Carnival and the Christian

Introduction

The matter of the Christian and Carnival is, to many, an unresolved and perhaps even unresolvable one. Over the years, views by pastoral leaders have been diametrically opposed to one another. It is critical however for the **Christian** to ask questions and carefully evaluate their position in an effort to locate themselves at a place that honours and glorifies God as is consistent with Biblical principles. I am not suggesting that this essay will have "all the answers" however it is my hope that it will provoke reflection and conversation towards responsible and informed decision making.

Definition

What is carnival? Defining carnival is affected by the difficulty in separating definition from description especially since description varies both historically and contextually. Carnival has changed through the years and has different components in different places.

Definition therefore will be using a two-layered approach; the etymological (word meaning) and the observational (what we see). The observational approach includes identifying what have been consistent ingredients over the years.

The etymological

The word 'carnival' comes from Latin origin meaning "farewell to the flesh", a word coined to reflect a practice where people were encouraged to entertain the desires of the flesh, abandon restraint, ignore discretion and disregard boundaries as a last "hurrah" before a season of self-denial and Christian discipline. Related in meaning, is the term Mardi Gras (French for 'Fat Tuesday') which was the French expression for that last opportunity of indulgence before Ash Wednesday and Lent. Some saw this as a kind of purge, a time to get rid of sin by giving expression to it.

Alston Becket Cyrus one of St. Vincent's iconic artistes defines and describes carnival in his song Carnival History as "mas (masquerade) and music… calypso… mas with steel band… peace… spree… brass band… free." In his 1982 song Vincy Mas he speaks of carnival as "panorama, discos, getting down, making love, drinking whiskey and getting high in the Vincy sun". While Becket's words may seem a bit disconcerting to some, others view them simply as artistic and poetic expression not intended for literal interpretation. It is easy however to see the connection between Becket's lyrics and the root meaning of carnival. His lyrics reflect the very ethos of indulgence and permissiveness that was embodied in the concept "farewell to the flesh". The lyrics of calypso and soca songs through the years have perhaps been the most articulate in representing this ethos. Chingee of Trinidad; "jumping so hard I don't care if a fall down in a drain, you want bacchanal, welcome to carnival". Destra Garcia also of Trinidad in her song Lucy says "I grew up as a real good girl… as soon as I was introduced to carnival they say I loose..."

A Historical overview

Let us take a brief look at the historical context of this festival. It is however important to note that history does not determine morality, rather it provides a context for us to better understand what carnival truly is. It is therefore important to eliminate the possible presumption that history by itself has weight on our discussion on morality. Saying therefore that a practice was embraced or even originated by the church is not a moral question but a historical one. That the church did something in the past is not authority for morality. None can honestly suggest that the church is historically faultless and flawless.

Carnival roots are deep and varied. Some persons point back to the African practice of mask-wearing as the first signs of a carnival-type festivity. In the European context one source speaks of carnival as predating Christianity; “The earliest record comes from ancient times, when tribes celebrated a fertility festival that welcomed the arrival of spring, a time of renewal of life. The Romans called this pagan festival Lupercalia in honour of “Lupercus,” the Roman god of fertility. Lupercalia was a drunken orgy of merrymaking held each February in Rome, after which participants fasted for 40 days. Interestingly, similar to modern celebrations, the Romans donned masks, dressed in costumes and indulged all of their fleshly desires as they gave themselves to the gods “Bacchus” (god of wine) and “Venus” (goddess of love**). The masks and costumes were used as disguises to allow sexual liberties not normally permitted as individuals engaged in “bacchanal,”** the drunken and riotous occasion in honour of Bacchus. (The word “bacchanal” is still associated with Carnival celebrations to this day.)”

This source contends that as pagans converted to Catholicism, church leaders found it difficult to divorce the new converts from their pagan customs resulting in them syncretizing this festival with the Christian celebration of lent. Another source elaborating on this historical development said “The festival originated with Italian Catholics in Europe, later spreading to the French and Spanish, who brought the pre-Lenten tradition when they settled (and brought slaves to) Trinidad, Dominica, Haiti, Martinique, and other islands.”

