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A Christian Response to Pride Month: Is Pride Revolution or Carnival?

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Abstract

"Many aspects of the status quo seem rather persistent in the face of otherwise revolutionary pressures, a fact bemoaned by many who are advocating for change."

Posting about processing the celebrations and symbols of Pride Month from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

<https://inallthings.org/a-christian-response-to-pride-month-is-pride-revolution-or-carnival/>

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A Christian Response to Pride Month: Is Pride Revolution or Carnival?

Donald Roth

June 21, 2022

It's relatively easy for someone working at a religious institution and living in a rural space like I do to live outside the thick of much of what June has come to entail as "Pride Month." At the same time, my birthday falls at the end of June, and going out to a fun bar or restaurant with my wife around that time has annually coincided with the aftermath of a parade or festival capping off the month. This has given me a front row seat to a decent range of people processing the crescendo of the month's activities in a shared social space.

On June 1, Carl Trueman issued a call in *World Magazine* to oppose the celebration and symbols that come each June during what has become Pride Month. On one level, I can appreciate Trueman's call for opposition to what June has come to stand for; however, I've also seen many people using the month to rally together against the perceived oppression of religion, and I do wonder if this month is the time and place to play into a caricature foisted upon Christians.

In the way these things sometimes align, I happened to be in a faculty reading group working through Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age* at the same time as I read Trueman's call to arms. Trueman's recent best seller, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self* makes extensive reference to Taylor, so it was natural for me to put Trueman and Taylor in conversation with one another as I thought through questions around Pride.

As a major cultural event, it seems like a given to me that Christians should have a response to Pride Month. Whether we celebrate or castigate it, I don't think we can ignore it. At the same time, there is some ambiguity as to what "it" is that deserves consideration. Drawing from Trueman and Taylor, I'm going to offer up two visions of what might be happening during Pride; two visions that may well be happening at the same time. From there, my next piece will examine what a Christian response might look like in light of this ambiguity.

Pride as Revolution

One interpretation of Pride Month is as a festal celebration meant to stoke the fires of cultural change. In many celebrations, the intentional rejection of the social norms of the past is seen as part of an important effort to dismantle those norms and replace them with something new. At the same time, as a celebration of tearing down, Pride isn't necessarily offering a more coherent vision of "something new" than "do whatever you want." This is the sense that I think

Trueman is highlighting, and he argues that this focus on tearing down and reconfiguring is a threat to the entire social order (not just Christians).

This concern over social revolution has a long history, but it was articulated in a particularly clear way by a Dutch politician named Groen van Prinsterer. He named this sentiment “the Spirit of Revolution,” and he tied the spirit behind it to unbelief and a rejection of Christianity. His protégé, Abraham Kuyper, chose the name “Anti-Revolutionary” for the political party he founded and eventually led as prime minister in early 20th century Holland.

The “revolution” that was particularly close to the imagination of these Dutchmen was the French Revolution, which sought to radically sweep away the vestiges of the old regime. It established a number of ceremonies and festivals meant to replace old religious celebrations and audaciously declared the day after the monarchy was overthrown as year one on a new calendar. Bloody chaos soon followed in Paris as the revolution turned to devouring itself. At the same time, suppression of the peasants who were not on board with the Revolution in the Vendée region led to the massacre of between 15-50% of its inhabitants. This history of a wide-ranging cultural revolution left deep scars in Europe, and the horrors of this sort of revolution went on to be reenacted in many of the revolutions that would come after. Even in the United States, the partial cultural revolution of the 1960s birthed an amount of radical violence over the following decade that dwarfs anything we see today.

Trueman’s concern then is that a cultural appetite for revolution (over, say, reform) focuses heavily on the coherence of tearing down while remaining vague on building up, and he sees this as a dangerous impulse that society must both name and confront to its face.

Pride as Carnival

Going back to Charles Taylor, however, there might be another purpose at work in Pride Month. In ancient and medieval societies, there were regular events that look an awful lot like Pride Month festivities. Some of the most popular were festivals like Carnival, which often featured excess in direct subversion of the morality of the impending Lenten season. While many religious authorities criticized the immorality on display in these events, these events were seen as a stabilizing, rather than destabilizing, force in society.

