



THE
PERMISSIVE
SOCIETY

BY JOHN COURT

Trinity
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Society

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Trinity Booklet No. B 9

National Library of Australia Card number and ISBN:

0 86945 409 9

Published by the

TRINITY PUBLISHING SOCIETY

87 North Terrace,

ADELAIDE, South Australia, 5000.

"THE PERMISSIVE SOCIETY"

J.H. Court, Ph.D.

While some will shake their heads sadly at the way the world is deteriorating, and others rejoice at the progress towards greater personal freedom which permissive trends provide, I doubt whether the concerned Christian should be found in either camp. It is no novelty for the Christian to be found holding different views from much of the community, but we must be cautious of seeking inspiration from the way earlier generations have acted. The very fine example of Christian social reformers of the last century is worth noting, but let us beware of being simply negative and censorious as we see forces at work which we recognise as alien.

Although we hear much of the "permissive society" and can recognise what is meant, it may be argued that it is something of a contradiction in terms. The two words "permissive" and "society" are effectively mutually exclusive. The Oxford English Dictionary defines 'permissive' as "each individual free to do what he likes". 'Society' is defined as "the customs and organisation of a civilised nation." Surely it is impossible to have "customs and organisation" if each individual "does what he likes". To maintain a viable society means that at least some individual freedoms must be sacrificed. Few save the anarchists would dispute this. The Christian finds that there is disagreement with the advocates of permissiveness over the extent to which controls are acceptable, desirable and necessary. There can be no doubt that the Christian is on the side of freedom if not permissiveness. "If Christ shall make you free, you shall be free indeed". However, he sees freedom as something derived from submission to a higher authority, i.e. the will of God. In contrast to the present emphasis on personal freedom as a right to be staunchly defended, the Christian is prepared to renounce personal freedom if it should be to the benefit of the society. The distinction is, in other words, between a "self-centred" view of the world and an "other-centred" view. Renunciation and self-sacrifice remain important Christian

concepts which are in contrast to the demand today for personal freedom.

It is worth considering the proposition that the "permissive society" is actually a myth because this highlights certain anomalies. We may observe increasing freedom in some areas, but how far is this a reaction against excessive control in other areas? Some have said Australia is too tightly bound by legislation. Certainly it seems difficult at times to avoid breaking laws. See what happens if you drive in Victoria without seatbelts, or operate a public lift in South Australia when under 18 years of age. What happens if you try to import a German shepherd dog or bring a pineapple back from a Queensland holiday? Go out and try to buy some fireworks, or shop in Elizabeth on Friday evening, and you will doubt whether our society is permissive.

In general we accept such restrictions insofar as they are necessary for the social good. We object when the degree of control appears a greater evil than the danger which legislation seeks to prevent. The Christian is taught to be active both in keeping the laws and in supporting those responsible for making them. If we fail to support those in authority by active interest and prayer, then maybe we have only ourselves to blame if things are not to our liking.

There are other areas where our conduct is a great deal less restrained than those I have mentioned. These are the areas of apparent morality (divorce, abortion, censorship, etc.) as well as areas where economics seem to be influential. We are given freedom to kill ourselves smoking, and advertisers may persuade us powerfully on our way. We may go to any chemist and buy drugs which may turn us into addicts and destroy physical health. We may be entertained on stage and screen with adventures which, if performed in reality would give rise to criminal, and possibly civil proceedings. It is difficult to escape the view that economics are more powerful than any ethical

arguments in these things. Surely the Christian must be as sensitive to the exploitation behind the persuasive advertisers who exploit the individual's fears and fancies as we are to those who cheapen human relationships and make people into objects for personal gain.

What then should be the Christian's stand in a pluralist, secular society where many traditionally-held values are being challenged? What can we say and do when it is stated that "it is impossible to legislate morality"? I believe the Christian must adopt a positive stance, making a genuine contribution to the fast-changing ferment of opinion around us. To have nothing to say would be to fail utterly and fall into the trap of speechless uncertainty that the Church has often fallen into before. It would be easy to be negative, destructive and critical in the face of powerful contrary pressures, but I doubt the wisdom of this too. Rather, I propose that Christians can exert a powerful influence positively by being champions for a responsible society. When values and attitudes are changing and many lack certainty, we can responsibly seek to educate, inform, mould opinion, and live a personal life of discipline and example.

As guides to contributing to a responsible society, I want to offer a few suggestions for action and attitude. These include attempts to counter what I consider to be errors, as well as proposals for taking initiative in the community of which we are a large part.

1. To those who would say "no one can legislate morality" I would say, "True, but it is possible to legislate so that the prevailing attitudes make moral behaviour easier." At present, the public condoning of premarital sex, and the open promotion of homosexuality make it increasingly difficult for the young to make responsible moral decisions.

2. The assertion that we must all be left free to make our own moral choices is naive. Any parent who tries this in relation to children, and refuses to intervene in decision-making processes, will be guilty of sitting by while powerful forces outside the home and in (especially the T.V.), go to work on the fertile soil.

As adults, too, we cannot pretend that we are making free choices: commercial enterprises and advertisers tell us what we will like, do and buy. If the mass media tell us constantly that immorality is fun and hurts nobody, the Christian must be correspondingly vocal in refuting this.

3. Whether we like it or not, people generally believe that if something is legal it is also right. There were times when this could be generally taken as a safe assumption, but it need not be, and is not at this time. The Christian must responsibly discriminate between what is lawful and what is helpful. ("All things are lawful: all things are not helpful".) (I Cor. 10:23).

4. We must recognise that the standards we demand of ourselves will be higher than those society is prepared to demand or legislate for. There is an idealism in the Christian's refusal to accept good when the best is available which is not matched elsewhere.

