

## We're All Moralists Now?

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Writing in *The Weekly Standard*, Andrew Ferguson makes an important point. Everyone, it seems, has a moral cause. The virtue of Ferguson's article is that it makes the point so clearly.

He starts with the news that movies featuring characters who smoke will be given a more restrictive rating. No kidding. The people who have already corrupted the movie ratings to the extent that they communicate almost nothing of value are now targeting cigarettes for darker ratings. Sexual promiscuity and scenes of naked flesh might slide by, but not a hero with a Marlboro.

Now, let me be clear. I do not smoke, I do not want children to smoke, and I recognize that children and adolescents are easily impressed by what they see in the media and entertainment. My problem is with a ratings structure that winks at so many issues, only to turn moralistic on tobacco. What's next, any movie with trans-fats is to be given an adult rating?

As Ferguson notes:

*Some conservatives complain that we live in an immoral age, or an age that's at best indifferent to moral judgment. But this isn't really true. Among a very large majority of people, the need to moralize, to be censorious, to alert our neighbors to the failings of others, is undying and ineradicable—as vital as the human need for food or warmth. And the new moralizers, like the old, can't shut up.*

More:

*It's certainly true, as traditionalists say, that the objects of the old censoriousness—promiscuity, divorce, abortion, infidelity—have been removed from moral categories altogether and elevated to the status of “lifestyle choices,” where no one but the chooser himself is allowed to render a moral verdict (and then only on himself. And the verdict, by the way, is pretty much always “not guilty.”). But keep looking. An acquaintance a few years ago urged me to read the New York Times Magazine Ethicist column, describing it as unintentionally comic because the writer could never bring himself to cast a strict moral judgment. “A weak-kneed relativist,” is what the columnist was, my acquaintance said. So I started reading the column and was surprised to find that my friend was wrong: This columnist was moralizing to beat the band. And on Sunday morning! Times readers must be disgusted, I thought, until I noticed what it was he was getting moralistic about. One morning someone wrote in with the eternal yuppie dilemma: Should she buy an SUV?*

*“There's no way to justify endangering others just so you can play cowboy,” the columnist thundered. Anyone who bought an SUV, he said, would be “driving straight to hell.” And so on, week after week, I became alert to the ways in which our pop culture is shot through with moralism: sulfurous condemnations of homophobia, smoking, guns, junk food, fur, big cars, and—this is the big one—judgmentalism. The new Church Ladies simply will not tolerate intolerance.*

There is a great deal of wisdom in Andrew Ferguson's article. If there are no atheists in foxholes, there are no true moral relativists. All but the truly nihilistic have some moral compass, some moral convictions, some moral causes — even if they are tobacco, trans-fats, and SUVs. Furthermore, there are moral dimensions to tobacco smoking, eating trans-fats, and driving SUVs. There is a moral dimension to every aspect of life, rightly understood. And everyone, in the end, has a cause.

Taking the argument a step beyond Andrew Ferguson's concern, Christians should take note of our need for a constant process of moral and theological reflection to ensure that we are maintaining a mature and faithful Christian moral outlook. It is just too easy for us to get sidelined by the inconsequential or to miss the major issues as we immerse ourselves in the minors.

So, how are we to maintain a faithful moral outlook as Christians? Certainly not by solitary moralizing. What we need is robust congregational deliberation, driven by Scripture and guided by the deepest resources of Christian moral thinking. Expository preaching from the pulpit is indispensable, as is the responsible and consistent teaching of Christian parents and leaders. A sense of humility would help, but so would a dose of theological courage.

The fact is, as Andrew Ferguson understands, we're all really Church Ladies at heart. Only the Word of God can save us from silliness and set our eyes and hearts on what is truly important.

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