

The Fate of Culture

In J.D. Unwin's

Sex and Culture

or

The Last American Generation

Submitted by

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If the British anthropologist J.D. Unwin¹ is correct in his assessment of society, this present generation in the Western world may be the last one. In his book, *Sex and Culture*, professor Unwin studied 80 “uncivilized” cultures and compared his results with 16 “civilized” cultures extending over the last 4,000 years. He found that when strict heterosexual monogamy was practiced the society attained its greatest cultural energy, especially in the Arts, Sciences and Technology; but as people rebelled against the prohibitions placed upon them and demanded more sexual opportunities, there was a consequent loss of their creative energy which resulted in the decline and eventual destruction of the civilization. Remarkably, He did not find any exception to this trend.

From the rise of divorce, the breakdown of the family and the re-definition of marriage itself, to the rampant increase of internet pornography and the growing danger of pedophilia, we are witnessing American culture fragment at an alarming rate. Why has there been such an outbreak of sexually deviant and sexually destructive acts? Why can we not pull ourselves together as a nation and rise above this unraveling of our moral fabric? What will the future hold if we cannot reverse this trend and right our world? I think we can find some answers in Dr. Unwin’s work, even though it was written two generations ago. Like a prophet on the biblical stage, Unwin’s message rings out to us today. Will we heed his words and find healing or will we continue our race to the ocean, lemming-like and filled with fury and futility? It is time for a change of direction.

Dr. Unwin concluded that the fabric that holds a society together is sexual in nature. When life-long heterosexual monogamous relationship is practiced, the focus is on the nurture of the family and energy is expended to protect, plan for and build up the individual family unit. This extends to the entire society and produces a strong society focused on preserving the strength of the family. However, He found that when sexual opportunities opened the door to pre-marital, post-marital and homosexual relationships, the social energy always dissipated as the individual focused more on self-gratification rather than societal good. In the end, the energy level reached such a low point that destruction from within, through anarchy, or destruction from without, through despotism or from an invading force with greater social energy, was inevitable.

Unwin also believes that this process of degeneration will take place within three generations of a society’s movement away from absolute monogamy. If this is true, then our culture in the West is now graduating the generation from its universities that will bring about the downfall of our civilization. Surely when we look at the rampant pre-marital sex, the sky-rocketing divorce rate (often caused by adulterous relationships), and the rise of homosexuality, we should realize that without a true reversal of this trend our society will die out just like all the other societies that Dr. Unwin documented. Only a society-wide revival, such as the Protestant Reformation or the Great Awakening here in America would be able to break this trend. Without a revival, America will die.

In this article I will explore J.D. Unwin’s study of these 96 cultures and show how his conclusions are very applicable to the decline of the American culture today. After an explanation of Unwin’s findings, I will then attempt to correlate them with our society via various surveys that have been conducted in the area of pre-marital and post-marital sex. I will then show how Unwin’s conclusions are reflected in the Bible and that the only hope for our society is the remedy that is outlined in the Bible: repentance, forgiveness and a renewed commitment to God’s prescription for marriage.

I. The Three Cultural Conditions of a Society

After studying 96 cultures, Dr. Unwin concluded that there are three conditions that define the social energy in a society: the *zoistic*, the *manistic* and the *deistic*. The zoistic culture has the least creative energy and is characterized by a lack of any sexual continence. Unwin states that these “people possess the power of reason, but they do not apply it to the world of their experience.... Generation after generation the same tradition is handed on; the same ideas prevail. Time does not alter them. In such a society human beings are born; they satisfy their desires; they die. And, when their corpses have been disposed of, they are forgotten.” (345-346) These cultures have no forward movement unless they change their views and restrict pre-nuptial sexual opportunities. If this occurs, then they will progress to the manistic condition that “seemed to be due to the operation of a factor which produced or intensified thought, reflection, and energy” (324, 354). Unwin seems to think that this movement upward is due to an irregular or occasional restriction of sexual incontinency so that “a small amount of mental and social energy is produced by the emotional conflict, and there is a slight modification of [their] zoistic ideas” (348). In order to progress to the highest level, that of the deistic culture, there would need to be a continued change in the thought, reflection, and energy present in the manistic culture, but the defining action would be that “the women were compelled to be pre-nuptially chaste, that is, the pre-nuptial sexual opportunity of a deistic society was less than that of any manistic society” (325). Though Unwin realizes that a deistic culture implies that there is often a religious motivation to preserve a strong monogamous society, he does not feel comfortable with a supernatural explanation. He prefers to attribute man’s control of his destiny to a naturalistic resolve and a deterministic attitude that he feels will result in a mastery over nature and destiny (336), but his own evidence conflicts with his assessment. None of the cultures that he studied were able to continue without a strong resolve toward absolute monogamy, yet most of the cultures that held to this virtuous position were based on religious regulations and motivations. I think that Unwin’s own Darwinian bias did not allow him to fully grasp the implications of the evidence.

