Morality - Cultural Factors

Teacher Background

The German psychoanalyst, Erich Fromm is in the tradition of Freud, but unlike Freud, Fromm insists that much human behaviour is culturally, rather than biologically conditioned. According to Fromm, culture structures individuals to conform to the social mould. We are what we have to be, in accordance with the requirements of the society in which we find ourselves.

Present Australian society has been variously described as secular, post-Christian, pluralist or multicultural. Australian adherents of any of the world’s religions face pressures simply by being forced to live in two worlds - a personal world where the values of their religion are the predominant factor in life and a public world - usually of the marketplace and work - which no longer automatically accepts or espouses any particular values as representative of the values and behaviour of all members of the society.

Throughout the world and across human history, some religious groups e.g. the Amish, Chasidic Jews, hermits and some monastic orders, have solved this problem by withdrawing from modern life completely. An alternative is to form religious enclaves within the society. Catholicism in Australia for most of the 20th century was described as operating out of a Catholic “ghetto”. Some migrant groups attempt to preserve their values by forming close-knit communities based on cultural and geographical boundaries.

For most religious people in Australia and the Western world, the challenge is to continue to live and work and operate in a pluralist culture in which some practices and actions are legal or tolerated, but not moral according to their personal beliefs. The Jews have lived in this way for millennia; Muslims and Buddhists and now Christians in a multicultural Australia face the same challenges. It is the experience of any minority religious or cultural group. The challenge is even greater when people try to pass these beliefs onto their young when they do not have the cultural supports to reinforce the religious beliefs. Cultural values and practices then, can have a strong influence on whether religious values are passed on to the next generation. In Australia, there are many examples of communities - Indigenous, South Sea Islander, Muslim, Buddhist, Vietnamese, Phillipino, Lebanese, South American, Asian - who are seeking to preserve their cultural heritage in order to pass on religious and cultural values to a younger generation which has been exposed to the pluralistic values of modern, secular Australia.

According to sociologists, the most pervasive and influential cultural factors in Australian society are (i) the Media - written, aural, visual and electronic; (ii) the entertainment industry; film, music, electronic “games” and cyberspace experiences and nightclubs; (iii) the business of “sport” and sports promotion; (iv) the fashion industry (v) the drug industry and (vi) the lifestyle industry: investment brokers, real estate brokers, wealth advisors and health/beauty brokers. Many of these are interconnected, using and relying on the media to spread their message and influence. The underpinning values are materialism, hedonism, pleasure, wealth, power, influence, appearance and individualism.

Any person hoping to live by religious values and moral norms in the modern world is literally bombarded by alternative messages via significant channels of communication in the home, market, educational institution, workplace and even transport - private and public. This occurs via free-to-air and pay television, internet, stereos, DVD player, VCR, newspaper, junk mail, games console, mail, billboards, blimps, sky writers, telephones - fixed and mobile. The individual must have a solid and coherent support base in order to constantly evaluate and analyse these contrary messages.
At times, cultural factors of minority groups can come into conflict with accepted practices or laws in a dominant or pluralist culture. This can be a cause of cultural conflict, especially if the practices of the culture are associated with religious beliefs. Some examples include the wearing of specific clothing, such as head covering or body adornments; physical mutilation or marking, such as piercing, cutting, tattooing, removal of skin, hair, teeth and body parts; practices such as prayer postures, begging, processions, ritual purity actions, food consumption and preparation, treatment of animals or natural features.

When such culturally associated practices of minorities are challenged in dominant cultures, adherents must decide whether these culturally-based practices and beliefs are essential to their values and beliefs and/or whether they can be preserved and expressed in forms more acceptable in their new cultural setting. The history of Christianity has many examples of how fundamental Christian doctrine found and continues to find, expression and legitimacy in different and alternative cultural practices. Other religious traditions, such as Judaism, Buddhism and more lately Islam, have also adopted and adapted culturally based beliefs and practices to distinguish between beliefs and culture.