

Feature Article: JAF4363

WESTERN INTELLECTUALS AND SHAME

by Daniel Mann

This article first appeared in CHRISTIAN RESEARCH JOURNAL, volume 36, number 03 (2013). For further information or to subscribe to the CHRISTIAN RESEARCH JOURNAL go to: <http://www.equip.org/christian-research-journal/>

We all want to be happy! Why then do we resort to masochism, a form of self-punishment—sodomasochistic sex, self-denial, or even self-mutilation? Not only this, masochism is not restricted to those forms we usually think of as “pathological.” In its many manifestations, it actually has gone mainstream.

Masochism seems to be at work when we silently endure painful relationships, ones we need not endure. How does this work? We feel guilty about something and therefore want to atone or compensate for this guilt by enduring the discomfort. Strangely, there seems to be a subconscious life script, an inner logic that requires us to transact a cryptic deal with ourselves. We pay the price of enduring some discomfort, and then we entitle ourselves to receive a reduction in guilt.

Similarly, according to this hidden contract or “logic,” after having paid the price of a few lashes, we have “bought” the right to enjoy the things that are more important to us, like sex. From this perspective, sexual satisfaction derives from painful lashes.

More commonly, armed with masochism’s inner logic, we punish ourselves when we fail to perform up to our standards and reward ourselves when we succeed. I had my own internal script that specified what pleasures I could enjoy. Since overconsumption would make me feel guilty, I would restrict myself to three-minute showers. My internal reward system signaled me that I was not worthy of longer showers. If I exceeded the limit that my legalistic script imposed on me, I’d have to compensate with some form of saving-the-planet activity.

Similarly, when I’d get an “A” on an exam, I’d feel worthy and entitled to buy a chocolate milkshake. However, if I failed to receive the “A,” the milkshake wouldn’t go down as easily. Somehow, I understood that my coveted sense of worthiness came at a price. Either I would have to earn it or if I couldn’t earn it, I would have to suffer for it.

Others, when they feel that they have achieved a certain scripted level of “worthiness,” feel entitled to take a vacation. Meanwhile, others who have a more stringent script never feel worthy of taking a vacation.

SELF-DENIAL AND SUFFERING

In many religions, self-denial and/or self-flagellation have become the staples for everyday righteousness or feeling OK about oneself. Sometimes they take the form of

puncture wounds, walking on hot coals, or even the use of knives. As an Augustinian monk, Martin Luther endured walking on his knees, walking barefoot in the snow, and long periods of sleeplessness, all in a vain attempt to prove himself to God. The faithful prove themselves by what they suffer.

In other religions self-denial is accomplished by making costly sacrifices, sometimes human, in order to earn the favor of their deities. As the plague stalked fourteenth-century Europe, a flagellant sect arose. They thought that the plague was a sign of God's displeasure and punishment. Therefore, the flagellants paraded through Europe whipping one another, convinced that this would earn God's favor. And for this, they received high grades from their admirers.

Masochism takes many forms. Benedict XVI writes about another form of masochism. He notes how Western culture, en masse, has turned against its own Christian heritage:

This case illustrates a peculiar western self-hatred that is nothing short of pathological. It is commendable that the West is trying to be more open, to be more understanding of the values of outsiders, but it has lost all capacity for self-love. All that it sees in its own history is the despicable and the destructive; it is no longer able to perceive what is great and pure...multiculturalism, which is so constantly and passionately promoted, can sometimes amount to an abandonment and denial, a flight from one's own heritage.¹

Hence, the Western intellectual establishes his virtue or "worthiness" by rejecting his own culture. Author Ayaan Hirsi Ali, a Somali Muslim turned atheist, shares this insight:

