

**FROM “FATHER KNOWS BEST” to “I KNOW BEST”:
MORAL NARCISSISM TRIUMPHANT—
“Every man did what was right in his own eyes”**

Gn 3:4-5; Dt 12:8; Jd 21:25

I. AUTONOMOUS (i.e. “self-law”) INDIVIDUALISM & SOCIAL STRUCTURES

condemned in Scripture now rampant, as evident to:

- A. Mario Vargas Llosa: *Notes on the Death of Culture*
 - 1. “Forbidden to forbid” slogan in 1968 student-revolt (barricades in Paris; SDS violence in Chicago; Woodstock; “Question Authority”)
 - 2. Anti-authoritarian art—enshrined ugliness, transgressing decency
 - 3. Collapsing educational standards in schools—grammar & Shakespeare discarded; grades inflated
 - 4. Western Civilization (and United States) repudiated (while Islam admired!)
 - a. Recent charter for European Union deletes any Christian influence
 - b. “Hey, Hey, Ho, Ho—Western Civ Has Got to Go” (Jesse Jackson leads Stanford students in protest march)
 - c. Howard Zinn’s *A People’s History* widely used; recent “standards” for public schools reveal negative assessment of America
- B. Roger L. Simon: *I Know Best: How Moral Narcissism Is Destroying Our Republic, If It Hasn’t Already*
 - 1. ‘60s radicals (SDS leaders Tom Hayden, Bill Ayers, Bernadette Dohrn)
 - 2. Luigi Pirandello’s play—*It Is So If You Think So or Right You Are (If You Think You Are)*
 - 3. Areas affected: environmentalism; race relations; Israel; empowered bureaucratic *Nomenklatura*; etc.
 - 4. Simon’s surprising (or, perhaps not so surprising) conclusion: Original Sin!!

II. LIBERALISM’S (modernism/progressivism) CULTURAL CONQUEST

- A. “Is God Dead?”—1966 *Time* article re “death of God” theologians
- B. Hegel’s enduring influence evident in Liberal Protestantism & Catholic Modernism & Secular Progressivism (Leftism)
- C. Two sides to the movement (N.B. *Gaudium et spes*—Vatican II document—urges openness to psychology (e.g. Freudianism, soon evident in therapeutic sermons) and sociology (e.g. Marxist ideology, soon evident in various forms of “Liberation Theology”)
 - 1. Self-actualization psychology
 - a. Abraham Maslow & Carl Rogers & “humanistic” psychology
 - b. Christian professors & preachers embrace—Norman Vincent Peale’s *Power of Positive Thinking* & Robert Schuller’s *New Reformation*
 - 2. Social activism (various forms of socialism embraced)
 - a. Rousseau & Jacobins. Marx & Bolsheviks, John Dewey & Progressives, Herbert Marcuse & New Left Dewey all urge transforming world
 - b. Christian “social gospel” advocates baptize Marx & seek utopian kingdom on earth

III. CURRENT POLITICIANS (influenced by religious views) REFLECT AUTONOMOUS MAN, ENGINEERING a LIBERAL SOCIETY

- A. Self-Actualization—Trump follows Peale
- B. Social Activism
 - 1. Hillary Clinton & Don Jones’ early influence re social gospel
 - 2. Tim Kaine & Jesuit school (Rockhurst), Honduras mission—modernist willing to annul Hyde Amendment (“Spirit of Vatican II” Catholicism)

“I KNOW BEST”

In *I Know Best: How Moral Narcissism Is Destroying Our Republic, If It Hasn't Already* (New York: Encounter Books, c. 2016), Roger L. Simon asks “Why do so few people permanently change their views about political and social issues even in the face of literally earthshaking world events?” (p. 1). He answers, quite simply: *Moral Narcissism* has engulfed America. He notes that Christopher Lasch published *The Culture of Narcissism* in 1979 and illustrated his thesis by pointing to the ‘60s radicals, most notably the Weather Underground, as its exemplars. Less violent than the Weathermen, today’s narcissists take pride in purchasing organic foods and devoutly promoting political correctness, championing clean energy and espousing social justice.

