

# Should we allow culture to inform our values?

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There is a common feeling among Christians that modern culture is, as Obi Wan Kenobi said, a "wretched hive of scum and villainy." These people see society as immoral (or at best amoral) and imagine a great divide between their own values and anything that mainstream culture might have to offer. Worldly is a synonym for lacking any moral center. Because they view the culture-at-large as having an essentially contradictory basis for morality, these people also reject any opinion held by a Christian that happens to agree with the presiding culture as the first step on the road to hell. The possibility that culture might actually have something positive to offer never enters their mind.

The problem with the assumption that secular culture is a moral wasteland can be demonstrated biblically, historically, and anecdotally. In Roman 2:13-15, Paul describes a group of people who do not have the law, but who are convicted by their conscience because they know intuitively what the law requires. Paul's point here is that there are people who do not know the Jewish/Christian God but who nevertheless instinctively know right from wrong. C.S. Lewis referred to this universal, intuitive sense of right and wrong as "moral law." Tim Keller refers to this same instinct as "moral obligation" and describes it as "a belief that some things ought not to be done regardless of how a person feels about them within herself, regardless of what the rest of her community and culture says, and regardless of whether it is in her self-interest or not." Even John Calvin, the father of total depravity (metaphorically speaking) believed in what he called "common grace," the idea that all people, not just Christians, have an echo of God's divine nature in them that provides an instinctive knowledge of right and wrong.

The belief that most people have an intuitive understanding of right and wrong is considered by many to be one way of demonstrating that the source of that morality; God; must exist. If most people have a common understanding of what is right and wrong, the logic goes, then there must be something upon which that standard is based? I don't have time to go through the full argument here, but you get the idea.

For people who find all this philosophizing tiresome (which, I have heard, is most people), there is also both historical and anecdotal evidence that this intuitive sense of morality exists. Historically, it has been secular society, not necessarily the church, that has increased the awareness of things like sexual and spousal abuse, hate crimes, animal cruelty, bullying, and a whole host of other evils. Yes, Christians have been involved in these issues, but it is the culture as a whole, including atheists, agnostics, Buddhists, and worshippers of the goddess Isis, who have together agreed that these are the values of a good society. It is society as a whole, and not just Christians, who respond to every natural disaster with money, resources, and volunteerism. And shockingly, many of us even have kind agnostic neighbors who shovel their elderly neighbor's driveway.

For anecdotal evidence of what society values, just turn on the television. Yes, materialism and sex are a huge part of what entertains us (as it has been for thousands of years), but take a look at something like the crime drama, which has been around at least 200 years longer than the reality show. The entire genre is predicated on society's need to believe that justice will prevail and that good will conquer evil. Serial killers, pedophiles, liars, and shallow rich people are bad. People who catch them are good. Heroes vs. villains. Good vs. evil. Anyone who thinks that culture is immoral needs to watch less Jersey Shore and more Criminal Minds. "Do you really think evil exists?" agent Morgan asked at the end of one episode. "After seeing everything we've seen," agent Rossi responds, "do you really think it doesn't exist?"

Let me be clear that I am not saying that culture should be the primary source of our values. Biblical revelation in partnership with the Holy Spirit should always be the last word. What I am saying is that if there is an intuitive moral law that resides in the general population; and if that moral instinct

comes from God?;then it is inconsistent to leave culture out of the discussion. Yes, adding another seat at the table makes the discussion more complicated. It's much easier to wrestle with just the Holy Spirit, the Bible, and the local church, without adding something as untidy and complicated as culture to the mix. But maybe it's the right thing to do. What do you think?