

Breaking the Jante Stronghold

By Paul Anderson

Scandinavians are as far from Italians as Scandinavia is from Italy. Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson, a famous Norwegian author, once wrote, "Every joy you have you pay for with sorrow." Many Norwegians think this quotation came from the Bible. They take this quotation seriously-and I mean seriously. They, and all Scandinavians, value even-keeled emotions rather than the highs and lows that are more prominent in Mediterranean cultures.

This means that expressions of affection and praise are guarded. When a highly gifted girl asked her mom why she didn't affirm her, she responded, "We didn't want you to get proud or spoiled."

Many children grow up in Scandinavian homes wondering if they are valued, and this attitude they then pass on to their offspring. It's not vastly different from many other places in the world in that respect, except that it might be more pronounced among Scandinavians because of their dispositions. Individuals have characteristics that set them apart, and so do races. These are formed by such things as religion, geography, history, and cultural values. Garrison Keeler has helped us laugh at some of these Nordic cultural patterns, but sometimes they aren't funny.

These attitudes, a part of Scandinavian society for centuries, were reinforced and perhaps embraced overtly as a result of a novel by a man named Aksel Sandemose. He was a Dane who moved to Norway and there came across attitudes of negativism and depression. His book, called *The Escape from Jante*, takes place in an imaginary small Danish town called Jante, based on his hometown Nykobing Mors. Written in 1933, it tells about the ugly side of Scandinavian small-town mentality, and the term "Janteloven," which means "the Jante Law" has come to mean the unspoken rules of such communities in general. It is a curse, not a blessing, but Scandinavians seem to have owned it as their particular DNA. Sandemose may have chosen ten laws to give it the seriousness of the Ten Commandments, which interestingly are called the "Moseloven" (or the Mosaic Law) in Norwegian.

WHAT IT IS

Here is the Law of Jante which Sandemose wrote after observing it in Norwegian culture:

- 1. Do not think you are anything special.**
- 2. Do not think you are as important as we are.**
- 3. Do not think you are wiser than we are.**
- 4. Do not fool yourself into thinking you are better than we are.**
- 5. Do not think you know more than we do.**
- 6. Do not think you are more than we are.**
- 7. Do not think that you are good at anything.**
- 8. Do not laugh at us.**
- 9. Do not think that anyone cares about you.**
- 10. Do not think you can teach us anything.**

Heresy is truth in distortion, and there is an element of truth in these ten commandments. St. Paul wrote to the Philippians, "Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves" (2:3). The next verse balances this outlook by saying, "Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others" (Philippians 2:4). Humility is a tricky quality to get a handle on. It does not mean putting ourselves down, de-valuing who we are, adopting an inferiority complex, or assuming we can't do well or won't amount to anything. This is a false face we sometimes give humility. True humility is a realistic assessment of who we are, and it actually leads to boldness rather than to lack of confidence.

The Law of Jante, however, takes an inaccurate picture of humility, what I call "worm theology," and applies it to others in a kind of pseudo-democratic fashion. It levels people off so no one feels like rising above anyone else.

The Japanese have a saying, "The nail that sticks out is pounded down," and the Law of Jante has been used for decades to pound people down, to put them in their place, to keep them from stepping out, to make them feel like they are junk, until they question their value to others and even to God.

A Swedish pastor once told me that it is opposite the American spirit of "rugged individualism." "If you ask a Swede if he plays an instrument, he says, 'Well, not much. I just practice a little bit,' even if he is a concert pianist. If you ask an American, he says, 'Sure, I'm going to release a CD soon,' even if he knows only two chords."

A man gifted in prophecy was in Sweden for the first time in the 80's. Without knowing about the Law of Jante, he saw a spirit over Scandinavia, a spirit of "Don't think that you are someone, don't brag or be pushy; step back in line." This man also said that it was not the true spirit of Scandinavia. The Vikings at their best were brave pioneers. When people are transformed by Christ and delivered from bondage to the Law of Jante, they take on this true spirit.

