

THE HEDONISTIC FACE OF HUMANISM

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*America has become the world's foremost champion of hedonism. This is the mindset in which the acquisition of pleasure and enjoyment is the highest priority in life. Responsibilities such as worship to a holy God, fulfillment of obligations, and personal improvement are deemed of secondary importance. Having fun is all that counts.*²

No nation in all of world history has ever been as hedonistic as the United States now is. Americans now spend more money on pleasurable pursuits of all types than on religion and education combined.³

Hedonism and Pleasure

Not all things pleasurable are hedonistic. It's a pleasure to taste well-prepared food. It's a pleasure to rest after a toilsome day. It's a pleasure to know you've done a job well. In itself, pleasure is good. Pleasure is a part of God's creation, of which he himself said was "very good" (Genesis 1:31). Moreover, the wise man of Old Testament times wrote that "there is nothing better for a man than that he should enjoy eat and drink, and make his soul enjoy good in his labor" (Ecclesiastes 2:24).

Yet pleasure, as a part of creation, is no more worthy of one's total pursuit than is fame, riches or power. The pursuit of pleasure may, in fact, be harmful rather than beneficial. Jesus once told a parable about how the word of God, when planted in the hearts of some people, is choked by "cares and riches and pleasures of this life" (Luke 8:14). The pursuit of pleasure apart from godliness is like serving the creature rather than the Creator (Romans 1:25.)

The philosophy most associated with pleasure is that of 'hedonism.' The name of this philosophy comes from the ancient Greek word *hedone* which indicates pleasure. In ancient times, the philosophy of hedonism was promoted in various forms by Cyrenians and Epicureans. The Cyrenians tended to stress the licentious and restricted pleasures to those of the senses whereas the Epicureans, while acknowledging the pleasures of sex, put more emphasis on peace of mind and the absence of pain.

Modern philosophers such as Thomas Hobbs, Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mills have also defended hedonism. Hedonism is now often categorized in different ways. Psychological hedonism contends that as a matter of scientific fact, pleasure is man's only motivation. Utilitarian hedonism contends that a person's conduct should have as its goal the giving of pleasure to the greatest possible number of people. Egotistic hedonism restricts pleasure to that

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²George Barna and William Paul McKay. *Vital Signs: Emerging Social Trends and The Future of American Christianity* (Westchester, IL: Crossway Books, 1984), 139-140.

³William S. Banowsky, *It's A Playboy World* (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell Company, Spire Books, 1969); 25.

of a single person. Philosophical hedonism contends that moral conduct should seek the most pleasure with the least amount of pain. In any case, hedonism is not so much the doing of a specific act which grants pleasure (such as obtained through eating or sexual activity) as it is a way of life produced by the viewpoint that there is nothing more worthy of pursuit in life than that which gives pleasure.

Although Christians distinguish between those pleasures that are biblically moral from those that are Biblically immoral, there is no such distinction in hedonism. To a hedonist, whatever is considered pleasurable is considered morally good. Hedonism does not rely upon sources outside of man to determine what is pleasurable and what is not. In hedonism, as in humanism, “man is the measure of all things.” In hedonism, pleasure is the means by which man measures all things.

Modern Conditions Which Have Produced Hedonism

While hedonism has always had some adherents, its extreme popularity in recent times has not always been possible. Throughout most of known human history about all most people could do was survive. Hedonism requires leisure time and personal wealth. Unlike most people in history who have had neither leisure time nor wealth, modern man often has much of both. “America has become a nation of tremendous prosperity. No other nation in the history of the world has known such material abundance, nor enjoyed such a broad distribution of that wealth among its people . . . The affluence of the American society has elevated pleasure-intended activities from the realm of the ‘desirable’ to that of the ‘essential.’ An entire sector of the economy has blossomed to satisfy the spectrum of people’s urges. America has become a hedonistic heaven.”⁴

Hedonism is also made possible by removal of social barriers. In rural America, everyone knew every other person’s businesses, their goings and comings; not so in modern America. The modern city provides a place of estrangement among crowds. People are free to pursue their selfish pleasures without neighbors’ awareness, or social condemnation. Moreover, the popularity of hedonism in modern times is partially the result of modern technology which has produced, advertised, and promoted new ways of acquiring pleasures of all kinds through travel, sports, drugs, etc. An interesting psychological factor now tending to produce hedonism is the prospect of doomsday. In a book about college students of the 1980s, *When Dreams and Heroes Died*, Arthur Levine said that “students have a sense of impotence and fatalism on the large issues. When they are asked about the future of America or the future of the world, they say, ‘It’s going down the tubes and there’s nothing we can do about it.’ With that attitude, students think they might as well enjoy themselves. Levine calls this hedonism ‘going first class on the *Titanic*. If you’re going first class on the *Titanic*, you don’t want a worldview, an understanding of life as a whole. It would only get in the way of enjoying yourself and not thinking about tomorrow.”⁵

Leisure time, personal affluence, urban living, scientific technology, doomsday prospects, and other factors have all contributed to the current popularity of hedonism. However, if any one

⁴Barna and McKay. *Ibid.*, 139-140.

