

Introduction

Religious attitudes, be they Christian or non-Christian, need frequent reality checks because they disclose a tendency to align original teachings with spiritual convenience, or to ignore them altogether. During my half-century as a Lutheran church historian, teacher, and pastor, many Lutherans have told me that they are “justified by faith” in the literal inspiration of the Bible—a far cry from the original teachings of sixteenth-century Lutheranism. Roman Catholics declared that the apostle Peter was the first pope—without a shred of evidence from the first century. Pentecostals insisted that “speaking in tongues” was necessary for salvation—ignoring eight other spiritual gifts of the same, indeed higher, authority (1 Cor 12:8-11). Popular theological assertions range from ecumenical cacophonies to naive, indeed ridiculous, opinions without any link to historical sources. Even formal ecumenical dialogues, teaching events, or interdenominational gatherings have to work hard to align agreements or disagreements with reliable historical evidence. Such work often creates “neuralgia—intensive intermittent pain along the course of a nerve, especially the head and face”¹ of “the body of Christ,” the church. It evokes the need for the application of the old adage that “the church must always be reformed” (*ecclesia semper reformanda est*).

Convenience, ignorance, and apathy, especially when combined, are good reasons for temptation among religious zealots who look for new recruits in their crusades to make the world ready for the kingdom of God

as they imagine it: a realm of selfish spiritual security embodied in specific doctrines, rules of behavior, and institutional structures. Exciting rhetoric, cunning maneuvers, and attractive strategies are employed to ignore, indeed abandon, the ancient Christian mandate for selfless, suffering discipleship as the penultimate mark of the “gospel,” the good news about an ultimate, never-ending future with God in Christ, beyond sin, evil, and death. “Converts” to citizenship in an earthly, triumphant kingdom are victims of an enduring temptation to substitute selfless cruciformity with selfish spiritual security. It is a temptation to be self-righteous, the chief symptom of spiritual poisoning resulting in a toxic spirituality.

The four spiritual toxicities we explore in this volume are essentially idolatry, the violation of the First Commandment of the Decalogue, “You shall have no other gods.” It is the original or “inherited sin,” the most dangerous poison for humankind, namely, to “be like God,” thus able to know good and evil and never die (Gen. 3:4-5). Such high goals are accompanied by the lure of physical, aesthetic, and rational pleasures.

When the woman saw that the tree was *good for food*, and that it was *a delight to the eyes*, and that the tree was to be desired *to make one wise*, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate. (Gen 3:6; italics added)

Legend has it, and Christian paintings show, that the fruit was an apple poisoned with the desire to possess divine power. The Brothers Grimm’s fairy tale *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* can be told as a counterpart to the biblical story of the Fall, a caveat for children of all ages against self-righteousness embodied in vanity. Vanity leads to deceit and violence (the wicked step-mother). Its target is childlike faith, linked to love and joy (Snow White and the seven dwarfs) and its happy end is a new life beyond death (the wedding to a prince—in the American film version the prince kisses Snow White back to life). Adam and Eve no longer wanted to be creatures but equal partners with the Creator. They desired a quick exchange of temporal earthly life for a timeless, eternal one. Like impatient, egocentric children, they wanted a quick fix, an easy life, to become “wise” as they saw fit. The cunning serpent makes the poison of idolatry very attractive by promising eternal satisfaction through the consumption of a forbidden fruit. The poison is hidden in an apple offered to Snow White by the wicked stepmother. It could also be in

attractive mushrooms used for cooking a delicious meal, in mind-altering drugs, or in powerful ideologies promising a secure and easy life.

Yielding to the serpent's temptation confuses divinity and humanity. To be confused is synonymous with being "diabolical" (from the Greek *diaballein*, "to set things apart by throwing them, to confuse"). But God has the last word. "The eyes of both were opened and they knew that they were naked, and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves" (Gen 3:7). Instead of seeing God face to face, they only saw each other, became ashamed, and could stand each other only under a cover of clothes. They ended up "east of Eden" and were forever prevented from returning home, to their garden. A cherubim with a flaming sword enforced the divine mandate (Gen 3:24). God always remains in charge. Great expectations, but only self-deception! Or, as an ancient Roman proverb put it (based on Aesop's Fables from the sixth century B.C.E.), "The mountains were in labor but delivered only a mouse."

