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# Sex and the Secular Culture

## *A Review Essay*

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Jeffrey Peterson

E. Michael Jones. *Degenerate Moderns: Modernity as Rationalized Sexual Misbehavior*. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993. Pp. 259. \$17.95. (Cited as *DM*.)

\_\_\_\_\_. *Dionysos Rising: The Birth of Cultural Revolution out of the Spirit of Music*. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1994. Pp. 204. \$16.95. (Cited as *DR*.)

Sexual sins, Michael Jones notes at the outset of *Degenerate Moderns*, are probably the most commonly committed throughout all eras of human history (*DM*, 12)—and so not only in recent decades, as conservative cultural critics sometimes suggest. On Jones's reading, what sets our era apart from the earlier history of the West is not the *fact* of promiscuity but the *rationalization* of it that leading modern thinkers have offered, and the dissemination of this hostile attitude to sexual mores through media of communication of unprecedented power. These two volumes make the case that the driving force of modern culture is the rationalization of the illicit sexual desires of secular moderns.

Jones's thesis covers both the intellectual culture taught at universities and published in books and journals and the popular culture embodied in magazines, newspapers, and music. *Degenerate Moderns* treats several "highbrow" writers whose sexual immorality has shaped their moral and ethical theories, and *Dionysos Rising* tells the story of how the sexual revolution conceived by one of these intellectuals, Friedrich Nietzsche, has become a dominant cultural influence in Europe and America through the

entertainment and broadcasting industry. Jones sketches a picture of the moral environment in which the churches must bear their witness to the Gospel today that is not encouraging; indeed, it is arguable that, far from equipping their members with the moral resources to resist the openness to depravity that is part and parcel of the conventional wisdom, many churches have already accommodated it in their eagerness to embrace modernity. In any case, Jones's account of the cultural air we breathe is one that Christian teachers ignore at their own moral and spiritual peril, and that of their students.

### Intellectuals and Their Vices

In *Degenerate Moderns*, Jones takes advantage of the new interest that biographers have shown in the past two decades towards the sexual histories of their subjects. Jones describes this revolution in biography as the silver lining of the sexual revolution, perhaps its one positive consequence. Describing the rise of the sexually explicit biography, Jones comments,

Suddenly, the private lives of everyone, but especially the key figures of the modern age, were fair game for biographers. Before long, the reader had come to expect this sort of revelation, and, given the lives that virtually all the moderns lived, they were right to expect it (*DM*, 13).

So while the sexual revolution has brought "death, disease, and wrecked lives to most people who chose to participate and profits to the exploiters" (*DM*, 9), along with the cultivation of new outlets of sexual expression has come "hindsight on sexual matters" (*DM*, 9)—an opportunity to assess how the private lives of leading cultural figures have found expression in their public pronouncements. Recounting the sexual history of secular moderns is not just an exercise in gossip; there are lessons to be learned from the human wreckage strewn along the path of sexual revolution.

Jones' predecessor in the harvest of this biographical crop is Paul Johnson. Johnson's book *Intellectuals*<sup>1</sup> was a study of the omnipresent class of secular experts in human affairs, whose rise over the past two centuries has coincided with the decline in influence of the Christian faith. Recalling that secular intellectuals have characteristically justified their position by pointing to the evils visited on humanity by the church, Johnson cast his gaze over the vices of these intellectuals themselves, and the harm that their alternatives to Christian teaching have visited on the world. The single most influential intellectual of the past two centuries is Karl Marx, of whom Johnson wrote, "The undertone of violence always present in Marxism and constantly exhibited by the actual behavior of Marxist regimes was a projection of the man himself."<sup>2</sup>

When one looks at Johnson's index under "intellectual characteristics," one finds the following sub-headings:

anger, aggressiveness, violence, ... cowardice, ... cruelty, ... deceitfulness, dishonesty, ... egocentricity, egotism, ... genius for self-publicity, ... hypocrisy, ... ingratitude [*sic*], rudeness, ... intolerance, misanthropy, ... love of power, ... manipulateness, exploitativeness, ... quarrelsomeness, ... self-deception, gullibility, ... selfishness, ruthlessness, ... self-pity, ... paranoia, ...self-righteousness, ... shiftlessness, spongeing, ... snobbery, ... vanity.<sup>3</sup>