⁵Steve Garber, “Going First Class On The *Titanic*,” *Christianity Today*, (November 20, 1987),

person were to be singled out as the most influential promoter of hedonism in modern times, it would surely have to be Hugh Hefner. His *Playboy* magazine, first published in the mid-1950s has had an unusually large circulation – especially among college and university people – in the intellectual community. *Playboy* has also had the second largest circulation of all American magazines in all of Western Europe, preceded only by the *Reader's Digest*.⁶ Through *Playboy*, Hefner has produced a slackening of moral standards, an excessive freedom of profane expression, and a much less disciplined world.

Because of Hefner we hear people casually using obscenities in public; we meet men and women who are openly living together outside marriage; we see young people getting high on whatever exotic substances they can obtain; we pass singles bars filled with men and women on the prowl for a one-night stand; we read in the newspaper daily of the soaring divorce rate caused by people bored and dissatisfied with the restrictions of married life; we see advertisements for X-rated movies or video-cassettes; we see people in T-shirts bearing suggestive or profane language; we are frequently upset by the aggressively selfish and self-indulgent attitudes we see in so many of our neighbors.⁷

The destructive nature of Hefner's philosophy, endorsed and promoted by the networks, hasn't escaped some of the secular press. *Chicago Tribune*, columnist Bob Greene makes some startling and intriguing personal assessments in an article on Hefner. Green credits him with being one of the two most influential Americans in the second half of the twentieth century.⁸

Green says, "Hugh Hefner let Americans know that they could behave in any way they pleased. Conventional ideas of morality didn't matter; the standards of one's parents didn't matter; the approval of one's peers didn't matter. All that mattered was that feeling good became an end in itself."⁹ To say that Hugh Hefner is the originator of the immoral revolution we've witnessed in recent decades would be incorrect. However, to say that no one person in modern times has more effectively exploited immorality than has Hugh Hefner would not be inaccurate. He took advantage of the fact that, for most Americans, moral standards had already been emptied of their Godly authority.

When a personal sense of duty, responsibility and a sense of moral righteousness is no longer rooted in a belief that God holds all men accountable for their actions, then human behavior is often regulated by one's own personal pleasures. In the name of freedom, Hefner championed pleasure. By calling for individual freedom, Hefner promoted individual selfishness and social irresponsibility that worked havoc on our cultural morality and especially on the institution of marriage.

In the *Playboy* Press' 'official history' of the modern sex revolution, author Allan Sherman proved surprisingly candid. The sex revolution, he suggested, was led by 'grown men and women, determined, dedicated, and dirty-minded beyond the call of duty.' He

⁶William S. Banowsky, *Ibid.* 25.

⁷Donald E. Wildmon, *The Home Invaders* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 100.

⁸*Ibid.*

⁹*Ibid.*

added: ‘Carefully, and often secretly, my generation manned the battlefronts of the [Sex] Revolution. We produced and sold the rock ‘n roll records with risqué lyrics; we invented the term ‘wonder drug,’ and LSD as the true panacea, pushing it at the kids in the allowed atmosphere at Harvard. My generation wrote and read best sellers with nothing more to recommend them than a half-dozen paragraphs of old fashioned smut . . . We invented or at least perfected wife-swapping. We performed illegal abortions. We crowded into the dark to watch those stupid stag films.’

According to Sherman, this conscious assault on the sexual restraints maintained by Western middle-class culture was soon transformed into an attack on the whole ‘incredibly clean-cut and impossibly wholesome’ American world of Disney, church socials, Shirley Temple, the YMCA, Blondie and Dagwood, *The Saturday Evening Post*, motherhood, miniature golf, apple pie, and hot dogs. In the end, Sherman suggested, the sex revolution of the 1960s and early ‘70s ‘removed America’s backbone and revealed our awful secret: Stripped of the Puritan ethic, we have no morals at all.’ When it was over, he said, ‘we were coming unglued, splitting off into gaps and shards and lunatic fringes.’ Sherman added that ‘nothing was reduced to less recognizable rubble than the revered . . . Institution of Marriage.’¹⁰

All these things have not been alone in producing the highly immoral and hedonistic climate now prevalent in modern America. More significantly have been those ideas that have prepared the way for and now support modern hedonism. If Americans are ever to be turned away from modern hedonism, then Americans must first be turned away from those ideas that have produced and currently support modern hedonism.

