

REFLECTION

The Vice of Nice

by Guillermo de Carndonagh

I have a middle aged acquaintance who lives in South Eastern Pennsylvania. Recently he left the Episcopalian Church and joined the local Greek Catholic Church. The members of the Church he left were like himself; moneyed, hereditary members of the upper class. Social events at this church are so refined, the Queen of England could attend and find nothing amiss. The parish he joined was built by and still serves ethnic Slovaks and Ukrainians, people with a solid faith but not the social graces of the upper crust. Knowing the man and the Greek Catholic pastor I was sure they had worked through all the theological issues very carefully but I was curious about the impact of the sociological differences. When I asked him he responded, "Manners and niceness are much less important than truth."

Truth is more important than niceness; not a view commonly held. It seems in fact that to contend for the truth or even to seek it by disputation is now a violation of social mores. One is tagged as mean spirited or judgmental if one tries through argumentation to seek or contend for the truth. The fact that the niceness cadres have added judgmental to their list of pejoratives gives us some insight into their philosophical base.

Now, I wish to make it clear that I'm not opposed to good manners; or even rules of debate. Such things are useful social tools that in fact can make discussion more effective and fruitful. No, what I'm opposing is the use of an appeal to niceness to forestall or choke off discussion. I'm opposing the idea that someone is ill mannered unless they let every conceptual idiocy pass un-commented and un-challenged.

Let us deal first with the idea of being judgmental. One cannot seek the truth without being judgmental. To seek truth implies that one can construct a hierarchy of ideas and judge which are ideas are correct. Not to be judgmental, is to be infantile and permanently ignorant. Whether two plus two is equal to six, or four or ten is not a matter of indifference, all ideas are not equally true. So in part the niceness cadres are driven by a desire to avoid the responsibilities of adulthood; to learn, to know, and to judge.

There are other philosophical vectors that move these niceness advocates. Some of these individuals believe the cant that there are no objective absolutes and reality is all in your head. This pernicious philosophy leads to two logical positions: first to dispute my ideas is a personal attack because reality is what I think it is, secondly there are no absolutes to seek so we should not disturb social peace by seeking them. To accept either or both of these positions effectively puts an end to rational discussion. Others are motivated by a fundamental misunderstanding of the American civil contract of toleration. Our constitutional structure requires the government to tolerate a variety of social and religious views for the sake of social peace. This does not mean that the citizen must believe all positions are equally true; but only that he can not use the armament of the state to coerce others to adopt his views.

People who have the wisdom and maturity to accept the fact that there are physical and moral absolutes even when they themselves do not always understand them, are the only persons philosophically able to seek the truth. They should not let themselves be intimidated by the niceness cadres whose positions threaten to terminate this search. A glass of wine with dinner contributes to the enjoyment of life. Nice behavior also makes life more pleasant. A jug of the same wine in the hands of an alcoholic becomes an instrument of vice and destruction. A rubric of niceness used to stifle debate is also a destructive vice.