The antidote to the poison of original sin is the encounter with the biblical history of salvation, the call for a pilgrimage with God in Christ who promises the only real happy ending through the good news, the Gospel, that sin, evil, and death will be "swallowed up forever" (Isa 25:7; 1 Cor 15:54). Antidotes require stamina and courage; the encounter with the biblical history of salvation is not easy. The Old Testament describes life with God as a difficult journey from slavery to freedom, symbolized by the exodus from captivity in Egypt to a "holy land," and beyond it to a heavenly future with God through a Messiah. The New Testament depicts Christian life as a mean meantime, an interim between the first and second advents of Christ. Christians are people of "the Way" (Acts 24:14), moving to a future "where righteousness is at home" (2 Pet 3:13). They are "strangers and foreigners on earth," a pilgrim people longing for the "city of God" (Heb 11:13, 16).

The poison of idolatry has remained an enduring temptation of Christian faith. Despite the graphic biblical description of the danger of playing God, Christians continue the dangerous game like many of their contemporaries who have become attracted to drugs as means to avoid harsh realities. The spread of toxic spirituality illustrates how hazardous it is to "hand on" (*tradere* in Latin) the gospel in a climate threatened by sin, evil, and death. Church history discloses how the "handing on"

becomes a sleight of hand, as it were, a skillful deception of the original “good news”: the gospel.

There are four main toxic Christian traditions that above all others—in my opinion—ignore, indeed reject, the biblical view of Christian life as shaped by the sin of idolatry and as an interim between the first and second advent of Christ. They reinterpret the historic structure of Christianity: its beginnings in Israel, the home of Jesus; its authoritative guides, its Scripture and tradition; its relation to the world; and its moral expression. I am listing them as “isms.”

1. *Anti-Semitism.* It is the toxic, enduring attitude of “hostility or prejudice against Jews.”² In the course of history, two issues began to dominate Christian attitudes toward Israel: a theological anti-Judaism and a racist anti-Semitism. Theological anti-Judaism was driven by an ideology claiming that Jews lost their status as God’s “chosen people” by rejecting Christ as the Messiah. Consequently, the divine favors were transferred to Christians as the “new Israel.” A Christian mission to the Jews tried to convert them and, whenever it failed, became a crusade of contempt. A racist anti-Semitism in the twentieth century secularized the Christian ideology, advocating a myth of a super-race called “Aryans” destined to rid the world of inferior people best embodied by “Semites,” identified as Jews. The result was the Holocaust in Germany during World War II.

2. *Fundamentalism.* It is the toxic, enduring attitude toward Scripture and tradition—“a form of Protestant Christianity that upholds belief in the strict and literal interpretation of the Bible, including its narratives, doctrines, prophecies, and moral laws,”³ and a form of Roman Catholic “traditionalism—the theory that all moral and religious truth comes from divine revelation passed on by tradition, human reason being incapable of attaining it.”⁴ At stake is the issue of authority derived from the Bible and the Christian tradition. Protestants adopted the ideology of an inerrant, divinely inspired “Scripture.” Catholics developed a theory of “apostolic succession” from the apostle Peter to the bishops of Rome. The centerpiece of the theory and its historical realization is an infallible ecclesiastical office, the papacy. Using an alliteration, it can be said that Fundamentalism affirms a combination: either a “pope,” representing an infallible office or a biblical “paper pope,” representing an infallible book.

3. *Triumphalism*. It is the toxic, enduring attitude of an “excessive exultation over one’s success or achievements (used especially in a political context).”⁵ At stake is the issue of the relationship between spiritual and secular power. Triumphalism either fuses or separates these powers. A fusion is driven by the attempt to create the heavenly “church triumphant” already on earth as a forerunner of the “kingdom of God” ushered in by Christ at the end of time. The “exultation” evokes a sense of triumph over the struggling “church militant” still mired in evil, sin, and death. This triumph is historically manifested in a theocratic, often violent, dominance of the world, usually in a political fusion of church and state: the medieval combination of imperial and papal power; eighteenth-century Puritan theocracy in New England; the zeal of “Evangelicals” who want to create a “Christian America.” Or the triumph is manifested in the reverse, namely, a utopian separation from the world, usually in an abstention from politics, the realm of the “secular,” in favor of a concentration on the inner life, the realm of the “spiritual”: the monastic isolation of the “desert fathers” (followers of Anthony of Egypt in the fourth century); the “Franciscan spiritualists,” addicted to speculations about the end-time (exemplified by Joachim of Fiore and his disciples in the twelfth century); a life in farm communes, without private property, separated from the outside world (exemplified by Hutterites in the sixteenth century); exuberant, charismatic Protestant sectarians (exemplified by Pentecostal churches at the beginning of the twentieth century in the United States).