Taylor explains this unexpected outcome in terms of the way that anti-structure (festivals like Carnival) was seen as a support for ancient social structure. He sees this in three ways:

1. Carnival was a way to blow off steam. – The structural expectations of society put everyone under pressure, and one way to avoid explosion is to periodically release some of that pressure.
2. Carnival was a way to energize structure. – Much as we often see straight-laced, structured people as a bit dull compared to the chaotic energy of, say, a rock star, a controlled injection of chaos could pump vitality into the system.

3. Carnival reinforced bonds of community. – By highlighting moments of reversal and transgression, Carnival gave legitimacy and power to the weak by bringing attention to the marginalized members of society.

The paradox of anti-structure was that society could get some relief from its repressive expectations while simultaneously deciding that these expectations should be readopted. While there were always some who wanted to Carnival to last forever, they were seen as the sort of drunken revelers least qualified to be running the show by the time Monday rolled back around. In this way, festivals of transgression produced something of the opposite of the revolutionary outcome.

So which is it?

If Pride Month is a ritual engraining the Spirit of Revolution, then Trueman's call might be appropriate; however, if Pride functions as a sort of anti-structure, then there might be reason to pause. While the reaction to revolution might be "all hands on deck" opposition, it's not as clear to me that this should be the same reaction to Carnival. So which is it?

There are absolutely a large number of voices explicitly calling for revolution and using Pride month as their rallying ceremony; however, the features that Taylor mentioned are also present.

Is Pride about blowing off steam? At the Pride events that I've inadvertently attended, an overwhelming number of attendees appear to be "allies." That is, a good number of participants appear to be taking an opportunity for revel and excess in support of their LGBT+ friends, only to happily return for most of the year to structures that those same friends decry as oppressive.

Is Pride seeking to harness chaotic energy? For this, I look to corporate America. Americans have long associated creativity with the sort of sex, drugs, and rock and roll attitude celebrated in Pride festivities. The elaborate support for Pride month by many of America's large corporations could also signal a desire to tap into the anti-structural power of this font of creative energy. After all, corporate America is nearly synonymous with the structural aspects of today's society. While there are a range of corporate opinions out there, I'm skeptical that the dominant corporate worldview actually seeks the total structural upheaval that the more revolutionary Pride advocates are pushing for.

Is Pride seeking to build community by shining a spotlight on the marginalized? I don't need to waste much ink on what is obvious to anyone with even a passing familiarity with the social phenomenon.

So is Pride really an anti-structure that serves, almost counterintuitively, to uphold the structure of a heteronormative society? I think both yes and no.

Pride doesn't have exactly the dynamics of Carnival. For one, the idea that we might desire a sort of perpetual bacchanalia seems to be more seriously entertained. Further, ancient anti-structure featured an intentional synthesis with structure. Typically, this meant an involvement with religious and political elite that ultimately culminated in ceremonies reinforcing the elite's rightful place in power. With regard to religion, this participation is both less visible and, for those of us with a traditional view on Christian sexual morality, undesirable.

At the same time, perhaps the tension of a serious consideration, followed by going back to the same structures, is exactly what anti-structure entails. While the more revolutionary elements of Pride might seek to purge some important vestiges of Christian sexual ethic from the public square, I'm more reticent about whether the overall foundations of society are similarly threatened. Perhaps this is just a reflection that religion is no longer part of the social elite, for I certainly see corporations and politicians participating in Pride in a way that might echo old patterns. Ultimately, many aspects of the status quo seem rather persistent in the face of otherwise revolutionary pressures, a fact bemoaned by many who are advocating for change.

The real challenge for Christians is that this doesn't have to be either/or. Some people are participating in Pride out of a more revolutionary spirit. Some people are participating in Pride in a sense more like Carnival. All of them share a certain rejection of sexual mores and traditional religious authority; however, if anti-structure doesn't pose the same threat to civil society that revolution does, it's not as clear that vocal condemnation is the right response. For those who are participating in anti-structure, strident religious condemnation can play right into the caricatures of oppressive hatred that the more revolutionary elements seek to leverage. In other words, a certain path of attack may make the necessity of revolution seem more plausible to people who weren't necessarily on that path. So what can Christians do? This will be the subject of my next piece.