to the rule of Satan. They have influence on earth, not only in the spiritual realm, but also in the physical, visible and material realm. Their primary target is God's elect, set apart for his service, those to whom God has revealed his love in Jesus Christ. They concentrate all their

powers on Christians. They try to cause unrest in churches, destroy faith and trust, and kill off love. Christians are involved in a spiritual battle (Eph. 6:12). The apostle Paul spoke of "deceitful spirits" who teach "doctrines of demons" (1 Tim. 4:1). The kingdom of darkness is the very antithesis of the kingdom of light. Although the devil and his cohorts are defeated enemies (Col. 2:15), nevertheless they are still viciously powerful. The only effective protection is God's armor. "Put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything to stand" (Eph. 6:13).

Conclusion

Christians today stand closer to the early church than a generation ago. The enemies of the Christian faith are many. Christians were a small minority in the Roman Empire, and today they are once again in a minority position. But this is not a time for God's people to despair! Continue to pray in faith:

And so Lord, uphold us and make us strong with the strength of your Holy Spirit, so that we may not go down to defeat in this spiritual struggle, but may firmly resist our enemies until we finally win the complete victory. (Heidelberg Cat. Q&A 127)