4. *Moralism*. It is the toxic, enduring attitude in ethics, “the practice of moralizing, especially showing a tendency to make judgments about others’ morality.”⁶ At stake is the issue of absolute moral control, be it by rational or physical means; the medieval Inquisition used both. The spiritual poison is the assumption of knowing divine moral mandates and how they are to be obeyed. Some moralists develop a “moral theology” of unchanging rules for Christian life and impose them by demanding ethical uniformity. In order to achieve and maintain such uniformity, they advocate fear of divine punishment and engage in clever reasoning, resulting in casuistic rules for a confession of sins designed to scare and to dominate believers (exemplified by Roman Catholic canon law and manuals for conducting private, or auricular, confession). Or, moralists do the reverse by developing moral rules for specific situations, trying to

determine a desired ethical action (exemplified by a Protestant situation ethics).

There are other expressions of Christian toxic spirituality, spreading at specific times and related to particular issues (such as racism and sexism). But they all proceed from the cesspool of the four poisons that threaten historic Christianity. Using a biblical paradigm, these toxic traditions could be called the “four horsemen of the Apocalypse” in ecclesiastical history (Rev 6:1-7) that trample through the “vineyard of the Lord” (Matt 20:1) and threaten the followers of the Lamb, but they will encounter the “wrath of the Lamb” (Rev 6:16). They embody prejudice (Anti-Semitism), ignorance (Fundamentalism), violence (Triumphalism), and fear (Moralism).

A scrutinizing Christian hindsight knows that life without sin begins only after the Last Day. “For now we see in a mirror darkly, but then we will see face to face” (1 Cor 13:12). That is why all earthly life is penultimate and offers no final solutions. But faith in the Last Day envisages earthly Christian life as a “triumphant procession” led by Christ, albeit with the smell of death. This procession spreads in every place the fragrance that comes from knowing him. For we are the *aroma of Christ* to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing; to the one *a fragrance from death to death*, to the other *a fragrance from life to life*. Who is sufficient for these things? “For we are not peddlers of God’s word like so many, but in Christ we speak as persons of sincerity, as persons sent from God and standing in his presence” (2 Cor 2:15-17; italics added).

The two types of fragrance, one smelling of death and the other of life, have spread throughout the history of the church, and their roots can be discerned by critical hindsight.

But the results of sharp critical hindsight rarely, if ever, find their way into pulpits, pews, and Christian education resources. Inherited traditions, no matter how true or fallacious, are communicated for the sake of keeping a convenient status quo that can become as poisonous as the waste dumps that surround the polluted concentrations of human life. Many parishioners are tempted to believe arbitrary interpretations that consign them to an anachronistic pattern of Christian life. Some church members are so afflicted by a toxic spirituality that they defend a stance of status quo and perceive any change as a threat, indeed as a satanic

attack, on their faith. As a frustrated pastor put it: “When Christ comes at the end of the world to usher in a ‘new heaven and a new earth,’ I will hear the seven last words from my parishioners, ‘We never did it like this before.’”

The church has a bad record of diagnosing the evil of toxic spirituality. It does not obey well the missionary mandate of Jesus for an evil world: “be wise as serpents and innocent as doves” (Matt 10:16). The image of the serpent has an interesting history. First, it is a symbol of evil, exposing the spiritual megalomania of Adam and Eve, trying to be like God (Gen 3:5). Then, as a bronze serpent, it is a symbol of healing, protecting the people of Israel from poisonous snakes (Num 21:9). Finally, the bronze serpent symbolizes “the son of Man,” Jesus, who gives eternal life to all who believe in him (John 3:14). The serpent is also a logo of healing and medicine in classical antiquity and today—a serpent curled around a staff, depicted in statues of the Greek demi-god of healing, Asclepius (c. 420 B.C.E.), the son of Apollo.

