
Have We Lost Humility?

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Once regarded as the essential Christian virtue, humility has become to many “a weakness or character flaw.”² A few contemporary thinkers have noted its absence. For example, Claes Ryn has observed that “the humility characteristic of the older kind of American is becoming rare in leading political circles.”³ Jonathan Sacks, a leading rabbi in England, has called humility the “orphaned virtue of our age.” This article will provide evidence to support these observations. It will focus on the transformation within Christianity by comparing the moral ideals of early modern English religious texts published in the seventeenth century with those of contemporary American religious and secular literature. In passing, this study will also examine and critique the view of pride and humility held by Thomas Hobbes. Although an obscure philosopher in his day, Hobbes has become one of the most influential of those whose ideas will be discussed here. An examination of Hobbes helps, at least in small part, to explain the loss of humility in contemporary society.

Humility was a quintessentially Christian discovery. Its opposite, pride, had achieved recognition much earlier. The Old Testa-

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² Deborah Ruddy, *A Christological Approach to Virtue: Augustine and Humility*, unpublished dissertation. Boston College, 2001, p. 1.

³ *America the Virtuous: The Crisis of Democracy and the Quest for Empire* (New Brunswick and London: Transaction Publishers, 2003), 3-6.

ment and Greek philosophical and literary traditions recognized that pride, or hubris, was a sin or a weakness to be avoided. Yet neither tradition quite reached the conclusion that, if pride or hubris is evil, humility must be good. Only Christianity took this step. While humility is mentioned several times in the Old Testament (for example, Moses is praised for his exceptional humility [Numbers 12:3]), there is no special emphasis on this virtue. In this respect the New Testament introduces a significant change: Christ, the son of God and the central person of the New Testament, explicitly teaches humility and provides a role model for humble behavior with his own life and death. By the seventeenth century, at least, Christian theologians regarded humility as a chief attribute of their religion. For example, Jeremy Taylor (1613-1667)—a bishop, Chaplain in Ordinary to King Charles II, and one of the most popular religious authors in seventeenth-century England—called it “the great ornament and jewel of Christian Religion, that whereby it is distinguished from all the wisdom of the world.”⁴

Humility in Seventeenth-Century English Literature

To document the development of English Christian thought, this study relies on bibliometric analysis—identification of the most popular books and their most important ideas. This assumes that best-selling texts reflect the preferences of the book-buying segment of the population, and contain ideas likely to be popular. Of course, public opinion revealed by best-selling books is limited to the literate part of the population. Yet these are the decision-making elite. Further, literacy was widespread in England by 1650, when about 350,000 to 450,000 of the 1.1 million households contained fluent readers.⁵ The *Short Title Catalogue* (STC) provides information on books published in England from the beginning of printing to 1700. It includes all editions of books surviving in our time, whether sold in England or elsewhere.

As this was Shakespeare’s England, one might ask whether religious texts reveal much about the morals of the time. However, between 1610 and 1640 production of theological texts outnumbered editions of poems, plays, and sonnets by a ratio of five to

⁴ Jeremy Taylor, *The Rule and Exercise of Holy Living* (London, 1680), 85.

⁵ Kari Konkola, “‘People of the Book’: The Production of Theological Texts in Early Modern England,” *The Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America*, 94:1 (March 2000), 22 fn 35.

The “mass media” of early seventeenth-century England were sermons.

one.⁶ While the morals found in plays are broadcast to a wide theater-going audience, the real “mass media” at the time were sermons. These emanated every Sunday from England’s 9,000 pulpits. Ideas in religious bestsellers reached the non-literate, church-going population through preachers. Intense educational efforts also make it probable that the core ideas of Christian morality were familiar to the entire population.

The moral thinking of early modern English Protestantism comes into objective focus through an examination of the extent to which it appears in books from the period. The first text that stands out in a survey of early modern English “bestsellers” is the English edition of Thomas Kempis’s *The Imitation of Christ*. The book sold over 100,000 copies in over forty editions before 1640—making it a blockbuster. Englishmen apparently enjoyed reading about a surprisingly demanding form of piety. In Kempis, one finds in Christ a role model that required mortification both of pride and the concomitant desire for power and esteem:

Learn to obey, you dust; learn to bring down yourself, you earth and slime, and throw down yourself under all men’s feet. Learn, I say, to break your will, and humbly to submit yourself to all. Wax hot against yourself, and suffer not pride to have place within you: but show yourself so lowly and simple, that all may tread you under foot like mire in the street.⁷

Core ideas of Christianity continued in England through the Reformation.

The appeal of Kempis also provides evidence that core ideas of Christianity continued with small changes through the Reformation. He wrote his book in the early fifteenth century as a manual for people who desired to introduce the ideas of monastic piety to lay society. Still, large numbers of Englishmen in the Tudor and Stuart periods obtained a slightly modified version of the book. English Protestants eagerly embraced large parts of a moral system originally intended for Catholics living a semi-monastic life!

In the second half of the seventeenth century, the best-selling author was probably Richard Baxter, whose books went through 301 editions between 1650 and 1700. Baxter, the spiritual leader of the nonconformist branch of English Protestantism, agreed with the Anglicans in condemning sham humility. Virtue had to be “in the soul”:

⁶ *Ibid.*, 24. For an estimate of edition sizes in seventeenth-century England, see *ibid.*, 16.

⁷ Thomas A. Kempis, *Of the Imitation of Christ* (London, 1587), 148.

It is not all that are clothed in sackcloth, but to the humble soul that God has respect: even to the self-abhorring person, who judges himself unworthy to come among the people of God . . . that patiently suffer the injuries of enemies and friends, and heartily forgive and love them; that bear the most sharp and plain reproofs with gentleness and thanks; that think the lowest place in mens esteem, affections, and respects, the fittest for them; . . . that reprove themselves oftener and more sharply than other men reprove them; and are more ready to censure themselves than others . . . ; and therefore are more ready to learn than teach, and to hear than speak⁸

Richard Allestree's *The Whole Duty of Man* was another best seller. It went through fifty-six known editions—about 200,000 copies—between 1660 and 1700. A modern reader would be surprised on reading *The Whole Duty of Man*, which devoted some thirty pages to pride, humility, and contentment, and regarded humility as the most important virtue. In contrast, Allestree only gave five pages to chastity.

Jeremy Taylor, a leader in seventeenth-century Anglican thought, enjoyed similar popularity: 60,000 copies of his book *Holy Living* came out between 1650 and 1700. At least that number must have read Taylor's view that a humble person

is meek and indifferent in all accidents and changes. . . . He patiently bears injuries. . . . He is always unsatisfied in his own conduct, resolutions and counsels He fears when he hears himself commended He loves to sit down in private, and if he may he refuses the temptation of offices and new honours He mends his fault, and gives thanks when he is admonished. . . . He is ready to do good offices to the murderers of his fame, to his slanderers, backbiters, and detractors.⁹

Because humility was the critical virtue, these early English theologians examined it in great detail. They meticulously explored and described the attributes of pride, the signs of a truly humble personality, the benefits of humility to the individual and to society, and, of course, the corresponding difficulties that pride brought to the world.

