

THE ULTIMATE ENCOUNTER — NARCISSISM AND THE KINGDOM OF GOD

by Theron H. Smith

The serious and systematic study of the human mind and personality in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries has made available a great deal of helpful information on the subject of the self and its expressions. From chapter ten of the first of two volumes by William James and, of course, the writings of Sigmund Freud, to Eric Fromm by way of Heinz Kohut, Alfred Adler, and Carl Jung, there is much accumulated insight available to any serious student who wants to gain a better understanding of the "self". One learns to distinguish between the self as object and the self as process. One comes to see the strategic importance of self-esteem, self-awareness, self-actualization. Yet barely beneath the surface in all of this is a problem of enormous proportions. The "frightful evil of the monstrous ego" was identified as the basic problem of mankind the world over centuries before any of these psychologists and psychiatrists were born.

Twenty-six hundred years ago the Chinese religion/philosophy of Taoism was stressing the basic and essential importance of selflessness, placing a premium on humility and submission. Buddhism has through the centuries set forth its fundamental doctrine of "no-self", and reinforced it by having its people bow and kneel and prostrate themselves. Hinduism has placed the greatest value on the mystic loss of self and provided help along the way with the generous cosmetic use of ashes. Islam has from its beginning addressed its part of the world with a basic message of submission, with no square meter of room for self-glorification, and a programmed reminder of five times a day putting the brow to the ground. Judaism camped much nearer to the danger zone with its distinctly greater individualism, but recognized the danger clearly and described it as the essence of the first "sin" and the one from which all evil evolved. Their people are called to bow, wear a covering over the head, and practice penitence — all of which should serve to pull the "I" back down to proper size. Their ancient Talmud recognizes that the problem begins early: "every child exaggerates its own importance, saying 'the world was created for me'."¹ And long before the Talmud they were identifying "pride" as the root of "wickedness" (Pss. 10, 36, 73). In the Poetic books and in the Prophets, time after time they name this villain and call the people to counter with humility and with the spirit of a servant rather than donning the tragic "crown of pride."

Then Jesus of Nazareth came, born in a barn, raised by a peasant couple. He called all of the people who would follow him to "give up all right to themselves." He informed his followers repeatedly that he was not following his own will. Then he proceeded to absorb insults, physical abuse, lies, betrayal, desertion. Not long after his death a most profound statement was written about him pointing out that "he did not think that equality with God was something to try for, but instead made himself of no reputation and took the role of a servant" (Phil. 2:6-7).

Surveying all of this Karl Menninger wrote that "The goal of all the great historic religions can be summarized as being the overcoming of one's self-love."² It is just not true that either chance or collusion causes this convergence of insight from all of these different people and times and places. Here is a great basic problem of human existence — in fact, *the* aboriginal, interminable problem.

The problem, ancient and contemporary, incalculably harmful, is the exaggerated "I", the vanity and self-centeredness that calls seductively and with varying degrees of success to every medical doctor and every military officer, every person that enters the pulpit or stands at the front of the classroom, every athlete and actor, every attorney and policeman, every truck driver and every farmer — everyone. Some form of this attacks the devout and the pagan, the scholar and the illiterate, the affluent and the poverty-stricken, the youngest and the eldest, female and male, ancient and modern, individual and nation. This disease infects the Philippino who warmly indulges his feeling of superiority over the Chinese who are certain of their rank above the Japanese who struggle little at times to hide their glance down on the Koreans. It is the Germans over the English over the Welsh; and of course the Frenchman looks at all of these with the quiet and smug confidence that comes from knowing that he is #1.

While allowing a valid and even essential place for self-respect and self-confidence and self-concern, how powerful is the ancient virus that so easily turns them into a malady. An individual expression of the evil of self-absorption is identified in an interesting line in *Lost Horizon*: "to strive for priority amongst one another — even as on the English playing field — seems entirely barbarous, a sheerly wanton stimulation of all the lower instincts." Unfortunately, all of us are more or less barbarian at times and more than a little stimulated in our "lower instincts." And at the same time this villain is identified in some of the warmest and least barbarian surroundings. Angela Barron McBride, working on her doctorate in developmental psychology at Purdue University, had the temerity to state that the main reason women have children is selfishness. She insists that the potential companionship and pleasure

combine with other personally fulfilling motives to create the self-enhancement that is the key motive for motherhood. Those who would rush to refute this charge may find it difficult, if sincere, to come up with purely altruistic motives for bringing another baby into the world.

