

The Popularity of Depravity

There is every sign that we are living in a society that suffers from an acute case of cultural schizophrenia. Survey research discloses that the American people worry about the future of the nation, citing the social disintegration that is upon us. Separation, divorce, illegitimacy, AIDS, homicide, suicide, drugs – you’ve all heard the litany before. But at the same time the American people seem to have an insatiable appetite for cultural shock. How else does one understand the phenomenal success of Madonna, “Demolition Man,” Howard Stern and “Bevis & Butthead”?

Madonna needs the least introduction. Suffice it to say that this “singer’s” fame is largely contingent upon her willingness to prostitute herself before her audiences while she “performs.” Surrounded by nude dancers, Madonna finds it almost impossible to do a number without some sexually explicit message (and she is not above using children in her acts). “Demolition Man” is a violent movie that stars Sylvester Stallone, an actor who now finds it necessary to appear nude in order to sell his movies. It is the number one box office hit of the fall season.

Howard Stern is a disc jockey turned author. Known almost exclusively for his delight in beckoning FCC lawsuits (there is nothing so vulgar that Stern won’t say on the air), Stern’s new book reveals his desire to be there when supermodel Cindy Crawford “gets into a disfiguring car accident.” The book sold a record 850,000 copies the first week it was released. “Bevis & Butthead” is an MTV cartoon that features two teenage buffoons who indulge in violence and women. The show was recently moved to a late-evening time slot after a 5-year-old set his home on fire, killing his 2-year-old sister. The boy, you see, got the bright idea of lighting an aerosol spray from “Bevis & Butt-head.” The show was the highest rated program on the network.

So what we have is the most famous female pop singer of our time, the number one movie of the fall season, the best selling book in America and the highest rated TV show on the MTV network-all co-existing in a society that claims to be very troubled by the degree of violence and reckless sex that the entertainment industry sports. Like children, we seem to want it all. We want the experience of pleasure seekers without the social consequences that such pursuits entail. And like children, we seem to learn the hard way.

Not until an innocent child is killed do we learn the insanity of our actions, and even then it is questionable what has been learned.

It is certainly true that we reap what we sow. Parents who fail to monitor the culture of their children are as delinquent as Hollywood producers. Even more so, as they cannot claim to be motivated by greed: theirs is a failure of passivity, of resignation, of family neglect. When Jesse Jackson recently instructed black parents to turn off the TV each night for three hours, he was on to something that has no color or class boundary. Just as drinking from a sewer has deadly effects, indulging in video vileness touches all who are exposed.

The real problem is that even those who do not partake of today's cultural excesses are at risk morally. Sociologically speaking, there is no such thing as what John Stuart Mill called "self-regarding" acts, i.e., acts which effect only the behavior of the actor. We do not live in solitaire, we live in society, ergo, what we think, what we feel and what we do ineluctably affects someone else. It is philosophical rubbish to suggest otherwise.

There is one saving grace in all of this: the shock value that Madonna, "Demolition Man," Howard Stern and "Bevis & Butt-head" afford is a tribute to the resiliency of a moral code that still allows for shock. And that, make no mistake about

it, is more a tribute to the resiliency of the Catholic Church than any other source of moral authority.

After all, when the pundits are looking to interview someone who is likely to object to the latest example of moral depravity, whom do they call? They don't call the Episcopalians, Presbyterians or Methodists. No, they call the Catholics. And with good reason: despite some internal discord, the Catholic Church remains the last best bastion of moral authority left in our society. For that we can all be grateful.