

23. “DO CHRISTIANS HAVE TO BECOME HOLY?”

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1. “Do Christians have to become holy?”. The New Testament gives a definite answer:

Matthew 5:48 You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

1 Peter 1:15-16 As he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, since it is written, "You shall be holy, for I am holy." (quoting Leviticus 19:2)
2. There are many more exhortations to holiness in the New Testament but the passage that mostly exemplifies what a Christian's life should look like, how he should behave, is Matthew 5-7, the so-called *Sermon on the Mountain* or the *Beatitudes*.
 - 2.1. This sermon has been called the *Magna Charta* of Christianity because it is meant to echo and somehow supersede the Ten Commandments (Exodus 10 and Deuteronomy 5).
 - 2.2. It is not an accident that this speech is located on a ‘mountain’, just as on the Mount Sinai Moses received the Ten Commandments.
 - 2.3. References are made only to some of the ten commandments (murder, adultery, perjury) but Jesus clearly wants to proclaim a more radical moral standard than the Ten Commandments as a whole for his disciples.

Matthew 5 21“You have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.’ 22But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, ‘You fool!’ will be liable to the hell of fire.

27“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ 28But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart.
 - 2.4. A Christian should not just be fair to others, but love even his enemies.
 - 2.5. Prayer, fasting, and generosity qualify as ‘holy’ not just be being performed outwardly (to be seen by others) but have to proceed from the heart and ideally be kept hidden.
 - 2.6. Compliance to the law is not enough, nor even exemplar behavior – it is the heart that has to change, that has to be ‘pure’ or ‘holy’.
3. One of the ways in which the New Testament, especially Paul, explains this change is by opposing the ‘law’ to ‘grace’.
 - 3.1. Holiness in the Old Testament is often associated with adherence to the Mosaic Law. The emphasis is on external rituals, purity laws, and a set of moral and ethical guidelines that regulates the behavior of the Israelites.
 - 3.2. With the advent of Jesus, the emphasis shifts from the external observance of the law to a heart-transforming relationship with God. Holiness is now seen as

a result of God's grace and the work of the Holy Spirit within believers. The New Testament teaches that believers are justified by faith, not just by keeping the law.

- 4. That which the New Testament calls 'grace', that is a loving relation to God that proceeds from the heart, is taught in the Old Testament too – for example through the image of the 'circumcision of the heart'

Deuteronomy 10:16 Circumcise therefore the foreskin of your heart, and be no longer stubborn.

- 5. In the New Testament though this comes to the forefront in a decisive and new way:

Romans 12:2 Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.

Galatians 5:22-23 But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things, there is no law.

- 6. There is a sense in which the ethical demands in the New Testament are so radicalized that they come across as impossible – as it is exemplified in the memorable image (which is found in the Sermon on the Mountain) of offering the other cheek:

Matthew 5.³⁸“You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ ³⁹But I say to you, Do not resist the one who is evil. But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. ⁴⁰And if anyone would sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. ⁴¹And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. ⁴²Give to the one who begs from you, and do not refuse the one who would borrow from you.

- 7. This is how Francis Spufford explains this trait of Christianity:

7.1. “This is the crucial point at which Christianity parts company with the other two monotheisms. Unlike the oldest (Judaism) and the youngest (Islam) of the one-god religions, the middle sibling isn't interested in coming up with a set of sustainable rules for living by.

- i. Jewish laws of behavior and Muslim laws of behavior may be demanding to keep at times, but they *can* be kept.
- ii. [Other religions] produce a moralized landscape in which the good people can be told from the bad people;
- iii. in which all human actions can be split into two categories, pure or impure, clean or dirty, permitted or forbidden, kosher or trayf, halal or haram.

7.2. Christianity does something different.

- i. It makes frankly impossible demands.
- ii. Instead of asking for specific actions, it offers general but lunatic principles.
- iii. It thinks you should give your possessions away, refuse to defend yourself, love strangers as much as your family, behave as if there's no tomorrow.

