

Morality: Is it a many-splendored thing?

Joan Chittister | Feb. 21, 2007 From Where I Stand

A series of rotating dinner parties is an institution in rural Ireland. With nowhere much to go, people go regularly to one another's houses "for a grand chat" over a good long meal and a couple bottles of wine. They come at seven o'clock and leave at 1 a.m. Then they drive back through the tiny mountain roads in deep dark night to rest up to do it again. Regularly.

We were hardly out the driveway one night till we spotted the flashing lights and striped yellow reflectors in the middle of the road around the bend ahead. Immediately, the driver swung the car around, raced back up the drive to the host house and got the tea-totaling American visitor there to take over the wheel.

And sure enough, we were followed up the mountain by the gardi. And sure enough, we were stopped.

I was astounded. Everyone in that car was stone-cold sober as far as I could see. But no, the Irish told me, one drink here is dangerous. One drink on a breathalyzer night and you run the risk of losing your license entirely.

The Irish with almost two million cars for a country of barely four million people and a road death rate that is one of the highest in Europe takes drunk-driving, which figures in over 36 percent of all traffic deaths, very seriously these days. But the accident rate is only one side of the issue.

Nothing is simple. Unfortunately, almost nothing is one-dimensional either. It's precisely the complexity and multiple levels of any social question that threaten both the moral and the social consensus of societies. There's a lot of truth on most sides of every question.

In the United States, those troublesome social questions include things like abortion, homosexuality, capital punishment, war and immigration. To people on either side of those issues, the questions seem clear, irrefutable, clearly moral or immoral.

To many people, for instance, abortion is about taking human life and so is clearly murder. Capital punishment is the application of justice and is, therefore, moral. Homosexuality is simply "natural" and therefore not immoral. War is state terrorism that takes innocent human life and is certainly immoral. Supporting illegal aliens breaks laws and so is obviously immoral.

At the same time, to many others, these same issues are all just the opposite. So these, we say, are the major moral questions of the age.

But not so fast. In other societies, the perspective shifts. Other issues take moral priority. In the Netherlands, for instance, prostitution is legal. In China, abortion is not "permitted," it is a political imperative. In a growing number of European nations -- Belgium, Scandinavia, Holland and Spain, for instance -- and in South Africa and Canada same-sex marriage is a legal option.

Obviously, the moral and the legal take on a different hue in different environments.

In Ireland, for instance, the thing that has the Irish struggling for moral rectitude these days may seem to us to be light years away from being a serious governmental issue. But the decline of the pub culture in Ireland and the role of the government in maintaining it has become a major moral question. Since the advent of smoking bans and drunk-driving regulations, the traditional Irish pub has been dealt "a mighty blow." Pubs, the surveys say, have been closing in Ireland at the rate of one a day every day for the last two years. (Sheridan, "One for the Road?" *The Irish Times*, January 13, 2007, Weekend Review, p.1)

Listen carefully and you can almost hear the cheers of those who equate liquor with sin. But is it -- is anything -- really that simple?

In the cities, for instance, pubs are barely touched by the bans. There's always the billion dollar Dart, the Luas, and the cab companies to cart drinkers home after a night of "good *craic*", the Irish equivalent of a roisterous good time.

But in rural Ireland, in the country, there's nothing. No cabs. No public transportation. No possible way to walk back and forth to the pub from the far-flung cottages that dot the hills.

For these country people, many of them old bachelors, the church and the village pubs are the only social life they have. Even now. The men -- inheritors of the tiny patches of grazing land, stayed in the country to farm. The women -- who for centuries could never inherit the land -- went into the city to get a job. Many of the men are still here. Alone.

There's a proposal afloat that the government should provide a Nite-link bus service to enable a safe and steady form of transportation to and from the pubs. But should they?

That's supporting drunkenness, one side says, and that's immoral -- and besides there aren't that many bachelors and if there are, we can simply relax the road regulations for them.

The other side says they're not supporting drunkenness, they're supporting good mental health and a necessary social system. The law is the law and must be universally applied. And there are plenty of bachelors.

An EU-funded survey of 165 men, ranging in age from 18-65, in fact, found that more than 20 percent of them lived alone, 70 percent had poor reading skills, 58 percent of them went to church regularly but only 15 percent visited their neighbors. For 77 percent, the survey reports, the pub was their main or only social outlet, the place they go "to meet people."

Another study of single, older men, finds that 23 percent of them reported depression or suicidal feelings.

"Very few will say that it's about drink," a supporter of the bill argued. "It's to meet up -- for the story-telling, the darts....That's all been taken away."

If the pub -- if alcohol -- isn't available, others argue, these isolated men will turn to drugs. Then, they say, the society as well as the men will have a real moral problem to deal with.

So what's really "moral" here? The accident rate is down and that's to be applauded. But the isolation rate is up, and that's regrettable.

It looks to me as if we can all take a lesson from what is a far less impacting moral question for us now -- but which we struggled over with a great sense of righteousness less than 75 years ago.

From where I stand, it seems to me that absolutizing the arguable is a dangerous path to take if we want to preserve all the truth there is in every issue. Unless we learn to listen to all sides of every moral question, we stand to tear the very fabric of the society to pieces. What's worse, we may never develop much real morality at all.

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