



The Credibility of the Christian Life in the Contemporary Narcissistic Society

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*Part One of a two-part series.
Look for Part Two in the Winter issue.*

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The apostolic message to each of the early Christian churches is clearly prompted by the church's cultural context. Sexual immorality prompted Paul's letters to the Corinthians. In Rome the issues revolved around the tensions between Jewish and Gentile Christian communities. Writing to the Ephesians, he addressed the civic pagan cult of the goddess Diana.

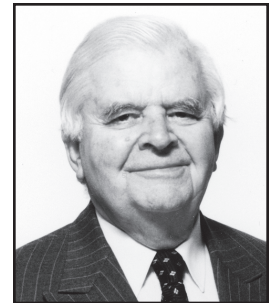
But today theological studies tend to become as specialized as all other academic studies; theology can be taught as an educational program like any other topic, without directly speaking to our way of life. This heightens our need to relate the gospel, not just to "church" or "the academy," but to how we identify ourselves and how we actually live daily. To do so, theologians should be as much engaged with the disciplines of society—whether history, political science, sociology, [behavioral] economics, psychology, etc.—as with biblical scholarship per se. Otherwise Christian leaders can be unaware and uncritical of cultural influences and so succumb to the temptations they present.

Should we be surprised, then, to address attention to narcissism within the nation's capital, when our whole culture has become narcissistic? Sociologists and psychotherapists have been addressing the issue now for at least four decades, but it has received scant theological attention, even though narcissism is now a cultural epidemic.

What Is Narcissism?

Specifically, the Mayo Clinic defines "narcissistic personality disorder" as

a mental disorder in which people have an inflated sense of their own importance and a deep need for admiration. Those with narcissistic personality disorder (NDP) believe that they are superior to others and have little regard for other people's feelings. But behind the mask of ultra-confidence lies a fragile self-esteem, vulnerable to the slightest criticism.¹



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The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders defines NDP as

a pervasive pattern of grandiosity (in fantasy or behavior), need for admiration, and lack of empathy, beginning by early adulthood and present in a variety of contexts, as indicated by five (or more) of the following:

- *has a grandiose sense of self-importance*
- *is preoccupied with fantasies of unlimited success, power, brilliance, beauty, or ideal love*
- *belief that he/she is "special" and unique, and can only be understood by, or should associate with, other "special" or high-status people (or institutions)*
- *requires excessive admiration*
- *has a sense of entitlement*
- *is interpersonally exploitative (or taking advantage of others to achieve his/her own ends)*
- *lacks empathy, is unwilling to recognize or identify with the feelings and needs of others*
- *shows arrogant, haughty behaviors or attitudes.²*

Implicit in this definition is the severe lack of empathy, and therefore of relational connectedness there is

in NPD, so that narcissists are the least aware of their defect. The medical profession finds the narcissist untreatable; no drug can treat it. The only treatment is centered on psychotherapy. As one psychiatrist communicated to me as I was writing this essay, “No narcissist has ever sought me to give treatment.” Within our churches, some of our most serious dysfunctions occur from narcissistic leaders who believe they have God on their side, because of their theological education and their professional mandate.

This personality disorder can be measured in its degree of severity, and treated in an individual way. But our concern is much more with the far wider issue of living within a whole society that is now suffering from a pandemic of narcissism, such as the Black Death of mid-fourteenth-century Europe. But that epidemic lasted only two years or so, while we are facing a relational affliction that could destroy our Western world, under an indebtedness of \$2,000 trillion of card credit debt and \$9 trillion of public debt in the United States alone.

This raises two questions: how did cultural narcissism arise in our late modern society? And what perpetuating factors are spreading the pandemic?

The Rise of Cultural Narcissism

One of the first social critics to blow the whistle was Christopher Lasch in his 1978 book *The Culture of Narcissism*.³ Deep discontinuities between childhood and adulthood had previously been explored, after the Second World War, by John Bowlby, Kenneth Kenniston, Heinz Kohut, among others. Some had reacted in revolt against parental authority. R.D. Laing and Wilhelm Reich claimed the freedom to criticize all established institutions, such as the nuclear family, educational institutions, and sexual norms. Abdication of authority at many levels ensued, during the 1960s. The contemporary climate became therapeutic, not religious, with “psychological Man” replacing “religious” or indeed “rational Man.” Lasch himself identified narcissism with a reaction to modern bureaucracy, and the pervasive distrust of those in institutionalized power. Perhaps he was too close to prevailing events to understand narcissism more profoundly, important as his pioneer work then was.

Narcissism as the love of self is as old as the origin of sin, in the temptation of Adam and Eve—“you shall be as gods”—or, within the same family, when in envy Cain killed his brother Abel. Surely then “a Christian narcissist” should be an oxymoron, in the context

of Christ’s self-sacrificial love. Certainly in colonial America that is what Jonathan Edwards preached, that conversion was “a willingness to obliterate selfishness and give all to God.”⁴

Perhaps it is Montaigne at the end of the sixteenth century who first realized that modern man’s identity was in flux, as he struggled by Stoic and Epicurean means to maintain a balanced sense of identity in his own particular experiences, without seeking superhuman standards. Pascal, early trained in Montaigne’s thought, then found that meditation on John 17, and with it his Christian conversion as a new economy of the soul, meant that “total submission to Jesus Christ” emancipates “the self,” both from the flux of identity changes and the smug acceptance of the sovereignty of “the self.”⁵

But beginning with Pascal’s enemy René Descartes, changing cultures have been profoundly associated with redefinitions of human identity, as Charles Taylor has traced in his important book *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*,⁶ which we shall elaborate upon in our second essay.