In certain countries, "left-wing," secular liberals have stimulated my critical thinking and that of other Muslims. But these same liberals in Western politics have the strange habit of blaming themselves for the ills of the world, while seeing the rest of the world as victims. To them, victims are to be pitied, and they lump together all pitiable and suppressed people, such as Muslims, and consider them good people who should be cherished and supported so that they can overcome their disadvantages. The adherents to the gospel of multiculturalism refuse to criticize people whom they see as victims. Some Western critics disapprove of United States policies and attitudes but do not criticize the Islamic world, just as, in the first part of the twentieth century, Western socialist apologists did not dare criticize the Soviet labor camps. Along the same lines, some Western intellectuals criticize Israel, but they will not criticize Palestine because Israel belongs to the West, which they consider fair game, but they feel sorry for the Palestinians, and for the Islamic world in general, which is not as powerful as the West. They are critical of the native white majority in Western countries but not of Islamic minorities. Criticism of the Islamic world, of Palestinians, and of Islamic minorities is regarded as Islamophobia and xenophobia.²

Self-castigation is subtly and subconsciously understood as a reasonable payment for self-validation, a necessary defense against shame. It works something like this: "I am a

good and worthy person if I champion the interests of others and am willing to criticize my own traditions.”³

A Universal Feeling

Can we ascribe all of these phenomena to pathology or to the idiosyncrasies of a limited number of cultures? Obviously, there is something more global taking place.

Ordinarily, it would have been more in keeping with our pleasure-seeking nature to believe, “I make my gods happiest with me when I’m thoroughly enjoying myself.” However, this type of hedonistic religion is always replaced by more masochistic forms. Why haven’t we become more proficient in rewriting our scripts to eliminate the necessity for pain and to maximize pleasure? Why has this mysterious script proved itself so impervious to editorial “improvements,” especially in view of the encouragement given to hedonism by our permissive, pleasure-seeking age? Evidently, there is something else indelibly taking place in humanity’s wiring. This is why human history consistently testifies that we are more than ready to pay the price of self-mutilation or self-deprivation.

Interestingly, self-indulgence and self-denial are both used by Eastern religions in an attempt to reduce stress. Some attempt to dry up self-deluding and imprisoning desires and lusts through self-mortification or various forms of meditation.

However, self-indulgence is also taught. As one Hindu mystic commented, “Fasting will only increase desire, and you will only think about food. Instead, consume as much honey as you can, and it will make you sick, and you will not desire it anymore.”

The Doors’ Jim Morrison had a similar outlook. As is the case with all of us, his sense of shame wouldn’t be silenced by self-denial. Instead, he believed that it had to be saturated by self-indulgence until it fell apart, like a soggy paper towel. He was convinced that this would result in freedom and spiritual purification: “Sensuousness and evil is an attractive image to us now....It’s like a purification ritual in the alchemical sense. First you have to have the period of disorder, chaos, returning to a primeval disaster religion. Out of that you purify the elements and find the new seed of life.”⁴

Sadly, the path of self-indulgence does not lead to “the new seed of life.” In Morrison’s case, it might have led to an untimely death. We cannot defy the conscience without paying a prohibitive cost.

Shame is life-controlling. Guilt and shame tell us that there is something the matter with us and compel us to do something about the disturbing alarms they sound. We therefore resort to denial, self-mutilation, self-indulgence, drugs, and even workaholicism to convince ourselves that we’re really worthy and entitled to feel good. We cut ourselves and for a few moments feel that life is worthwhile. Clinical studies have even shown that after an act of self-mutilation, cortisone production, directly associated with stress, is reduced.⁵

But an entitlement mentality is a lethal poison. Because of their self-inflicted punishments, the flagellants had convinced themselves and others that they were even

more spiritual and entitled than the priests. Consequently, they entered the cathedrals, driving away the “less worthy” presiding priests, sometimes even beating them.

Unresolved guilt and shame cause psychological turmoil. We feebly erect a wall of denial and self-righteous rationalizations in a vain attempt to shield ourselves against their indictments. However, we find that they are like inflated beach balls in the ocean, which inevitably resurface no matter how valiantly and persistently we fight to keep them submerged. Are we condemned vainly to pursue an unattainable freedom from these slave masters? Have we become servants of denial and image management to hide the painful truths about ourselves? It would seem so. If we need to feel that we are significant and worthy people and our unalterable script tells us we’re not, we have a problem—a fatiguing quest after the transient feeling of worthiness.