This Darwinian bias also prevented him from fully understanding the difference between the three conditions of society. Following Darwinian convention, Unwin believed the zoistic culture was merely the lowest form of a primitive culture that never moved up to a higher level. Those cultures that did move up became manistic or finally deistic. Unwin relates how a number of cultures started out religious when they migrated to a certain area, but then rebelled against their “deistic” confines and became more manistic and even zoistic in their sexual behavior. This evidence clearly suggests that these cultures degenerated to these levels rather than others that are now deistic were examples of evolutionary ascendancy. In other words, the evidence points to a higher form of culture experiencing degeneration and corruption rather than merely primitive beginnings that did not evolve any higher. (363-364)

I would therefore offer a correction to his assessment of the three conditions of culture based on a biblical view of the evidence. Don Richardson, in his book *Eternity in Their Hearts*, entitles one of his chapters “Scholars with Strange Ideas.” He characterizes the late 19th century and the early 20th century as a period dominated by Darwinian thinking. Thus, when scholars such as Edward B. Tylor, in his book on *Primitive Cultures*, viewed the origin of religion, they “dismissed the Bible’s claim that the first religion to appear on earth was a monotheistic faith – a faith which the one true God has confirmed since antiquity with successive revelations.”² Instead,

because of their evolutionary bias they said that the first state of early man was one of no religion because they would not have been capable yet of religious thought. Then when man developed self-awareness in distinction to all other creatures around, he developed also an awareness of the “spirits” that inhabited things and began to worship these spirits. Thus was born animism. When a number of these spirits became more important than all the others there commenced the worship of many gods or polytheism. These scholars then linked man’s political progression from many village rulers to a monarch with the move from polytheism to monotheism, which is the worship of one God. Thus, monotheism would be the result of many generations of evolutionary development. The sequence doesn’t usually stop there, though. Most who interpret the origin of religions through the filter of evolution will then say that in time man comes to the point of realizing that there is no supernatural power so all that is left is the worship of man as god, and that is humanism. Others will see the futility of that and “progress” on to nihilism, which claims that there is no meaning in life and certainly cannot be called religious. Thus, in the evolutionary view of the origins of religion, man ends up where he began: with no religion. In the biblical view however, man starts with a belief in one God, and then through degeneration and corruption his religious views may become polytheistic, humanistic, or animistic, depending on the amount of degenerative views involved. He may even end up with no religion, which is usually referred to as atheism or even nihilism.

In light of this understanding, then, I would say that Unwin’s interpretation of the origin of his three conditions is in error, but I would still accept and support his observations about the various cultures.

II. The Four Types of Post-Nuptial Regulations

Generally speaking, Unwin believes that when human societies were absolutely monogamous they displayed a much greater energy than any other society. In fact, he suggests “the cultural condition of any society depends upon the amount of energy which it displays, the amount of that energy being dependent on the intensity of the continence imposed by the sexual regulations” (359). Thus, if a culture adopts stricter regulations in regard to sexual practices, it will become “homogeneous and extremely energetic” (369).

In his assessment of cultures, Unwin divides them into four types according to their views on post-nuptial regulations: “modified monogamy, modified polygamy, absolute monogamy, absolute polygamy...” (342)

- Modified monogamy refers to "the practice or circumstance of having one spouse at one time, the association being terminable by either party in accordance with the prevailing law or custom." (342)
- Modified polygamy refers to "the practice or circumstance of having more than one wife at one time, the wives being free to leave their husbands in accordance with the prevailing law or custom." (342)
- Absolute monogamy refers to "the practice or circumstance of having one spouse at one time, but presupposing conditions whereby legally the wife is under the dominion of her husband and must confine her sexual qualities to him, under pain of punishment, for the whole of his or her life." (342)

- Absolute polygamy refers to "the practice or circumstance of having more than one wife at one time, these wives being compelled to confine their sexual qualities to their husband for the whole of their lives." (342)