Historians believe the first "modern" Caribbean Carnival to have originated in Trinidad and Tobago in the late 18th century, as a flood of French emigres (emigrants) brought the Masquerade tradition with them to the island. The festival was originally celebrated in the Caribbean among white planter class who hosted elaborate masquerade balls where masks and mimicry were an essential part of the ritual. They mimicked the coloured slaves. The slaves and free coloured soon developed their own versions of the festival holding the festivities around the burning and harvesting of the sugar cane (this was known as cannes bruleés, anglicised as Canboulay or Camboulay). They in turn mocked and mimicked the white planter class while adding several other indigenous ingredients such as the drums, their dress, stick fighting and their “spirit” (the expressiveness and passion of an African and oppressed people). For the slaves, carnival had a subversive character (before and after emancipation). This was embodied in the opportunity for indulgence, defiance and “freedom” and meant a lot to a people whose lives were defined by bondage and restrictions.

Carnival has over the years taken on various ‘shapes and sizes’. In the context of St Vincent, the fundamental principles of carnival have been maintained however economic expediency demanded the move to a June-July Celebration. It was considered disadvantageous to compete with the self-acclaimed ‘king of carnival’, Trinidad and Tobago and provided more time in the new year for planning and preparation while also creating an opportunity for a somewhat unique festival dubbed Vincy Mas.

A significant feature in the evolution of this festival is the class-race dynamic. It is interesting to note that while the festival began with distinct groups (Whites and slaves) having their own observances the modern festival is considered an amazing melting pot where race, class and other social barriers significantly disappear though not totally flattened. What is equally true is that flattening of social barriers reflects that vulgarity and immorality is easily achieved by all while dignity and self-respect requires greater resolve. As such, while there are bands whose prohibitive costs preserve social barriers what has been a lasting memory of mine is the opportunistic ‘vagrants’ and “unkempts” who look forward for that moment when they can “thief a wine” with someone who, without the influence of alcohol or the environment of carnival, will never tolerate their proximity.

Carnival Content at a glance (observational)

Through the years, various components have been included in this festival. The masquerade, alcohol consumption, fetes, street procession, music and dance have been among the most enduring components of the festivities. Calypso, steel pan, soca, pageantry have all become defining features of the modern festival though calypso has been fading in popularity. Perhaps tangentially, but useful to note, in the 'evolution' of the festival that the creation of soca music which is attributed to Lord Shorty (Ras Shorty I) was an attempt to rescue the dying calypso art-form. In 1971 his fusion of calypso and East Indian rhythms (reflecting the two dominant cultures of Trinidad) produced what he called soca ("the soul of calypso, the depth of [calypso] music") presented more catchy and up-tempo rhythms that grew in popularly and has become the more dominant genre today.

Is Carnival "We Culture"?

It is very common to hear the phrase "Carnival is our culture". This view is a consequence of several factors including (1) Integral to festival is an artistic expression that is peculiar to the Afro-Caribbean experience. soca and Steel pan for example are Caribbean creations. (2) The sustained use of satire which creatively provide occasion for social commentaries and, (3) The festival has become entrenched in our socio-economic milieu and attracts more visitors than any other national activity. This culture-label is however problematic as it raises several issues and questions to answered. If the definition of culture used is "a way of life", then does Carnival reflect how we live and function on a day to day basis or to what extent is carnival a snapshot of our way of life? If culture is understood as an artistic expression of one's indigenous identity then, considering the historical roots (Europe to Trinidad to St Vincent) to what extent is this "our culture"? If however culture is understood as commonly accepted norms, practices and behaviours then it is difficult to deny that carnival has mass approval and support in St Vincent and the region. Yet there is much room for discussion on whether we appropriately speak of carnival as our culture. Papa San, a Jamaican gospel artiste confronts the application of the label "our culture" in his song *Fasure*; "war and crime and violence we are not proud of, don't tell we it is a part a we culture" (slighted adapted). Arguing with respect to the Jamaican context that the common phenomenon of crime does not qualify it to be called our culture and identified as part of our cultural identity. Determining what is called culture depends in part on definition and application.