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- iv. These principles do not amount to a sustainable program. They deliberately ignore the question of how they could possibly be maintained.
 - v. They ask you to manifest in your ordinary life a drastically uncalculating, unprotected generosity. And that's not all.
 - vi. Christianity also makes what you mean by your behavior all-important. You could pauperize yourself, get slapped silly without fighting back, care for lepers and laugh all day long in the face of futures markets, and it still wouldn't count, if you did it for the wrong reasons.
 - vii. Not only is Christianity insanely perfectionist in its few positive recommendations, it's also insanely perfectionist about motive.
 - viii. It won't accept generosity performed for the sake of self-interest as generosity.
 - ix. It says that unless altruism is altruism all the way down, it doesn't count as altruism at all.
 - x. So far, so thrillingly impractical. But now notice the consequence of having an ideal of behavior not sized for human lives: everyone fails. Really everyone".¹
8. This might explain a trait of Christian spirituality which is the humor surrounding the striving towards holiness.
- 8.1. In the chapter on the "Tools of good works" of his Rule, Saint Benedict curiously says
Do not aspire to be called holy before you really are, but first be holy that you may more truly be called so.²
 - 8.2. Or a saying I often heard in my youth as a monk
"Saints are to be admired but not to be imitated".
 - 8.3. Or the joke that circulates in monasteries that young monks look holy but are not holy, middle aged monks don't look holy and are not holy, and old monks don't look holy but are holy.
9. In many ways we find an instance of the same humor in Paul's famous chapter on love in 1 Corinthians:
- 1If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. 2And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. 3If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned,^a but have not love, I gain nothing. 4Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant 5or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful;^b 6it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. 7Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

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¹ Francis Spufford, *Unapologetic: Why, Despite Everything, Christianity Can Still Make Surprising Emotional Sense*, 44-46.

² Rule of Saint Benedict 4.62

- 9.1. Paul suggests that holiness in Christianity is not about external behavior, 'looking' holy, heroic self-denial but depends entirely on what we harbor in our heart towards each other.
- 9.2. Christians should really, sincerely, wholeheartedly want the good of other people over and above their own.

How has this model evolved in the history of spirituality? How has Christian holiness been understood, narrated, and represented?

- 9.3. Initially, the people venerated as saints were almost exclusively martyrs.
 - 9.4. When Christianity became the official religion of the Empire and Christian persecutions subsided, a new model emerged epitomized in Athanasius' *Life of Antony the Great* (written around 360 CE): instead of dying physically by being martyred, the 'saint' became the person who died to the world by fleeing it, with an emphasis on self-denial, miraculous powers, fight against the devil, exceptional temptations, solitary life, and the achievement of something like a state of 'perfection'.
 - 9.5. It was the beginning of 'hagiography': the body of literature that describes the lives and veneration of the Christian saints and aims at edifying readers.
 - 9.6. This literary genre had little concern for 'history' as we understand it today.
 - i. Its aim was less to give models to imitate than
 - ii. to establish a new class of human beings who had achieved such perfection, such proximity to the divine that they could act as intercessors for the majority of Christians who remained 'unholy'.
10. In part, asceticism arose to counteract the dilution of Christian ethical standards caused by mass conversions after the Edit of Constantine (313 CE) but opened the gate to a reversal of the New Testament model of holiness which increasingly became confused with *perfection*. One of the most pernicious and obstinate forms of this confusion is what is called *Pelagianism*.
11. Pelagius (390-418 CE) was a British monk and a successful spiritual director. He surely 'meant well' but his rigorism introduced in Christianity the reflex that whatever we say about 'grace' in the end becoming holy is a matter of will.
- 11.1. He was anxious to restore a strong meaning to the name 'Christian' and this is why he preferred to speak of the 'perfect Christian'.
 - 11.2. He downplayed the efficacy of baptism (that is of grace): only those who show their faith with their behaviour truly belong to the Church. Baptism is a strictly symbolic gesture and should be administered in response to the merits of the individual. The words that accompany this sacrament are seen primarily as an exhortation.
 - 11.3. In theory, Pelagianism proclaimed the same requirement of perfection for all. In fact, it ends up in elitism: its own logic leads it from the idea that all Christians must be perfect to the idea that only the perfect are Christians.
 - 11.4. The fact that this might apply -and indeed appeal- only to a minority strengthens its claims because it favours the 'little remnant' mentality, a pride capable of nourishing perseverance. One of the most useful rewards for a minority is the conviction of forming an elite.

