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## The Culture of Death and Its Legacy

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Watson promises that there will be an infinite array of issues and options presented by new technologies such as genetic mapping and genetic engineering, along with germ-line therapies. In addition, he advised that the technologies should be able to identify genetic links to everything from schizophrenia to homosexuality.

The famous scientist published his advisement in The Times [London]. His British readers were scandalized at his suggestion that mothers who discover that their infant in the womb has a pre-disposition of homosexuality, might well choose to abort. Of course, it was not the morality of genetic manipulation that became the issue, rather it was the morality of targeting homosexuality as the focus of the manipulation that raised this censorious debate.

The Culture of Death represents the ultimate degeneration of the entire civilization, and it represents nothing less than total opposition to God and his authority over the spectrum of life and death—indeed over every dimension of morality.

The late Walker Percy—a physician as well as one of America's chief men of letters—said this in answer to an interviewer's question: "I am scandalized by the fact that in my own profession—medicine—American doctors have the dubious distinction of being the first generation of doctors in 6,000 years to accept abortion with hardly a murmur. Abortion has been something absolutely disallowed by the medical profession in the entire western world since the oath of Hippocrates. We are talking 2,500 years ago. That's on the Greek side. For 6,000 years before that in the Jewish tradition. Yet we in the last two generations—judges and doctors—have not only made it legal but have done it willingly. There has been no outcry, not one letter of protest in the august, New England Journal of Medicine. I off hand can think of only one doctor, a Jewish doctor, who keeps saying this is wrong."

This was the impulse that led Percy to write his novel *The Thanatos Syndrome*, indicating the ultimate end result of the Culture of Death—death itself. In another interview over ten years ago, he was asked the question, "What are the signs of death that you see in America in the 1980s?" He answered: "Last night, I was listening to an interview between Bill Moyers and Associate Justice Harry Blackmun, who wrote the Supreme Court's decision that legalizes abortion. Obviously, Blackmun is a decent man, a thoughtful man, who was trying to do the right thing. Yet, what did he do? He helped to legalize the murder of 30 million unborn human beings. That, by the way, is not a theological, Catholic statement. Any doctor can tell you that an unborn child is fully human. There is no difference in a child five minutes before birth and five minutes after birth. What about a month before birth? Same. How about eight months? How about one day after conception? Sure, it's a separate organism. Any doctor will tell you that it's all standard biology: the fetus is a separate genetic structure, a separate immune system, a separate organism, a separate creature. So, we have this great situation where for the most humane reasons we kill more people than the Nazis did in all their death camps. In times like these, that is enough to give a novelist a cause to write."

Just before he died, Percy said that what would come next was what he called "pedothesia," the killing of children who are perceived to have no future.

Of course, we not only speak of the Culture of Death, but of the death of culture, which is the necessary product and parallel to the Culture of Death. In the time span of the last fifty years, we see the devolution of our moral discourse and of our moral actions from modern manipulation and death to postmodern chaos and even greater death.

John Howard, the former president of the Rockford Institute, gave a speech a few years ago looking back at the end of World War II. Speaking of his own experience, he intimated that those fifty years appeared as though it were a “whole civilization ago.” What happened at the end of World War II? The West won. Freedom won. Democracy won. And what did they win? They won the opportunity to build, to develop, and to devolve into the Culture of Death. The West defeated Hitler and Japan, only to institutionalize, in a scientific and therapeutic sense, so much of what was represented by those regimes.

We have seen in the last fifty years a series of decades marked by moral decomposition—decomposition that is difficult to quantify and almost impossible to take into the mind. We have seen the breakdown of the family, largely performed on ideological grounds. We have seen the rise of the divorce culture, which yields complete destruction of the family structure. As Barbara Dafoe Whitehead says, “Divorce is now part of everyday American life.”

We have seen the rise of alternative lifestyles openly intending to reverse centuries of civilization in the name of liberation. We have seen homosexuality, which was forbidden by God through His Word and censured by societies throughout history, now made an openly celebrated part of American culture with successful calls for political equality and special group rights.

We see the revolt against authority: the authority of God, the authority of the state, the authority of the church, the authority of parents, the authority of the Constitution and law, the authority of teachers, the authority of every segment of society, which provides order and protection. We have seen the breakdown of order at every level in such a way that we now have no control over many of our streets and have no control over much of what our children see and hear. We have no control; all in the name of liberation.

