RASH OF INCIVILITY HAS DEEP ROOTS

The lead story in this issue of *Catalyst* is disturbing on many fronts. The rash of incivility is bad enough, but the uneven response to these moral outrages is also a serious problem. The etiology of this phenomenon runs deep in our culture.

The coarseness of our culture exploded in the 1960s and has only gotten worse. There are many causes.

Economic
Just prior to the 1960s, Harvard economist John Kenneth Galbraith wrote about the success of the private sector in his book, *The Affluent Society*. Released in 1958, it detailed how prosperity was transforming the nation following World War II. While "pockets of poverty" remained, middle class Americans were booming.

Affluence, historically speaking, is associated with moral relaxation. When times are tough, there is little time for anything but work; this instills a sense of self-discipline. When times get better, our moral muscles tend to atrophy as our leisure time expands. This is what happened in the 1960s—we got soft, dropping our moral guard.

Demographics
The spike in the birth rate following World War II was significant, and by the 1960s the baby boomers were in high gear. Young people have always been prone to risk, so when their ranks swell, certain behaviors follow. Sexual experimentation, drug use, crime—these are all associated with youth. They certainly marked the culture of the 1960s.

Technology
The birth control pill became commercially available in 1960. This had a huge impact on sexual mores, allowing men and women

to engage in pre-marital sex without fear of creating a family. They now felt free to indulge themselves, abandoning responsibilities attendant to intercourse.

Law
The rights revolution of the 1960s initially focused on justice for African Americans, but it quickly became a rights crusade that helped to spur radical individualism. Court rulings undermined the locus of authority in civil society, awarding rights that undercut the ability of parents, teachers, community leaders, and the police to do their job. From relaxing the obscenity statutes to anointing prisoners with new rights, these judicial decisions wreaked havoc in the culture.

Education
Prayer in the schools was banned in 1963, the effects of which were not readily apparent. Subsequently, the schools embraced values clarification, a "non-judgmental" approach to ethics which undercut traditional sources of morality. Everyone was now free to make up his own mind about right and wrong, setting in motion a crazy quilt pattern where right and wrong switched places. Moreover, the right of teachers to discipline unruly students broke down.

Entertainment Industry
In the 1950s, TV viewers never saw the bedroom of Ralph and Alice in "The Honeymooners." A decade or two later, unmarried guys and gals were shown bed hopping. Next came a string of shows with gay characters, all of whom were depicted in a positive light. By contrast, Hollywood's depiction of priests, and of Catholicism in general, was almost always negative.

Churches
The 1960s witnessed the beginning of the end of the mainline Protestant churches. One by one—the Episcopalians, Methodists, Lutherans, Presbyterians—succumbed to the pressures of the dominant culture, adopting its secular values. They couldn't

even stand up to abortion in the 1970s. Almost as bad, the Catholic Church relaxed its moral strictures, and by the 1970s promiscuous gays entered the seminaries in droves, the result of which was the sexual abuse scandal. In addition, too many priests sought to be liked, thus abdicating their role as moral leaders.

Consequences
These seven factors help to explain why our society is in deep trouble. The damage done to the culture is not irreversible, but it will take a massive shift in public opinion to reverse course.

Netflix, Sarah Silverman, Kathy Griffin, the New York Public Theater, Bill Maher—they are all a reflection of a society gone mad with radical individualism; elementary standards of decency have been violated with impunity. But at least the reaction against Griffin and Maher, and to a lesser extent the theater group, shows there is still a moral pulse.

The absence of outrage at Netflix and Silverman is a different story. We can blame the cultural elites all we want—they deserve to be fingered—but we must also point to Christians. Why are so many reluctant to speak out against these assaults on their religion?

Many are no longer practicing Protestants and Catholics, so they really don't care about the Christian bashing. Others just want to get along: their common refrain is, "it is what it is"—as if that were a mature way to deal with bigotry. Still others think that by pushing back they will look defensive and parochial in front of their "open-minded" colleagues and neighbors.

Even though the roots of incivility run deep, they are not cast in stone—they can be uprooted if enough people take action. If we remain passive, we can only expect more of the same. Better to fight than yield.