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THE LAST TANGO

by D.B. Knox

The Protestant Faith

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You may have read in the papers that the Federal Film Censor has allowed a controversial film called "Last Tango in Paris" to be imported into Australia without any cuts or alterations. The film is entirely devoted to sex. The American magazine "Time" is very frank in its review, from which I quote only a part: "The intimate scenes are unprecedented.....(the film tells) a stark story of sex as a be-all and end-all". "The Australian Financial Review" says "(The film) is pornography, because it conceives man totally in terms of his erotic being, because it separates his sexual activities from his total identity". No-one could accuse these two magazines the American "Time" and the "Australian Financial Review" of being puritanical in outlook, yet their comment is severe.

What are we to make of the fact that the Australian Film Censor has allowed the film to be shown in Australian cinemas? It is, of course, in accordance with the present federal government's policy on censorship, which reads, "The ALP policy on censorship is: 'The censorship laws to conform with the general principles that adults be entitled to read, hear and view what they wish in private or public, and that persons (and those in their care) be not exposed to unsolicited material offensive to them. For the purpose of implementing these principles a judicial tribunal to be established to hold public hearings and to give published reasons'". This policy is not confined to the Labour Party. It is based on the principle that individuals have a right to read, hear and see what they like. The principle is often generalised to say that the law should not interfere with people's private acts, whether these are homosexual or pornographical or gambling or abortion, or so on. But this is a false principle and if it thoroughly pursued, will lead to the break up of society. It is true that society should not interfere with the personal liberty of its members in areas which are harmless, but society has a right to prohibit even private acts which are harmful, even though the harm may be only to the perpetrator of the act. None of us lives to ourselves, and society is affected by all its members, and so it has a right to protect its members even against themselves. In other words, Cain's question "Am I my



brother's keeper?" must be answered in the affirmative. We have an obligation to our brother, at present, the state legislates in areas of private morality where plain harm is being done. For example, it prohibits heroin. The taking of drugs is a private activity, and directly harms on-one but the drug taker, yet the state does not allow people even with their consent to sell drugs to each other or even to possess drugs. Here is a plain case where the law takes account of private acts of morality because these are harmful to the person doing them.

The principle of allowing people "to read, hear and view what they wish" is a wrong one. On the contrary if reading or seeing certain literature is harmful to the person who sees it or reads it, society has a right to restrict this action by censorship, and ought to do so. The principle that the state should not interfere in private morality, although very popular these days is a false principle, and its falseness can be seen immediately when we think of the illicit drug trade. Selling drugs and taking drugs are private acts between consenting adults, but society prohibits these actions because of the damage the drug taker is doing to himself.

The question then is whether obscenity and pornography harm those who indulge in it. This is not an easy question to answer. It is easy to see the damage that drugs do, because this damage is physical. It is not so easy to see what is the injury that salacious thoughts and lustful habits do to a person who indulges in the, because these affect not his physical but rather his psychic and mental life. Yet we all know that happiness is more dependent on our psychological health than on our physical health. A person who is happily related to his wife and family and to his friends, can put up with physical pain and physical disabilities without losing his happiness, but a perfectly healthy person who is at odds with himself, devoid of friends and in strife at home, is unhappy, so much so that he may be driven to suicide. Injury that is done to our psyche and to our relationships with others is more devastating,



yet much harder to pinpoint than injury to our physical well-being. It is in the areas of human relationships that obscenity and pornography does its damage. Our sexual life and our sexual feelings are vehicles for establishing true relationship and if this side of our life becomes twisted in its development we will not be able to relate properly to other people, and so the chief object of life and its main source of joy will be denied us, even though our bodies remain perfectly healthy.

God's Word uniformly condemns dirty talk, filthy jesting and impure actions. We are not to allow our minds to meditate on these subjects. Our natural instincts indicate the same. St. Paul referred to the shame of even speaking of the things that some of his contemporaries did in secret. This reference to secrecy is interesting, for it shows that even pagan society recognises that obscenity is wrong and needs to be shrouded with secrecy. Again we ask the question, "Why is it wrong?", for God's Word does not condemn things which are harmless. Its evil lies in its misuse of the means of fellowship and social relationship with our fellow men and women, and particularly with our spouse, so as to prevent proper development of this fellowship. However the truest joys of life are to be found in such relationships and it is God's beneficent purpose for mankind that we should be related both to one another and to Him in true personal fellowship. Obscene habits of mind and licentious behaviour hinder the development of proper relationships.

Society is concerned to preserve the good life for its members, and therefore society is bound to provide barriers of censorship against actions and literature and films which will twist the thoughts and the character so as to prevent the development of true and happy fellowship and personal relationship with other people.

We are faced then with the practical question - to what extent can these evils be restrained. For example, we are at present able to keep the drug traffic at bay to some extent though it is more difficult to keep the liquor traffic or the gambling habit at bay as these things have

such a hold in our Australian community; but society is bound to do what it can in these respects.

With regard to the censorship of obscene literature there are three positions that can be taken. The one, adopted by the present Labour party platform, is that a person should be allowed to read or see in private as much obscenity and pornography as he chooses. A second possible position is that of the policy of the Minister of Customs in the previous government, namely that censorship should reflect current community standards, which in effect means that censorship should go along with the vociferous demands so long as they were of the minority. And the third possible position, which is the traditional position, and which was the position of the government before Mr. Chipp took over the portfolio, is that censorship should act as a break against tendencies which are harmful to the community. It is, of course, impossible for a democratically based government to legislate directly against the wishes of the people. Christians and Christian ministers should be indefatigable in educating people as to what is the right attitude in these matters. Nevertheless, the government ought to act slowly rather than go along with the vociferous members of the crowd much less should it be in advance of the crowd as is the policy of the present government.

Everything, of course, depends on whether obscenity is harmful to the individual. If it is not, then there should be no censorship at all. But God's Word and the natural heart confirms that it is harmful, and reflection will show the reason, namely, that obscenity misuses sex in a way which stultifies its purpose of being the basis of true natural relationships between people in society. If our thoughts are twisted in a dirty, obscene way we cannot have natural, spontaneous fellowship between the sexes on the one hand or within the family on the other, and especially between man and his wife. Fellowship requires respect for one another and a man habituated to obscene ways of thinking cannot suddenly begin to respect the other person as a person. This is the evil of



obscurity and this is why society should restrict obscenity as much as it is able to and this is why the censor's decision to allow "Last Tango in Paris" to be shown uncut in Australian cinemas is to be deplored.

If you agree with me, could you write to Senator. L. Murphy, Parliament House, Canberra, and ask him to disallow the importing into Australia of obscene films like the "Last Tango in Paris", and also write to the chief secretary, Parliament House, Sydney, asking that he should not allow it be shown in N.S.W. cinemas.

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