

IMPRIMIS

"Can We Be Good Without God?"

by Chuck Colson
Founder, Prison Fellowship Recipient, 1993
Templeton Prize

Charles Colson, former special counsel to President Richard Nixon, is a highly acclaimed author, speaker, and commentator. He is founder and chairman of Prison Fellowship, a ministry devoted to helping prisoners, ex-prisoners, victims, and their families. Born Again, Colson's international best seller, detailed his conversion to Christianity in 1973. His other widely read books include *Life Sentence*, *Loving God, Who Speaks for God?*, *Kingdoms in Conflict*, *Against the Night*, *The God of Stones and Spiders*, *The Body* (with Ellen Vaughn), and *Why America Doesn't Work* (with Jack Eckard). He also writes a regular column for *Christianity Today* and appears regularly in the national press and on radio and television. He is the recipient of the 1993 Templeton Prize for Progress in Religion.

Preview: There have been many explanations offered for social problems like crime and drug abuse in American society. But, as Chuck Colson argues, most of these explanations, even when they touch upon the breakdown of values, avoid addressing the fundamental question, "Can we be good without God?" His remarks were delivered at the 73rd Shavano Institute for National Leadership seminar, "Culture Wars," in Palm Beach, Florida, for over 400 business and community leaders from around the country.

Last December, newspapers ran a striking photograph of a group of people held at bay by armed guards. They were not rioters or protesters; they were Christmas carolers. The town of Vienna, Virginia, had outlawed the singing of religious songs on public property. So these men, women, and children were forced to sing "Silent Night" behind barricades, just as if this were Eastern Europe under communist rule instead of Christmas in America in 1992.

We have spent the past 30 years determined to secularize our society. Some months before the incident in Virginia, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in *Lee vs. Weisman* that a rabbi who delivered a very politically correct "To Whom It May Concern" prayer at a Rhode Island junior high school commencement had violated the constitution-

al rights of a fifteen-year-old student in the audience. The Court said, in effect, that the girl must be legally protected against listening to views she disagreed with. There was a time when it was a mark of civility to listen respectfully to different views; now you have a constitutional right to demand that those views are not expressed in your presence.

In another case that went all the way to the Supreme Court, visual religious symbols have been banned. Zion, Illinois, in the "heartland of America," was forced to eliminate the cross featured in its city seal, because the Justices ruled it a breach of the First Amendment.

In education, the same kind of court-enforced secularism has been so successful that teachers may hand out condoms in school, but they are forbidden to display a copy of the Ten Commandments on a bulletin board. Students, meanwhile, may indulge in almost any kind of activity in school, but they are forbidden to pray.

The Supreme Court is not the only institution out to protect us from the "threat" faith poses. The media assault upon religious believers has been fierce. Cardinal O'Connor has been excoriated by the *New York Times* for even suggesting that he might deny the sacraments to a pro-choice legislator. (This was the same *New York Times* that praised a Louisiana archbishop who refused to administer communion to a segregationist legislator in 1962.)

In February of 1993, the *Washington Post* featured a front-page article that characterized evangelical Christians as "largely poor, uneducated, and easy to command." If a journalist said that about any other group in America, he would be fired on the spot, but the *Post* didn't fire anyone. It merely expressed surprise that many readers found the description offensive. A few days later, one of the bemused editors explained that they felt they were simply printing something that is "universally accepted."

It is no wonder that Peter Berger, professor of sociology at Boston University, says that if you look around the world you will find that the most religious country is India, and the most irreligious country is Sweden—and America is an interesting combination of Indians who are governed by Swedes.

A Post-Christian Society

These Swedes have done their job well. In 1962, polls indicated that at least 65 percent of all Americans believed the Bible to be true. In 1992, polls indicate that only 32 percent do, while 50 percent say that they actually fear fundamentalists. If the polls are right, our Judeo-Christian heritage is no longer the foundation of our values. We have become a post-Christian society.

The process of "shedding" our religion began with the cultural revolution of the 1960s, which exalted existentialism and a kind of "live-for-the-moment-God-is-dead-or-irrelevant" philosophy. Today, that Sixties philosophy has become mainstream; it is in the White House, it is in the poetry of Maya Angelou, it is in every walk of life. This is not to say that people aren't going to church. Forty-four percent of the American people still attend religious services regularly. But we live in a Donahue-ized culture in which we sit and watch, hour by hour, the banality that passes for knowledge on television, and we rarely think about issues in terms of Judeo-Christian truth. We hear carolers singing "Silent Night" or an invocation at a public ceremony and we are filled with trepidation; we are worried that we are infringing upon the rights of nonbelievers. We see the symbol of the cross and we feel compelled to paint it out because it might

violate the principle of separation between church and state. We exalt tolerance, not truth, as the ultimate virtue.

