

The cult of Diana

by Cal_Thomas

DUBLIN, Ireland - Britain's version of Elvis week reaches its crescendo Friday with a memorial service marking the 10th anniversary of the death of Diana, Princess of Wales. The woman famously described by Diana as the "third person" in her marriage isn't coming. Discretion and the Queen convinced Camilla that her presence would distract from the occasion. The media are full of stories and images of Diana, whose face when it appeared on the cover of People magazine sold more copies than any other subject. Diana is our goddess of beauty. We can't get enough of that face, the clothes or the fairy tale story with an unhappy ending. Maybe if we keep reliving the story, the ending will be different, but it never is because worship based on externals is always bound to disappoint. Beauty covers a multitude of sins, and Diana, like all of us, had plenty of them. We forgive her multiple affairs and her manipulative tactics because we love her looks. She makes us feel good still. We desire her even in death. The feminist writer Germaine Greer penned a devastatingly honest essay for The Sunday Times that pierced the makeup, the clothes, the jewels and the image to reach her reality: "When Diana presented herself to her adoring public as a guileless girl who fell in love with a chap who just happened to be heir to the English throne, only to have her innocent young love spurned, she was acting a lie." Greer says that in adulthood Diana became "more, rather than less, devious." It is a character assessment her adoring disciples are prepared to overlook. And then Greer writes this explosive line: "The story of how she emerged from her dowdy chrysalis to become the people's princess is often told, but what is seldom assessed is just how much of a performance this was." We are prepared to believe lies if they affirm our deepest desire to feel good, if not about ourselves, then about a goddess statue that can be as devoid of spiritual power as the false gods created by pagan peoples. How many women believe the old lie, "Of course I'll respect you in the morning," before climbing into bed with a man who doesn't even respect them in the evening?

A measure of the power of the beauty cult can be found in the answer to a question. Suppose Diana had been the mistress of Prince Charles and Camilla were his first wife. If Camilla and not Diana had been killed in that Paris tunnel a decade ago, would the outpouring of grief from people who never met her have been as great? Surely not. No one celebrates or elevates plainness; less so, goodness. Where is the stadium event for Mother Teresa, who died the week after Diana? The media were forced to cover her funeral lest they be condemned as too superficial. That didn't last long. Consider the power of the beauty cult. Network news, which was once serious, employs women whose makeup increasingly resembles the thickness of a death mask. The new NBC News financial reporter, Erin Burnett (a younger version of CNBC's "Money Honey," Maria Bartiromo) is ogled by Chris Matthews and others, who focus on her looks and not what may be inside her head, if anything. Cable networks employ Barbie-doll wannabes (do they have a hooker version?) who are blondes with short skirts and apparently little self-respect. They are all interchangeable parts, virtually indistinguishable from one another. Most speak in clichés and have trouble ad-libbing anything that isn't written for them in the teleprompter, but the lip gloss and hair look great. They are the fantasies of aging male management and middle school boys, or am I being redundant? The Diana cult will continue until someone younger with a better story replaces her. The public always wants a better and younger story. Consider the musical "Chicago," when public attention and favor quickly pass from Velma Kelly to Roxie Hart and then to yet another woman with a more exciting narrative. Cults ultimately disappoint, and the Diana cult will, too. Germaine Greer concludes by writing that Diana was a "desperate woman seeking applause." No wonder so many still love her, because they are seeking the same thing. (Direct all MAIL for Cal Thomas to: Tribune Media Services, 2225 Kenmore Ave., Suite 114, Buffalo, N.Y. 14207. Readers may also e-mail Cal Thomas at tmseditors@tribune.com. (c) 2007 Tribune Media Services, Inc.

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