The lesson that Johnson drew from his study was modest:

[I]ntellectuals are no wiser as mentors, or worthier as exemplars, than the witch doctors or priests of old ... [I]ntellectuals, far from being highly individualistic and non-conformist people, follow certain regular patterns of behaviour. Taken as a group, they are often ultra-conformist within the circles formed by those whose approval they seek and value.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Paul Johnson, *Intellectuals* (New York, et al.: Harper and Row, 1988).

<sup>2</sup> Johnson, *Intellectuals*, 69.

<sup>3</sup> Johnson, *Intellectuals*, 375-376. Consulting Johnson's references will provide a preacher in a college chapel with material for a multiyear series on the works of the flesh, illustrated from the lives of respected figures of the academy.

<sup>4</sup> Johnson, *Intellectuals*, 342.

### Morality, Intellect, and Truth

Michael Jones does not demur from Johnson's assessment, but he thinks a deeper lesson can be drawn. In every act of thought (whether that of a physicist, a novelist, or a preacher) one either subordinates the truth of the world to one's desires (for pleasure, wealth, fame), or one subordinates desire to the truth. Making desire subordinate to the truth—i.e., repenting, in traditional Christian terminology—is the prerequisite to genuine knowledge of the world, of oneself, and most especially of God (*DM*, 11–12).<sup>5</sup> Jones likens the mind to a window, transparent to the truth only when cleansed of the distortion brought about by desire. Thus, “the intellectual life turns out to be a function of the moral life of the thinker” (*DM*, 258). The moral advice characteristic of modern thinkers is then for Jones a function of their immorality, especially in regard to matters of sex.

Perhaps the most timely chapter in *Degenerate Moderns* is the first, devoted to Margaret Mead (*DM*, 19–41). Mead's 1928 book *Coming of Age in Samoa* is the tap root of cultural relativism, especially in respect of sexual morality. Its findings, including the claim that Samoan primitives “have no preference for reserving sex activity for important relationships,”<sup>6</sup> have been discredited as scientific ethnography.<sup>7</sup> In the memoir of Mead's daughter<sup>8</sup> and in Jane Howard's biography,<sup>9</sup> Jones finds the bias that accounts for Mead's misapprehension (or misrepresentation) of native life in Samoa: she entered into her field research while in the midst of two extramarital affairs, and on the sea voyage back from Samoa she began a third affair with a fellow anthropologist, whom she would leave her first husband to marry, and whom she would later leave for a third, Gregory Bateson. It

<sup>5</sup> See also the brief but insightful remarks of Diogenes Allen, *The Path of Perfect Love* (Cambridge, Mass.: Cowley, 1992) xi–xiv.

<sup>6</sup> Margaret Mead, *Coming of Age in Samoa: A Psychological Study of Primitive Youth for Western Civilization* (New York: Blue Ribbon Books, 1928) 222.

<sup>7</sup> See Derek Freeman, *Margaret Mead and Samoa: The Making and Unmaking of an Anthropological Myth* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1983), and the summary of Freeman's critique of Mead in *DM*, 20–28.

<sup>8</sup> Mary Catherine Bateson, *With a Daughter's Eye: A Memoir of Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson* (New York: Morrow, 1984).

<sup>9</sup> Jane Howard, *Margaret Mead: A Life* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1984).

was while she was in the process of dissolving her first marriage that Mead wrote her influential poetic account of a primitive culture in which adultery is not regarded as a serious offense; her anthropological work constituted a justification of her adultery.