Moral Narcissists, Simon says, make much of mouthing words that make them feel good with little concern for actually making the world better through personal sacrifice. Urging compassion for the poor substitutes easily for writing a check to support charitable organizations. Decrying racism frees one from any guilt for 50 years of “progressive” policies that make our inner cities resemble war zones. Urging “income equality” gives one Hollywood celebrities a pass for indulging themselves. The Italian playwright Luigi Pirandello memorably dramatized this penchant in *It Is So If You Think So or Right You Are (If You Think You Are)*. Saying so makes it so! Feeling good about yourself is ultimately all that matters. “Not only are we good. We are *the best* and therefore we can do anything we wish” (p. 12). Such narcissism “allows Hillary Clinton to go from undergraduate Alinskyite to Chappaqua plutocrat with a net worth in the tens of millions without missing a beat” (p. 11).

Simon pursues his thesis through a variety of current issues: climate change; race relations; Islamic jihad and global terrorism; the perennial allure of Marxism (dramatically evident in Bernie Sanders’ impact on the Democrat Party); the deeply entrenched, well-heeled and powerful “*nomenklatura*” dominating universities and bureaucracies; the leftist mainline media; the pro-Palestinian, anti-Israel mindset pervading elite segments of liberal society; the homosexual agenda; feminism. He laments, looking back on his long and distinguished career, that he once shared the progressive perspective he now critiques. For him, it took a “lifetime” to discover what he now considers “a deeper way of looking at the world” (p. 184).

That “deeper” vision centers on the reality of evil, the demonic sinfulness that distorts human nature and destroys human society. Though admitting he doesn’t actually believe in the devil, he has come to “believe in something metaphorical that is inside humanity, a representation of evil and a, I guess concrete in some way, manifestation or our obvious ability to commit horrendous acts—all of us” (pp. 187-188). Moral Narcissists scheme to evade this truth, denying the demonic, “explaining away evil, blaming all ills on social causes and therefore pushing back the necessity of examining the human soul or one’s own, of not seeing the possible darkness within, the levels on which we all contain that evil within us” (p. 188).

As a secularized Jewish playwright, Roger Simon would not be expected to fully understand the Christian doctrine of Original Sin. Yet, as G.K. Chesterton said, it is the one great doctrinal truths that is fully and persuasively demonstrated by history. To open your eyes to this truth is, in fact, the beginning of wisdom for understanding who we are and how we should live.

Liberal Protestantism's Cultural Conquest

--Notes from "Death of God Fifty Years On"

by Matthew Rose, in *First Things*, Aug/Sept 2016

43—1966 *Time* magazine article: "Is God Dead?"

44—the "death of God" theologians "anticipated a crucial but under-examined phenomenon of our time: the institutional defeat and cultural victory of liberal Protestantism.

44—influence of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's "religionless Christianity"; "God is teaching us that we must live as men who can get along without him."

45—Nietzsche's influence on Thomas Altizer, one of "death of God" thinkers

45—K. Barth's influence (credited by both Altizer and Alasdair MacIntyre) on "death of God" theologians—by rigidly restricting revelation to Christ alone (thus all we know of God is His self-emptying death), he could be cited as a source

46—"There are many twists and turns to Hegel's philosophical re-narration of the scriptural story, but its most important claim is that God entered history in order to abolish his separation from it. History's meaning and purpose are no longer 'above,' but instead operate within the ongoing flow of human affairs. God's coming into the world in Christ represents, symbolically, man's coming-to-himself as the rational author of his own destiny.

Altizer seized on Hegel's interpretation of Christian doctrine. In Christ we come to see the revolutionary truth about God. God is not a timeless being that exists over against the world; God is the forward-moving rational process within history that moves all things to overcome alienation and achieve freedom. For Altizer, as for Hegel, there is now no God and the modern world is secular, because Jesus was his Son."

47—"The Death of God movement was part of a tradition of liberal Protestantism that sought to turn critics of Christianity into allies who could help midwife a fuller realization of the essence of faith."

47—"Christianity is not about possessing knowledge of God or salvation in a world to come; it is about the inauguration of a new way of life that breaks down every barrier to inclusion. Inspired by the New Testament's vision of human community, they argued that Christianity is a fundamentally social movement, and the job of theology is to purify the Christian tradition of its interest in heaven above."

47—"The central fact of American religion today is that liberal Protestantism is dead and everywhere triumphant. Its churches are empty, but its causes have won. In 1995, the sociologist N.J. Demerath observed that mainline Protestantism has a paradoxical status in American life. It has experienced both 'institutional defeat' and 'cultural victory.' Mainline Protestantism has succeeded in communicating its progressive moral and political values to the surrounding culture. On virtually every issue that consumed its postwar energies—from civil rights to feminism and gay rights—the mainline churches have been vindicated by elite opinion. At the same time, their membership has evaporated. The institution that once brokered the postwar cultural and moral consensus for America has now almost vanished.