Paul said, "Don't let the world around you squeeze you into its own mould, but let God remould your minds from within."
(Romans 12:2; J.B. Phillips).

5. Although we cannot expect the law of the land to be framed to facilitate Christian aspirations, we have none-the-less a responsibility to show how far Christian values can contribute to the well-being of the whole society. For example, when the evidence from history shows that immorality is associated with social decline, we must be prepared to

campaign for high moral standards in the community. We should also be able to expect in a democracy that our views will receive consideration in proportion to our presence in the community.

6. In seeking to speak out against immorality we must make sure we are on target. We are easily ridiculed for campaigning against sex and nudity. Our opponents are right in saying there is nothing wrong with either. Just as the Bible condemns not "money as the root of all evil", but "the love of money", so we must see that the real evils are a devaluation of sex from a special relationship to a cheapened exhibition, and an exploitation of the human body instead of a reverence for it. The present trend in films and books is not such much permissive as dehumanising and irresponsible. What passes as "adult" is often no more than puerile and perverted.

7. The Christian must work for a society which is not simply personally comfortable. It was Cain who asked, "Am I my brother's keeper?" and it was a well-read ape who asked, "Am I my keeper's brother?" We need not ask. We must be responsible for our neighbour, whether disadvantaged or sophisticated. We must be responsible also for those who will come after us. The present rate of change in values and attitudes makes one realise that the next decade or two may decide whether man continues to exploit himself and his environment to the point of extinction. I can think of no group better equipped to meet such a challenge than those committed Christians who will campaign for a responsible society.

8. The Christian should recognise that the authoritative statements of the Bible are for the good of Christian and non-Christian alike. God has made known to us moral standards which are for the benefit of mankind. These are exemplified in the Ten Commandments in the Old Testament and the Sermon on

the Mount in the New Testament. They can be summarised as "Love God and love your neighbour." Sufficient evidence is available from history, and personal experience to establish the validity of these directions for the moral welfare of all. Therefore the Christian feels bound to follow these himself, while doing everything possible to make it easier for others to do so as well. The innocent, the immature, the psychologically maladjusted, as well as the integrated, need to be protected from others and themselves. On this basis, whatever other arguments one may present in this context, the absolute standards of God are of over-riding significance to the Christian, both as a basis for his own behaviour and to be made known to others for their recognition and acceptance.

The Governor-General, Sir Paul Hasluck, when asked to speak on the permissive society, said:

"At present, in Australia, I would suggest that there is more constant and persistent invasion of privacy by evil influence than by good. What is lewd and suggestive is persistently thrust under notice. What is violent and criminal is presented romantically, and successful greed and the very high earthly emoluments of sin are shown with glamour in ways that make it difficult for even the youngest and most carefully protected to avoid contamination. The stimulation of sexuality and aggression is constant. One of the consequences of the new attitudes is that the right or the power of society to take action to protect any of its members, even the innocent, from these influences or to check the attacks on their privacy, is being challenged.

I wonder whether the churches are doing all that they might do. Let me confess that sometimes I have found difficulty, when hearing some pronouncements, in understanding why persons who profess to give religious leadership dwell in such a shadowy land trying to distinguish between what is good and evil, between what

is clean and what is dirty, what is true and what is false, what is one's duty towards a neighbour and what may cause a brother to stumble.

If our society ceases to be one in which the view of man as a spiritual being prevails over the view of man as an animal capable only of animal antics and animal relationships, the impending changes in the rules of society and the standards of conduct will, I am sure, bring confusion, distress, danger, and eventually collapse. Religious people have to join the struggle and do it, not simply by giving shrill cries of alarm at every instance of outrageous conduct, but by maintaining their own faith and winning the argument."

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FOOTNOTE:

Many ask how can Christians individually and churches collectively actually do anything to influence the permissive society constructively. In South Australia, a concerted effort by Christians, acting as the "Moral Action Committee", resulted in action against the proposed staging of "Oh! Calcutta!" with a direct effect that appeared in human terms incapable of succeeding.

The success of this stand on a particular issue can be related to (1) a heavy reliance on prayer; (2) a unanimity of purpose of Christians from all denominations.

Among the consequences of this stand have been

- 1) the encouragement of many Christians who have found positive action is possible after all;
- 2) the increased opportunities for evangelism both in church and in personal witness.

After the Moral Action Committee had been formed, it was found that an interdenominational group existed in all other

States committed to action in defence of moral standards in the community. A link has now been made by South Australia with this group (the Community Standards Organisation) so that branches now exist in all States. Personal and group memberships are possible (\$1.00 per annum), providing an effective co-ordination of concerned Christians, particularly in relation to issues like advertising, exploitation through the mass media, and pornography.

For further information concerning the Community Standards Organisation, contact the address below -

VICTORIA:

Box 117, P.O. Moorabbin, Vic. 3189.

NEW SOUTH WALES:

Box 1306, G.P.O., Sydney. N.S.W. 2001

QUEENSLAND:

225 Pickering Street, Enoggera, Q'land. 4051

A.C.T.

104 Pennefather Street, Higgins, A.C.T. 2615

WESTERN AUSTRALIA:

5 Elizabeth Street, South Perth. W.A. 6151

SOUTH AUSTRALIA:

7 Caulfield Avenue, Cumberland Park. S.A. 5041

OR, in Victoria, ring 63.9296 (24 hour service).

Other useful booklets on the Christian's responsibility to be salt in the world:

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THE PERMISSIVE SOCIETY

This paper was presented by Dr. Court
at a public Panel held at
Holy Trinity Church in July 1971.
Other points of view on the subject
were contributed by Dr. N. Bléwett
(Civil Liberties), the Rev. K. Smith
(Methodist Church), and the Attorney-
General of South Australia,
(the Hon. L. J. King).

Recommended price 10c

ISBN 0 86945 409 9

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