Using the medical paradigm of healing, Christians need to live in the world like well-trained physicians, cold-blooded and with a sharp mind, discerning the cunning temptations to be ego-centered rather than Gospel-centered. Since not everyone can become a medical specialist, some are to be called, educated, and employed as “doctors of theology,” so to speak, who work against evil and, when necessary, like neurosurgeons, perform delicate theological surgeries to save Christian minds from becoming victims of the power of evil. On the other hand, Christians also must nurture a childlike faith which, like innocent doves, praises God from the rooftops of earthly life. But as any hunter of fowl knows, cooing doves can be shot at close range while making love. That is why serpenthood is needed to stay alert against evil, especially its devastating, terrorist features, as Jesus’ missionary mandate warns.

Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death, and you will be hated by all because of my name. But the one who endures to the end will be saved. (Matt 10:21-22)

The most important work of healing is diagnosis which, if correct, is followed by a prognosis and treatment. Discerning the poison of sins, be they doctrinal, moral, or institutional, opens up ways of containing,

indeed overcoming them. But diagnosis must be scrutinizing and, at times, be secured by a second opinion. An example in an old anecdote:

A teacher was unable to teach because of fear. He consulted a psychiatrist who, after a lengthy analysis, offered the diagnosis, “You have an inferiority complex that paralyzes you in the classroom. Find another vocation.” The teacher was advised by a good friend to get a second opinion. So he went to another psychiatrist who, after a lengthy analysis, offered the diagnosis, “You do not have an inferiority complex. *You are inferior.*” Now the teacher could teach again, though not as well as many others, but well enough to make a living.

Critical Christian hindsight based on the scrutinizing study of church history is relatively young. It began after 1400 years of Christian history with a movement called “Humanism.” Humanists became known through their slogan “back to the sources” (*ad fontes*) as the best way to establish sound authority (from the Latin *auctoritas*, “origination”). The Italian humanist Lorenzo Valla (c. 1405–1457) was the pioneer of a literary criticism which exposed revered documents as spurious, like the Apostles’ Creed, which originated in the fourth century and thus could not have been composed by the apostles in the first century. Erasmus of Rotterdam (1469–1536) published a Greek text of the New Testament in 1516 based on Valla’s numerous proposals for corrections in the sanctioned Latin Bible, the Vulgate. Martin Luther used the Greek text for his famous German translation of the New Testament, the “September Bible” of 1522. The Bible and the records of church history guided his reform movement. In his view, they constituted an antidote to a toxic spirituality that dominated a millennium of Christianity (500-1500). On July 4, 1519, Luther defended his stance in the famous Leipzig Disputation, using historical evidence against abusive ecclesiastical claims of authority.

While sin prevails until the end of time, the power of specific sins in the interim can be detected, diagnosed, and exposed, indeed neutralized, like some poisons in a household. This is the work of church historians who must find ever new means and ways to prevent the spread of toxic Christian teachings. Such work needs to be guided by the wise, serpentine strategy of humanists like Valla: focusing on a critical historical analysis

of sources, and showing how they deviated from the core of the Christian tradition, indeed poisoned it, often by clever manipulation, fraudulent revisions of sources, and self-righteous ideologies.

I have followed this strategy. First, I present the historical analysis by way of narrating the trajectories of the four toxic Christian attitudes. Then, I show how they have poisoned the core of the Christian tradition by using it as a means to justify their own ends, the most enduring temptation. Finally, I offer a way of detoxifying, as it were, the four embodiments of toxic spirituality in church history by transfusing the original healthy lifeblood of Christian faith into the infected “body of Christ,” the church. For the return to Christian origins, to the “good news” of the Gospel, opens the door to healing and a reform of Christian faith and life.

My study involves the Eastern Orthodox tradition only minimally, especially after the schism of 1054 when eastern and western Christianity went their own ways. Toxic spirituality seems to have found a better home in Roman Catholicism and in Protestantism—although aspects of “triumphalism” can also be discerned in Eastern Orthodoxy.

I deliberately used widely available publications as sources; some of them reflect “party lines,” at times with attempts to retain a poisonous status quo. But I also used the best collection of sources and their critical analysis in a few important works available only in German. When published translations were unavailable, I used my own. Biblical quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version.