COMPASSION AS RELIGION

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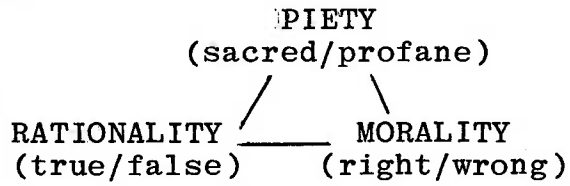
is, as both irrational & immoral, a low-quality religion, but there's a helluva lot of it around, & it's this Thinksheet's purpose to detail some of its baneful effects. (The informed will note that my title is a takeoff from Paul Vitz's PSYCHOLOGY AS RELIGION.)

1. This religion lacks both breadth (as lacking rationality) and depth (as lacking religiomorality). ITEM: Reagan's compassion for the suffering individual, v. intelligent-moral concern about humanity (a) in groups & (b) in the mass. INSTANCE: Approving arms for the Ayatollah, he thought a chance of stanching the tears of hostages & their families more important than the certainty that the arms would chew up Iraqi military & civilians--with all "those" tears that were not "ours." Reagan is soft on compassion, not on communism; & I don't know which is worse. Maybe he's hard on communism because communism is hard on compassion: his excess (actually, a defect) mirroring "the evil empire"'s insensitivity to the individual as a "typos" defect (actually, a point of realism, in that humanity is really groups as well as individuals).

2. Every human tradition is both tough & vulnerable. Because our religious tradition, Jewish & Christian, views suffering of the group & of the individual as the primary social & intellectual problem (as does, from another angle, our chief rival in the world, Buddhism), we are apt to overdo compassion, an emotion seen as so rare as to have a leg up in comparison with rationality (true/false) & morality (right/wrong). When compassion subverts rationality & morality, "idolatry" is the proper biblical concept for what has happened: the compassionate is the dividing line between the sacred & the profane. Another way to put it is that "compassion" has come to = "piety." Let's look at the whole psychosociospiritual dynamic:



3. Now, biblical piety (=obedience to and joy in the biblical God among God's people on God's good earth) sees compassion as religion for what it is, viz, a competitor-interloper, a claimant threatening to dislodge biblical religion from within, ie by claiming to be the essence of, or replacement for, the old religions (ie Judaism & Christianity). From the standpoint of secular humanism, this claim is true-right-sacred: from the standpoint of the ancien regime, biblical religion, the claim is false-wrong-profane, degenerate, sentimental in the pejorative sense.

4. Public issues get structured trifocally (the far lens as piety, the midrange as rationality, the closeup as morality). When a public issue is thus trifocal, its complexity is so great as to defy solutions satisfying everybody. To right-to-lifers, abortion is murder plain & simple; & "the right to privacy" led straight to roast Bork. The religion of compassion, teaching compassion as the ultimate value, intensifies the problem of arriving at democratic political solutions; in the two cases alluded to, the sacrality of (1) the womb & fetus & (2) the bedroom (the hottest spacial reference in the Bork hearings).

5. Church leaders, even more than political leaders, are in danger of bad-faith, bad-reason, bad-morality compassion. The authority-space of religious leaders has been shrinking in America for more than three centuries: we are still the priests (but facing severe competition here from "therapists"), but no longer the pronouncers of the moral or philosphers of the true. Desperation leads to betrayal.