

Why is **SELFISHNESS** an insufficient description of **SIN**?

TODAY, resisting my Christian vision, a 53-year-old man (the age our middle son would be if he had not died, & thus an early Boomer), claimed that human beings & the world can be saved only by unselfishness, which can begin now in one's heart & will eventually show religions up for what they are, viz. selfish false-promises-based illusional paths to an imaginary heaven.

My rejoinder--I may as well call it a counterattack--went about like this, the remainder of this Thinksheet except for an upfront rejection of the notion, now common in our softminded culture, that "it does no good to argue about religion: 'a man convinced against his will / is of the same opinion still'." The point of apologetic-polemic isn't just to convince the particular nonChristian conversational partner (as, e.g., ca.AD150CE, Justin tried to convince Trypho); rather, it is so to exercise & refine one's thinking as to worship God "with all your mind" while witnessing to what you have received & believed, the biblical Story in Scripture, Tradition, & Church. One prays that one's witness will benefit the other one, but such benefit is neither the primary motive for the witness nor its control: "if perhaps we meet, it's beautiful; if not, it can't be helped" (as Gestalt therapy's founder Fritz Perls put it; as I described his pessimistic realism [p188 of my FLOW OF FLESH, REACH OF SPIRIT] "human beings are self-defeating when they make outsized demands on relationships"; we are to trust God for outcomes with optimistic realism: "grace, and the condition of repentance, offers reconciliation, 'meeting,' even to 'the foremost' of 'sinners' [1Tim.1:15]).

1 Where did you get that double idea that (1) selfishness damns & (2) unselfishness saves? You got it & hold it in the teeth of countervailing evidence that (1) selfishness, from Dawkins' "selfish genes" onward throughout the organism's life, is a survival essential, & (2) "good guys finish last," i.e. the unselfish, while perhaps noble, are often seen to sacrifice themselves with no salvific effect on others & with the loss of themselves. I'm not being cynical. There is some evidence to support your claim. But what is that evidence, & how did you come to add the weight of your life to that side of the argument? And if indeed you have so dedicated your life when the evidence is conclusive on neither side, does not that dedication constitute your personal religion? And if that is indeed what you are doing with your self, in hope of converts to your position, & that the converts will move with you toward the Realm of the Righteous Unselfish, can you really make stick a claim that all this ego-investment qualifies as pure unselfishness? To me, you seem to have come upon nothing more than a refreshing way to be a sinner while feeling good about yourself as (you imagine) occupying higher ground than all of us who are traditionally religious (a superior claim which in itself stinks of the hypertrophied self).

Am I saying you're more sinful than I? Of course not! There's nobody here but just us sinners (Ro.3.9: "all...are under the power of sin"), & no argument based on degrees of sin (which, however, only God knows) can avail against the universality of the category. But (to use a Reformation triism), we can be "just" (acceptable in God's eyes because of the salvific work of Jesus Christ on our behalf) while at the same time never, in this life, ceasing to be sinners: *simul justus et peccator*.

2 If selfishness is the essence of sin, is not infancy humanity's most sinful stage? If you counter that what's natural at the earliest stage is sinful at later stages, is there something wrong with nature that we need to and can outgrow? And if, as you say, selfishness is sinful, how is the infant's selfishness different from "original sin," a notion you find disgusting?

3 In your eschatology (vision of the oncoming, inevitable Realm of the Righteous Unselfish), the sinfulness of the religions, which (you say) have arrested human development at the adolescent level, will cease in the withering away of the religions. Your utopianism here is in sad parallel to Marxism's withering away of both religions & the "nonproletarian" states: "history" (a holophrastic replacement

of God) would inevitably mature humankind into (yes!) the unselfishness of "from each according to his ability, to each according to his need" (a phrase communism picked up from Chas. Kingsley, a British Christian social actionist, who used it not of an atheist vision of historical inevitability but of the human condition in future submission under God [as in the Lord's Prayer, "your kingdom come on earth"])). While your idealism is like that of the early Marx, you differ from communism in two ways:

(1) You've not yet been "mugged by reality" (a phrase Irwing Kristol picked up to describe neocons (ex-liberal neoconservatives; from the old joke that "A conservative is a liberal who's been mugged")). Your preaching has not become a program sufficiently developed so that the consequences of what was preached have become visible. Since communism's preaching/program/practice of unselfishness resulted not in your ideal self-determining, mature, unselfish human being but rather in state-determined, socially & economically immature, selfish human beings, what assurance can you give that your politicized unselfishness would not move the world any closer to but farther from unselfishness than it now is? If you say you do not intend the politicization of your version of unselfishness, your eschatology envisions the arrival of the Realm of the Righteous Unselfish anarchically. I counter with the historical evidence that anarchistic experiments have been short-lived, disintegrating into doing your thing (there being "no king": Judges 17.6, 21.25).

(2) Your frustration has not yet brought you to violence, as his frustration when coming to power brought former-theological-student Stalin to violence. I am prepared to defend the proposition that all schemes transverse the way things are, in the name of the way things ought (in the estimation of the powerful, whether cynical or idealistic) to be, come either to dessication (drying up unfed by the springs of reality) or to violence.

4 When you complain that every religion considers itself the best, & some the only, way of salvation--& therefore the religions can never get together in the interest of a tradition-transcending Golden Era of Unselfishness--you should notice that you are no exception: you preach that Unselfishness is **the only way** of salvation. Further, you say that Unselfishness would motivate people to do unselfish deeds across religious lines: you should notice how much of that is right now going on, making your Unselfishness Gospel nothing new but only a me-too encouragement of today's reality: indeed, far from requiring the death of religions, without the religions unselfish deeds might be even fewer.

5 As this Thinksheet's title shows, I agree with you that self-absorption (of an individual to the neglect of others, & of a group to the neglect of other groups) is sinful. But against your position I assert that while selfishness is a necessary component in the description of sin, it's insufficient to describe sin, the essence of which (in the biblical religions, Judaism & Christianity) is the neglect not of our fellow-creatures but of the Creator (Gn.3.6-13; Ro.1.25). Of course to you, an atheist, that is nonsense: how could one sin against Nothing? A further foolishness in your eyes is that the Bible says that the Source of our salvation is in the grace action of the Nothing (for Christians, "the foolishness of the Cross" (1Cor.1.18-31)). Your analysis of the human plight seems to us biblical folk superficial & sad, not touching the root of sin, which is that "Against you, you only [an exaggeration], have I sinned" (Ps.51.4). Since our positions, yours & mine, are nonsense to each other, the issue lies in which has the more accurate understanding of the human condition & situation. The hours may be on your side, the ages are on mine.

6 A commonplace of motivation analysis is that while a negative may get you to stand up, it will take a positive to get you to MOVE! At the beginning of his DIVINE COMEDY, Dante honors "the Love that moves the worlds." The worlds, the world, human beings are not moved by any un-, even unselfishness. Indeed, any word with "self" in it has not escaped the essence of sin, which is *incurvature* on the self. The question rather is "What/whom do you **love** if anything/anyone?" Torah & Jesus say love God, & your neighbor as yourself.