Pride: To understand how the Divines saw humility, it helps first to examine how they saw pride. In contemporary society we

⁸ Richard Baxter, "Christian Directory," in William Orme, ed., *The Practical Works of The Rev. Richard Baxter* (London: James Duncan, 1830), III, 51. This book henceforth will be referred to as "Baxter, *Directory*."

⁹ Taylor, *The Rule and Exercise of Holy Living* (London, 1680), 95-96. See also 86.

*Pride the
worst of sins.*

are more familiar with the vice than the virtue. The Divines took seriously the Old Testament story of a proud Lucifer, who resented his subjection to God. His rebellion ended with his banishment from heaven and the entry of sin into the world. Pride is the devil's sin and the original source of all evil—the worst of sins. The Old Testament repeatedly warns that: "Pride goeth before destruction, and an haughty spirit before a fall" (Prov. 16:18); "The Lord will destroy the house of the proud" (Prov. 15:25); "Every one that is proud in heart is an abomination to the Lord: though hand join in hand, he shall not be unpunished" (Prov. 16:5).

Popular English writers in the seventeenth century accepted these Old Testament warnings:

[The devil's] sin was Pride, and his Pride an emulation of God himself. I will ascend and be like unto God. He thought himself such a freeborn Subject, that he ought to cast all Sovereignty off him . . . this Leader the proud man follows; and with the same event likewise. His great design and aim is to be high, honoured, and applauded: and of all men, is the most odious to God and man.¹⁰

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psychologists.*

Further, the divines were early modern religious psychologists. They believed sins influenced thoughts, desires, instinctive emotional reactions, and actions. These were controlled—in religious terms, "corrupted"—by the underlying sinful passion. This hidden influence means that the only practical way to define pride is to identify its effects. Richard Baxter used this method when he described pride as:

1. A will to be higher or greater than God would have us to be. 2. An overvaluing of ourselves, or esteeming ourselves to be greater, wiser, or better than indeed we are. 3. A desire that others should think of us, and speak of us, and use us, as greater, or wiser, or better than we are. 4. An endeavor or seeking to rise above our appointed place, or to be overvalued by others. 5. An ostentation of our inordinate self-esteem in outward signs of speech or action. Every one of these is an act of pride. The three first are the inward acts of it in the mind, and will, and the two last are its external acts.¹¹

Baxter believed the root of pride to be an urge to rise above others: "a lifting up of ourselves above the state or degree appointed to us A will to be higher or greater than God would have us

¹⁰ Matthew Scrivener, *The Method and Means to a True Spiritual Life* (London, 1688), 104.

¹¹ Baxter, *Directory*, 2.

to be." This deep-seated yearning for status and power was regarded as the "root" of all of the various manifestations of pride. One of the most visible effects of the desire for status was an "instinctive" feeling of pleasure in fame, admiration, and power. This pleasure and its consequent behavior defined pride. As one theologian saw it, the proud "cast the Eye this way and that way, to see whose eyes are upon them, and may seem to admire them: and who shall say, That, that's he: which observed, or overheard . . . wonderfully delights the mind."¹² Or, as Baxter put it so succinctly: "Pride does tickle the heart of fools with content and pleasure to hear themselves applauded . . ."¹³ In seventeenth-century England, the expression "sin of pride" denoted all thoughts, emotions, desires and behaviors stemming from a deep-seated yearning for power, status, praise and admiration.

Attributes of the Humble Personality: Humility was the opposite of pride. Thus, a low regard for oneself was the most important part of humility. "Humiliation in the understanding consists in a low esteem of ourselves, and in self-abasing, self-condemning judgment on ourselves."¹⁴ Applying their brand of religious psychology, English theologians urged both acceptance of one's own worthlessness and an avoidance of admiration from others. "Humility is of two sorts, the first is, the having a mean and low opinion of ourselves, the second is the being content that others should have so of us. The first of these is contrary to pride, the other of vainglory."¹⁵

*Humility
contrary to
pride and
vainglory.*

Sins corrupted not just actions, but also the thoughts, emotions,

¹² Scrivener, *The Method and Means to a True Spiritual Life*, 204-205. A similar sentiment was expressed by Jean de L'espine, *A Very Excellent and Learned Discourse, touching the Tranquillitie and Contentation of the minde* (Cambridge, 1592), fol 21: "the disordinate affection which we have to be masters, and to have the highest roumes in assemblies, taking pleasure, as we pass in the streetes, to be pointed at with the finger, that some man may say, This is he." This book henceforth will be referred to as "de L'espine, *A Very Excellent and Learned Discourse*."

¹³ Baxter, *Directory*, 38.

¹⁴ Baxter, "Directions and Persuasions to a Sound Conversion," in Orme, ed., *The Practical Works of The Rev. Richard Baxter*, VIII, 61. See also de L'Espine, *A Very Excellent and Learned Discourse*, 38 ("true humility lies . . . in the mortification of our affections . . . in a dislike and displeasure we take at ourselves . . ."). Finally, see Edward Pelling, *A Practical Discourse upon Humillity* (London, 1694), 5 ("Humillity . . . a modest and slender opinion of a man's own self, whatever his endowments or circumstances are.").

¹⁵ Richard Allestree, *The Whole Duty of Man* (London, 1663), 137.

and desires inspiring the action. Thus, true humility must extend to affections, desires, and will. Following this idea, English divines warned against sham humility, in only “railing against yourself, or wearing mean clothes, or going softly and submissively.” It was necessary to “believe yourself an unworthy person heartily, as you believe yourself to be hungry, or poor, or sick, when you are so.”¹⁶

Another hallmark of the humble person was a remarkable ability to bear insults. Insults could not bother a humble man because what was proffered contained nothing new. They only confirmed his view of himself. “As the humbled soul has base thoughts of himself, so he is willing that others should esteem and think of him accordingly, even as a vile, unworthy sinner . . . His pride is so far taken down, that he can endure to be vilified with some consent.”¹⁷ In early modern England the ability to “turn the other cheek” was a well-known sign of godliness. Humility reveals itself “in meek and quiet bearing of all injuries, unkindnesses, and disgraces . . . if a man is truly humbled, his humility will tell him; you deserve thus to be used, you are worthy of these wrongs.”¹⁸ The speaker, Daniel Dyke, also taught that no one could say anything about an humble repentant worse than he would say of himself. Such was the mentality and behavior required of every truly religious person in seventeenth-century England.

*Humility a
sign of
manliness.*

Kempis and other popular English theologians also saw humility as a sign of manliness. A “manly” person was master of such passions as pride, envy, greed, lechery, and anger: “be well assured, the stronger the passions are, the greater weaknesses they are; for he is not the strongest, nor wisest man that shows most passion, but he that subdues it most.”¹⁹ A truly masculine, pious seventeenth-century Englishman was humble, content and chaste, and he meekly suffered injuries without revenging them.²⁰

Self-Analysis: English theologians believed that people were

¹⁶ Taylor, *The Rule and Exercise of Holy Living* (London, 1680), 85.

