

The Emperor is naked

I watched in astonishment as the ‘Emperor’ i.e. – Western philosophy/science, paraded before the thronging crowd of admirers. He was unabashedly naked: but no one seemed to notice. Indeed, most people were congratulating him on his fine clothes without the slightest hint of irony. Turning to my Christian companion, while pointing at this spectacle, I inquired incredulously: “Are you seeing what I’m seeing?” To which my colleague simply replied, “Yes! What magnificent new clothes, wouldn’t you agree?” before applauding the Emperor and his entourage as they passed by.

I don’t know which was most astonishing: the vision of a stark-naked Emperor; or the apparent blindness of my fellow Christian. Sadly, it seems that a substantial portion of the church is now so much in thrall of the Emperor that it has become as sycophantic as any other sector of our society. Much of the church’s descent into blind acceptance of Western values has been rapidly accelerating in recent decades, but this development is actually the result of a gradual process stretched out over the past four hundred years. Somewhere in that history I believe we missed an important turn and maybe it’s time to retrace our steps and reset our compass.

A match not made in heaven

Western culture and the church have been dancing around one another for centuries, mutually affecting one another; both for good and for ill. Certainly, without the church there would be no such thing as Western culture; and without the West, the church would have been vastly different. Universities, hospitals and modern democracy —to name a few—are all children of this unlikely coupling. But this pairing, sometimes called Christendom, was not necessarily a match made in heaven, and ever since the Age of Enlightenment (1620-1860), there has been a gradual estrangement between the West and the church.

Theology —once regarded as the Queen of sciences —has been pushed to the background of the culture. In its place, Western philosophy/science was crowned the new monarch. Advances in science called in question some of the never-before-doubted dogmas of the church and even cast aspersions on the authenticity of the Bible. Consequently, the centre of knowledge gradually shifted away from church and priest, to the university and professor. And the church was not exactly helping to counteract this shift either; with unwholesome connections between the church and state, clerical corruption, religious wars and doctrinaire close-mindedness aiding the decline.

Naturally, the church has not taken this cultural dismissal at all well, and ever since she has desperately wanted to reclaim the admiration of the culture and her position at the ‘table of ideas,’ with the cultural elites. Enter the enlightenment theologian, Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834), and his famous apologetic, *“On Religion: Speeches to its Cultured Despisers.”* In it Schleiermacher attempted to bridge the ever-widening chasm between the church and the enlightenment thinkers. He forged an amalgamation of the religious piety of his youth with the enlightenment philosophy of his academic life, (most especially of Immanuel Kant), to posit an aesthetically appealing and rationally defensible knowledge of God built on a spirituality of personal experience. While this is an over simplification of Schleiermacher’s position, it can be said with accuracy that he had initiated an entirely new pedigree of theological thought that appealed to the mind shaped by rationalism and Western philosophy.

Schleiermacher's inventiveness has since given rise to modern liberalism and its offshoots. I believe that it was at this point in history that the Western Church missed an important turn.

A new light

The Apostles and early church Fathers were keen to let the world know that God had stepped into human history in the person of Jesus Christ, and that this extraordinary advent was the truest and unsurpassed basis of all true theology and the best hermeneutic for every aspect of life. When Jesus declared: "I am the light of the world" (John 8: 12), this is what he meant. He was effectively saying that everything and every thought are relative to him. As far as the first believers were concerned, all forms of knowledge were a subheading under knowing Jesus Christ. To them he was the 'picture on the jigsaw box,' so to speak, by which the purpose and place of all the pieces of the jigsaw of life were to be understood. Relationships, vocation, the scriptures, theology, parenting, marriage, authority, government, health, education and any and every piece of the jigsaw, only make sense in the light of the light of the world.

However, much of the post-enlightenment church, apparently blinded by the dazzling new "light" of Western philosophy/science, gave up the assertion that Jesus Christ is the true light of the world. The enlightenment had, after all, delivered on some of its promises by providing unprecedented healthcare, cheap mechanised labour, classical music, discovery of distant planets and huge advances in technology. Who, in their right mind, would stand in the way of such obviously good and wonderful progress? Consequently many theologians lost confidence in the gospel, and capitulated to Western philosophy/science, and effectively dimmed "*the* light of the world" to a lower setting of: "*a* light in the world."

A new darkness

Nevertheless, truth is truth and gradually the influence of the false light of Western thought began to inevitably disintegrate and lose its sense of purpose and meaning. While science may have gifted us with GPS tracking systems and LED lights, our culture has, nonetheless, managed to lose its way in the dark. Science has helped to explain many of the "How?" questions, but the "Why?" questions remained hauntingly unanswered. Even while scientific discovery continued to advance unimpeded, Western philosophers—ironically—began to draw attention to the futility of life and the absence of meaning that Western thinking had given us. Almost prophetically philosophers such as Nietzsche (1844-1900) cast a long nihilistic shadow over the otherwise heady days of the post-enlightenment Romantic era. This, and the devastation of two World Wars, bore terrible testimony to the moral hollowness of Western culture. As I heard someone quip once, "Ah the West; so many possibilities; so little reason."

