The real moral scandal: indifference to suffering

H. Paul Santmire

The full significance of the Jim and Tammy Bakker affair has yet to be diagnosed.

That a leading TV evangelist should be caught with his pants down and his leading TV wife with her doghouse air-conditioned surely is a moral scandal. That sordid scene richly deserves the outpouring of ridicule and scorn it has received.

But the lifestyles of the rich and famous, however sordid, are not the real moral scandal. They are rather symptoms of a more deep-seated moral disease — indifference to human suffering. The real problem is not the sleazy sex, but the deadly silence.

While the public indulges in an orgy of self-righteous condemnation of the Bakkers, few people seem to be concerned about the 13 million children in our nation who live in poverty. While the reporters who peer into Gary W. Hart's bedroom get their stories published on page 1, those who dig out the ugly statistics about infant mortality in cities such as Hartford struggle to get any space at all.

When a former Nazi is deported to the Soviet Union, that's front-page news. But when a distinguished historian like David Wyman documents in his book, "The Abandonment of the Jews," that all segments of American society abandoned the Jews during World War II, and suggests that that moral indifference still might be rampant in the soul of this nation, few seem to notice.

Americans love to individualize sin, to see transgressions in terms of single personalities, when in fact sin is a social cancer that shapes the very way we see — or don't see — things.

Pollster George H. Gallup said recently that the United States is facing a "moral and ethical crisis of the first dimension." True. He cited extramarital affairs "of epidemic proportions," fraudulent telephone charges, extensive shoplifting and defaulting on federal loans by one student in seven. Bad enough.

But why didn't Gallup talk about the millions of impoverished and brutalized children in our society or about the thousands of Vietnam veterans, many of them black, who can't find work, or about the conspiracy of silence about American attitudes toward the Holocaust?

More than 50 years ago, ethicist Reinhold Niebuhr diagnosed a certain moral tunnel vision in our society in his book, "Moral Man and Immoral Society." He argued that the rich and the powerful love to personalize moral issues, almost as much as they love to personalize sins. In that way, Niebuhr maintained, the rich and the powerful, including the pious among them, never have to come to terms with the systematic and endemic injustices of the society in which they pursue their opulent lifestyles.

That's the lesson we have yet to learn about the scandalous Jim and Tammy Bakker affair.

H. Paul Santmire is pastor of Grace Lutheran Church in Hartford.