WHAT IT DOES

The Law of Jante has the effect of creating:

- **An appearance of humility which is, in fact, pride**
- **A passive rather than an active faith (Fatalism replaces faith.)**
- **A lethargy that is difficult to overcome**
- **A lie which engenders a false religious spirit**
- **A uniformity rather than a true unity (Unity requires diversity.)**
- **A stifling of courageous leadership**
- **A resistance toward doing good works**
- **A legalism that opposes grace**
- **A spirit of judgment and suspicion rather than of Christian fellowship**
- **A cap on emotions, making a person feel emotionally restrained**
- **A climate in which prophets are not welcome**

The Law of Jante neutralizes what is positive in the Viking spirit. It levels everyone off, so that no one shines above the others. It creates a democratic spirit, the strong side of which encourages the rich to share with the poor, as they do in Scandinavia, but the negative side of which keeps people from feeling special to anyone, even God. So to hear how freely God loves them for Jesus' sake is good news, although many find it too good to be true and prefer sticking with their own feeble efforts.

The Law of Jante stands in contrast to God's assessment of His crowning creation when He said that it was "very good." It says instead, "I'm not okay, and you're even worse." So it makes people reluctant to affirm others, to show honor where honor is due, to live with positive attitudes toward themselves, and to exercise faith. Place the sieve of the Jante spirit over a person's mind and truth is siphoned out. Even if I read from Scripture that I am special, the interpretation comes out, "I am second-rate. God blesses people; I just don't happen to be one of them. Of course, God loves the world, but I'll never play on His first team. I'll ride the bench because I am not gifted, I am not worthy, I am not important to God or to anyone. And I shouldn't attempt to think differently."

The Law of Jante also keeps people from living their true emotions, from letting the joy out. One Christian lady we spent an evening with in Norway told us that she was criticized by some friends for having too much fun on her thirtieth birthday. The spirit of Jante creates a heavy legalism that makes people uncomfortable with a spirit of celebration and that transforms delight into duty. Sober living is deep in the Scandinavian soul. They laughed at the jokes I told in sermons, but they let me know that their pastors do not tell jokes when they preach. I could get away with it, because I was an American. Because of the shame that is imposed on people who step out of the line or rise above the crowd, many people have placed a cap on their emotions. They stay close to the middle rather than going to the edges, either of expressed grief or of expressed joy. Going to the extremes is a

greater social sin than passivity. So look for a whole company of passive-aggressives. They are spawned in this kind of climate.

All of this means that peer pressure is a big factor in the Christian culture and in the community. Pastors fear becoming mavericks more than they do in America, disappointing their bishops, creating waves, and stirring up opposition among their people. So while many pastors in the state churches have experienced personal renewal in the life of the Spirit, very few churches have. People long for the freedom of the Spirit and find it in renewal meetings, but then they must return to churches where tradition brings intimidation and where you had better not stick out in any way, lest you get pounded down. I once asked a Norwegian pastor friend, Jens-Petter Jorgensen, then the director of Oase, the Norwegian form of Lutheran Renewal, whether the main enemy in the church was liberalism or traditionalism. His answer, the latter, was borne out by my experience there. Traditions are healthy, but traditionalism makes a god out of traditions, and it makes change and innovation no piece of cake.

One can fall off the horse on either side. Where you find legalism, it will be followed by license. Both operate in the flesh rather than in the spirit.

Legalism creates license, because legalism resists grace, condemning people to put on holiness and resist sin by their own effort, which is impossible. So the Pharisees were out-of-control sinners, although they hid their wickedness behind a veil of religion. Scandinavia, for all its sophistication, success, and beautiful state churches, has trumped American culture in its embrace of immorality. America is the world's leader in evangelizing evil, but Scandinavia is ahead in living it out. Its churches, like many of its people, are empty.

Dr. Gary Sweeten, director of Lifeway Ministries International and a frequent lecturer in Scandinavia, said, "We encountered the spiritual, social, religious and familial results of Jante when we began to minister in Norway in 1986. It showed up in many of the comments of bright and capable men and women. They chronically put themselves down. For example, most refused to respond to my request to write down their talents and share them with others. When I asked them why the usually submissive Norwegian pastors would not comply, I got this answer: 'We have no gifts or talents. It would be sinful to act with pride and admit that we have any strength.' Most attempts to affirm them were rebuffed, and suggestions that anyone assert himself or excel were seen as 'American and not Norwegian.' While doing a weeklong retreat...we ran headlong into several leaders who mentally beat themselves up for being successful. In fact, one asked for prayer to be healed from success!"