- 11.5.** Hence the Pelagians' taste for visibility and their tendency to judge those whom they see as weak.
- 12.** Pelagianism is not just a historical heresy, but became something of an endemic virus – like the flu: a protean temptation embedded in Christianity (especially in the West).
- 13.** This is how, for example, it is diagnosed in the life of the Church today by Pope Francis in his encyclical *Evangelii Gaudium* (2013) when he talks of the
“self-absorbed promethean neopelagianism of those who ultimately trust only in their own powers and feel superior to others because they observe certain rules or remain intransigently faithful to a particular Catholic style from the past. A supposed soundness of doctrine or discipline leads instead to a narcissistic and authoritarian elitism, whereby instead of evangelizing, one analyzes and classifies others, and instead of opening the door to grace, one exhausts his or her energies in inspecting and verifying. In neither case is one really concerned about Jesus Christ or others. These are manifestations of an anthropocentric immanentism. It is impossible to think that a genuine evangelizing thrust could emerge from these adulterated forms of Christianity”.
- 14.** The fundamental way of tackling this caricature of holiness was developed especially by Pelagius' fiercest opponent, Saint Augustine (354-430 CE)
 - 14.1.** While Pelagius seems to be interested only in the maximum that attracts the elites, Augustine emphasizes the minimum required from and accessible to all.
 - 14.2.** In his teaching, Augustine constantly displays a benevolence towards the weakest and the concern not to discourage anyone.
 - 14.3.** While Pelagius favours a moral criterion to determine who truly belongs to the church, Augustine opts for more objective criteria, namely baptism and the confession of faith, and leaves to God the judgment as to who is a real Christian and who is not.
- 15.** What we can learn from the confrontation between Pelagius and Augustine is that in the ethical models circulating in the ‘sub-conscious’ of Christianity there is a tension between ‘holiness’ and ‘perfection’.
 - 15.1.** *Perfection* entails a focus on individual improvement, on overcoming sinful behaviours and developing good habits to such an extent that our heart is purified and we are given access some form of direct (or mystical) knowledge of God. Personal union with God is the real aim and communal love tends to be seen as one of the means that enables the person to ‘ascend’ in his/her spiritual life and reach this end.
 - 15.2.** *Holiness*, on the contrary, while aiming at reaching a level of spontaneity and freedom in doing what is good and in loving, is happier to allow for human frailty, whether one's own or of others, not instrumentally or provisionally but structurally and sustainably during our life-time. Communal love, especially under the form of patience with oneself and with others, is not a means to an end, but an end in itself, because love is God.
- 16.** There is a tension between perfection and holiness and the whole Christian spirituality

constantly oscillates between these two poles. Trends of spirituality have leaned towards either of these two poles in turn, while never excluding the other altogether.

17. There is a sense in which the experience of holiness cannot avoid the initial temptation of 'perfection' and that only through the experience of the failure of this approach opens the way to authentic evangelical 'holiness'.
18. What holiness ultimately looks like takes the form of 'patience' and of 'humility' understood as such an experience of one's own weakness, frailty that the need for God's grace and forgiveness becomes not just something believed of confessed but truly *felt*. This in turn leads to authentic *compassion* for others.
19. Cf. the Rule of Saint Benedict,
 - 19.1. In the last of the so-called "tools for good works" listed in chapter 4 of the Rule
 - i. after a long list of prohibitions and injunctions (ranging from not killing to respecting elders and loving the young),
 - ii. after much advice relating to the ascetic life (to avoid eating too much or sleeping too much or being lazy) and to
 - iii. a truly evangelical community life (not to repay evil for evil; to love one's enemies),
 - iv. the last word, which ultimately underlies all of these instructions, is the following: "And finally, never lose hope in God's mercy" (RB 4.74).
 - 19.2. The only 'perfection', the only justice, the only wisdom to which we have access in this life is the Father's mercy and a discernment that must be taken up day after day, tirelessly, until our last breath.