

SOCIAL SENTIMENTALITY AS HYPERTROPHIED COMPASSION

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A man I deeply loved & as deeply disagreed with, and from whom I took a raft of courses irrelevant to my U. of Chicago doctorate--Henry Nelson Wieman--wrote a late-life book titled THE SOURCE OF HUMAN GOOD. I suppose that at least this title lies behind the title of this series of Thinksheets, of which this one is the 6th. (I haven't yet applied my mind to what the first five may be, but this one feels like about the sixth.)

1. When I was young, I'd not the courage to weep during a sermon--not even of others, to say nothing of my own. Men cry, but big boys don't, and I was only a big boy. (In our middleclass white culture, most males die either young or as big boys: few, no matter their bio-age, get to be men.) Now I freely (I hope not excessively!) cry while preaching, but always spontaneously, never by programmed marginal annotation "Weep here." I'm beginning to get some clarity about the difference between sentiment as a human essential & sentimentality as its inflated fake, its sinful excess, its hybridic form.

2. In an Aristotelian-Thomistic excess/defect analysis, so much of our world & our culture suffers from a defect of compassion that an excess thereof--ie, hypertrophied compassion--looks like, & passes for, righteousness. A cluster of upbeat synonyms--"caring," "justice," "peace," et al --goo together into a self-congratulatory mass of feeling good about the self (& one's group/movement) reinforced by feeling bad about the opposition, whatever. Within any such society of self-congratulation, any appeal to critical reason is felt as treachery, betrayal, evil, sin. Eg, I've been trying to get a particular ecclesial body to come out for investment in S.Africa as arguably the best policy toward a more humane S.Africa; but the near-uniform responses have been irrational, viz, humor & anger. "Arguably": In the light of reason, nobody knows what's the best action of foreigners vis-a-vis Pretoria: why the virtual unanimity of our "mainline" religion for Divestment & even withdrawal? (A rereading, with this question in mind, of Roof & McKinney's AMERICAN MAINLINE RELIGION, Rutgers/87, will yield an illumining answer or two.)

3. As hypertrophied compassion offsets psychosociopathic insensitivity to the human condition local & larger in one direction, in another direction it offsets, as SOCIAL sentimentality, the INDIVIDUALISTIC sentimentality of American introverted evangelicalism, esp. in its tele-religion form (the tears messing Tammy's mascara). Each of these antipodal outrages tempts mainline religion to a particular selfrighteousness, & the convergence of these two forms of selfrighteousness is a devil's delight. And devilishly hard to attack & expose in the interest of truth & love.

4. Examples of said pathology abound in American life private & public --&, in the latter, in both church & state. The disease is an AIDS-of-the spirit pathology, endemic & epidemic, a paradigmatic continuum. Jimmy Carter's sentimental version of the Christian religion was continuous with his letting himself + the USA be the 55th hostage for 444 days, & Reagan (with roughly the same religious background) was willing to throw reason & caution to the winds in filling Terrorist Khomeini's lap with tools for chewing up Iraqis, in the naive hope of reducing the net number of US hostages. Why is the White House so easily seduced into going off on children's crusades to rescue a few hostages from the infidels? And why do some church leaders & church groups want to force "democracy" on S.Africa but not on Nicaragua?

5. Like "God," "Democracy" is defined according to the convenience of the definer. Theological analysis should treat the two as synonyms.