Amazingly however the West stubbornly refused to be daunted by the obvious vanity and moral bankruptcy that its philosophy and science had bequeathed it. Instead the West got busy with individualism expressed in narcissistic self-indulgence as a way of ignoring the meaninglessness. "Eat, drink and be merry for tomorrow we die" being the axiomatic upshot. Certainly the words of the American declaration of Independence, "that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." (1776) underscore this adage. These words have been venerated and ultimately raised to the status of sacred text in Western culture.

Unsurprisingly all this has given rise to the ‘cult of self’ with self-actualisation, self-fulfilment, self-esteem, self-help and selfies serving as altars of the new religion. “You only live once,” so live the dream, follow your desires and believe in yourself—the theme song of popular culture. After all, there is no life-after-death, no heaven or hell, no consequences or judgement because no one is watching us. You owe it to yourself to get out there and tick the boxes in your bucket list before it’s too late.

A new morality

This ‘brave new world’ of enlightened self-determination has become the supreme virtue of Western culture and arbiter of a new morality. Meanwhile the wisdom of the ages, expressed in natural and divine law, has been unceremoniously cast aside—even repudiated as dark and evil. This new morality is measured by the freedom to pursue personal happiness rather than answering to any higher call of either divine or human authority. This is particularly true of sexual ethics as romantic/sexual fulfilment became emblematic, and even central, to the ‘pursuit of happiness.’

Naturally, the cultural, political and legal environment has morphed to match this new morality. In the wake of the 1960s and 70s sexual revolution we have witnessed the introduction of no-fault-divorce, the legalisation of abortion on demand, the normalisation of pre-marriage sex, the endorsement of same-sex marriage and the deconstruction of gender. All these serve to expedite the ‘inalienable right’ for each individual to pursue whatever libidinous predilection happens to take their fancy. Even now there is serious discussion around the normalisation and acceptance into law of polygamy, polyamory and even paedophilia. Yet those who have the temerity to speak against this new ‘morality’ are instantly labelled as bigots, bullies and haters.

Astonishingly, this new morality is not only being championed by the self-interested secular culture; it is also being supported by significant sectors of the Western church. I find it inconceivable that same-sex-marriage is being touted as a virtue and pursued as a matter of justice, even though the overwhelming majority of the church—culturally, geographically and chronologically—has never once begun to even entertain the notion of SSM as a plausible possibility. The fact that SSM is a uniquely Western phenomenon ought to at least make us a little suspicious that SSM has more to do with our Western value systems than it does with any kind of biblical or serious-minded Christological reflection.

Getting back to basics

All this reveals just how much the church has been steadily syncretising with Western culture. It’s not only the so-called progressive liberal end of the church that has caved in to the pressure; even those claiming to be part of the reformed orthodox tradition have been caught up in the zeitgeist as well. I have talked with church leaders from a variety of denominations in many non-Western cultures who literally shake their heads with incredulity at how Western churches even entertain the notion of SSM, let alone how they form a theology to support it.

However the acceptance of SSM within the church is a symptom of a far more serious problem. The real issue is a faulty epistemology. After cosyng up with the culture through the centuries of Christendom, much of the church has gradually lost its discrete identity. The Western Church has allowed the astounding otherness, i.e. – holiness of the gospel to be diluted. Even after the enlightenment schism, the church has remained reluctant to differentiate itself from the culture and, if anything, seems even more determined to give away her birthright in an effort to be accepted and liked. This is certainly what appears to be happening in relation to SSM.

All this poses the question: “Is same-sex marriage the inevitable outcome of a Christ-centred theological reflection; or is it merely the progeny of syncretising with Western philosophy?” Sadly, I believe the latter of these options is what we are currently witnessing. The purportedly theological reasoning of those advocating SSM within the church, is little more than Western philosophy thinly veneered with Christian respectability. It may look vaguely Christian but get past the veneer and it is purely Western.

At the very least, it should be disquieting that the church has never once in all its history been leading a push for SSM against the grain of the culture. On the contrary, it seems more accurate to say that the church has been slavishly chasing the culture in thrall to the zeitgeist of the enlightenment. What makes this all the more maddening is that we are missing a wonderful opportunity to offer an alternative to the spiritual suicide that our Western culture seems so keen to commit. Even though our culture is metaphorically on fire and jumping off a cliff; half the church seems to be enthusiastically resolved to join them on the descent in order to remain ‘relevant.’

Jesus warned his disciples about this kind of scenario when he urged them to keep their distinct flavour saying, “You are the salt of the earth. But if salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot.” (Matthew 5: 13). If we look and taste the same as the world around us, then perhaps we too are in danger of being ultimately ignored and trampled underfoot. If we are saying and doing exactly what the world is saying and doing we may end up—paradoxically—becoming utterly irrelevant.

Rev. David Kowalick

(UC Minister of the Word in South Australia)

Revised July 2018