Dr. Sweeten took people at the retreat through an eight-step process of deliverance prayer. "Amazingly," he wrote, "after all this teaching, discussion, confession and repentance, there were still many leaders who were confused about why the Law was wrong. It had become so much a part of each person's mental map that change was almost impossible. Thus, that very night I did another complete teaching, confession, small group sharing, burning of the vows, public confession and repentance and burning of the Law of Jante. After the retreat we heard something that thrilled us and made us think that God was at work among us. The Prime Minister, Gro Harlem Brundtland, appeared on national TV the night after our teaching and prayer. At the time (the late 80's) there was a recession in Norway and she was concerned that the country could not pull itself out without great effort. She spent a great deal of time discussing how the Jante Law destroyed Norwegian initiative, self-reliance and self-esteem. 'This old view must be destroyed,' she said. Next, the Prime Minister did a very powerful thing. She, like us, destroyed the Jante symbolically by first reading it, then tearing it up! This showed the entire country that it could not go on with these lies in the minds of the people. We believe that her boldness was related to our spiritual fight the night before. Perhaps some of the current revival in Norway can be traced back to that evening of spiritual warfare. However, it must be taught and re-taught all the time."

HOW TO OVERCOME IT

1. I identify the stronghold. People of Scandinavian heritage in particular have most likely been influenced by the Law of Jante, although the whole culture of the upper American Midwest has been impacted by a Jante spirit. Acknowledging a stronghold, a habitual and unhealthy way of responding to life, begins the process of deliverance. I acknowledge that some of my responses to life come more from the culture than from the living God.

2. I confess my attachment to the stronghold. I acknowledge that I have been influenced by lies more than by the truth, by laws of the flesh rather than by laws of the Spirit. I have been held back by a false humility, by passivity, by a spirit of lethargy, and by cowardice, rather than obeying the Word of the Lord. I acknowledge that these lies have brought some bondage to me.

3. I renounce the lies. I refuse the lies of the Law of Jante. I renounce their impact on me, my family, and my heritage. A baptismal liturgy reads, "I renounce all the forces of evil, the devil, and all his empty promises." Instead of clinging to the lies, I expose them and resist them actively. I don't give in passively as if I have no other option. I come against the lethargy that the Jante spirit produces.

4. I forgive others. Where I have been wounded because of a Jante spirit, I extend forgiveness to anyone who has hurt me, including pastors, the church, my heritage, or my parents.

5. I affirm the truth. Standing in the truth invites the Spirit of truth to work in my life. Clinging to lies invites the devil to work me over. I make the choice to move in the opposite spirit. I walk in boldness rather than in timidity. I give appropriate expression to my emotions rather than keeping them capped. I step out and do what God is leading me to do, inviting Him to change my heart as I bring forth the fruit of repentance. I embrace and live the truth, and I set my mind to be controlled by the Spirit (Romans 8:6).

Gary Sweeten wrote a response to the Jante Law, which he called the **Law of the Spirit:**

o I am a person of worth, created in God's image
o I am as good as anyone else because God says so
o I have the wisdom of God's Spirit
o God has gifted me to be a winner
o I am filled with the knowledge of God
o God honors me as much as anyone on earth
o I have God's destiny and plan for my life
o What others think or do will not control me
o God loves me and so do His people
o I have a teachable spirit.

6. I receive deliverance. We pray (for ourselves or others): "In the strong name of Jesus, I command the Jante spirit and any spirits associated with it to leave. They have no power or right in my life. I lay claim to the freedom that is in Christ Jesus. I lay hold of the inheritance that belongs to me as a child of God purchased by the blood of Christ. I break off the influence of an unhealthy inheritance. I cling to Jesus as my true stronghold."

7. I ask to be filled with the Holy Spirit. I reject all wrong spirits, and I invite the Holy Spirit to fill me. I rely on the power of the Spirit to overcome the negative impact of the Law of Jante in my life. I learn to walk in the Spirit day by day, moment by moment, yielding my life, my destiny, my time, and my choices to Him. I make decisions that keep me open to Christ's work in my life. Deliverance is both an act and a process. I must establish new thought patterns and resist old ones.