

## CAN A DEFEATED MESSIAH SAVE HOLLYWOOD CELEBRITIES?

In the eighth of his continuing series “Must the Sun Set on the West?”, Indian thinker Vishal Mangalwadi addressed the topic of heroism in his Tuesday night (November 6) lecture at the University of Minnesota. Lecturing before a full house, he argued that because of Jesus Christ’s death on the cross (and what seemed to be a defeat for God’s Messiah), Western ideas of heroism took on the notion of self-sacrifice for the good of others. This contrasts dramatically, said Mangalwadi, in our post-biblical age when Hollywood celebrities are treated like heroes instead.

Casting the issue as a contrast between the life of the Apostle Paul and that of Paris Hilton (who recently proclaimed that she wants to go to Rwanda to help their poor), he began by showing the similarities between them: both were icons in their era, were known for their charisma, went to jail, and were involved with the poor. However, the similarities abruptly end there. While one’s life was built on self-sacrifice for Christ and others, the other’s life has revolved around the sex, money, and power that reflects the emptiness of Paris’ life. That emptiness, said Mangalwadi, is the direct result of a materialist worldview which asserts there is no soul, and, thus, no reason for a genuine inner life. Now we have what the scholar Philip Reiff called “charisma in a can,” a new hair style or fashion that projects one’s celebrity status before the world.

While Dr. Mangalwadi hopes that she is sincere in wanting to go to Africa for the poor, he fears that, ironically, Paris needs Africa’s destitute to save her image. “Can they save her, or is she taking her lostness to them?” he asks.

Mangalwadi also talked about his wife’s heroism in working among India’s poor in the mid 70s through mid 80s. After several violent attacks in the early 80s against members of the Christian community he was leading (up to 1,000 community members at one point) in central India, Mangalwadi’s wife Ruth (and her two small daughters) was warned not to continue serving the poor with their Gospel-based message of personal and social redemption. She, however, resisted those warnings because she believed that she must follow Christ all the way. This heroic decision was motivated by her Christian faith: “We lay down our lives for Him because He first laid down his life for us.”

Ruth’s heroism mirrored that of St Paul, whose earliest notions of heroism (prior to his conversion) were partially shaped by Greek and Roman classical ideas of the hero as one who expresses the will to power. Thus, Paul used his power to persecute the young church, only to experience God’s power during his conversion and thus to have a completely re-defined notion of heroism which involved what Institute campus minister Pete Lackey calls the “cruciform” (cross-defined) life.

Subsequent medieval notions of heroism, said Mangalwadi, were more influenced by the Greeks than by the Gospel. However, Thomas Aquinas in the 13<sup>th</sup> century began to critique the excessive warfare associated with medieval heroism, and with the church sought to limit the brutal heroism of private warfare. The Reformation of the 16<sup>th</sup> century

solidified a return to the idea of heroism as self-sacrifice for others, in particular, as servanthood.

The biblical notion of the hero is still appealing, even early in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, said Mangalwadi. Thus, *Star Trek* and the film *Armageddon* feature biblically-shaped heroism in their storylines. On the whole, however, greatness in the West is being redefined as an external makeover. “The amputated soul of the West is becoming empty and superficial.” Mangalwadi’s fear is that unless a biblically-oriented notion of heroism is restored, Westerners will eventually return to the classical notions of heroism and violence, which are all about power and nothing to do with self-sacrifice.