The City of Man

Can we really sustain the city of man without the influence of the City of God? St. Augustine argued that it was impossible.

Any society, especially a free society, depends on a moral consensus and on shared assumptions: What is ultimate reality? What is



meaningful in life? By what standards should we be governed? These common values are the glue that holds society together.

In America, the glue is wearing pretty thin. We are in the middle of an identity crisis in which we are attempting to redefine our basic values all over again. We can no longer assume that right and wrong have clear meanings or that there is universal truth. After all, pollsters tell us that sixty-seven percent of the American people say there is no such thing.

What we fail to realize, however, is that rejecting transcendental truth is tantamount to committing national suicide. A secular state cannot cultivate virtue—an old-fashioned word you don't hear much in public discourse these days. In his classic novel, *The Brothers Karamazov*, the 19th century Russian novelist Dostoyevsky asked, essentially, "Can man be good without God?" In every age, the answer has been no. Without a restraining influence on their nature, men will destroy themselves. That restraining influence might take many abstract forms, as it did for the Greeks and Romans, or it might be the God of the Old and the New Testaments. But it has always served the same purpose.

Even before Dostoyevsky posed his timeless question, an 18th century German professor of logic and metaphysics, Immanuel Kant, had already dismissed it as irrelevant. God exists, said Kant, but he is separate from the rest of life. Over here are the things that we can empirically know; over there are things we can accept only on faith. What does that do to ethics? Kant's answer was to separate them from faith; we can, on our own, with only our rational capacities to depend upon, develop what he called the "categorical imperative." He explained: "Act as if the maxim from which you act were to become through your will a universal law"

This rational, subjective view is the basis of ethics being taught in nearly every school in America today, from Public Grammar School No. 1 to Harvard Business School. Students are never exposed to traditional moral teaching in school, only to rationalism. Pragmatism and utilitarianism are substituted for Judeo-Christian ethics, and students are taught that they have the inner capacity to do good rationally, apart

The Danger of Self-Righteousness

Nothing could be more dangerous.

Let me give you a case study:

Chuck Colson. I grew up in the Depression years. My dad, who was the son of a Swedish immigrant, used to tell me two things on Sunday afternoon. Although no one in my family had ever gone to college, he said, "If you work hard, you can get to the top. That's the American dream." And the second thing he used to say was, "Always tell the truth. No matter what you do in life, always tell the truth."*

I kept both of these pieces of advice in mind as I grew up, earned a scholarship to college and then went on to law school. I also remembered them when I joined a very successful law firm and years later in 1969 when President Nixon asked me to come to work at the White House. I took everything I had earned and put it into a blind trust. (If you want to make a small fortune, let me tell you how: You take a large fortune and put it in a blind trust.) I did everything to avoid even the appearance of a conflict of interest. I passed unsolicited gifts on to my employees. I refused to see people whom I

*One could not go through Watergate and claim much distinction for anything, but the fact was that I testified under oath 44 times and I was the only defendant who was not charged with perjury. My dad's lesson stuck: tell the truth.

had practiced law with or made business deals with—I mean, I *really* had studied Kant's categorical imperative, and I *knew* that I would always do right.

What happened? I went to prison.

Why? Because we are never more dangerous than when we are feeling self-righteous. We have an infinite capacity for this feeling and for the self-justification that accompanies it. It was only when Jesus Christ came into my life that I was able to see myself for who I am. Indeed, it is only when we all turn to God that we begin to see ourselves as we really are—as fallen sinners desperately in need of His restraint and His grace.

Kant's philosophy, like much Enlightenment thought, was based on a flawed view of human nature that held that men are basically good and, if left to their own devices, will almost always do good things. It was also dead wrong in assuming that the categorical imperative could take the place of moral law. Just because men can think the right thing, it does not mean that they will heed it. Remember Pierre, one of the central characters in Tolstoy's *War and Peace*? Torn by spiritual agonies, he cried out to God, "Why is it that I know what is right and I do what is wrong?" We can know what is right, but we don't always have the will to do what is right.

How Shall We Live?

In books like *Mere Christianity* and *The Abolition of Man*, the 20th century British Christian apologist C.S. Lewis attempted to refute Kant and make a powerful intellectual case for the City of God that did not wall it off from the city of man. In an essay entitled, "Men Without Chests," he drew an analogy between the spiritual life and the body that sums up his objections to the supreme rationalism of the Enlightenment. The head, Lewis said, is reason, and the stomach is passion or appetite. The head alone cannot control the stomach. It needs the chest, which is spirit, to restrain our baser passions and appetites.

Yet after World War II schools began to teach ethics based on subjective standards without transcendent moral truths. Lewis challenged this, writing, "We make men without chests and we expect of them virtue and enterprise. We laugh at honor and we are shocked to find traitors in our midst. We castrate and bid the geldings be fruitful." That is what we are doing in America today.