"In 2010 the YMCA decided, in light of the 'vibrancy and diversity of the organization,' to eliminate the word 'Christian' from its official title. Henceforth it would be known officially as 'The Y.'" An organization conceived in the nineteenth century to promote Christian social reform and founded 'to put Christian principles into practice' thus declared itself functionally secular."

“DONALD TRUMP, MAN OF FAITH”

--Matthew Schmitz, in *First Things*, Aug/Sept 2016

72 // Trump is nonetheless a man of strong and very American faith. His career throws a light on the spirit of the age, as Lytton Strachey once said of Cardinal Manning.

Trump was baptized and confirmed at the First Presbyterian Church in Jamaica, Queens, in New York City. His parents raised him in the austerities typical of devout low-church Protestants. As a result, he does not gamble, smoke, or imbibe—even when the stimulant is caffeine. “I’ve never had a cigarette. I’ve never had a glass of alcohol. I won’t even drink a cup of coffee,” he told *Esquire* last year.”

72 // In his late twenties Trump began attending Marble Collegiate Church on Fifth Avenue.

72 // Here Trump walked down the aisle after exchanging vows with Ivana and heard the sermons of Norman Vincent Peale, a man whose philosophy would become Trump’s own.

When Trump met him, Peale was already famous as the author of *The Power of Positive Thinking*, a book that would go on to sell some five million copies.

72 // Before Trump made his own foray into politics he read Peale’s book and adopted its program of “positive thinking.” The two men began to trade public compliments. Peale, always generous in his assessments of human nature, said that Trump had a “profound streak of honest humility.” Trump, not exactly showing that humble streak, said that Peale “thought I was his greatest student of all time.” In a certain sense, Trump was right. Peale has had no more perfect disciple.

Peale distilled the optimism and self-sufficiency of the American character into a simple creed. The first article of his faith was a warm patriotism. He called the U.S. “the greatest country in the world” and addressed his writing to “everyday people of this land” who “are my own kind whom I know and love and believe in with great faith.” Any one of them could become efficient and successful—if only he would believe in himself, harnessing the power of positive thinking.

71 // Peale promised his readers “constant energy” if they thought positively. Optimistic thoughts opened one up to a vital force coming directly from God. Negative thoughts, especially a tendency to dwell on one’s faults, could interfere with the divine charge. He warned those with active consciences that “the quantity of vital force required to give the personality relief from either guilt or fear” so great that it left “only a fraction of energy” for going about one’s tasks. Productivity and cheeriness became for him the signs of eternal election.

For Peale, “attitudes are more important than facts.” The man who displays “a confident and optimistic thought pattern can modify or overcome the fact altogether.” The first fact that Peale’s positive thinking had to overcome was the fact of human frailty. Peale knew about the difficulties some encounter in alcohol, in troubled marriages, and in economic hardship, but he never could accept the inevitability of misfortune or that all must pay the wages of sin. Like one of Job’s comforters, he told the suffering that they simply needed to look on the bright side. Where the Bible urges man to search his heart and know his faults, Peale encourages him to “make a true estimate of your own ability, then raise it ten percent.” For Jeremiah the heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked, but for Peale its dark recesses are bathed in California sunshine.

Thus the necessity of repentance recedes. It is important to think positively, and a negative thought, such as *Domine, non sum dignus*, can be injurious to spiritual health.

At a campaign event in Iowa, Trump shocked the audience by saying that he had never asked God for forgiveness. All his other disturbing statements . . . are made intelligible by this one. The self-sufficient faith Trump absorbed from Peale has no place for human weakness. Human frailty, dependency, and sinfulness cannot be acknowledged; they must be overcome.

Peale is now largely forgotten, and his bestseller languishes in used book stores. This is a shame, for it has led us to underestimate the influence and power of the self-sufficient faith that he promoted, and that he imparted to his greatest student. Peale meant to preach a gentle creed, one that made hellfire and terror into mere afterthoughts. In Trump it has curdled into pagan disdain. Both forms of this philosophy have captured the public imagination, and both stand at odds with the faith taught by Christ.