During his study, Unwin noticed that both a modified monogamy and a modified polygamy allowed for more sexual opportunities outside the strictures of a monogamous relationship and this always led to a decrease in the social energy of those cultures. Even a society with an absolute polygamy, such as with Islam, could not sustain the same level of energy as that of an absolute monogamy after the conquest and marriage to women who came from a strict monogamous culture (342-343). In the next generation "the energy dissipated as they were brought up in a polygamy" (368). Even in an absolute polygamy, the "society preserves but does not increase its tradition. It does not possess the energy to adopt new ideas; it remains content with its old institutions" (368). We see this stagnation in the world of Islam today. The only culture that has been able to sustain a growth in social energy has been the absolute monogamy. But no culture has been able to sustain that energy for an extended period of time (431). "In the past different societies have risen up in different parts of the earth, flourished greatly, and then declined. In every case the society started its historical career in a state of absolute monogamy, manifested great energy while it preserved its austere regulations, and relaxed after a less rigorous tradition had been inherited by a complete new generation" (369).

One of the reasons that societies have not been able to sustain this energy is that in order for an absolute monogamy to work, women had to be reduced to the status of legal nonentities. "Eventually they were freed from their disadvantages, but at the same time the sexual opportunity of the society was extended. Sexual desires could then be satisfied in a direct or perverted manner; no dissatisfaction demanded an outlet; no emotional stress arose. So the energy of the society decreased, and then disappeared." (431) In other words, the sexual opportunity of the female is more important than that of the male (342). Whenever the status of the woman is raised in a society the sexual opportunities also increase – to its own detriment. The only exception to this rule (though not acknowledged by Unwin) is when the culture is guided by a strong religious foundation that enforces chastity as well as the equality of women. This is why Christianity has been able to prolong the social energy of a culture.

III. A Modern Correlative

If the assumption is granted that every human society is capable of displaying social energy, then Unwin concludes "compulsory continence must be regarded as the immediate cause of a cultural advance. Any extension of sexual opportunity must always be the immediate cause of a cultural decline." (325-326)

In regard to the Sumerians, Babylonians, Athenians, Romans, Anglo-Saxons and Protestant English Unwin reminds us, "In the beginning each society had the same ideas in regard to sexual regulations. Then the same struggles took place; the same sentiments were expressed; the same changes were made; the same results ensued. Each society reduced its sexual opportunity to a minimum and, displaying great social energy, flourished greatly. Then it extended its sexual opportunity; its energy decreased, and faded away. The one outstanding feature of the whole story is its unrelieved monotony." (381)

America is very much like the golfer Tiger Woods, who went from the cute two-year old kid swinging a golf club on the Mike Douglas Show, to a phenomenal success in his twenties when all his talent seemed to come together and every dream seemed to be fulfilled. He was at the top of his game as well as the top of the world. However, when fame, fortune and power should have been an asset, his destructive sexual behavior began to unravel his life and led not only to a divorce but also to the self-destruction of his golfing ability. There was a young promise of a golden future, then the fulfillment of dreams beyond reckoning, and then the long slide down paved with sexual misconduct and episodic eccentricities. America has also enjoyed the glory of youth, filled with bravery and honor, as well as the fabulous heights of material success and the respect of the world. However, the sexual revolution of the 60's and 70's may well have initiated the three-generation slide mentioned by J.D. Unwin (347).

In the November 13th, 1967 issue of Newsweek these changes are documented: "The old taboos are dying. A new, more permissive society is taking shape ... And, behind this expanding permissiveness is ... a society that has lost its consensus on such crucial issues as premarital sex... marriage, birth control and sex education..."³ James Dobson says that "the burgeoning social ills seen in Western nations, including rising crime rates, drug abuse, sexual exploitation of children, and the disintegration of families, can be traced to the disintegration of traditional values and biblical standards of morality."⁴ The explosive rise in pre-marital sex and divorce are among the top reasons for the decline of our nation. One survey states that "nearly one million teen girls get pregnant each year.... while nearly four out of 10 young women get pregnant at least once before they turn 20"⁵ In the United Kingdom 31% of births were outside of marriage and for every two marriages there is one divorce.⁶ Another survey done in America states that "the average age at which a person becomes sexually active is 16 years." Another one "revealed that 63% of youth aged 14 to 21 are sexually active." And yet another survey found that "70% of youth will become sexually active before graduation from high school.... It also showed that 50% of 15 to 19 year old young women and 55% of young men have engaged in sexual intercourse at least once."⁷ In a report by Ben Wattenberg in the book, *The First Measured Century*, which consulted a number of sources, the percentage of 19-year-old unmarried white women with sexual experience soared from 6% at the turn of the century to almost 75% at its end.⁸ What we need to understand from this sampling of statistics is that over the last 40-50 years our nation has been in a sexual free-for-all that has effectively eroded away our public good. Remember that the French historian Alexis de Tocqueville wrote over 160 years ago, "America is great because America is good." Well, evidence shows that America has ceased to be good, and now it may only be a matter of time before it will even cease to be.