We are taking away the spiritual element and abandoning morality based on religious truth, counting instead on our heads and our subjective feelings to make us do what is right.

In our zeal to accommodate our so-called enlightened and tolerant age, we have lost the ideal of public virtue. I am reminded of Samuel Johnson, who, upon learning that one of his dinner guests believed morality was merely a sham, said to his butler, "Well, if he really believes that there is no distinction between virtue and vice, let us count the spoons before he leaves." Today, there aren't any spoons left to count. Look at Washington, Wall Street, academia, sports, the ministry—all the spoons are gone because we can no longer distinguish between virtue and vice.

Recovering that ability depends on asking the right questions. Our brightest and best leaders are concerned with the question, "How shall we be governed?" But in the Book of Ezekiel the Jews asked: "How shall we live?" It doesn't matter who governs if society has no spiritual element to guide it. Unless we learn how to live—as men with chests—we are doomed.

The City of God

I have seen this truth most powerfully in the area in which I've been called to spend my life. With the help of my friend Jack Eckerd and others, I work with men and women in prison in 54 countries around the world. The crisis is grave. In Washington, D.C., for example, 46 percent of the inner city black population between the ages of 18 and 31 is either in prison, on parole, or on probation. America as a whole has the highest per capita rate of incarceration in the world, and, for the last 25 years, the crime rate has gone up every year. We can't build prisons fast enough. In the last seven years, we have seen a 120 percent increase in murders committed by those between the ages of 18 and 20. According to some sources, twenty percent of all schoolchildren carry a weapon.

Criminologist James Q. Wilson, among others, has tried to identify the root cause of this epidemic of violence. When he began his inquiry, he was certain that he would discover that in the great period of industrial revolution in the latter half of the 19th century there was a tremendous increase in crime. But, to his astonishment, he discovered a decrease. And then he looked at the years of the Great Depression. Again, there was a significant decrease in crime. Frustrated by these findings which upset all our

preconceived notions, Wilson decided to search for a single factor to correlate. The factor he found was religious faith.

When crime should have been rising in the late 1800s because of rapid urbanization, industrialization, and economic dislocation, Victorian morality was sweeping across America. It was a time of intense spirituality. It was not until the conscious rejection of Victorian morality during the Roaring Twenties that crime went up. This was the era when Sigmund Freud's views were coming into vogue among "thinking" Americans: people weren't evil, just misguided or mistreated, or they required better environments. Sin was regarded as a lot of religious claptrap.

The crime rate did not decline again until the Great Depression, a time of people banding together in the face of crisis. Wilson concluded, therefore, that crime was in large part caused by a breakdown of morality. Since 1965 the crime rate has steadily risen. In the same period, religious faith has waned. We have told people there are no

absolutes and that they are not responsible for their own behavior. They are simply victims of a system that isn't working anymore and they don't have to worry about it because the government is going to fix it for them. We thought that in this brave new world we could create the perfect secular utopia. But the secular utopia is in reality the nightmare we see as we walk through the dark, rotten holes we call prisons all across America.

In this context, it always amazes me when I listen to politicians say, "We are going to win the war on drugs by building prisons, appointing more judges, and putting more police on the beat. I remember when President Bush announced the "War on Drugs." Having spent seven months in prison, there wasn't one night that I did not smell marijuana burning. If you can get marijuana into a prison, with watchtowers, inspections, and prison guards, you can get it into a country. You can send the U.S. Marines to Colombia to bum all the fields, seal all the borders, and build all the prisons you want, but you won't stop drug use in this country because it isn't a problem of supply; it is a problem of demand. When there is no greater value in the lives of so many people than simply fulfilling individual desires and gratifications, then crime and drug abuse become inevitable. The soaring crime rate is powerful testimony to the failure of the city of man, deprived of the

moral influence of the City of God.

If we cannot be good without God, how do we sustain public virtue in society? We cannot do it through the instrument of politics. Alasdair MacIntyre, moral philosopher at Notre Dame, says that "Politics has become civil war carried on by other means." Without moral authority to call upon, our elected leaders are reduced to saying, "We can't say that this is right and that's wrong. We simply prefer that you wouldn't murder." And crime and drug abuse are not the only results of this loss of moral authority. Forty-four percent of the baby boomers say that there is no cause that would lead them to fight and die for their country.

In the city of man, there is no moral consensus, and without a moral consensus there can be no law. Chairman Mao expressed the alternative well: in his view, morality begins at the muzzle of a gun.

There has never been a case in history in which a society has been able to survive for long without a strong moral code. And there has never been a time when a moral code has not been informed by religious truth. Recovering our moral code—our religious truth—is the only way our society can survive. The heaping ash remains at Auschwitz, the killing fields of Southeast Asia, and the frozen wastes of the gulag remind us that the city of man is not enough; we must also seek the City of God. **A**

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