When the Church Is More Cultural than Christian

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So, I'm reading this excellent biography of Bonhoeffer right now, and I've been mulling this question. Well, I guess it's twofold, really.

Background: You probably know this already, but just in case. In Nazi Germany the German church pretty much abandoned any form of orthodox Christianity in order to fit in with the culture. Bonhoeffer, Niemoller and others formed the Confessing Church as a stand for true Christianity in the face of the cultural abdication of the wider church. Most were either imprisoned or killed for their efforts.

1 – Do you think that the American church is undergoing a similar shift to fit in with cultural norms on a broad scale that could threaten orthodox Christianity (clearly, hopefully, not to the extent of the Reich church, but still, I see some possible parallels)? What do you think are the areas in which the American church is most at risk? Why?

2 – Do you think we have leadership that is taking a stand for orthodoxy in a counter-cultural and true way on the national scene? If so, who?

Yes. The American church acquiesces to the culture in various ways which are detrimental to the Gospel. It's tricky because it is vital to the Gospel that the Gospel (whose hands and feet are the church) be relevant. Churches which are highly separatist and never adapt to or accommodate culture do violence to the Gospel as well, so it's tricky. And we'll none of us ever get it 100% right. Ever. I keep trying to tell God humility is overrated; he never listens.

I think there are two veins in which American churches are perhaps more American than Christian. One is liberal; one is conservative. (Brilliant, I know.) The tendency is to point the finger at the other and overreact for fear of falling into the other's traps. We're so focused on not falling into *this* trap, that we don't even notice that what we think is a bunker is merely another trap of another sort.

Now to your actual question: What are these traps?
Liberal:
Of course there are the far left examples like: Employing poor hermeneutics which 1) Undercut Scripture as a text which is not historical or literal at all, and 2) justify sin, usually sexual sin such as premarital sex and homosexual sex and the sexually-related sin of abortion. And then there is the slightly more subtle trap of feeling the need to bend over backwards to kiss the keister of Science. Finally, there is the acquiescence of the (pseudo)tolerance mantra of hypermodernism: partly out of fear of being legalistic, partly because it is more comfortable, we succumb to Relativism.

Conservative:
Employing poor hermeneutics which truncate Scripture as a text which is entirely literal (it seems to me that this is a very Western thing to do, but I could be wrong; it could simply be a human thing to do… we feel more comfortable in black and white). Such a lack of hermeneutic leads to overly hard-nosed positions about creation and "the woman issue" among other things. It also leads to, instead of justifying sin, creating an extra hedge of rules so that we can be darn sure we avoid the undignified, socially unacceptable sins, perhaps especially, sexual sin.

And then of course there's the idea of a Christian America; or that politics can fix every(one else)thing.

Traps for all:
Moralistic Therapeutic Deism is probably a problem for both

sides. So is materialism of course, privatism and spiritual professionalization—You'd better keep your hands off of my individual rights and my private life… and: spiritual things go in one compartment, which is private and has no business interfering in the public sphere: ie. faith and science and/or faith and business. Professionalization is also quite Western. I love this quote from GK Chesterton's *Heretics*:

> *But if we look at the progress of our scientific civilization we see a gradual increase everywhere of the specialist over the popular function. Once men sang together round a table in chorus; now one man sings alone, for the absurd reason that he can sing better. If scientific civilization goes on (which is most improbable) only one man will laugh, because he can laugh better than the rest.*

Professionalization probably also includes running our churches too much like businesses.

Finally, Q number 2: Yes. What's tricky about this is that one must sometimes be under the radar to be counter-cultural, partly because when you're counter-cultural, no one wants to listen to you! Eugene Peterson, Tim Keller, NT Wright, Nancy Pearcey, Os Guinness (an outside perspective is always helpful) and the Trinity Forum, Jamie Smith, especially in the area of how we do church and spiritual formation… I'm sure there are others, including my colleagues who are currently working on assessing and addressing this issue of cultural captivity: first creating an Ah-ha moment about our cultural captivity, and secondly, creating a way out of captivity and into freedom.

Good question!

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India’s Missing Girls and the Right to Choose

Rusty Wright and Meg Korpi reveal that female infanticide and feticide in India’s patriarchal culture stir passions for equality and fairness but raise troubling questions. Does favoring a woman’s right to choose logically imply that one supports her right to terminate a fetus simply because it is female?

Last summer, a farmer in southern India discovered a tiny human hand poking from the ground. A two-day-old baby girl had been buried alive. The reason? Much of Indian culture favors males over females, sometimes brutally so. The girl’s grandfather confessed to attempting murder because his family already had too many females; keeping this one would be too costly.

