

Cross-Cultural Education Journal



Discussions of Interest to Immigrants

VOLUME 1, NUMBER 5

DECEMBER 2004

Faith Lutheran Church

Seeking Improvement of Morality

*"Welcome one
another as
Christ welcomed
you, for the
Glory of God."*

Romans 15:7

**CULTURAL FORCES
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Introduction

Cultural forces can make it difficult for immigrants to understand what they observe and to acquire morality in modern society. In this essay we compare Chinese, American and European points of view and their individual problems. We also discuss morality concerns and explore alternative viewpoints and constructive responses. While these discussions mainly address Chinese immigrants, they can apply to people from any cultures who are subjected to modern pressures in society.

Effects of Chinese Culture on Morality

While materialism has presented problems in many cultures, it has developed recently in China due to a rapidly changing political and economic environment. Until the middle of the twentieth century common people in Chinese culture were guided by religion-based or similar philosophical principles of morality. Since 1949 communism has controlled China politically and economically. For most of the following years, lives of the people were materially poor and dominated by politics. Secular-based morality was developed as a means to control the population. Sexuality and other expressions of freedom were oppressed.

Since the 1980s, China has enjoyed a more open society. This has allowed people to see how the rest of the world lives and to

have opportunities to seek wealth. While much of the population has remained poor, some individuals have suddenly become quite rich by exploiting new freedoms and participating in newly developing capitalism. In some respects this has created a certain amount of chaos in the country. The morals and standards of the newly rich have come to dominate the society. When money becomes the symbol of success, then wealth commands dignity and respect, no matter how it was obtained. Even prostitutes who earn money by selling their bodies have been praised for their financial success. Driven by the desire for wealth, many people, doctors, professors and others all want to get into the business world. They call it "jumping into the sea."

Capitalism cannot be blamed as the sole cause of decline in morality. Most successful capitalists are able to maintain high moral standards. However, capitalism can contribute to relativism and a decline of spiritual life by offering many choices, some of which are bad. The positive side of capitalism is that it generally improves overall material standards of living as competition and economic efficiencies lower costs.

Since some people in China have been able to find wealth in the freer society, many have felt they were cheated by the govern-

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ment and communism is losing its control over people. The secular morality that previously held society together under the communists has waned. At the same time Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism that previously provided religious or philosophical standards of morality for centuries were suppressed by the government. Christianity, a later

religious influence on Chinese society, has also been suppressed.

Some who are educated are able to leave China and participate in world commerce. Of those left behind, many who lack necessary skills or fail to find opportunities to maintain their living standards may lose a psychological balance in their lives. In such desperate straits, if they have adult children in America or other countries who are enjoying a better life, they may demand or request that the children send them money. They have no other way to improve their financial and social position.

Effects of American Culture on Morality

American culture is not immune to a decline in morality and pursuit of material wealth. Those who look at the overall culture of America for moral standards may be poorly advised unless they realize this and see beyond what is presented in movies, television, magazines and other information media. America has many sub-cultures, some based on good morals, and some based on bad morals.

Since the “sexual revolution” of the 1960s and 1970s as part of a cultural revolt against authoritarian rule and order, anti-establishment movements in America caused a decline in morality that goes beyond sexual expression and extends to ques-

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tions of right and wrong regarding other aspects of life (business ethics, legal liabilities, illegal drug usage, abortion, etc). For many in America, the country embraced a relativistic morality that replaced religion-based values with secular-based values. In some cases, what is legal may not necessarily be moral. In past years, religion-based morality was the norm and

moral relativism was considered to be “counter-cultural.” Now this has been reversed; moral relativ-

ism is becoming the norm at the expense of religion-based morality, which is now becoming the counter culture.

Secular moral relativism is based on the premise that what is moral is dependent on what a societal group or person believes is acceptable behavior at a given time. This type of morality is not considered to be absolute. It is based on personal choices depending on circumstances and emotions. The people who dictate this relative morality may not even be a majority, but if they control the media, courts and other elements of society, they can dictate their morals (or lack of morals) to others.

Abortion is an issue that some people strongly oppose. Yet, even most who may accept abortion in the early stages of pregnancy would still not promote the idea of killing a child because its parents do not want to raise it. A professor at an American university has actually proposed that people be given the choice of killing a child within one month after its birth if they consider it to be a burden on them. This is an extreme example, but even just proposing it is a reflection of a decline of morals and is shocking to most people with faith-based morals.

An example of changes in American society can be seen on television. In the 1950s a favorite TV situation-comedy show was called “I Love Lucy.” It presented good, clean family fun. When a bedroom scene was shown, the two main characters, Lucy and her husband, Ricky, were shown in separate twin beds. Sex may have been an underlying theme, but it was not flaunted. Mainstream TV shows today are considerably different. A person watching “prime time” (evening) TV today might think that many people are having affairs or producing children outside of marriage and that homosexuality is a mainstream norm. Some people who do not have a well-established basis of strong moral principles may be influenced by this. Eventually behavior that was only tolerated before becomes accepted, to the detriment of society.

Individuals in some church organizations in American society are proposing a lesser moral standard than now exists for members of the clergy. Modification of churches’ definition of marriage to be something other than a union between one man and one woman is also being considered. These proposed changes are creating battles within mainstream church organizations and threaten to further weaken them.

However, there are still many people in American society who do not accept this new morality. They are often not visible though to those who do not choose to read, watch, or listen to media in which they appear, and when they express their opinions they are often criticized by people who are more vocal and do not share their views. An immigrant living in America should not take what he or she sees on television or other media as behavior that is acceptable to all who live here. What is morally repugnant to an immigrant may also be morally repugnant to a large portion of the American population.