Modern Concepts Supporting Hedonism

Just what are these ideas. They are anti-biblical beliefs primarily about the nature of man and the source of morality. They are also false human assumptions about the acquisition of human happiness, the nature of freedom, and the role of individuals within community.

The Physical and Temporal Nature of Man

Mankind is now generally said to be the highest life form that has evolved from a self-existent universe. Mankind is considered to be the product of a natural, social, and cultural heritage and environment. Humanity is thought to be not sinners in need of salvation, but basically good and self-sufficient. Mankind is assumed to be only temporal, like all other animals. Individuals are therefore not believed to have eternal spirits or souls. Human beings will therefore not have to stand before an eternal God to be judged for their earthly conduct. Mankind is thought to be the sole judge of all things. Mankind is said to need guidance only by his reason and intelligence, and his use of the scientific method, not by faith or divine revelation. It is

¹⁰Allan C. Carlson, “On Parents, Children, and The Nation-State,” *Whose Values? The Battle For Morality In Pluralistic America*. ed. by Carl Horn (Ann Arbor, MI: Servant Books, 1985), 62-63, with quotations from Allan Sherman, *The Rape Of The American Puritan Ethic: The Official History Of The Sex Revolution* (Chicago: Playboy Press, 1973), 11, 338, 347-348.

believed that the goal toward which all mankind should strive in life is to reach their full human potential in the here and now.

The Human Origins of Morality

Regarding the foundations of morality, these anti-biblical ideas contend that moral values are not derived from God, but from human experience; that ethics stems from human need and interests; that ethics are self-made and situational. It is therefore believed that no restrictions should be placed upon sexual behavior between consenting adults, nor should the many varieties of sexual exploitation in themselves be considered evil. All individuals should be permitted to express their sexual proclivities and pursue their own lifestyles as they desire.

These ideas are the ideas of humanism. They make man to be his own god. While these ideas have been steadily gaining credibility in the Western world since the time of the Renaissance, the last century especially has seen them unleashed because the authority of the Bible, which heretofore had held them in check, was undermined by skepticism, higher criticism, and the assumed validity of Darwin's theory of evolution. When the authority of the Bible was no longer considered valid, human hearts were emptied of the relevancy of God and a true understanding of the nature of man. Into hearts emptied of God's relevance and of humanity's true nature, mankind has been only too willing to install himself as his own god and to rely upon his own intelligence to guide his life.

The Deceitfulness of Hedonism

But it is not in man who walks to direct his own steps (Jeremiah 10:23) Because modern man knows that pleasure in itself is good, he has assumed that the pursuit of pleasure is his most worth-while goal. The hedonist seeks happiness through immediate and sensual thrills. The person who can have the most pleasures in life is judged to be the happiest. But this perspective fails to realize that man is a spiritual as well as a physical being. To think of mankind as only physical is to be "foolish, disobedient, deceived, serving various lusts and pleasures" (Titus 3:3). The spiritual nature of man cannot be satisfied with physical thrills. The quest for happiness through pursuit of personal pleasure (if we may learn anything from human experience and observation) is the surest way to unhappiness and discontentment. Man is happy only if his spiritual nature is satisfied through godliness (Psalms 40:8).

The hedonist is also deceived because he thinks he can be free without responsibility. Assuming he is free to do as he pleases, the modern pleasure seeker looks upon Christian morality as restrictive of individual rights. He does not want to be inhibited by moral codes nor to be distracted from pleasurable quests. He thinks his freedom gives him license to indulge himself in his desired pleasures. He assumes that society must tolerate his selfish quests regardless of whatever social consequences may result. He generally has little if any sense of community responsibility, and whatever responsibilities he may assume generally come after personal pleasures are fulfilled.

Consequences of Hedonism

Whenever most people in a society think that way, then, because every man seeks only his own pleasures, the structures of society begin to fall apart and people are left in a decadent world. That's what has happened in the United States.