¹⁷ Baxter, “Directions and Persuasions to a Sound Conversion,” in Orme, ed., *The Practical Works of The Rev. Richard Baxter*, VIII, 61 ff.

¹⁸ Daniel Dyke, *Two Treatises, The one on Repentance, the other, Of Christs temptations* (London, 1616), 89-91.

¹⁹ Timothy Rogers, *Good News from Heaven, of a Safe Conduct, Discovering Many Treasons Against Everyone’s Soul* (London, 1627), 193.

²⁰ Richard Bolton, *Some General Directions for Comfortable Walking with God* (London, 1626), 96.

usually unaware of their sins, especially pride, envy, greed, or lust. Thus, they developed a practical theology that included “sight of sin.” When a person gained a good “theoretical” knowledge of sins and virtues, he could use this knowledge to investigate private thoughts, emotions, and actions. The self-analysis commonly led to the discovery of the vast influence that sins such as pride exerted on what the person had previously believed to be “free” and “rational” behavior. This discovery was thought to be crucial for further spiritual growth, because only a person who realized how proud he really was, and how much he lacked in humility, would make a serious effort to change himself.

The theological expression used to describe the self-investigation was “detailed and particular application of sin,” and seventeenth-century English divines emphasized time after time the importance of this activity.²¹ Significantly, the “application” of the details of sin was not limited to introspection. Preachers were advised to use the same style when talking about sins.²² This introspective self-analysis would make most contemporary readers un-

²¹ Edmund Calamy, *The Art of Divine Meditation* (London, 1680), 187-188. Calamy was very emphatic on the importance of application. He repeats the point on p. 108: “Divine meditation must be particular and applicative; for generals will not work at all . . . therefore the greatest part of meditation is application. You must apply the things you meditate of, to your own particular.” See also Stephen Egerton, *The practise of Christianity* (London, 1623), 319, and Henry Scudder, *The Christian’s Daily Walke* (London, 1652), 181. Both Egerton and Scudder call application “the life of meditation.” The mentor of many of the Cambridge puritans, Richard Greenham (1539-1594) thought meditation and its associated application to be absolutely crucial: “Meditation is that exercise of the mind, whereby we calling to our remembrance that which we know, do further debate of it, and apply it to ourselves, that we might have some use of it in our practise. . . . For example, a man then meditates on the word, when he so remembers it and muses on it, that he goes from point to point, applying generally some things to himself, and wisely examining how the case stands between the Lord and him in those things, whereby he seeing what is like to follow upon it, has his heart stirred up to put something in practise. . . . the knowledge which one gets, while it swims in the brain, and is not settled in the affections by meditation, is but vanishing knowledge.” *The Workes of the Reverend and Faithful Servant of Jesus Christ M. Richard Greenham* (London, 1612), 22.

²² “. . . the ministry that God has sanctified to convert sinners, and whereby he has been wont for to work most effectually, is such as applies the Word particularly, . . . the very life and power of preaching, consists in this . . . Till our sins are effectually discovered to us, we will never seek salvation seriously, and in good earnest.” Arthur Hildesham, *CLII Lectures upon Psalme LI* (London, 1635), 52. Thomas Hooker in his *The Application of Redemption* (London, 1656) pt. II, 193, emphasized in oversized type that “A plain and particular Application of

comfortable. For example, try to read the passage below as a religious person in early modern England would have read it. Go through the text slowly, and at each point contemplate your thoughts, emotions, and actions to consider whether you satisfy God's requirements for true humility. The one who succeeds is—

a truly humble Man, that does despise himself, and is contented to be counted not only humble, but vile, and wretched too; that . . . is contented his defects and infirmities should be known, bears Injuries patiently, is glad of mean employments to show his love to God, does not care for being known . . . and looks upon himself as nothing; is circumspect, and modest, delights not in superfluous talk, laughs but seldom . . . is well pleased with being made the filth of the World, and as the off-scouring of all things: That does think himself unworthy of the least crumb he eats, of the least drop of drink, he drinks . . . That can hear a friendly check with meekness, can ask forgiveness, in case he does unawares offend . . . That is contented, that those whom he loves, and in whom he trusted, and who have been kind to him, should forsake him, abandon him, and persecute him, and can bear with the ingratitude of men, to whom he has done many good turns . . . That can be contented to see his neighbour honour'd, and he himself slighted.²³

*Lack of
humility
meant eternal
damnation.*

This passage can only be understood if one recognizes that humility was at that time an inseparable part of a truly religious personality.²⁴ The individual who did not meet the above requirements thus knew that she would spend her afterlife in the torments of hell.

The Impact on the Individual: Most seventeenth-century theologians thought pride brought disastrous consequences to the individual. Proud people desired praise and esteem. One way to sat-

special sins by the Ministry of the word is a special means to bring the soul to a sight of, and sorrow for them." Robert Bolton in his *Works* (London, 1641), 176-77, agreed: "Pressing upon men's consciences with a zealous, discreet powerfulness, their special, principal, fresh-bleeding sins, is a notable means to break their hearts, and bring them to remorse."

²³ Anthony Horneck, *The Happy Ascetic* (London, 1651), 48-50.

²⁴ Humility was thought to appear in the early stages of conversion, when introspection and the ensuing discovery of one's sinful passions such as pride and envy totally destroyed the self-esteem of all those who would be converted: "If your faith is right, it will bring that with it, to make you humble and vile in your own eyes . . . wheresoever Christ comes to dwell, he comes with a light, he shows the creature his vileness, he makes a man see his sin, he makes him see what creature he is . . ." John Preston, *Breastplate of Faith and Hope* (London, 1634), 236.

isfy this craving was ostentation—a very expensive personality trait with ruinous financial consequences.²⁵ As pride grew stronger—inevitably—individuals lost empathy, that is, they no longer understood how others perceived their actions. This, of course, degraded interpersonal relationships.²⁶ Pride created an inherently quarrelsome personality, because concern about esteem made the proud see insults even when none was intended. As a result of this hypersensitivity, proud people had a tendency to get entangled in quarrels which wasted their time and energy while producing little in terms of useful results.²⁷ The desire to appear flawless made it almost impossible for the proud to acknowledge that they were wrong. As a result, proud people could neither notice nor correct their errors. Ironically, this blindness made it impossible to see one's pride, putting any remedy out of reach. Proud people also lost their ability to learn, because the first step in learning is to acknowledge that there is something one does not know, and this step the proud could not take.²⁸

The most dangerous “personal” effect of pride stemmed from the overpowering influence early modern “religious psycholo-

²⁵ “Sin doth correct and reprove the sinner in this world, by impoverishing his Estate. . . . this needlesse expence is for their honour, or rather pride; and will not undoe them; that is for their pleasure, and diversion; and they think they may bear it, it will not ruine them: and so for others, no one of which alone brings poverty, but altogether in a little time do it. What large revenues have been wasted in vanity?” John Shower, *The Present Correction and Reproof of Sins* (London, 1685), 19-21.