But far from the beauty of childbearing and motherhood this demon of self-centeredness and self-indulgence strikes a dastardly blow. A journalist writing about the hideous massacre in Beirut in 1982 accounts for it as coming from "narrow self-interest on the part of the Phalangists who vented their frustration and hate, and the Israelis who permitted and condoned the atrocity." Well that is hardly an original motivation for such large-scale atrocities. Barbara Tuchman describes the excesses of nationalistic egoism that unleashed World War I,³ and you might well expect to find the same motivation in most of the wars in human history.

From greed and intolerance and envy and lust and gluttony, to war and racism and exploitation and environmental destruction, to drug abuse and crime and marriage failure, the infected and distorted self-interest can ultimately and always be found. And none of us escapes. The spotlight swings across a whole army of us when David Myers asks, "have we not sensed the primacy of selfishness as people spend most of their energies on the personal concerns of themselves and their families, while world famine, tyranny, and nuclear weapons proliferate and world resources are depleted?"⁴ All of this adds up to much of the evidence from which Aaron Stern makes this terribly unsettling announcement at opening of *Me: The Narcissistic American*: "No society has ever survived success — the terminal disease for the Roman empire and all the rest, was narcissism. American society is about to join the rest."⁵ Speaking from a longer range view Arnold Toynbee reflected on the human situation from the perspective of his years of study and writing on the history of our life on this planet and he observed that "man's fundamental problem is his human egocentricity." While noting some of the accomplishments and advancements brought by science, he pointedly observes that "it has not helped man to break out of the prison of his inborn self-centeredness."⁶

Though it is a recent phenomenon that there have been those like Ayn Rand who have aggressively and skillfully campaigned for assertive individualism and the "virtue of selfishness," still there is evidence that excessive interest in one's own has been a very serious problem during all of the time that there has been human life on earth. This might seem to imply that since nothing can be done to seriously alter that circumstance, we should simply recognize it, accept it, and adjust life to allow for it. But what of the continuing encounter between all of this and the kingdom of God?

The time is right for a contemporary reexamination of this. Paul Vitz, a psychologist at New York University, insists that there is a major historical opportunity for Christianity to provide meaning and life as more and more people discover the emptiness of self-worship.⁷

From the earliest days of the Christian church it is relatively easy to identify the problem of inordinate self-love. It is reportedly the motivation that caused the circumstances resulting in cardiac arrest for both Ananias and Sapphira. In the doctrinal treatise sent to the Roman church, the opening chapter identifies the human problem as "worshipping and serving the creature rather than the creator." It is clearly a concern of major proportions at the opening of the Corinthian correspondence. It was addressed as a serious complication in the life of the Galation church. The people of the Ephesian and Colossian churches are cautioned repeatedly to avoid pride and arrogance. Timothy is advised that the ultimate effect of evil on this planet is that humans will be totally preoccupied with their own selves, utterly self-centered.

Rather than diminishing after the first century A.D., by the middle of the second century this original sin had clearly infected some prominent persons in the Church. Marcion set up his *own* canon and his own church; worse yet, he openly pandered to anti-semitism and pride. Shortly after this star flashed by, the gifted Montanus decided that the "fruit of this tree was desirable." And he had begun so well, identifying some problems which the Church needed to address in order to continue to grow and flourish. But then he began to insist that he was *the* advocate through whom the Holy Spirit would speak. Further he let the people in on the revelation that the Kingdom soon to be set up would have *him* in a very prominent place. The Church only had time enough to forget him when the brilliant preacher/orator, Paul of Samosata, Bishop of Antioch, began asking for applause and the waving of handkerchiefs following his speaking. He was able to become rather wealthy by way of his itinerant ministry. There is a considerable amount of evidence that he had an exaggerated interest in his own importance.