Whatever definition you use and whether it is the collective ethos of a people or the artistic expressions, it is perhaps facetious to suggest that my reflection is a reflection on CULTURE as against CARNIVAL – both are not synonyms. Strictly speaking, carnival is not culture. It is perhaps more accurate to speak of or discuss carnival as a cultural festival or a festival of culture since culture is the larger concept of which carnival is believed to embody. There has been a convenient conflation of the terms which may have been intended or at least used to invoke guilt in those who reject carnival, making them feel that they are rejecting our culture/cultural identity/way of life/collective consciousness when the issue is with a festival. So, while the bigger conversation on the Christian and culture will have various points of intersection and expression in this paper, I am limiting the discourse to this particular festival called Carnival. Invariably theories exposited and explored such as Richard Niebuhr's Christ and Culture (Christ against Culture, Christ of Culture, Christ above culture) are visible backdrops which I avoid deliberately engaging so as not to lose focus on the issue at hand. I am however guided by the view that Christ is above culture in the sense that culture is not a moral authority in itself and must be engaged and evaluated based on Biblical teachings and principles. It is the view espoused by Paul "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God…"In this Paul outlines that the Christian's first obligation is not conformity, not cultural norms and practices but adherence to Biblical standards and principles. So even when

something is common, popular or culture that of itself is not the basis of Christian moral decision making.

The Moral Excursus

The Christian and Carnival therefore is really a moral and spiritual discourse. The question of morality is intriguing since we do not all come to the conversation with the same guiding principles. Some people make their judgements based on which decision will maximize pleasure or happiness (Hedonism). Consequently, so long as people will be happy it is worth doing. Others make their decisions based on what works or will benefit the larger group of people (a form of utilitarianism). Still others make their decisions based on what is "suited" to a particular time or context (relativism), while for others right and wrong is an issue of numbers – what is popular or democratically derived at determines our obligation. This approach finds company in the view "the voice of the people is the voice of God". Still others will be guided by economic benefit, a factor which has been at the core of various moral issues over the years. Where there is substantial economic benefit, opportunity for employment and 'improving the standard of living' something that is wrong by other standards and principles is regarded as right, obligation or justifiable. In some respects, this continues to be a 'silent partner' in the discussion on carnival. The moral question being explored in this paper is really a God-question, right and wrong simply as what God desires and reveals in His Word. So, while others may feel compelled to act for other reasons this essay is geared towards those whose morality is intertwined with spirituality and informed by Biblical principles. Suffice it to say, the Biblical principles I refer to are universal best practices for the construction of a wholesome and healthy society. The premise I espouse is one which recognizes that Biblical values and principles are battle-tested and proven to be credible and reliable guide for the general wellbeing of individuals and peoples.

Carnival and morality

<u>The ideological framework – the etymological approach</u>

The question of the morality (rightness and wrongness) of carnival ought to begin at the ideological and philosophical level before looking at various practices and elements of the festival. The ideological framework which guides and governs this festival is indulgence, no-boundaries, "freedom". From its inception carnival was based on a principle of sensuous and wanton abandon, indulging desire and something of a purge concept - get it all out of your system.

This principle continues to define the modern celebrations. The music captures this succinctly with lyrics which continue to reflect the ethos of freedom and recklessness, "behaving the worst" (Skinny Fabulous), "no behaviour at all" (Hypa 4000), "is whole year I live for the carnival… misbehaving, I ga no care at all" (Machel Montano - Like a boss). Heavy consumption of alcohol is characteristic of the festival and serves to reduce inhibitions, enable greater risk-taking and enable behaviours which may otherwise be viewed as inappropriate. This resonates somewhat with the use of masks as they enable a certain anonymity that facilitates the recklessness. **Whatever else carnival is, the fundamental governing principle or ideological framework of permissiveness and indulgence is in radical conflict with Christian values, is Biblically and therefore morally wrong, unwholesome and dishonours God.** In Gal 5.16-23 Paul outlines what are works of the flesh and advises that the fruit of the spirit includes self-control. How much more subversive can you get with "behaving the worst"!!!

