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Separated at birth: clerical and athletic cultures

Eugene Cullen Kennedy | Dec. 8, 2011 Bulletins from the Human Side

The Oxford English Dictionary offers several definitions of culture, at least two of which help us understand the sex abuse scandals that have burst into flame on the campuses of Penn State and Syracuse universities and the very same scandal that is still eating its windswept way across the vast prairie of the Catholic church.

These are different faces of a scandal where origins and accelerants are exactly the same. They are functions of the cultures in which the blazes exploded from the same kindling, waxed stronger as the officials perched atop their common hierarchical structures, certain that they could keep them under control, decided not to pull the fire alarm -- what the heck, the fire chief and the newspaper editor were old friends of ours, we can count on them to keep this quiet and, besides, reporting it might increase our insurance rates, and we've had little fires before and if you don't make a big deal out of them, they burn themselves out.

The OED definition of such a culture informs us of its constitution by "the distinctive ideas, customs, social behavior, products, a way of life of a particular society, people, or period. Hence, a society or group characterized by such customs."

This describes the clerical and the athletic cultures, not to mention the entertainment, political, and military cultures. Card-carrying members of these cultures may not seem the same, but so similar are their instincts and presumptions that they could exchange skin grafts with each other.

We may also apply another OED definition of culture as that of the "artificial propagation and growing of microorganisms." In short, strange but invisible, and perhaps dangerous, entities come alive on other host cultures. Sex abuse has found the conditions in the clerical and athletic cultures congenial for its development, much as unappealing forms of life squiggle restlessly on the damp underside of rocks but, turned over, cannot survive in sunlight and fresh air.

Sex abuse scandals have grown on the underside, or, better, in the shadowed places in the clerical and athletic cultures. These phenomena are the same in the respect, if not idealization, accorded to its members by the hero-hungry general public. Its members are automatically accorded respect. They don't have to do anything but don their uniforms -- the Roman collar for one, the athletic togs for the other -- because a previous generation did the hard work, before million-dollar contracts and million-dollar scandals, to merit the esteem and affection granted without charge to them. No wonder they think they must be special and not, in the Gospel phrase, "like the rest of men."

Such privilege is also granted to singers and actors or to the heady whiff of movie-making when a herd of trailers and trucks with cameras, lights and props takes over a busy big city thoroughfare for a day or a week of shooting. Frustrated drivers or pedestrians are immediately calmed, as if bitten by the showbiz serpent, when someone speaks the magic words, "It's OK. They're making a movie."

Professional athletics in this country has outrun the clergy in the latitude automatically granted to stars who have been able to get away with almost anything, from drunken driving to assault and near rape, and to be

welcomed back after a prison stay as if they had only been away on a weekend cruise. Even being mean and ready to accept bribe-like inducements is not enough to shake off the stardust with which Americans so prodigally sprinkle them.

This is obviously similar to the privileges granted to Catholic clergy and religious. Those good priests, nuns and brothers who actually deserve it because of their selfless service to their people do not seek or want it. The fraction of those who take advantage of it do not deserve it and often are the ones who use the culture's generous appraisal as a cloak behind which to hide their sexual abuse of those in their care.

At Penn State and Syracuse, coaches who, like priests, were considered trustworthy because of the automatic admiration of the culture abused that faith in them to abuse young people whose personal integrity they were committed to protect. But the athletic culture, like the clerical culture, was so bewitched by the noisy parade of acclaim in which its leaders marched every day that they granted these coaches leeway, the benefit of the doubt, and muted everything that might harm the football or basketball culture that so dominated the imagination and judgment of faculty, fans, alumni and, yes, the doctors, police and media who looked the other way, covered up the situation or conveniently lost the records on any members of the culture who got into trouble by sexually abusing those they were supposed to care for.

At the bottom of these tragedies we find the individuals who understand the culture and knowingly use it to provide victims for themselves and protection from their superiors and others. These are the grand manipulators, for manipulation is the premier art practiced by clergymen or coaches who understand not only how to talk malleable youngsters into spending weekends or taking showers with them, but also know how to manipulate their bishops, superiors and the system itself to get a head-start on the police or the equivalent of medieval sanctuary for themselves within the church. They victimize and manipulate everyone to gratify their needs and then feel sorry, and want you to feel sorry for them instead of the victims whose wounds never heal.

Clerical culture is dying, but the athletic culture, with its spoiled stars, its greedy agents and pharaoh-like owners, walk unquestioned, as though they were our benefactors, through our culture. As long as that is so, the manipulators will thrive and we will be surprised, though we should know better by now, when similar scandals are found, as they will be, on the underside of other campus athletic programs and professional sports.

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