But through much of the history of the Church those who have led in the formulation and articulation of Christian doctrine have catalogued narcissism as the original and uniformly fundamental human problem. Augustine declared emphatically that the "primal destruction of man was self-love."⁸ He insisted that "pride is the beginning of all sin."⁹ Pope Gregory announced that the primary sin and the one from which all others derive is *hubris*.¹⁰

One of those who grasped the nature and significance of this matter more clearly than others was Martin Luther. Out of his own

personal faith journey he came to see this phenomenon in a clear perspective as it affects most all of us — egocentric religion rather than theocentric. He identifies and sharply condemns Christian thinking, teaching, and practice where our relationship to God depends essentially on us, our perceptions, our needs, our desires, our performance. He had a passion to refute the common thinking that man is the center of everything and that all moves around him. His driving concern was to turn all of us to see that God must be the center. Philip Watson insists that this is the fundamental motif of Luther's thinking and writing.¹¹

John Wesley had a strong opinion on this subject. He considered it to be of primary importance. In his Sermon LVII, part 1, section 1, he declared that "self-love is the root, not the branch, of all evil." In an earlier sermon he had asked rhetorically, "where is the man that is born without pride?" He proceeded immediately to warn his hearers that "hereby we rob God of his inalienable right, and idolatrously usurp his glory."¹²

This perception has continued to emerge through the centuries. It is one matter on which there is common agreement by persons of a rather wide spectrum of theological persuasions. Paul Tillich identified hubris, pride, self-elevation, as "sin in its total form."¹³ Emil Brunner said that "the origin of sin is the deification [by man], the grasping after the divine right . . ."¹⁴ In his exhaustive study of the Christian idea of love, Anders Nygren makes clear the conclusion that man's greatest need is to be taken out of his "cramping preoccupation with himself," delivered from "the prison of his egocentricity into the glorious liberty of the children of God."¹⁵ Reinhold Niebuhr offers his summary observation: "The Biblical definition of basic sin as pride is an admirable summary of the whole Biblical doctrine of sin."¹⁶ Bishop Aulen stated it just as clearly: "The essence of sin is egocentricity."¹⁷ Dietrich Bonhoeffer in his direct and disarming manner left many of us squirming with self-recognition when he related that the hardest thing that he ever had to give up was his self-righteousness. The popular C.S. Lewis calls this the center of Christian morals. Here is the evil that leads to every other vice, says he — the one vice of which no person in the world is free — Pride or Self-Conceit.¹⁸ J.B. Phillips concludes that there is no "sin" we can name which does not spring from love of self; and, the sins which do most damage and cause most suffering are those which have the highest content of self-love.¹⁹

The world would be well served if the Church would focus a sharp attack on this problem as the twentieth century closes. From generation to generation the Christian pulpit and pew identify, rather slowly, some of the moral ailments that infect their age and

a counter-attack is launched. Human society has benefited immeasurably from this influence as those who pray "thy kingdom come" have moved out to work for its coming. But the time is long overdue for careful attention to be directed to the ultimate struggle. We should dare to join our leader in a deliberate assault on the most widespread, most persistent, and most potent of the ailments that impose suffering and crippling on his world. Narcissism's malignant and relentless curse can be effectively countered by time-proven means.

A new investment of energy and determination must be injected into continuing the efforts to reform and revitalize Christian worship. This is of strategic importance. It rests on the truth in the statement by the late Wm. Temple: "Worship is the most selfless emotion of which our nature is capable and the chief remedy of our self-centeredness, which is our original sin and the source of all actual sin."²⁰ There still continues a lot of Christian worship that is not "worthy," and much that appeals to infantile elements in human personality, as Paul Hoon insisted ten years ago.²¹ We continue to urgently need a hard reexamination of much of the hymnody in use in all churches, from the cathedral to the store-front church. Intense effort needs to be made in all quarters of the Church to be certain that their corporate worship has an equal balance between the cognitive and the emotive. No less effort should be invested in the recovery of the historic position of the Eucharist in the worship of Christian people, carefully combined with a balanced emphasis on prophetic preaching that follows a comprehensive lectionary. This is no effort to reduce religion to liturgy, but it is a concern to add the mystique and depth with feelings that are desperately needed. One final suggestion in the area of worship: the entire Church should look very carefully at the benefits of Penance being practiced as one of the sacraments. When properly understood and employed, no other single practice has the potential of so effectively holding *ME* to an appropriate size.

