

Sentimentality and Its Relation to “Cheap Grace”

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The sentimentality we see in connection with “cheap grace” is that which always, feeling itself to be loving and “nice,” manages to reconcile good and evil. It does so by ignoring the evil in a thing, by refusing to name and renounce it. Rather, it focuses on the good that is within the person, ideology, or circumstance. In our fallen world, evil rarely, if ever, comes in its unmitigated state but always together with a good, and with much that *seems* good as well. Evil comes with “niceness” attached.

In our time, because the scriptural moral good has been denied and replaced by (of all things) political correctness, the church, inundated with the culture, is largely given over to this kind of “niceness,” and it replaces the work of the Holy Spirit; it replaces real love; it replaces the idealism that has within it the wisdom and knowledge of God’s will and way.

Mark Jefferson’s essay *What Is Wrong with Sentimentality?*¹ is helpful in terms of closely defining sentimentality, and I strongly recommend it to those in search of a short but scholarly presentation (8 pages in its entirety). The following, shown in italics, are quotes from his article:

A sentimentalist is one kind of person who warps reality for the sake of feelings--namely, one who “misrepresents the world in order to feel unconditionally warm-hearted about bits of it.” [Jefferson’s quote is from Mary Midgley’s essay entitled “Brutality and Sentimentality.”] ...It is a dishonest distortion of reality.... Indulgence of one’s feelings are secured by misrepresenting reality....What gives sentimentality its claim to be properly formed is the peculiar nature of the misrepresentation it involves; and this is also what makes it more objectionable than many other sorts of emotional indulgence.

Each indulgence requires the projection upon the world of a different kind of unreality.... Sentimentality is objectionable because of its sustaining fantasy and not simply because it must employ one. It is a sort of emotional indulgence that involves misrepresenting the world....Sentimentality involves attachment to a distorted series of beliefs...this is not something that simply befalls people.

¹ *The Virtues: Contemporary Essays on Moral Character*, edited by Robert B. Kruschwitz and Robert C. Roberts (Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1987).

What distinguishes the fictions that sustain sentimentality from those that occur in other forms of emotional indulgence? Well, chiefly it is their emphasis upon such things as the sweetness, dearness, littleness, blamelessness, and vulnerability of the emotions' objects. The qualities that sentimentality imposes on its objects are the qualities of innocence. But this almost inevitably involves a gross simplification of the nature of the object. And it is a simplification of an overtly moral significance. The simplistic appraisal necessary to sentimentality is also a direct impairment to the moral vision taken of its objects. This may in itself be harmless. Often enough it is. Though the sentimentalists in the poodle parlors may have a morally warped view of their little darlings no one need be too alarmed by it. But sentimentality does have its moral dangers and these are rather more apparent when its objects are people or countries.

Using E. M. Forster's classic novel, [A Passage to India](#), as an example, Jefferson then goes on to show the brutality and evil that comes about when *sentimentality corrupts one's moral vision of its objects and of how this corruption naturally extends itself*. That literary classic is built around the horror that sentimentality, as *a fiction of innocence*, is capable of bringing about on a national and global scale. The novel *enables us to see emotion in general and sentimentality in particular as something integral to the moral self*. Moral choice is involved.

Church leaders are often asked to dialogue with those who hold and propagate fictions of innocence. From time to time, I am asked to do such. In other words, we are asked to sit at table with unreality and reason with it. An impossibility. There are many who work tenaciously toward this end. They may even think of this activity as being rooted in a valid idealism. For example, one person dedicated to this kind of dialogue told me that it came out of his idealism and implored me to be part of such. I had to tell this very sincere man that what he thought of as idealism was not idealism at all, that it was sentimentality.

A valid idealism (from the standpoint of pointing to truth) has a goal other than that of the monistic ideal of bringing all things into one, reconciling good and evil. It is in great dialogue that is true, that we *become* persons--principally through dialogue with God, then with others. But we do not dialogue with darkness, with untruth, with unreality. We reprove it. We denounce it. It is said that he who sups with the devil needs a long spoon—a very long spoon indeed. In fact, there is not one long enough in the created universe. Eve in dialogue with the serpent got us where we are. Dialogue with such was the effective method used to break down orthodoxy and destroy the old-line churches in America. Dialogue with darkness never works for good, for it can only be endless. That is the method. It never stops. There is no stopping place. The motives behind the "cheap grace" that we see today go back to one thing: the determination of the enemy to introduce homosexuality and sexual perversion and permissiveness into the church. The aim of the enemy is to reinstitute the worship of Ahab and Jezebel. The "cheap grace" we see today, even and especially that of the most clever, subtle sort has behind it, as stated earlier, the old antinomian heresy.