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Under the Influence: California's Intoxicating Spiritual and Cultural Impact on America

Monica Ganas
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Via the “cultural machine” that is California, Americans have derived divinity and desire from the synthetic and the superficial. Television is reality. Neighbors are strangers. Funerals have disc jockeys. And to many, nothing seems peculiar about these inversions of “beauty” and “truth.”

A lifelong and proud resident of California, Dr. Monica Ganas proclaims and analyzes the loss of “grace” in our society, selecting California and “the Cal-type” as a symbol of moral deterioration. Applying an extended metaphor of alcoholism, Ganas realizes that the American (symbolized by the Californian) public has been plagued by “amnesia” and a loss of humanity due to poor choices.

Blaming inherent imperialist instincts for what she recurrently refers to as “McDarwinism,” Ganas seeks humanity in the midst of social selection and plastic adaptations. Quoting McDonald’s founder Ray Kroc, this “dog eat dog, rat eat rat” mentality is seen across the state and its history, from the Gold Rush to the rise of franchising industries. A devout Christian, Ganas conversely quotes James Herrick: “‘Salvation is built on transforming grace, not on an evolving human race.’”

With researched historical and personal anecdotes, Ganas emphasizes the relationship between past, present, and future. Ganas describes her mother, and thousands like her who, during the postwar era, knew no form of salvation other than a makeover or a new household appliance. She references a woman who describes a memory, only to realize that it is a movie scene. Furthermore, Ganas recognizes the phenomenon of celebrity apotheosis: “the camera, lighting, editing, and special effects, all these lend a supernatural component to the action and serve to make the narrative seem at least as vital as the one we’re hearing at church.”

Ganas advocates truth despite the mass-production of dishonesty: “When the public is longing for stories of any kind…it is just plain easier to manufacture propaganda, especially in an environment that equates time with money rather than history.” With years of experience in the Hollywood scene, she is now a professor of media at Azusa Pacific University. Additionally, she has founded the Azusa Renaissance Project (ARP), which familiarizes children with local theater. ARP works against the influences of Californian culture, sharing art, beauty, and messages of truth with young people.

To overcome “California-ism,” Ganas declares that “step one of our ‘sobriety program’ is to *admit we have a problem* that must be addressed through spiritual means.” Although she encourages Christians to locate spirituality beyond the overbearing physical world, she is, in general, expressing hope for the reintroduction of humanity; therefore, anyone interested in sociology, theology, or history may be intrigued by Ganas’ insight.
LYDIA BELANGER (July / August 2010)

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