A second major component of the response is that all of the Christian Church should turn once again to make a clear and insistent call in teaching and preaching for all persons to make a deep and expensive commitment to their faith. It must be clearly seen that authentic affiliation with his kingdom makes a very large demand on life and lifestyle. At the center of that demand is the self-surrender that William James said has been and always must be regarded as the vital turning point of the religious life.²² Without disputing over when and how it happens we must all faithfully point to its nature and importance, this moral transaction that carries each one to that higher dimension beyond the purely rational. When this is absent there remains a guaranteed survival of the

subtle and indescribably powerful infected self-motives. But where this self-surrender occurs a crippling blow has been struck at the original sin. The issue addressed here is at the center of this war between narcissism and the Kingdom. It is in a word: *authority*. This is at the heart of the earliest Christian confession: Jesus Christ is Lord. This refers to a particular historical figure and we are committed to discern and respond to the ways of his rule (king) in the midst of all the forces in this world. And there will be countless ways for every woman and man that will measure whether or not they are really in his kingdom. There is a forever continuing relevance in Dietrich Bonhoeffer's "costly grace." And our pursuit of that grace must be guided by a greater and growing familiarity with the Scriptures. A companion to our commitment to the lordship of Jesus Christ should be our commitment to the authority of the Holy Scriptures. We do not need any more people petrifying in Bibliolatry, or a greater supply of those skilled at mindlessly spouting proof texts. But all of the world would benefit enormously from a church more Biblically literate, searching with integrity for more truth for our day, and committed in advance to receive and act on their insights.

Let's turn our attention to the ultimate struggle and examine what it *really* means to be in his Kingdom.

FOOTNOTES

¹*Talmud*: Sukkah, 21a

²Karl Menninger, *Whatever Became of Sin?* (NY: Hawthorn, 1973), p. 227.

³Barbara Tuchman, *Proud Tower* (NY: Macmillan, 1972).

⁴David Myers, *The Inflated Self* (NY: Seabury Press, 1981), pp. 7, 8.

⁵Aaron Stern, *Me: The Narcissistic American* (NY: Ballantine, 1979), p. 1.

⁶Arnold Toynbee, *Surviving the Future* (NY: Oxford Univ. Press, 1971).

⁷Paul Vitz, *Psychology as Religion* (Grand Rapid: Eerdmans, 1982), p. 10.

⁸St. Augustine of Hippo, *Sermo* 96.2.

⁹Augustine, Tractate XXV, 15 *On The Gospel of John*.

¹⁰*Moralia* XXVI, 28.

¹¹Philip S. Watson, *Let God Be God* (London: Epworth Press, 1947), p. 38.

¹²John Wesley, Sermon XLIV, part 2, sect. 7.

¹³Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 2 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1950), p. 50.

¹⁴Emil Brunner, *Die Mystik und Das Wort*, p. 224.

¹⁵Anders Nygren, *Agape and Eros*, translated by Philip Watson (Phila.: Westminster, 1953).

¹⁶Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man* (NY: Scribners, 1949), p. 186.

¹⁷Gustaf Aulen, *The Faith of the Christian Church* (Phila.: Muhlenberg Press, 1948), p. 260.

¹⁸C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (NY: Macmillan, 1952), p. 94.

¹⁹J. B. Phillips, *The Newborn Christian* (NY: Macmillan, 1978), p. 49.

²⁰William Temple, *Readings in St. John's Gospel* (NY: Macmillan, 1947), p. 68.

²¹Paul W. Hoon, *The Integrity of Worship* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1971), p. 94.

²²William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (NY: Macmillan, 1961).