

Saint Paul the Sociologist

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Re-reading the first chapter of St Paul's Letter to the Romans recently, it occurred to me that Paul was offering, among other things, a kind of sociological theory of the three stages of society's moral degeneration.

The first stage is atheism, or at least a willful rejection of God:

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of those who by their wickedness suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made. So, they are without excuse; for though they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their senseless minds were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools; and they exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images of a mortal human being or birds or four-footed animals or reptiles. (1:18-23. NRSV)

The second stage is immense sexual immorality:

Therefore, God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the degrading of their bodies

among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen. For this reason, God gave them up to degrading passions. Their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural, and in the same way also the men, giving up natural intercourse with women, were consumed with passion for one another. Men committed shameless acts with men and received in their own persons the due penalty for their error. (1:24-27)

The third and final stage is generalized immorality:

And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind and to things that should not be done. They were filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, covetousness, malice. Full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, craftiness, they are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, rebellious toward parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless. They know God's decree, that those who practice such things deserve to die – yet they not only do them but even applaud others who practice them. (1:28-32)

If I'm correct (which would, by the way, entitle him to a chapter, or at least a few paragraphs, in any book on the history of sociology), does his theory apply to American society today? I think it may. Let's look at the three Pauline stages.

Sometime early in the second half of the 20th century the United States, hitherto an overwhelmingly Christian country, mostly Protestant but with a significant Catholic minority, began turning away from belief in God. At first not many people became

outright atheists, frankly and openly declaring their disbelief in God.

That has been changing in recent years; explicit atheism is no longer and especially rare thing in America nowadays. But great numbers of people have become virtual atheists. Without acknowledging their rejection of God, often without acknowledging it even to themselves, they have simply lost interest in God; he no longer had anything to do with their moral or intellectual life.

These people, if asked to describe their metaphysical beliefs, will often call themselves agnostics. Perhaps more often, they are simply indifferent to metaphysical questions. They have no time for belief, but they also have no time for atheism or agnosticism. They are busy about many other things: pursuing a career, rising in the world, having adventures (including romantic adventures), getting and spending money.

They have no time to ask themselves questions regarding the ultimate foundation of the universe. In the immediate postwar period, these atheists and semi-atheists were no more than a small cloud on the horizon. Today they are a dark cloud dominating the sky, blocking the sun.

By the late 1960s, America entered a second phase: an era of great sexual immorality, the so-called Sexual Revolution. At first, this revolution was a limited thing. It might more accurately have been labeled at first a fornication revolution, not a generalized sexual revolution. Or it could have been called a sex-in-college revolution. For its principal function at the beginning was to allow college boys and girls to go to bed with one another while having a non-guilty conscience about doing so.

Like all true revolutions, however, it moved inexorably leftward. Soon it gave moral legitimacy to unmarried cohabitation, loveless sex, unmarried childbirth, abortion, and – after something of a delay – homosexuality.

One might want to say that the culminating moment of the sexual revolution came in June of 2015 when the Supreme Court found (or rather, “found”) that the Constitution contains a right to same-sex “marriage” – just as one might want to say that the culminating moment of the French Revolution came in January of 1793 when the revolutionaries cut off the head of King Louis XVI. Just as the French Revolution still had many heads to cut off after January 1793, I suspect our sexual revolution still has many surprises in store for us. I suspect we have not yet seen its culmination.

Which brings us to phase three. Are we now on the verge of a complete moral breakdown? Having discarded God (our traditional foundation of morality) and having discarded very large chunks of traditional sexual morality, are we on the verge of plunging into moral anarchy? I don’t know. I fear the worst, but I think it is still a little too early to tell.

As an old sociology professor, it is my earnest prayer that God will allow me to live one or two hundred more years in order that I may see how all this turns out. (God probably has a different plan for me.) But it’s awfully interesting to have a ringside seat at what may be the collapse of a once-great nation.



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