

REDEFINING MORALITY

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A few years ago, Daniel Patrick Moynihan wrote a brilliant article explaining how our society was “defining deviancy down.” What he observed was the disturbing tendency to approve of behavior that previously had been labeled deviant. He was right in his assessment, but he didn’t adequately address its root causes.

Over the past quarter century, there has been a concerted effort to redefine morality. Those leading the charge have come almost exclusively from the ranks of well-educated men and women who are paid to disseminate ideas. For the most part, they work in higher education, the entertainment industry, journalism, the arts, the publishing world, foundations and non-profit activist organizations. Never mind that their sermons on tolerance often belie a mad devotion to intolerance, what deserves discussion is why they seek to redefine morality.

The contemporary approach to morality, as understood by the chattering class, is expressly solipsistic. In other words, morality is something that begins and ends with individual preferences. It’s as though each of us is entitled to make up his own morality without any reference to the common good. The result is moral chaos.

The term “individual morality” is an oxymoron: morality is a social construct, having absolutely nothing to do with individual wants or desires. It cannot be said too strongly that morality refers to principles or standards of right conduct and is not therefore analogous to tastes or opinions. Just as there is no such thing as an individual social order, there is no such thing as an individual moral order; only a society can possess a social and moral order.

Part of the problem we have today is the belief that societies are comprised of a bunch of individuals. Nothing could be more wrong. Societies are comprised of groups—families, tribes, clans, parishes, communities, organizations—all of which form a reality that transcends the contribution of the many individuals who live within its normative boundaries. The idea that every man, woman and child walks around with his or her own morality—as if we were speaking about legs—is sociologically illiterate.

When you are invited into the home of your neighbor or cousin, you are expected to abide by the house rules, some of which you may find disagreeable. Similarly, when you live in society (you have no other choice, by the way) you are expected to live by *its* house rules, some of which you may find disagreeable. In short, house rules, or moral codes, cannot be vetoed by individuals willy-nilly. They can change but they can never be whatever anyone wants them to be.

The idea that morality can be dissolved to individual claims is not simply wrong, it is pernicious. For example, no one could drive to school or work unless a moral code was understood and enforced. We don't leave it up to each driver to determine what is right and wrong and that's why we have signs and lines. The fact that not everyone agrees with these moral rules means nothing: what matters is that most people agree with them.

The same is true of such fashionable ideas as gay marriages. It does not matter that the chattering class approves of two men marrying, what matters is that most people see no legitimate social interest in granting gay couples the same social status that heterosexuals enjoy. To the extent that we value the institution of marriage, we must devalue alternatives to it.

The good news is that the Catholic Church doesn't subscribe to the thesis that everyone is free to determine what is right

and wrong. That is one reason why the Church is properly seen as a countercultural institution these days. This is the kind of deviancy we should applaud.

At bottom, those who want to treat morality as if it were a smorgasbord are driven by selfishness. They want sex without encumbering consequences (no kids or AIDS) and they want the rest of us to pay for their abortions and medical research. They want access to pornography on the internet and laws that punish sexual advances in the workplace that they deem unwanted.

Most of all, those who seek to privatize morality want to live in a world where no one passes judgment on their behavior. This is a world of fantasy. It's also a world of deceit, discontent, discord and disease. So three cheers for Catholicism. By rejecting this world it makes possible the only alternative lifestyle worth pursuing.