HILLARY CLINTON'S "SPIRITUAL LIFE"

After writing spiritual biographies of presidents Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush, Paul Kengor turned to Hillary Clinton and portrayed a different kind of Christian in *God and Hillary Clinton: A Spiritual Life* (New York: Harper Perennial, c. 2007). Whereas the two presidents gave witness as Christians to a personal relationship with God (mediated through Jesus Christ) and were committed to traditional doctrines, Hillary Clinton proclaims her faith primarily through social action. Doing good, advocating "social justice," she believes, makes her Christian.

Born in 1947, young Hillary followed her father's example in most every realm, including a commitment to Methodism. Though he rarely attended services, Hugh Rodham staunchly defended the church of his ancestors. Attending the Park Ridge Methodist Church in Chicago, young Hillary took to heart "that 'wonderful old saying' of the church's founder John Wesley," who said: "'Do all the good you can, by all the means you can, in all the ways you can, at all the times you can, to all the people you can, as long as you ever can'" (p. 11). Hillary's willingness to embrace the social gospel was accelerated by the Reverend Don Jones, who came to her church as youth minister. Fresh out of Drew Theological Seminary, Jones tried to radicalize his young charges without unduly antagonizing the relatively conservative older members of the congregation. In particular, he urged the youngsters to support the civil rights movement and a government-mandated redistribution of wealth. This involved taking them to meet Saul Alinsky, the "always irreverent Chicagoan" who worked to pull "down the 'power structure' throughout capitalist America" by "organizing demonstrations throughout the country" (p. 18).

Off to Wellesley for her college years in the mid-1960s, she kept in touch with Don Jones and avidly read *Motive* (the Methodist youth magazine he gave her), which vigorously proclaimed both pacifism and the social gospel as proclaimed by the National Council of Churches. She discarded her father's conservative political convictions for the liberalism of her Jones and her professors, opposing the Vietnam War and a espousing racial and economic justice. Graduating from Wellesley, she seriously considered joining Saul Alinsky, who offered her a job in California, but decided instead to go to law school, entering Yale in the fall of 1969. Here she met Bill Clinton and began the tumultuous and historically significant partnership that would largely impact Arkansas, America, and the world.

In Arkansas, Hillary both supported her husband's career and pursued her own ambitions as an attorney. While he maintained his own religious ties, attending a large Baptist church in Little Rock, she found a church home in a liberal Methodist congregation and "traveled around the state giving a speech that explained why she was a Methodist" (p. 72). Working with her husband, she inspired the establishment of the "Governor's School," a summer program in the '80s that brought 400 high school students together to study what seems to have been a Don Jones curriculum—social change through governmental action. One of the young students "said that the goal of the program seemed to be to 'deprogram' young people away from the traditional values they had learned and to inculcate them into the brave new world of postmodernism, with special attentions to 'feelings' and so-called critical thinking" (p. 80).

With Bill's election to the presidency in 1992, Hillary envisioned the White House as a doorway to her own political ambitions, which included appealing to a certain swathe of Christians. The first couple decided to join the same church and attended Foundry United Methodist, whose pastor Philip Wogaman, espoused an aggressively liberal agenda—even opening "his pulpit to fellow Methodist and author of *Roe v. Wade*, Harry Blackman" (p. 100). One of the few core convictions the Clintons have maintained is abortion-on-demand, at any stage of pregnancy and for whatever reason a woman gives. Despite encounters with and rebukes from Pope John Paul II and Mother Teresa, Bill and Hillary have resisted all pro-life appeals and initiatives—even opposing "a ban on the grim procedure of partial-birth abortion" (p. 212). For Hillary, it was not important "how Jesus felt about abortion, but how Jesus felt about the minimum wage" (p. 233), and the position of her Methodist church provided ample support for her views.

Her religious convictions were tested by the Monica Lewinsky affair. For comfort and guidance she relied on counsel from her pastor, prayer and the Christian call to forgive those who harm you. (She also realized her husband and her political ambitions could not be severed!) Elected to the Senate in 2000, she spoke often in churches (particularly African-American congregations in New York City), sharing her convictions about such things as racial justice, same-sex unions, and abortion rights. At every point she tacked closely with those of the Democrat Party.

For Hillary Clinton, championing a variety of progressive political causes equates with being a Christian, whereas doctrinal orthodoxy, traditional ethics, and personal piety matter little.