<u>An observational assessment</u>

Taking an observational approach to the festival, allows the critical onlooker to see the subversion of Christian values and the display of vulgarity, the excesses, the lack of modesty in dress, the reckless and irresponsible behaviour, the heavy dosage of sexual and sensual content in the songs, conversations and

the dancing. These are not peripheral to the festival but have been characteristic ingredients of different levels and are an inevitable consequence of a festival of whose ideological framework is indulgence. However much one may highlight the positive and artistic components of carnival it cannot be denied nor ignored that carnival is inundated with a host of vices. This is not a recent phenomenon, through the years we have experienced these vices at various levels. Songs have long been composed coining words that woo profanity, promote unhealthy sexual values and behaviour and encourage use and abuse of alcohol. **Whatever else carnival has been, it has <u>also</u> been a display of vulgarity and excesses and an obvious subversion of Christian Values.** 2 Tim 3.1-5 Paul in speaking of the godlessness of society lists various examples which are evident in our carnival festivities (e.g. lovers of pleasure, despising good) and advises; "avoid them" (NRSV), "Have nothing to do with such people" [NIV] a counsel which is not meant to disregard our evangelistic responsibility but to express strong rebuff of that kind of living.

Consequences

The morality of this festival goes beyond the philosophical and academic engagement to the matter of consequence. Here is where the observational approach is priceless. In St Vincent, the evidences abound; police presence is multiplied not simply because we have crowds but because crime and violence escalates. The monumental increase in vehicular accidents is equally a reminder of God's grace since so few end up being fatal. The hospital's Accident and Emergency struggles to keep a pace with the wounded patients that come for attention. Proudly we promote various unhealthy practices and many feel a sense achievement that they have not slept for the last 3-12 days of carnival. This year (2017), the police raised concern about the number of children left unattended at events and in the city. Yet the bigger question for which it is difficult to do a scientific and objective analysis of, but is necessary to raise is, what impact does a festival which deliberately celebrates, glorifies and promotes unhealthy and unwholesome values have on the general psyche and outlook of a people? Is possible to contain the philosophical and ideological conceptions to the season? To ask the question in reverse, what benefit is there to be derived if Carnival is simply a snapshot of our wider moral decay? And if it is, does giving permission to promote and celebrate that decay help in redressing? The answer to this last question seems obvious since history has proven that the decay has only spiralled, carnival is certainly not a part of the solution.

How do we respond?

The question of the Christian's response is complicated since (1) the fact that something is immoral does not automatically speak to how the Christian ought to respond, and (2) That carnival ideologically is contrary to Biblical principles does not expressly address the issue of separating the parts from the whole, that is, reflecting on individual aspects as against the festival as a whole.

The exploration of response is guided by the view that **"Whatever else carnival is, the fundamental governing principle or ideology of permissiveness and indulgence is in radical conflict with Christian values, is Biblically and therefore morally wrong, unwholesome and dishonours God."**

Once the prism through which I address the response issue is clarified then we can consider the question of "parts versus the whole". Since the governing principle or the ideological framework of carnival is contrary to Biblical principles the question for exploration is, whether or not there is room to evaluate separate aspects of the festival and determine a response to 'each'. The artistic design of costumes, the satirical elements like calypso and ole mas, the pageants, the steel pan; can a Christian responsibly divorce the parts from the whole in principle and in practice? If the overall governing principle is wrong can we isolate parts that are good and divorce them from that governing principle? If someone has a factory producing illegal drugs for distribution yet in that company they provide jobs,

give staff scholarships, help those in need, is working for that company, right? If good is used to facilitate evil is the good still good, or at least excusable? These questions offer us the opportunity to again explore an age-old question of the relationship between means and ends. In the context of the Christian faith, can the ends be separated from the means or the means from the ends? If you are doing wrong or evil to achieve good, is God glorified? If you are doing good to promote wrong or evil, is God glorified? In Genesis 3.1-19 the good agents of increasing in knowledge, opened eyes and wisdom were all a means towards an evil end – disobeying God. The separation principle would seem to suggest that God's response to Eve should have been; *I see that you have ambition, I see that you want wisdom, I see that you appreciate the beauty of my creation… yes you disobeyed me but… that's ok the good outweighs the bad.* It seems to me that the first hurdle to negotiate is, with an ideological framework of indulgence can we participate in parts of the festival which may not normally reflect that indulgence? I do not believe that the separation can be made. Further to this, because the ideological framework is one of permission then even these events which would normally be contained are certain to have moments of excesses and immorality.