²⁶ Joseph Hall, *Characters of Virtues and Vices* (London, 1608), 71ff. See also Hall, *The Hypocrite set forth in a Sermon* (London, 1630), 12.

²⁷ “. . . a proud man takes all things as heinous or intolerable that are said or done against him Pride is a most impatient sin: there is no pleasing a proud person, without a great deal of wit, and care, and diligence. You must come about them as you do about straw or gunpowder with a candle.” Richard Baxter, *Christian Ethics*, in *Practical Writings*, III, 295. Baxter described this branch of pride numerous times: “[pride] is so contentious a sin, that it makes men firebrands in the societies where they live . . . the missing of a word, or a look, or a compliment, will catch on their hearts, as a spark on gunpowder.” Baxter, *Directory*, 46-48.

²⁸ “Pride makes men hear their teachers as judges, when they should hear them as learners and disciples of Christ: they come not to be taught what they knew not, but to censure what they hear; and as confidently pass their judgement on it, as if their teachers wanted nothing but their instructions to teach them aright . . . the scholars that are still quarreling with their teachers, and readier to teach their masters than to learn of them, and boldly contradicting what they never understood, are too proud to become wise.” Baxter, *Directory*, 33.

gists" believed passions to have on thinking. They understood that love is blind, and that passions extinguish the light of reason. Seventeenth-century religious writings abound with warnings about this emotion-induced loss of rationality: In short, ". . . a man cannot be wise and passionate . . ." ²⁹ To put it another way, "wise men confess, and ignorant men prove, that passions blind their judgments and reason." ³⁰

*Pride harmful
"even in this
life."*

Over the long term the desire for power and esteem brought about destruction and shame rather than the sought-for high status and admiration. Popular English writers held this counter-intuitive result to be the message of the ferocious Biblical condemnations of pride, and many of them warmly seconded these threats: "God is the proud man's professed enemy . . . it is most frequently seen, that this sin meets with very extraordinary judgments even in this life." ³¹

Conversely, seventeenth-century English theologians believed humility had beneficial effects. Successful mortification of pride produced a person with whom it was easy to get along: one who was eager to learn, rational, thrifty, hard-working, and honest. Many theologians argued that these virtuous traits would not only lead to Paradise; they were likely to produce success already in "this life":

everybody loves a humble person, because humility is naturally amiable; and the more amiable, because it is attended with many such other graces, as win and endear the hearts of all mankind, with a power that is uncontrollable, and attractive like the faculty of a magnet . . . ³²

Thus, some divines thought the virtuous were "more likely to attain Riches and Honor "because "their minds are free from Sloth, Dullness, Carelessness, Intemperance, Riot, and such dissolute courses, as usually are the sources of dishonor and of declining in estates and fortunes."

Contentment: Perhaps the most important reward for the

²⁹ Richard Sibbes, *The Returning Backslider* (London, 1639), 426.

³⁰ Thomas Wright, *The Passions of the Minde* (London, 1601) 86. See also Anthony Burgess, *A Treatise of Originall Sin* (London, 1658) 215-216, 329: "A man doth now for the most part reason, believe, and will according to his affections and passions . . ."

³¹ Allestree, *The Whole Duty of Man*, 140.

³² Edward Pelling, *A Practical Discourse upon Humility* (London, 1694), 19-20. Pelling provides a detailed list of the benefits of humility.

humble person was the achievement of contentment. Contentment assumed a life of its own. More than thirty-five editions of various manuals of “the art of contentment” appeared in the second half of the seventeenth century.³³ These described people whose behavior was the opposite of that produced by pride—particularly as it manifested itself through ambition. Contentment was “a resolution to be pleased, and sit down quiet, in what station soever God has appointed or allotted him, not to . . . be emulous of greatness, but in patience and meekness to undergo whatever shall befall him.”³⁴ This peaceful, joyous state was always joined with humility. Only a person who regarded himself as utterly worthless and deserving absolutely nothing could be happy with whatever he had.³⁵

Early modern theologians investigated the psychology of contentment in remarkable detail. They determined that true satisfaction had no absolute connection to the external world. Rather, the mind willed contentment.³⁶ A person was content when his external conditions agreed with his desires and discontent when his desires exceeded his circumstances. This observation led naturally

Contentment willed from within.

³³ At least three very popular books treated this subject: Thomas Watson, *The Art of Divine Contentment* (London, 1682, 15th edition) (1st edition 1653); Richard Burroughs, *The Rare Jewell of Christian Contentment* (London, 1685) (1st ed. 1648, and 11 more editions by 1685); and Richard Allestree, *The Art of Contentment* (Oxford, 1675) (10 editions between 1675 and 1700).

³⁴ Anon., *The Danger of Pride and Ambition*, (London, 1685) fol A3-A4. See also Richard Baxter, *A Treatise on Conversion*, in *Practical Writings*, VII, 86-87. Thomas Watson, in his *The Art of Divine Contentment*, (London, 1682), 27-29, was more concise: “[contentment] a sweet temper of spirit, whereby a Christian carries himself in an equal poise in every condition.” Burroughs was almost poetic: “Christian Contentment is that sweet, inward, quiet, gracious frame of Spirit, freely submitting to, and taking complacency in God’s wise, and fatherly dispose in every condition.” *The Rare Jewell of Christian Contentment* (London, 1685), 4.

³⁵ “[T]hey who have a humble opinion of themselves must needs think they are well used, if they have any room assigned them by the Almighty, thou it be the lowermost seat.” Pelling, *A Practical Discourse upon Humility* (London, 1694), 166. Thomas Watson made the same point in his *The Art of Divine Contentment*, 187: “The humble man is the contented man The humble man studies his own unworthiness; he looks upon himself as less than the least of Gods mercies, and then a little will content him.”

³⁶ “Contentment does not so much come from outward arguments, or any outward thing that helps them to be content, as it does from the disposition of their own hearts.” Burroughs, *The Rare Jewell of Christian Contentment*, 11.

to a second idea: a person could make himself content by controlling his desires.³⁷

Contentment was the answer to sinful passions. Satisfaction would only make the passion grow stronger. Thus, the only way to reach contentment was by mortifying the passions.³⁸ For example, getting a promotion would not make an ambitious person content, because he would soon desire a higher position.³⁹ In contrast, the humble enjoyed a happy and contented life:

The meek man, where will not he live? What will not he enjoy? As on the contrary, if a man be proud, froward, passionate, what house is good enough? What fare fine enough? What estate will give him content? The meek think all too good, and that which the proud man scorns, would serve his turn well enough.⁴⁰

Contentment was a religious duty; dissatisfaction with one's condition was sin.⁴¹ A psychological view of sins and virtues made even the most secret unhappiness with one's present state sinful. Indeed, secret dissatisfaction with one's condition, "murmuring in

Even secret
unhappiness
sinful.