We see decadence in the arts, and the celebration of artists such as Robert Mapplethorpe, who are unusual not because of their unique decadence, but because of their unique popularity and publicity. In the last fifty years, we have seen the artistic community celebrate what was once marginalized and scandalized.

We have seen the breakdown of the political system aided and abetted by every branch of government. We have come to the place where there is no common moral discourse. There is no such conversation, and legislation is intentionally, publicly and officially divorced from any moral consequence. We can read statistical indicators, and can see the inexorable march of our culture’s destruction. We can see that our conversation is reduced to nothing more than “rights talk.” Our conversations center merely on what our rights are and should be. We have come to what the philosopher Jeffrey Stout has referred to as the “perfect babble of confusion.” Animal rights, for instance, are posited in such a way that the entire structure of creation is offended.

Issue after issue represents not merely a tinkering with the moral code, but the usurpation of the entire moral system. Joseph Epstein, long-time editor of the *American Scholar*, recently asked if the future has a future? How did this happen? It is all rooted in rebellion and in the decomposition of our moral discourse. Sociologist Daniel Yankelovich has suggested that it all comes down to the clash between individual choice and social and familial obligations—a question of responsibilities or so-called rights.

But in biblical terms, what it means to be human is to be submitted to biblical norms. How did all of this happen? Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn asked the same question, and he answered, “Men have forgotten God, that is how all of this happened.”

Fyodor Dostoevsky explained this loss of faith and resulting nihilism in *The Brothers Karamozov*: “Without God anything is permissible and everything is now permissible.” And yet what is the means of recovery? What are we to do? What should the church do in the midst of the degeneration, devolution and disillusion of the culture? And what should the church be in the midst of the Culture of Death and the death of the culture?

Very simply put, we are to let light shine in the darkness. A simple and urgent and uncomplicated command is brought

into sharp relief when there is so much darkness surrounding us. This means, though, that we must understand ourselves in the midst of this culture as a cognitive minority—standing out in our minority status against a majoritarian decadence.

We must let light shine in darkness. This means, in part, that the church must be a Culture of Life, in the midst of the Culture of Death and the death of the culture. The church must contend for life—life in the biblical sense—at every level. This means contending for life in the womb and in the nursing home, in the hospital ward and on the streets. Everywhere, we must be those who stand for the culture and sanctity of life, for we know that the Culture of Life can never be predicated upon the authority of man, but only on the authority of God.

In the same sense, we must also contend for the life of the culture. That is, we must be engaged and not disengaged, even as we are a cognitive minority. Even as a moral minority, our method must not be to turn entirely insular and inward, but instead to engage the culture in such a way that we bear open witness to life. And calling for the life of the culture means that the church must be the people of the truth, representing, bearing witness, and contending for the truth of the living, holy, sovereign, transcendent God. For this self-revealing God has spoken to us through His Word, revealing a pattern of life to us with commandments and principles for living. We must bear witness to the truth of God's wrath against sin and to the wondering glory of His grace in the redemption of sinners. We must be a people of truth, and this means bearing witness to the sanctity of life and to our living hope. This should be our proper mode.

To despair is atheistic, but to be optimistic is hubris. We live in hope—biblical hope—because we know in whom our hope is placed, and we know that He is able to keep all that we have committed to Him against that day.

How are we to live in such a society as this? What is the church to be and what are we to do? In the midst of the Culture of Death and the death of culture we must get our own house in order. We must recover our own moral authority, which can only come when we are submitted to our Savior's moral authority. And we must share the light.

I am reminded of what the Romanians in 1989 referred to as the “night of the candles.” It was that night in Bucharest when those who contended for freedom and for life and for dignity stood against totalitarian oppression and stared down tanks and soldiers, when all they had in their hands were unlit candles. One person lit a candle and the flame passed from one candle to another in the hands of those who stood for life and freedom and dignity, as they stood against those who stood for death and for oppression, for manipulation and totalitarian regimes. The Culture of Life stood against the Culture of Death and passed the light from candle to candle. That is an apt metaphor for us. Let us pass the light from candle to candle—and let us pass it well.