Separating the parts from the whole in practical terms asks (1) can we participate in the soca festivals but ignore the songs which promote negativity? Or, (2) can we attend selected shows because they are 'majority clean'? This kind of approach has various components to it including the issue of our Christian witness. It also seeks to ascertain the extent to which the Christian ought to participate in something that is mostly good but has obvious wrongs or mostly wrong with significant good. An extension of this prompts the question, is there ever a time when wrong is accommodated or overlooked because of the abundance of right? I am hoping that this can be considered a rhetorical question and that it is clear that the Christian does not have an option to accommodate or overlook wrong. Jesus' interaction with the woman caught in adultery in John 8.1-11 addressed the hypocrisy of Pharisees but certainly did not reflect an overlooking or accommodating of sin. In fact, his admonition was "go and SIN no more." Invariably the Christian who chooses to embrace the positive and celebratory elements of the festival by participation almost never makes it an order of business nor has occasion, save in private conversations, to declare the "go and sin no more." The conversations I have had with many who are sympathetic towards participating in the activities is a "wrong, but" approach. An approach which acknowledges the wrongs but either seeks to downplay them or overlook them because of the good. I find no justification in scripture for this approach. Our call to holiness reminds us that Jesus was uncompromising to a man who lacked ONE THING [Mark 10.21] despite the many noble qualities he possessed.

The matter of our **Christian witness** cannot be slighted. When a Christian gets involved in an activity where wrong is integral to that activity, how do they avoid giving tacit approval to the whole? How can they clarify to the distant onlooker that they disapprove of the wrongs of the festival? Experience informs that the onlooker does not distinguish a part from the whole. Seeing a priest, minister or pastor simply standing on the sidewalk observing as the procession passes is hardly ever reported in light of their distinguished and disavowed posture or a presumed presence at this one activity, rather reference is made to their presence as support for the whole.

Let us consider another "part" of the whole, the matter of pageants. What is or are the guiding principles, is it empowering and enriching the lives of our women or is it objectifying our women, using their sexuality exploitatively while promoting an approach to womanhood where she is defined by her physical? If it were about empowering women, why has there almost always been a "beauty" segment and a bikini parade? I have no issue with the realization that patriarchal aspects of our history demanded and demands providing opportunities for women to be celebrated, perhaps even reminded that they are special and beautiful, as such there is a liberating theme that can be celebrated in

pageants. Yet, to what extent pageants, or at least modern pageants have been a focus on the empowering of women as against highlighting her "sexuality" and an opportunity to use the woman's sexuality to make money? The rhetoric around the pageant is often 'noble' but what of the content? While distinguishing one pageant from another is philosophically helpful it seems purely academic in the conversation on carnival when observationally an exception will be defined by the "rule". The 'rule' with respect women and carnival which is pervasive beyond the festival is one where over the years, it is the women whose costumes have become more revealing and especially vulgar. It is the women who are featured in the songs in a degrading manner. It is the women who are featured in the advertisements and videos using their "sexiness" to promote and sell products. How does one separate (with surgical precision) this wider milieu (the rule) from the pageants which punctuate the festival and accentuate this reality.

Transformative response (prophetic)

This response appreciates that as salt and light the Christian imperative is transformation where there is inherent wrong. If the Christian's intention is transformation, then it cannot simply be participation or presence for selective entertainment. The principle of the triumphal entry "when Jesus entered Jerusalem the whole city was stirred" (Matt 21.10 NIV) is a principle which points to the upturning influence of the Christian in the midst of wrong. It seems to me therefore that this transformative approach demands a response that does not seek accommodation and compromise but a turning over of tables. Such a response may be an administrative engagement that is deliberate in change-impact while it may also be a collective voice saying "what you are doing is not right". Transformation therefore demands a clarity about the morality since ambiguity can easily lead to the one attempting to transform being transformed instead.