The biblical faith affirms that we do have a very real problem—God (and even our God-given human nature—Rom. 2:14–15) has been offended by both our sin and our inadequate, self-absorbed attempts to atone for our sin through self-righteous acts and rationalizations. We have covered ourselves with fig leaves in the form of accomplishments hoping that this would obscure the offense and silence the guilt and shame. When this failed to work, we ran from God and refused to meet Him in the light of true confession. And we have been running ever since.

However, He paid the price through mutilation by our human hands so that we wouldn’t have to suffer mutilation at His hands or even our own. If we are convinced that Christ has paid the price for our sins in full, and that nothing will separate us from His love and forgiveness, then the sense of guilt and shame and the need to continually prove ourselves are neutralized.

Good deeds are imperative, but not as a ploy to deny our guilt. Any attempt to forgive ourselves by virtue of these deeds is egocentric and represents a refusal to face the objective offense of our sins.

Martin Luther subjected himself to the most extreme and painful disciplines trying to earn God’s love. However, in the midst of his studies, the concept of grace and reconciliation through Christ suddenly came alive as never before. In his *Commentary on the Book of Galatians*, he wrote,

Although an impeccable monk, I stood before God as a sinner troubled in conscience, and I had no confidence that my merit would satisfy Him. Therefore I did not love a just and angry God, but rather murmured against Him...Night and day I pondered until I saw the connection between the justice of God and the statement, “The just shall live by his faith” [Rom 1:17]. Then I grasped that the justice of God is that righteousness by which, through grace and sheer mercy, God justifies us through faith. Therefore I felt myself to be reborn and to have gone through the doors into paradise.

Luther rediscovered grace! It (and the God who gave it) is the necessary antidote for masochism in its various forms. Christ replaced our tattered fig leaves by experiencing the ultimate punishment for us, ending the need for self-punishment. By this

atonement, He put to death not only our guilt but also our self-absorbed and futile attempts to pay for it.

I still don't enjoy taking long showers, but I no longer experience the need to prove my worthiness by keeping them under the three-minute limit. In contrast to the reassurances of many psychologists that I was a "great guy," it was only the Word of Christ that was able to convince me that I was safe, beloved, and free from my internal shackles.

When we reject the gift of *God's* righteousness procured on the Cross, we condemn ourselves endlessly to pursue our *own* righteousness, like Sisyphus self-condemned to push his boulder. When we fail to receive this payment for sin, we likewise sentence ourselves to lives of masochism, endlessly trying to pay off a debt that is far beyond our means to ever satisfy. Consequently, we are always paying, always pushing, always trying to prove ourselves.

In retrospect, I find it so remarkable that Jesus' death on the Cross is the only antidote for humanity's obsessions. It's also the perfect piece to complete the jigsaw puzzle presented by our confused lives. Denial, masochism, and pleasure-seeking each had failed to fill the gap. This forces us to ask the question, "Why is there such an incredible fit between this two-thousand-year-old, Bible-centered event and my mental well-being?" We find that Christ is the missing piece!

Daniel Mann has taught at the New York School of Bible since 1992 and blogs at www.Mannsword.blogspot.com. Facebook Page: "Apologetics for Today."

NOTES

- 1 Quoted by Jean Bethke Elshtain, *First Things*, March, 2009, 36.
- 2 <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5382547>.
- 3 It is not my intention to devalue good deeds but rather self-righteous motivations!
- 4 Quoted from Steve Turner, *Hungry for Heaven* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 96.
- 5 <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sadomasochism>; <http://www.niu.edu/user/tj0bjs1/papers/scclm09.pdf>;
http://books.google.com/books?id=FeDHhTVZ5yMC&pg=PA568&lpg=PA568&dq=Masochism+and+cortisol+reduction&source=bl&ots=czLqdvgo3i&sig=c06aEy7_CPHCqAu4iqXxP1FTjOs&hl=en#v=onepage&q=Masochism%20and%20cortisol%20reduction&f=false.