Effects of European Culture on Morality

While European culture is not a main focus of this essay, it is worth mentioning because much of the morality we see in Europe is being touted in America as a worthy goal. An example of a decline of morals in Europe can be seen in Scandinavian countries. In Sweden, most children are now born outside of marriage. This has been a result of a decline of religion in Sweden and the rise of a socialist state in which many normal parenting processes have been taken over and provided by the government. While in some respects this may be good because it frees parents to do other things, a religion-based morality is being lost. Many in America look to Europe as an example of what we should become. They do not recognize the downside of following such a model.

Summary of Problems in Modern Morality

Problems in modern morality are thought by many to be based on a decline of the influence of religion in people’s lives. In some cases, such as China, secular-based morality replaced philosophy-based and/or religion-based morality in the second half of the twentieth century. However, changes in government policies and opportunities for creating wealth in China have stimulated a desire to increase material possessions without consideration of what this means to the quality of one’s spiritual life. This has often resulted in a decline in morality.

Solutions to Improving Morality

The directions that morality is taking in modern society may upset many of us. However, there is some

hope. The battles may be difficult, but they are not impossible. It is important to join the cultural life in a new country and understand one’s own moral or immoral behavior before one can improve morality in general. While we may be tolerant of what we consider to be immoral behavior, we do not have to accept it for ourselves. Furthermore, we can declare to our friends, neighbors and others that we believe having a moral society is important.

We can look to the Bible to provide a basis for our behavior. Regarding the marital relationship between men and women, the Bible is clear. (All references in this essay are from the New International Version.) God declares in Genesis 2:22, “...the Lord God made a woman...and he brought her to the man.” And in Genesis 2:24, “...a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh.”

Striving to improve one’s material life is not in itself sinful if one’s spiritual life is not compromised. Jesus provides guidance in Matthew 6:24 where he says “You cannot serve both God and Money.” He goes further in warning us not to neglect our spiritual life while pursuing wealth when he says in Matthew 19:24, Mark 10:25 and Luke 18:25, “...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.” When Jesus taught The Lord’s Prayer to his disciples, he instructed them in Mathew 6:11 to request that God “Give us our daily bread.” The “bread” he speaks of is not material wealth; it is adequate material sustenance for our bodies and spiritual food for our souls.

Regarding all aspects of morality, at least 600 to 700 or more commandments from God can be found in the Jewish Bible, depending on which authority is quoted. Of these the primary Ten Commandments from God are presented in Exodus 20:1-17 and repeated in Deuteronomy 5:1-21. They provide clear direction regarding: worshipping only the one true God, not creating idols, not misusing God’s name, having a day of worship, honoring parents, not committing murder, not committing adultery, not stealing, not lying, and not coveting a neighbor’s wife or property. These Ten Commandments form the primary basis of Judeo-Christian morality. For Christians, the teachings of Jesus form additional direction based on love. Jesus is

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Faith Lutheran Church

Faith Lutheran Church
9041 166th Avenue NE
Redmond, WA 98052

(425) 885-1810
Info@faithluth.org
www.faithluth.org

Faithful people, raising up people of Faith

If you wish opportunities to further explore what has been discussed here or additional topics of interest to immigrants and others, you might like to contact Rainbow Zeng at the address above.

Contributors:

David Gilmour, PhD, Librarian, Faith Seminary, Tacoma, WA
David Lund, Pastor, Faith Lutheran Church, Redmond, WA
Earl Nelson, PhD, Faith Lutheran Church, Redmond, WA

Also:

Bill Engstrom, Editor
Ben Zorn, PhD, Technology
Rainbow Zeng, Chinese language translator

About Faith Lutheran Church:

Faith Lutheran Church is a caring people, who support one another's spiritual growth and who reach out to the community with Christ's love.

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quoted in several places in The New Testament as having taught that we should love one another. For example in Matthew 22:37-40 Jesus declares that "Love the Lord your God..." is the most important commandment and he considered the second most important commandment to be his own, "Love your neighbor as yourself."

Immigrants struggling for moral guidance should be aware that what is becoming or has become the norm may not be what is morally acceptable in the eyes of God. It is important for immigrants to gain better understanding of the English language so they can recognize better what is good and what is bad morally in American society. In addition to formal English language classes, immigrants can join "Talk Time" classes at various libraries and churches, such as Faith Lutheran Church in Redmond, Washington, to be able to practice their language skills. There are many English-speaking people throughout the United States who want to serve their communities by meeting immigrants and helping them practice speaking.

While we can look to religion for guidance, we should not concentrate too much on promises of heaven and threats of hell. This is not practical. There is a saying that declares, "One cannot talk about spiritual life when the diaper is wet." What this can mean to immigrants is that the struggles of daily life override worries of hell. It is important to reflect more on God's

grace and love than on punishment. For believers, Jesus has died for our sins and, although we will not be perfect, we need to lead the best lives we can, serving God by serving one another.

Conclusions

The secular-based counter-culture of the past is becoming, or has become, the norm in many aspects of our lives. At the same time, the religion-based norm of the past is becoming or has become the counter-culture of today. But we do not have to accept the secular immorality that surrounds us. We can avoid much of it by being selective about what we read, what we watch on TV, and with whom we associate. We can help maintain our own moral integrity by associating with those people who share our values. Usually we can find such people in Christian churches.

At the same time, we do not need to totally shun those who do not share our values. Many of those who have other values that we consider to be less morally based may just lack knowledge and be confused by what is presented by society. In some cases, we may find that we can help educate them by declaring what we believe is correct behavior and by explaining why we believe it is correct in the eyes of God. We can look to the Bible and other religious teachings to gain a strong basis for our moral beliefs.