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Victorian attitudes linger near the surface

The images stood in striking contrast: One news photo showed the tearful face of the fallen television evangelist, pleading for forgiveness to his American audience. The other photo showed the resolute face of the compelling Anglican archbishop, leading a march for justice in the streets of South Africa.

This contrast ought to tell us something about ourselves. We are still the captives of the Victorian fixation on sex. However much the Victorian era condemned loose sexual mores, the fact remains that it was fascinated with sex. D.H. Lawrence and Sigmund Freud, no less than hell-and-damnation Protestant preachers of the era, were Victorians.

Modern American society likewise revolves around sex. Jimmy Swaggart is front-page news because it is shocking to millions that he should have been a lifetime connoisseur of the pornography he condemned. His plight confirms the lascivious mind-set of leading secular intellectuals and other cultural pacesetters, such as Ted Koppel or Johnny Carson, who have always known in their hearts that every evangelist is an Elmer Gantry. The truth of the matter is, however, that sex is the opiate of the masses.

Sex claims our conscious minds, in one way or another, to the exclusion of other humane concerns.

This is the disservice we render to ourselves by our failure to transcend the Victorian spirit. A century ago, sex-obsessed clerics or sex-obsessed secular romantics — those who essentially wanted no love or those who essentially wanted free love — both found it easy to blink at the excesses of the Victorian age. They ignored the brutalities of child labor, the degrading working and living conditions of the coal miners and the rank violence of colonialism.

Today, the children of those sex-obsessed clerics and secular romantics are playing out the same escapist story. Swaggart supporters pass out literature on behalf of presidential candidate Marion G. "Pat" Robertson that states the Bible is on the side of South African President Pieter W. Botha, and that the anti-apartheid movement in this country is inspired by communists.

On the other hand, many secular intellectuals and their numerous fellow travelers want to make money to escape to the country, ascend to the penthouse or buy a little cocaine. Meanwhile, movements for justice for the underclass, care for the environment or meaningful steps toward disarmament falter for lack of widespread and articulate support.

Where is the American equivalent of South African Anglican Archbishop Desmond M. Tutu? Where are the prominent clerics to walk arm-in-arm with such a leader to challenge the powers of injustice? Where are the secular intellectuals and the people of good will of all social strata, to rise up in one voice to challenge today's insidious narcissism and sometimes brutal social indifference?

It appears that, despite many striking exceptions, most people are fixated on sex, whether they are drawn to by the tearful confessions of the TV evangelist or privately fascinated with what the reverend really did with the prostitutes. Sadly, sex does seem to be the opiate of the masses in our society.

H. Paul Santmire is pastor of Grace Lutheran Church in Hartford. He wrote this article for the Hartford Courant.