Statistical evidence began mounting during the 1960s and 70s which suggested that American family life was malfunctioning. The nation's divorce rate, for example, tripled between 1958 and 1978, while the marriage rate in 1980 stood at its lowest level in forty years. The number of divorced persons per 1000 married persons climbed from 35 in 1960 to 100 by 1980; among black women, the increase was from 78 to 257. The U. S. fertility rate (births per 1000 women aged 15-44) fell from 122.7 in 1957 to 66.7 in 1975, reflecting a rapid American retreat from child-bearing. Over the same few years, the nation's illegitimacy ratio (illegitimate births per 100 live births) tripled. Of the 3.5 million children born in the U. S. in 1979, 17 percent were to unmarried women; among black Americans, the figure was 55 percent, almost three times the figure from the late 1950s. Four out of every ten out-of-wedlock births in 1979 were to teenage girls, who commonly became children raising children. The incidence of human abortion increased from an estimated 100,000 illegal abortions annually during the late 1950s to 615,000 in 1973 (the first year when the procedure was legal in every state) to over 1.5 million in 1982. In that year, an estimated one million American children lived on the streets, as many as a third of them supporting themselves as prostitutes."¹¹

The hard fact is that whenever people choose freedom from all restraints they become slaves to their own passions. Their passions then lead them to ruination of their communities. "Society cannot exist," said the Anglo-Irish statesman, Edmund Burke, "unless a controlling power upon will and appetite be placed somewhere, and the less of it there is within, the more of it there must be without. It is ordained in the eternal constitution of things that men of intemperate minds cannot be free."¹² If we wish to be free to direct our own destiny, free of totalitarian domination, then we must discipline ourselves and seek the common good which is found only when all seek to obey God. Hedonism does not produce a free or stable society. The pursuit of pleasure ends not in fulfillment, but in emptiness.

A Realistic Worldview

In order to obtain fulfillment in his pursuits, mankind must pursue realistic objectives in accordance with a worldview that is realistic. Such a worldview requires recognition that man is a creature, made by an eternal Creator, and accountable to his Creator for his conduct; that man is a spiritual as well as a physical being, and that the spiritual nature of man, as well as the physical, has needs which must be fulfilled; that man is a sinner and in need of salvation from the consequences of his sin; that God cares about man and that he took the initiative in making possible man's salvation by having his Son bear the penalty for the believers' sins; that the word of God is given to man in order that man might know how to live; that the word of God is

¹¹Allan C. Carlson, "On Parents, Children, and The Nation-State," Ibid. 58-59.

¹²Quoted from William S. Banowsky, Ibid., 68.

demonstrated by the life of Jesus, the incarnate Word, as an example for men to see how the word is to be lived.

The pursuit of objectives that give a real sense of fulfillment also requires that people act according to the reality of God's existence and of man's spiritual nature. This means that in order to gain life, one must lose it (Matthew 16:25). Self denial and humility are required. Greatness is achieved through service (Matthew 20:25-28). Paul's letters to the Ephesians and the Colossians describe both negative and positive actions of those who think realistically. Negative conduct includes repentance, the laying aside of all anger, malice, slander, lying, greed, etc. Positive conduct includes obedience to the Lord in such things as being kind, compassionate, gentle, patient, thankful, forgiving, etc. It includes being genuinely honest, speaking the truth in love, working diligently, being just and fair, forbearing with one another, etc. Husbands are to love their wives as themselves. Wives are to submit to their husbands. Children are to obey their parents in the Lord. The conduct that brings fulfillment is unselfish. It is in exact contrast to the selfishness of hedonism.

Whereas the pursuit of pleasure ends in emptiness and boredom, the pursuit of objectives based upon spiritual realities brings lasting joy, peace and happiness. It's a spontaneous joy based upon deliverance from sins, like the joy of Israel when they were delivered to the other side of the Red Sea from their Egyptian enemies (Exodus 14:30-15:21; Acts 8:5-8; Matthew 25:21). It's a joy which minimizes hardships and suffering, like the joy of Paul and Silas when they sang praises to God at midnight, even though they had just been beaten and bound in prison (Acts 16:16-25). It's a joy that sustains persecution and the loss of property for Christ's sake, like the Hebrews who took joyfully the spoiling of their goods, because they knew that they had in heaven an enduring substance (Hebrews 10:34). It's a joy that looks upon trials and hardships, not as circumstances to be endured, but as means to produce greater character (James 1:2-4).

Conclusion

In this world two conflicting worldviews compete for the minds and hearts of men. One is temporal, the other is eternal. One walks by the flesh, the other by the spirit. One is man-centered, the other is God-centered. One is pleasure seeking, the other is joy producing. You must decide which of these worldviews will determine the way you live. And whether or not you consciously decide, you will either make pleasure your God, or you will serve the God of all joy.