³⁷ "Contentment lies within man, in the heart; and the way to be comfortable, is not by having our Barns filled, but our minds quiet." Watson, *The Art of Divine Contentment*, 37. "It is not usually our condition itself, but the unsuitableness thereof to our disposition and desires . . . that createth discontent; for, although it be very mean, others bear the same cheerfully; many would be glad thereof: if therefore we will be content, we must bend our inclinations, and adapt our desires to a correspondence with our state." Isaac Barrow, "A Sermon of Contentment," in *The Works of Isaac Barrow, D.D.* (New York: John C. Rikes, 1845), I, 421. See also Ezekiel Hopkins, *The Vanity of the World* (London, 1685), 144: "The Great ground of Discontent, is not our Wants, but our desires. There is scarce any condition in the World so low, but may satisfy our Wants: And there is no Condition so high, as can satisfy our Desires."

³⁸ ". . . no outward accessions will every satisfy our cravings, our appetites must be tamed and reduced, and then they will never be able to raise tumults, or put us into mutiny and discontent." Allestree, *The Art of Contentment* (Oxford, 1675), 201. Burroughs specifically noted that contentment which came from mere "external" satisfactions will not last long. Burroughs, *The Rare Jewell of Christian Contentment* (London, 1685), 12.

³⁹ "Ambition never suffers him that has once received her as a quest, to enjoy their present estate quietly It causes them to contemne that which they have gotten by great pains and travell, and which not long before they desired very earnestly, by reason of their new imaginations and conceits of greater matters." Peter de Primayde, *The French Academie*, vol 1. no paging, the quote comes from chapter 21.

⁴⁰ Harris, *Works* (London: 1635), 295.

⁴¹ "We must lay it down for a rule that discontent is a sin; so that all the pretences and apologies wherewith it labors to justify itself, are but the painting and dressing of a strumpet." Watson, *The Art of Divine Contentment*, 44.

spirit," was explicitly condemned.⁴² Discontent was an extremely serious transgression. After all, Lucifer's pride grew out of discontent with his subservient position to God: "The devil is the most discontented creature that is in the world . . . therefore so much discontentment you have, so much of the spirit of Satan you have."⁴³

Discontent allied itself with "the sin of ambition." According to popular English writers, ambition was a part of pride, just as contentment was a part of humility:

the *ambitious* man is always *disliking* his present condition, and that makes him so greedily to seek higher, whereas he that is content with his own lies quiet out of this temptation. Now *ambition* is not only a great sin in it self, but it puts men upon many other: There is nothing so horrid, which a man that eagerly seeks greatness will stick at; lying, perjury, murder, or any thing will down with him, if they tend to his advancement.⁴⁴

The contrast between what today is regarded as "normal" and the observation that ambition was "a great sin in itself" only highlights the change that has taken place in Protestantism in the last three centuries. The opposition between humility and pride remained central in English religious morality through the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.⁴⁵

True, popular English theologians did not always agree about

⁴² For a detailed description of murmuring in spirit and its effects see Burroughs, *The Rare Jewell of Christian Contentment*, 118-151.

⁴³ Burroughs, *The Rare Jewell of Christian Contentment*, 147.

⁴⁴ Allestree, *The Whole Duty of Man*, 150 (emphases in the original). The view of humility as the most important virtue is given on p. 136: "The first of [virtues toward ourselves] is *Humility*, which may well have the prime place, not only in respect of the excellency of the *virtue*, but also of its usefulness towards the obtaining of all the rest. This being the foundation on which all others must be built."

⁴⁵ John Bossy has argued that in the sixteenth century the meaning of sin changed from the seven deadly sins to violations of the ten commandments. John Bossy, "Moral Arithmetic: Seven Sins into Ten Commandments," Edmund Leites, ed., *Conscience and Casuistry in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: The University Press, 1988), 215-216. A bibliometric analysis shows that, at least for England, Bossy's thesis needs to be reconsidered because he based his argument on the popularity of Catechisms. Yet, Catechisms were only the first step of a long program of religious education, which in its later stages included instruction in the psychology of sins, virtues and the conversion process. Books intended for this "higher education" described humility in great detail, and they sold by the hundreds of thousands through the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. This evidence makes it very probable that humility remained a widely known and important part of the moral code of English Protestantism until at least 1700.

the effect of sins and virtues. A few theologians believed that the motivation provided by greed and pride inevitably made sinners rich and powerful while their humility kept the godly in a lowly position.⁴⁶ An interesting view was that of Thomas Adams, who saw a circular process: "Religion gives riches, and riches forgets religion Thus do our affections wheel about with an unconstant motion. Poverty makes us Religious, Religion rich, and riches irreligious."⁴⁷ However, bibliometric analysis suggests that by the second half of the seventeenth century the prevailing view saw advantages to humility in this world as well as the next.⁴⁸

Hobbes

The seventeenth-century divines have gone out of favor as reading material today. Still, some of the old religious psychology lingers and has seeped into contemporary thought. Thomas Hobbes, an obscure philosopher in his day, has now emerged as among the great thinkers in our past. He believed human nature to be dominated by ". . . a perpetual and restless desire for Power after Power, that ceaseth only in Death."⁴⁹ Much of *The Leviathan* consists of a catalogue of the destructive effects of this endless pursuit of power and its associated war "of every man, against

⁴⁶ Baxter said this in several places: "There is somewhat in the nature of all worldly men which makes them earnestly desirous of riches and honors in the world and they that value them most will seek them, and they that seek them are more likely to find them than those that despise them." *Reliquae Baxterianae* (London, 1696), 31. For another influential divine holding the view that religion kept a person in poverty, see Richard Rogers, *Certaine Sermons Preached and Penned by Richard Rogers* (London, 1612), 77-78.

⁴⁷ Thomas Adams, *Diseases of the Soul: A Discourse Divine, Morall, and Physicall* (London, 1616), 24.

⁴⁸ ". . . it is a most certain truth, that the leading of a holy and good life, is in all respects very greatly for a man's own benefit and comfort, even in this present world. Godliness is profitable for all things. It makes for the quiet of our minds, the health of our bodies, the increase of our estates, and procures us much credit and esteem, much love and good will among our neighbors." John Rawlet, *The Christian Monitor, Containing an Earnest Exhortation to an Holy Life, With some Directions in order thereto* (London, 1686), 18. Rawlet's book was a synopsis of the effects of religion, and it had some 100,000 copies in circulation between 1680 and 1700. The publication numbers for *The Christian Monitor* are given in the end of vol. I of John Scott's *A Practical Discourse Concerning Obedience and the Love of God* (London, 1700).

⁴⁹ Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. Richard Tuck (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991) 70.

every man." Hobbes's solution to this problem was an absolute ruler, who could use ferocious punishments to control the inherently destructive human nature.