This wasn’t an isolated incident on the subcontinent according to award-winning filmmaker Ashok Prasad. Prasad spoke recently at Stanford University at the U.S. premiere of his BBC documentary “India’s Missing Girls.” Anti-female bias affects Indians rich and poor. Males can perpetuate the family name, bring wealth, and care for elderly parents. A female’s family typically must pay a huge dowry when she weds, often depleting family resources. A popular Hindi aphorism: “Having a girl is to plant a seed in someone else’s garden.”{1}

Female Infanticide and Feticide

Against odds, this baby survived, but social and financial pressures bring alarming rates of female infanticide and feticide (termination of a fetus). UN figures estimate 750,000 Indian girls are aborted every year.{2} Demographic studies

reveal dramatically growing gender disparity since the 1980's{3}; in some regions only 80 baby girls survive for every 100 boys.{4} Many men cannot find wives.

Financial repercussions are typically cited as the reason for discarding daughters, but the decision is often an economic choice rather than necessity. Greater gender disparity occurs in wealthier states.{5} There families can better afford the sex determination tests and sex-selective abortions that, according to a report published by the UN Population Fund, are the main contributors to the decreasing proportion of female children.{6}

Adding to the offensiveness of sex-selective abortion: the fetus must be well-formed (15-18 weeks) before the sex can be detected using ultrasound-the common sex-determination technology. "India's Missing Girls" includes brief, grisly footage of terminated female fetuses being lifted from a well belonging to a clinic that performed sex-selective abortions. After the discovery, outraged women's groups protested in the streets; several such clinics were closed down.

The heartening side of the documentary is Sandhya Reddy, who runs a children's home, cares for abandoned kids, and tries to persuade mothers to keep their daughters or girl fetuses. This angel of mercy brings love, care and opportunity to society's young rejects.

"India's Missing Girl's" poignantly depicts where devaluing women can lead. The Stanford screening's sponsors included feminist and women's organizations, but feminists and nonfeminists, liberals and conservatives alike will be moved. An abbreviated 29-minute version on YouTube is worth watching, even if only the first 10-minute segment.{7}

Troubling Questions

To Western sensibilities, killing babies and terminating

fetuses solely because of gender is abhorrent. Yet no Hitler masterminds this mass extermination of females. It results from hundreds of thousands of personal decisions.

As the U.S. recognizes 35 years of *Roe v. Wade*, feticide's increasing contribution to India's missing girls raises a disturbing dilemma: Doesn't favoring a woman's right to free reproductive choice logically require supporting her right to terminate a fetus simply because it is female?

Important worldview questions emerge. Opposing female feticide seems to ascribe some sort of value to the female fetus. Is this value inherent because the fetus is female? If so, wouldn't equality require that we ascribe similar value to the male fetus because it is male?

Or is the fetus's value utilitarian, e.g., to ensure female influence in society or sufficient brides? Or is it merely economic-negative for Indian females, positive for males?

An enduring view of the fetus's value appears in Psalm 139. King David's worldview recognizes awe-inspiring biological intricacy fashioned by the Divine: You made all the delicate, inner parts of my body and knit me together in my mother's womb. Thank you for making me so wonderfully complex!{8}

Inherently valuable? Socially useful? Economically consequential? Wonderfully complex? The troubling quandary still haunts: Can opposing female feticide be reconciled with supporting reproductive choice? The question demands a logically consistent answer from every thinking person.

Notes

1. Raekha Prasad and Randeep Ramesh, "India's missing girls," Guardian Unlimited, February 28, 2007, guardian.co.uk/india/story/0,,2022983,00.html; accessed January 18, 2008
2. Ashok Prasad, "Harsh reality of India's unwanted girls,"

BBC News, 22 October 2007, news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/programmes/this_world/7050657.stm; accessed January 18, 2008.
3. Christophe Z. Guilmoto, “Characteristics of sex-ratio imbalance in India, and future scenarios,” Report presented at the 4th Asia Pacific Conference on Reproductive Health and Rights, Hyderabad, India, October 29-31, 2007. Published by the United Nations Population Fund www.unfpa.org/gender/docs/studies/india.pdf; downloaded January 25, 2008.
4. Prasad and Ramesh, loc. cit.
5. Using India’s 2001 census data for each state (www.censusindia.gov.in), we found strong negative correlations (-0.5 to -0.7) between various indicators of wealth and female-to-male sex ratios for children under 6.
6. Guilmoto, loc. cit.
7. www.youtube.com/watch?v=gf32d735VgE; accessed January 18, 2008.
8. Psalm 139:13-14 NLT.

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