As interesting as the origins of *Coming of Age in Samoa* is its reception by anthropologists and the reading public. Intelligent men and women accepted the claim, since falsified, that Samoans are free of Western-type hang-ups about free sex; they also received as gospel the dogma, deduced from this claim, that the sexual inhibitions cultivated through two millennia of Christian civilization can be casually disregarded. Jones observes that the practice of human sacrifice among the Aztecs or cannibalism among South Sea islanders has not led to the imitation of these practices, or to the dismissal of the Western belief in the sanctity of life as ethnocentric or culturally relative. Why, then, the enthusiastic reception of Mead's studies of sexual morality, and the advocacy of a new public sexual ethic based on Mead's observations? As Jones observes,

The fact that the book proved to be a best-seller and was considered a classic in the [anthropological] profession only showed that the ... need for rationalization [of sexual license] permeated large segments of the culture it addressed. People read such books and chose such professions because of deep-seated moral and emotional needs. The intellectual project of cultural relativism was rooted in sexual guilt (*DM*, 33).

The best documented chapter in the book treats Sigmund Freud (*DM*, 153–233) and concludes that, like his follower Mead, Freud projected his own guilt over incest with his wife's sister onto the race as a whole; the Oedipal complex takes its place alongside Mead's project of cultural relativism as a rationalization of sexual misconduct. The chapter on Sir Anthony Blunt (*DM* 51–78), which argues for a connection between Blunt's homosexuality and his betrayal of British state secrets to the Soviet government, might more profitably have focused on the economist John Maynard Keynes; Jones notes the judgment of Keynes's second biographer

(the first suppressed mention of Keynes's homosexuality) that the economist's short-term approach to the national economy bespeaks a "childless vision" (*DM*, 59).

The most controversial chapter for the Protestant reader is the last, which treats Martin Luther in the same light as the twentieth-century figures (*DM*, 235–254); here the biographical sources that Jones cites are colored, perhaps hopelessly, by Reformation and Counter-Reformation polemic, and one despairs of sorting the issue through. The other chapters are uneven; in particular, the brief treatment of Stanley Fish (*DM*, 79–86) lacks the depth of analysis that Jones brings to Freud and Mead and has the appearance of a settlement of a student's score with an instructor. The Epilogue (*DM*, 255–259) should give pause to any who see in Nietzsche and his deconstructionist epigoni a new academic ally for the Christian faith.

### Nietzsche, Dionysos, and the Rolling Stones

The Epilogue of *Degenerate Moderns*, and the brief treatment given Nietzsche earlier in the book (*DM*, 45–46), adumbrate the argument of Jones's second volume. *Dionysos Rising* builds on the thesis of *Degenerate Moderns* and argues that it is Friedrich Nietzsche's rationalization of his sexual aberration that has come to dominate the culture of the twentieth century, both "high" and popular. The story, told in four chapters, is richly detailed, if occasionally repetitive, and quite troubling. A comprehensive assessment of Jones's account would require conversance with nineteenth-century German intellectual history, the theory and history of music, and contemporary literary criticism. The outlines of Jones's thesis will be sketched here; the index, an aid to the reader which *Degenerate Moderns* unfortunately lacks, facilitates closer examination of the argument by those who wish to pursue it.

As a university student, Nietzsche's Lutheran faith was assaulted by the skeptical biblical criticism embodied in Strauss's *Life of Jesus for the German People* (*DR*, 56), his virtue by Richard Wagner's "paean to

impossible adulterous love," *Tristan und Isolde* (DR, 52). Inspired by *Tristan*, Nietzsche visited a brothel and there deliberately exposed himself to syphilis, which left him chronically ill to the end of his short life (DR, 56–57). Wagner had sought revolution (first political and then, after a failed experience with the Revolution of 1848, cultural) for the sake of sexual liberation; Nietzsche advocated sexual liberation as a means to social revolution, specifically the dissolution of Christian civilization (DR, 101–102)—the “transvaluation of all [traditional, i.e., Western Christian] values.” In this connection he was eventually drawn to the music of Africa as a means to unleash the power of Dionysos, the Greek god patronizing sexual ecstasy; Dionysiac lust would dissolve the Christian social order which Nietzsche hated.