Much of Hobbes's philosophy reflected the commonplace wisdom of seventeenth-century theology, but he diverged on two points. While he understood the effects that made pride dangerous to society, he overlooked most of the effects that made pride dangerous to the individual. This latter failure led him to overestimate the dangers of the lust for power in the aggregate. Numerous seventeenth-century "religious psychologists" believed proud people to sink in status and finances, and this decline reduced their ability to harm others. The perceived dangers of pride also made it logical to regard humility as beneficial. The reasoning was simple: people who had overcome pride had also freed themselves from quarrelsomeness, spendthriftiness, inability to learn, and irrationality stemming from passion.

One might ask whether Hobbes had it right. England makes for a good "case study" of Christianity's effects on society. During the commonwealth period Puritans made an energetic effort to inculcate a strict, ascetical form of Judeo-Christian morality. England in the late seventeenth century was probably one of the more pious regions of Europe. Yet England experienced a brutal civil war in the 1640's. This war, including the execution of King Charles I, raises some questions about the effects of humility on society. However, one must note that aside from the king and some of his closest advisers, Cromwell's reign executed very few people. Further, the insurrectionists at least went through the motions of giving due process to those who were executed. The English civil war lacked a period of "terror," such as later would accompany the French Revolution of the eighteenth century, when large numbers of royalists and others were summarily killed. Wholesale massacres of political enemies, prisoners, or civilians were rare in the history of England during the early modern period.

After about 1650, forgiveness was the rule. Executions accompanying the return of Charles II in the Restoration were few. At the Glorious Revolution, James II was not brought to trial but was allowed to escape. The reluctance to punish adversaries suggests that by the second half of the seventeenth century Englishmen had internalized central ideas of Christ's moral teaching: do not revenge wrongs; "turn the other cheek."

A look at England's post-1700 history reveals an even more impressive picture: there have been a few deaths in occasional riots and terrorist attacks, but they have been so rare as to be "invisible" in any demographic analysis. For all practical purposes, it is factually accurate to say that mortality in domestic political violence in England since 1650 has been minimal. From the perspective of comparative history, the 350-year period of tranquillity is exceptional indeed, particularly considering that during this period England went through the massive social changes associated with industrialization and urbanization.

England's long domestic peace under a rather weak form of government should prove Hobbes's philosophy to be flawed. Hobbes was myopic in that he viewed religion narrowly as a political tool of the government. Even though he took his basic view of human nature from the Christian sin of pride, he overlooked the effect that controlling pride and the lust for power might have in English Christianity.

*Contrary to
Hobbes,
society can be
both peaceful
and free.*

Hobbes's failure to discuss the religious morals of his day had a significant effect on his philosophy. The Christian effort to mortify pride and inculcate humility in effect was a large-scale project to root out of Englishmen precisely the destructive lust for power that formed the foundation of the philosophical reasoning set forth in *Leviathan*. A full investigation of Christian virtues and sins would have forced Hobbes to consider the possibility that asocial human nature can be changed from within to some degree by self-restraint. A society thus can be both peaceful *and* free. In Hobbes's system, a successful mortification of pride/lust for power would have ended the war of all against all, thus eliminating the need for an all-powerful, absolute ruler.

Humility Today

To examine the role of humility in contemporary society, we must abandon the bibliometric method. The best sellers of our time rarely deal directly with theological or moral issues. Rather, we must sample popular writers on religion and morality and general summaries of Christian philosophy. One good source of evidence is provided by recent encyclopedias of Christianity. These have been produced by committees of academic specialists on religion, and include entries for aspects of Christianity that cur-

rently evoke interest in academia. For popular authors, the sample contains bestsellers that have generated debates in the general media. The ideas of these authors and texts thus reach beyond the immediate readership of their own works, rendering these particular books good “gauges” of general attitudes.

The most detailed survey of Christianity to be published in recent years is Mircea Eliade’s sixteen-volume *The Encyclopedia of Religion*.⁵⁰ This work seeks to provide a comprehensive summary of current knowledge of religion, but it contains no entries for “humility” and “pride.” In the course of the last three centuries the central moral teaching of Christianity concerning humility seems to have faded away so completely that entries for this virtue of Christ and the sin of the devil are not found in an encyclopedia of religion. The editorial team of *The Encyclopedia of Religion* also deemed it unnecessary to have entries for “vice,” “virtue,” “envy,” “hypocrisy” or “flesh.”

A more recent example of what appears to be an impressive change in the meaning of Christian morality can be found in *The Oxford Companion to Christian Thought* (2000). The editors of this 750-page collection described their purpose as “to provide a lively introduction, at once authoritative and accessible, to a living tradition of thought central to the western world.” The editors believed that the articles “provide a pretty fair impression of Christian thought as it flourishes today.”⁵¹ The introduction has no entries for “humility” and “pride.” A careful search uncovered a brief discussion of pride under “sin,” but there was no trace of the specifics of humility. In contrast, there were entries for “sexuality” and “chastity.” In modern religion, silence about humility and pride coexists with an intense interest in Christianity’s teachings about sexual morals.

The most recent summary of Christianity to be published in the United States is the *Encyclopedia of Christian Theology* edited by Jean-Yves Lacoste.⁵² This three-volume work follows the path laid out by Eliade and *The Oxford Companion to Christian Thought*. There are no entries for humility and pride. Furthermore, a survey of the volumes uncovered no “hidden” discussions of this virtue and its

*Contemporary
Christian
reference
works silent
on humility.*

⁵⁰ *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Mircea Eliade (New York: Macmillan, 1987).

⁵¹ Adrian Hastings, Alistair Mason and Hugh Pypers, eds., *The Oxford Companion to Christian Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), x-xi.

⁵² (New York: Routledge, 2005). The first edition came out in 1998, in French.

cognate vice; humility and pride simply are not aspects of the “Christianity” described in this encyclopedia.

The article on “Virtue” points to a possible explanation for this oversight. There is a list of the three traditional Christian virtues, faith, hope, and love, and the four classical virtues, prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance. The author of the article then notes (p. 1682) that, “throughout the Middle Ages, there were at least two ways of organizing the virtues: by organizing them into cardinal virtues and theological virtues, or by contrasting them with the seven deadly sins.” Unfortunately, the author does not go on to investigate the obvious problem: the traditional lists of virtues and sins had entirely different origins. Unlike their Medieval ancestors, contemporary Christian writers for the most part do not pair virtues with their corresponding vices; hence humility, which would be paired with the sin of pride, is often overlooked. In semi-popular surveys of religion, the loss of humility can be seen in the series of books on the seven deadly sins currently being published by Oxford University Press. These books only discuss sins. As part of a common introduction included in every volume, the editor, Elda Rotor, surveyed the virtues. Unfortunately, she based her discussion on the same traditional structure of four cardinal virtues and three theological ones used by Lacoste. There is no awareness of the lack of correspondence between this list and that of the seven deadly sins. As a result, the word “humility” is not mentioned in Rotor’s discussion of virtues.⁵³

The survey of recent reference works of Christianity reveals a common trend: humility is passed over in total silence. Even its opposing sin, pride, receives little attention. The neglect of this virtue-sin pair is particularly intriguing because of a second trend shared by all the surveys: a strong interest in the role of power in interpersonal relationships. This interest is at the core of many subjects that in recent decades have become “hot” in religious studies—for example, feminist, liberation, and political theologies. All receive considerable attention in the reference works.