There are those whose perspective on transformational response sees the Christian as being present for the purpose of evangelism. This however is entirely different from participation and entertainment.

There are Christians who believe that participation for demonstration of a better approach is one of our best rules of engagement. I am of the view that the response of the Christian cannot be one which tacitly or expressively supports a festival governed by the principle of indulgence. In pragmatic terms, hardly anyone looks at the Christian band saying, *"that's how it should be done"*, in fact, they more readily use the presence of the Christian band as evidence for approval of the festival as a whole. To the average onlooker doing it differently simply translates to doing it.

The Christian must begin a conversation and use its influence to rebrand and redesign this festival. This approach demands two levels of engagement (1) administrative and (2) collective influence. It is to demand that we have a cultural festival which seeks to truly celebrate our artistic and historic identity without the compromised vulgarity or immorality. There are several versions of cultural activities throughout the region that seek to prevent the philosophical or organizational corruption. For us in St Vincent, nine mornings has been a festival which has maintained a cultural uniqueness while avoiding (so far) the fete and rum and "wildness" that some admittedly long for. The concept of the Nevis Culturama and the Tobago Heritage Festival are all differently themed and branded events which create an occasion for cultural expression and are significantly "family-friendly". In fact, Tobago Festivals Commission speaks of the Heritage Festival as "by far the main event on the Tobago cultural calendar and it is considered and accepted that the Heritage Festival is to Tobago, what Carnival is to Trinidad." It seems to me, while a "lego beast" festival has its appeal to some, a truly cultural festival which promotes wholesome behaviour and values, accommodates the family and the significantly large

Christian community, will be a much more inclusive and national festival. I must also admit that while this is true, vulgarity has over the years attracted greater participation and support than sobriety.

Pastoral response

Alongside the transformative response is the pastoral response. This response is not a compromise but is sensitive to the complexities involved in preserving godly values amid such an entrenched phenomenon. It acknowledges that there are many whose livelihood depends on this festival. It takes cognizance of the fact that this festival has become "a part of my life" for some who have developed personal and family traditions around the festival. It is that response which appreciates the difficulty many will have in negotiating how to exist amid a festival which seems to infiltrate all of society and makes it almost impossible to disassociate from it. It recognizes that for every Christian who may which to step back from the festival there are several close friends and family members who are deeply involved. It is that response which appreciates the struggle a person may have when friends and family visit who don't share the same awareness or inhibitions about the festival. This pastoral response therefore reminds of the need for faithfulness to Biblical principles along with virtues such as patience, sensitivity and compassion, mindful of the difficulties many face in seeking to "do the right thing". This response is complicated by the fact that most human beings are uncomfortable with and even resistant to the principle of change or the "what you are doing is not right". When one speaks of the vulgarity or the lewd behaviour the pastoral response is mindful that we are speaking of *people* who are involved in vulgarity and lewd behaviour. I will not attempt to prescribe on this matter save to acknowledge that it is a factor to be considered.

Conclusion

I love the calypso art-form and its social commentaries. I love steel pan music. I love the lively, catchy rhythms of soca however, as long as these are ingredients of carnival I have a Christian and moral duty to 'distance' myself from the carnival version as I advocate for righteousness in our nation. It is difficult for me to see how a Christian can justify "farewell to the flesh" or diminish their responsibility to be light and salt for personal interest and appetites. We cannot support a festival which promotes ungodly values and encourages ungodly behaviour. That we have always done it cannot be our reason to continue. That it was started by the Church is no grounds for continuation. That it is hard and seemingly impossible to bring change is not a reason to stop trying. We cannot separate parts from the whole for our own convenience sake. We cannot be accommodators and justifiers of wrong because of that which we like. As Christians and anyone whose moral compass is still functional we have a responsibility to demand what is good and best for our society, work aggressively towards it, seeking primarily to be faithful to what honours God and persistent in our defiance – We must obey God rather than man (Acts 5.29).