Kerby Anderson, of Probe Ministries, believes that the only hope for our nation is to turn around, for "apart from revival and reformation, this nation is destined to decline."⁹ He goes on to outline ten stages that civilizations go through in their journey from bondage back to bondage:

The first stage moves from bondage to spiritual faith. The second from spiritual faith to great courage. The third stage moves from great courage to liberty. The fourth stage moves from liberty to abundance. The fifth stage moves from abundance to selfishness. The sixth stage moves from selfishness to complacency. The seventh stage moves from

complacency to apathy. The eighth stage moves from apathy to moral decay. The ninth stage moves from moral decay to dependence. And the tenth and last stage moves from dependence to bondage.¹⁰

From my observation of our nation, I would have to conclude that we are in the eighth step moving very quickly to the next step of dependency (on the government). Bondage is not far behind. Kerby Anderson then points out that this is the fate of every nation unless revival and reformation reverses the cycle. The book of Judges outlines the cycle that the Israelites went through as they turned away from God, and they are the same stages that America has gone through. Our fate will be captivity and dispersion as well unless we redirect our energy back to a renewed relationship with God.

Kerby Anderson also points out that the decline and fall of a nation usually comes from within. “Even though some may have fallen to barbarians, their demise ultimately came because of moral and spiritual weakness which manifested itself as military weakness.”¹¹

The progression of a nation’s decline follows a 4-stage pattern that the apostle Paul outlines in Romans chapter 1. In the first stage the people turn from God to idolatry. In our nation this idolatry is represented by the worship of money, position and power. In the end it only leads to emptiness and futility. The second stage is when men and women exchange natural sexual relations for unnatural ones. James Dobson shows how this trend toward homosexuality is now flourishing in a number of cultures today, much as it did in societies from the past such as Sodom and Gomorrah, and ancient Greece, as well as in Rome where it reached epidemic proportions. Dobson says, “The historical record tells us that those cultures and many others gradually descended into depravity, as the apostle Paul described in Romans 1, resulting in sexual perversion in all its varieties.”¹²

The third stage Anderson outlines is anarchy. Moral and social anarchy result when cultures reject the word of the Living God. We see this in Unwin’s observation of the loss of expansive energy and social cohesion as a culture moves from absolute monogamy to a modified one where sexual indulgence becomes the rule and in time the social structures that hold the culture together begin to erode away. The fourth and final stage in this path of destruction is judgment. The society that practices immorality will bring condemnation upon itself and the ultimate judgment from God will be when he gives them over to their sexual perversion. This progression from idolatry to sexual perversion to anarchy and finally to judgment is found throughout history. J.D. Unwin documents it in his book as the movement from a deistic culture to a zoistic one, from an absolute monogamy to a modified one. This progression occurred in ancient Israel, in Greece, Rome, Persia and Babylon. It will also destroy this nation as well unless we heed the words of 2 Chronicles 7:14 –

If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land.

May this be Our Prayer!

Endnotes:

¹ Unwin, J.D. *Sex and Culture*. London: Oxford University Press, 1934. Professor Unwin taught Anthropology at Oxford and Cambridge Universities.

² Richardson, Don. *Eternity in Their Hearts*. Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1981, p. 134.

³ Hornor, Noel. *Society's Slide Into Sexual Immorality*. United Church of God, 1997. p. 1.

⁴ James Dobson. *Complete Marriage and Family Home Reference Guide*. Tyndale House Publishers, 2000.

⁵ B.A. Robinson. *How Many Teen Girls in the U.S. Get Pregnant Each Year?* The National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, 2002.

⁶ David Holloway. *War Over the Family*. Jesmond Parish Church newsletter, August, 2002.

⁷ BA Robinson. *How Many Teen Girls in the U.S. Get Pregnant Each Year?* The National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, 2002.

⁸ Wattenberg, Ben, Theodore Caplow, Louis Hicks. *The First Measured Century: An Illustrated Guide to Trends in America, 1900-2000*. American Enterprise Institute Press, Washington, D.C., 2000. Ch. 4.

⁹ Anderson, Kerby. *The Decline of a Nation*. Probe Ministries, 1991.

¹⁰ Ibid, p. 1-2.

¹¹ Ibid, p. 5.

¹² Dobson, James. *The Origins of Homosexuality*. Family News, Focus on the Family, June, 2002, p. 3.