This interest in power makes the silence on humility and pride puzzling. As discussed at the outset, the core moral teaching of Christianity—as early modern English theologians understood

⁵³ Morton W. Bloomfield, *The Seven Deadly Sins* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1967), 66-67; Joseph Epstein, *Envy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003). Rotor’s discussion of virtues appears on pages XI-XII.

Power has displaced humility as a core Christian aspiration.

that religion—was the devil’s preoccupation with power, and Christ’s total renunciation of the desire for power. This dualism is at the heart of the Bible’s teaching on power, and knowledge of it would help explain the dominance relationships discussed in the encyclopaedias.

Ironically, contemporary theology often views early modern English Protestants as providing a prime example of patriarchal oppression of women and minorities. The discussion of humility and pride above should reveal a problem with this interpretation. The “patriarchal interpretation” accuses early modern Englishmen of behavior which by their own moral standards was the worst of sins. Furthermore, pride carried strong sanctions: detecting a desire for power in oneself was an infallible sign that one’s afterlife would be spent roasting in the torments of hellfire, which in Protestantism meant for all eternity.

It might be argued that the talk about humility was a hypocritical sham used by patriarchal theologians as a tool in their pursuit of power. Yet this possibility seems unlikely, because popular seventeenth-century texts provided very detailed instructions for introspective investigation of one’s own sins and the detection of hypocrisy in others. From the point of view of “deconstructing” gender relationships, the most intriguing aspect of these instructions is that one of a wife’s religious duties was to point out to her husband any signs of his pride or lust for power that she might notice. How dominant could a husband be in such a relationship?

Traditional stress on humility moderated patriarchal power.

If we turn to a survey of today’s best-selling Christian writers of a conservative bent, we find a similar lack of attention to humility. There are a few exceptions, such as J. I. Packer among evangelical Protestants and C. S. Lewis, an Anglican whose works are popular with Catholics.⁵⁴ Yet even they treat the virtue relatively gingerly. The requirement for active introspection concerning one’s sin of pride is virtually missing in modern popular religious literature.⁵⁵ The stinging descriptions that made people notice sins

⁵⁴ J. I. Packer’s discussion of Puritanism, *A Quest for Godliness: The Puritan Vision of the Christian Life* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1990) notes that humility was the highest Puritan virtue (p. 331). However, there is nothing about the pride that had to be overcome before people could become humble. C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Simon and Shuster, 1996) does have a chapter on pride (pp. 109-114).

⁵⁵ For example, Lewis explicitly notes (p. 112) that a feeling of pleasure in being praised is not pride. In early modern England, this feeling was considered

in themselves and others, and which early modern theologians believed to make religion effective, are rare even in the conservative religious literature of our era. A survey of popular, “mildly religious” writers finds very few mentions of humility. It has been “crowded out” by attitudes contrary to it.

In contrast, self-esteem has become astonishingly popular.⁵⁶ Definitions of self-esteem vary in details, but they generally mention two characteristics as absolutely necessary for this condition. First it requires a sense of self-efficacy, which is defined as “confidence in one’s ability to think, learn, choose, and make appropriate decisions, and, by extension, to master challenges and manage change.” Second, it requires a sense of self-respect and self-worth. This is defined as “confidence in one’s right to be happy and, by extension, confidence that achievement, success, friendship, respect, love, and fulfillment are appropriate for oneself.”⁵⁷

Comparing these definitions of self-esteem with traditional Christian morality reveals an obvious conflict: the feeling of self-worth is irreconcilable with the self-image required by humility. As we may recall, a humble person “judges himself unworthy to come among the people of God, or to be doorkeepers in his house . . . think the lowest place in men’s esteem, affections, and respects, the fittest for them . . . have a low esteem of their own understandings, and parts, and doings . . .”⁵⁸ Even the second part of self-esteem, the feeling of self-efficacy, is questionable by traditional Christian standards. Honest Christians were not to deny the skills they had, yet talking about those skills could very easily turn into

both pride and a well-known sign of hypocrisy. “By this we may gather a very good rule to discover passions, for if that you see one much to please himself with others’ praises, and (as it were) to feed upon the wind of men’s words, doubt not but self-love and vanity posses the best tenement of his heart: And this you may know, if the person praised, either openly confess it, underhand insinuate it, or as it were with a smiling countenance silently approve it, for as gold is tried by fire, so a man by the mouth of a praiser.” Thomas Wright, *The Passions of the Minde* (London, 1630), 136.

⁵⁶ A query of “self esteem” on PSYCINFO for the period between January 1990 and February 2005 produced 15,039 entries.

⁵⁷ Nathaniel Branden, *The Psychology of Self-Esteem* (San Francisco: Joey Bass, 2001), 252. For a detailed discussion of the various definitions of self-esteem, see Christopher J. Mruk, *Self-Esteem: Research, Theory, and Practice* (New York: Springer Publishing Company, 1999), 1-32.

⁵⁸ Baxter, *Directory*, 51.

boasting about them. Religious people would credit all their accomplishments to God.

The early modern theologians would regard self-esteem as a form of pride. Of course, there is more to pride than feelings of competence and self-worth. Even so, the attitudes and behaviors described in our contemporary literature on self-esteem fit the seventeenth-century description of a proud personality. As contemporary psychology has had powerful influence on American religion since the 1950s,⁵⁹ even conservative modern Protestants have come to regard self-esteem as a virtue. This change is highlighted by the title of a child-rearing manual put out by the hugely influential evangelical Protestant leader James Dobson: *The New Hide or Seek: Building Self-Esteem in Your Child*.⁶⁰

Pride, repackaged as self-esteem, now promoted as a virtue.

The embrace of self-esteem by modern Christians is actually somewhat ironical, because several psychologists have recently raised serious doubts about this virtue.⁶¹ These doubts would not have surprised seventeenth-century theologians, who supported their concerns about pride with an abundance of what could be called sociological and psychological observations. As a result, early modern theologians would immediately have pointed out several problems with self-esteem. The most serious of these was pride's habit of wanting ever more when its desires were satisfied. This implied that it was not possible to make a person feel worthy by gratifying the desire for esteem; the contentment would only last for a short time, and the person would soon be again yearning for more than he currently had. Over the long term, the effort to gratify self-esteem produced people who experienced themselves as disappointed, unhappy failures.