Nietzsche’s influence has been enormous. His three principal intellectual heirs, according to Jones, are the Nazis, the engineers of the “global cultural revolution of 1968–1969,” and American university faculties since the 1970s (DR, 66). Chapters 3 and 4 chronicle the descent of the tradition of classical music into the unlistenable cacophony of the twelve-tone system and the simultaneous emergence of jazz and rock, styles of popular music incorporating African rhythms and promoting the myth of the sexually potent and promiscuous black as an alternative to the image of the restrained, impotent European Christian man.<sup>10</sup>

The outcome of this cultural development Jones finds in the free concert given by the Rolling Stones at the abandoned Altamont racetrack in Livermore, California, in 1969. The Stones retained the California chapter of the Hell’s Angels for security at the concert. Well into the concert, the band cranked up Mick Jagger’s comeback single, “Sympathy for the Devil,” and the fans responded by rushing the stage in their Dionysiac trance. The resulting violence is captured in the concert film *Gimme Shelter* and stands as

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<sup>10</sup> Jones points out the irony that blacks were on average more committed to Christianity than whites in the era when jazz was born; the image of the black man as a “paradigm of sexual liberation” was thus a distortion of the truth, created by white cultural elites who bribed black musicians with fame to embody their ideological construction (DR, 92–95).

a chilling testimony to the power of Dionysos unleashed, the power with which Nietzsche proposed to build a post-Christian society.

### Conclusion

The reader who makes his way through Jones' 460 pages may find himself in sympathy with Wilfred Sheed, who—upon hearing that Ayn Rand had introduced herself to William F. Buckley, Jr., with the declaration, “You ahrr too intelligent to beleef in Gott!”—remarked, “Well, that is an ice-breaker.”<sup>11</sup> If one aspires to both learning and goodness, what is one to make of Jones's indictment of the culture in which, for better or worse, we live and move? The Christian scholar will agree with Michael Ramsey:

The Wisdom of God is working through all created life, and far and wide is the sustainer and inspirer of the thought and the endeavour of men. The Church will therefore reverence every honest activity of the minds of men... But Wisdom cannot be thus learnt in all its fulness. The mind and the eye of man are distorted by sin and self-worship; and the Wisdom which the Spirit of God unfolds throughout the world can lead to blindness and to deceit unless men face the fact of sin and the need for redemption.<sup>12</sup>

The question Jones presses is to what extent the study of the humanities in the modern university constitutes the honest activity of the human mind, and to what extent it is an instance of sin and self-worship, blindness and deceit.

Jones may strike some readers as an alarmist; the question to be explored in light of his work is whether the current state of our culture justifies his sometimes shrill tones. A man crying, “Fire!” in a crowded theater likewise courts dismissal as an alarmist, and a threat to the safety of others—unless the fire is real. We must judge for ourselves, from evidence statistical and anecdotal, whether Jones exaggerates the enormity of the climate in which we must make our way and rear our children.

<sup>11</sup> William F. Buckley, Jr., *Cruising Speed* (New York: Putnam, 1971) 147.

<sup>12</sup> Michael Ramsey, *The Gospel and the Catholic Church* (2d ed.; reprinted, Cambridge, Mass.: Cowley, 1994 [1956]) 125.

Jones's two volumes invite us to scrutinize the attitude towards sexual morality that we find in the town square (traditional or electronic), in the church, and in ourselves. They also serve as a reminder that for the Christian church chastity and fidelity are not quaint relics of a past age of innocence; they are the hard way of the Gospel, which the apostles of Christ required from the outset of those who converted from a paganism that rivaled ours in its tolerance of promiscuity.

For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from unchastity; that each one of you know how to take a wife for himself in holiness and honor, not in the passion of lust like heathen who do not know God; that no man transgress and wrong his brother in this matter, because the Lord is an avenger in all these things, as we solemnly forewarned you. For God has not called us for uncleanness, but in holiness. Therefore whoever disregards this, disregards not man but God, who gives his Holy Spirit to you.

1 Thessalonians 4:3-8

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