Tocqueville noted the distinctive North American origins of “the rise of the individual,” which in the rural vastness of the New World was in danger of exaggerated tendencies without being checked by civic responsibilities.⁷ This was later promoted to build “character,” hard-working, moralistic, frugal, and emotionally restricted. But as secularization grew, so “the self” has become increasingly a problem.⁸

Around 1890, argues Warren Susman, a new quality was brought in, not the moral strengthening of “character,” but the quality of “being somebody” or “a personality.”⁹ Then followed Hollywood in the 1920s, the rise of the advertising industry, the advancement of medical science, leading into the postwar “therapeutic revolution,” and the new cult of “self-fulfilment” for the “empty self.” Now the citizen became a consumer, with a growing capacity to convert the war-production factories into new potentials for insatiable consumption.¹⁰ Then in the late 1980s, big banks began the credit card commercial device to further promote how the “empty self” could quickly be refurnished by “authentic individuals” who are strong, independent, and who can do everything on their own.¹¹

Following Freudian theory, the British psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott analyzed the dynamics between the child and its mother. He argued that there was both a “true self,” fragile and needing nonrestrictions to unfold “naturally,” intuitively so, and the “false self,” which will do everything possible not to

be separated from the mother, for it is both originally empty, yet strangely omnipotent.¹² From this flowed the illusions of entitlement, grandiosity, and choice to be whatever you desire. Heinz Kohut, another psychoanalyst, even more forcefully argued for the centrality of “the self,” requiring the infant to cultivate a “healthy narcissism.”¹³ So it was deemed essential that the parents mirror their responses to every desire for self-esteem. Such advocates for both consumerism and narcissism have had enormous influence in the rise and dominance of the therapeutic revolution now so dominant in our culture.

Summarizing postwar trends, Cushman notes:

*The post-World War II self has had many faces, such as the early fifties face, cautious, somewhat confused unsure of what would come next. The rebellious, unpredictable, colorful, naive sixties face; the increasingly frustrated, angry, bitterly disappointed face of the seventies; the sad, self-involved, acquisitive face of the eighties. But the uniting of each of these public presentations has been consumerism... the belief one could find individual salvation through the liberation of one's core essence, and that one could liberate that essence by purchasing and consuming the proper product or merging with the perfect celebrity, in other words by filling up the empty self—that, in our time, is the face of everyone.*¹⁴

The Socio-Economic Consequences of a Narcissistic Society

The financial crash of 2009 is a continuing reminder that “ideas have consequences.” The greed of the narcissistic self is being now punished. Living in an age of entitlement is bringing a heavy toll of social consequences. In parenting, we are seeing the breakdown of the family unit, with the increasing loss of parental authority. In media attention, “celebrities” destroy the possibility of genuine friendships, for they demand “glitter” and then they can only feed on it. In advertising, slogans shamelessly promote materialistic entitlement as a virtue, yet our credit card economy is forcing young and old to drown in debt.

Now the Internet revolution is generating devices to provide innumerable forms of self-exhibitionism and of pseudorelationships, which are dramatically changing the consciousness of children as well as youth; I think of Facebook, Myspace, and YouTube. What an older generation innocently thought might be time-saving ways of connecting with more people end up being major factors in spreading the pandemic of youthful narcissism.¹⁵ For in such forums everyone

can promote one's self to become a “celebrity.” And nudity—of body or of emotions—can be exhibited to all who seek it. The grandiose sense of self-importance—religious or secular—was never more accessible than Ipad or Iphone now permit. Even Christian “conversion” seems that much more convincing when narrated by a celebrity! Is it accidental that the newest electronic devices now begin with “I”? Could Ovid ever have anticipated how such devices would provide a better “pool” than that in which Narcissus saw his own reflection and then drowned?

Will eventually our whole Western world also drown—drown in narcissistic consumerism?

(This was Part One of a two-part series. Look for Part Two in the Winter issue.)

Notes

1. 1998-2010 Mayo Foundation for Medical Education and Research, Newsletter, November 19, 2009. See <http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/narcissistic-personality-disorder/DSOO652> (accessed June 29, 2010).

2. *The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 4th ed.*, (Washington, D.C.: American Psychiatric Association, 1994), p. 661.

3. Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1978).

4. Cited in Richard I. Bushman, “Jonathan Edwards as a Great Man; Identity, Conversion, and Leadership in the Great Awakening,” in *Our Selves/Our Past: Psychological Approaches to American History*, ed. Robert J. Brugger (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981), p. 63.

5. James M. Houston, ed., *The Mind on Fire: Blaise Pascal, Classics of Faith and Devotion* (Portland, Oreg.: Multnomah Press, 1989), p. 19.

6. Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989).

7. *Ibid.*, p. 414.

8. See Roy F. Baumeister, “How the Self Became a Problem,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 52 (1987).

9. Warren I. Susman, *Culture as History: The Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Parthenon Books, 1973).

10. Philip Cushman, *Constructing the Self: Constructing America, a Cultural History of Psychotherapy* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1995), p. 77.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 83.

12. Donald W. Winnicott, *The Maturational Process and the Facilitating Environment* (New York: International Universities Press, 1965).

13. Heinz Kohut, *The Analysis of the Self* (New York: International Universities Press, 1971).

14. Cushman, *Constructing the Self*, p. 277.

15. Jean M. Twenge and W. Keith Campbell, "The Narcissism Epidemic: Living in the Age of Entitlement" (New York: Free Press, 2009).

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