Considering the direct and indirect attacks on humility, it comes as no surprise to find this virtue to be practically unmentioned in non-religious discussions of morality. An example of this

⁵⁹ For psychology's influence on Protestantism, see James Hunter, *The Death of Character* (New York: Basic Books, 2000). For psychology's influence on Judaism, see Andrew R. Heinze, *Jews and the American Soul: Human Nature in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

⁶⁰ James Dobson, *Hide and Seek: How to Build Self-Esteem in Your Child* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: F. H. Revell, 1999).

⁶¹ For summaries of the criticism of self esteem, see Nicholas Emler, *Self-Esteem: The Costs and Causes of Low Self-Worth*, (London: Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2001) and the numerous publications of Roy Baumeister and Jennifer Crocker.

absence is William Bennett's *Book of Virtues*,⁶² once a *New York Times* number-one best-seller. This anthology contained a large collection of short stories that provided models for exemplary life, but none of the selections discussed humility. In full accord with so much modern writing on morals, humility is not even mentioned in the book. Intriguingly, Bennett also ignored chastity. Still, the book's stated aim was to rediscover the traditional values of Western Civilization. Significantly, few if any of the numerous reviewers of *Book of Virtues* pointed out the failure to mention humility.

The gap illustrated by *The Book of Virtues* is an exceptionally good indicator of the change that has taken place in Christian morals. Bennett, a former Secretary of Education in the Reagan administration, is an important figure in the neoconservative movement. Fully in accord with humility being left out of *The Book of Virtues*, humility is not a part of the voluminous rhetoric of this movement. This is true despite the fact that many neoconservatives claim to be deeply Christian and are so regarded by a large block of evangelical American Protestant voters.

How could moral ideals central to Christianity, not least in old America, get so lost that hardly anyone has noted the conflict between the actions and speeches of the Christian neoconservatives and what Protestants especially used to regard as the teachings of Christ? It seems that modern Western society has lost its memory. Any seventeenth-century theologian transferred into today's American society would immediately have to ask: Where does one find an exhortation to "turn the other cheek"? Granted that Christ's admonition cannot be applied literally to politics, where is the spirit of Christ in the belligerent and prideful rhetoric of the neoconservatives? How can preachers who call themselves "Christian" have failed to ask such self-evident questions? How can they so totally have ignored humility, the virtue that Christ introduced to Western Civilization and that he taught by his words and by the example of his life and his death?

To state that humility was central to traditional Christianity is not to ignore the danger that an unbalanced emphasis on humility could turn into a morbid obsession with the sinfulness and insignificance of man. The present neglect of humility points in the direction of an opposite extreme.

⁶² William Bennett, ed., *The Book of Virtues* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1993).

Conclusion

A survey of popular seventeenth-century religious texts shows humility to have been one of the most important moral ideals of the time. A survey of present-day writings, on the other hand, shows references to humility to be rare or non-existent. In fact, the sin of pride, which in early modern religious morality was contrasted with the virtue of humility, currently seems, under the guise of “self-esteem,” to be in the process of becoming a virtue.

That much of what is called Christianity today can be virtually devoid of the humility that previously constituted a central tenet of the faith points to the fundamental ambiguity of language. A single word such as “Christianity” can be used to describe various—even opposite—modes of life and belief. Jesus said, “By their fruits you shall know them.” Clearly, a Christianity of humility and self-restraint will bear different fruits in the world of action than a “Christianity” that has abandoned those attributes. It is how we live, not how we describe how we live, that ultimately determines historical reality. Still, the use or misuse of words matters. As the Harvard professor Irving Babbitt emphasized nearly a century ago, “Words . . . have . . . an important relation to reality because they control the imagination which in turn determines action and so ‘governs mankind.’” Morally corrupt vision, he explained, often distorts reality by using linguistic symbols in a misleading way. For that reason, wrote Babbitt, vague terms should be submitted to “a searching Socratic dialectic.”

Calling it essential to “dichotomize” words Socratically in order to become aware of the deceptive uses to which they can be put, Babbitt introduced a wide array of dichotomies in his works. One such necessary dichotomy, according to Babbitt, is that between genuine religion and what he termed “sham spirituality.” The former, for Babbitt, is characterized by “inner working” to achieve “certain virtues. Of these the virtue that marks most immediately the obeisance of the spirit to what transcends nature and therefore always has been held . . . to command the others, is humility.”⁶³ By contrast, “sham spirituality” is what results from “a tendency to substitute for a superrational concentration of will a subrational expansion of feeling. How many persons, for ex-

*“Sham spirituality”
marked by the
absence of
humility.*

⁶³ Irving Babbitt, “Buddha and the Occident,” afterword to *The Dhammapada*, trans. Irving Babbitt (New York: Oxford University Press, 1936), 78-79.

ample, exalt the 'love' of St. Francis who, in their total outlook on life, are almost inconceivably remote from the humility, chastity, and poverty, from which, in the eyes of St. Francis himself, the love was inseparable!"⁶⁴

Babbitt was not himself an orthodox Christian. He derived his understanding of how goodness can be attained not from special revelation but from immediate human experience. Yet even on this basis, Babbitt concluded, much like the traditional Christian divines described in this article, that there will be little justice or peace unless man restrains his expansive desires in deference to a power higher than himself.⁶⁵

*Eclipse of
humility
brings
arrogance,
aggressive-
ness, and
injustice.*

Babbitt here believes that he is expressing an insight known to all of the higher moral and religious systems of mankind. That today large parts of Christianity, Roman Catholicism perhaps less so than Protestantism,⁶⁶ have lost this insight may go far toward explaining why Western, and particularly American, civilization is increasingly beset by arrogance, aggressiveness, and injustice.

Western leaders may need to heed Babbitt's admonition that a "man needs to look . . . up to standards set so much above his ordinary self as to make him feel that he is himself spiritually the

⁶⁴ Ibid., 100-101.

⁶⁵ See Irving Babbitt, *Literature and the American College: Essays in Defense of the Humanities* (Washington: National Humanities Institute, 1986; first published 1908), 103.

⁶⁶ Seventeenth-century English theologians not only gave a great deal of attention to pride and humility; they also had a remarkably well-developed understanding of the psychological functioning and social effects of this sin-virtue pair. This knowledge appears to have come from late medieval Catholic confessors, who had an outstanding opportunity to investigate what in modern, scientific parlance would be called the depth-psychological roots of interpersonal violence. Considering this "original source" in the confessors' manuals, it is not surprising that one of the few places where the traditional view of pride and humility survives today is the Roman Catholic Church. For example, *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, a post-Vatican II document that details the official views of that large denomination's hierarchy, is replete with references to the practice of humility as the key to keeping the commandments, avoiding sinful temptations, praying effectively, and so forth. Thus Paragraph 2540 of the *Catechism* notes that "Envy often comes from pride; the baptized person should train himself to live in humility." And Paragraph 2554: "The baptized person combats envy through good-will, humility, and abandonment to the providence of God." And Paragraph 2631: "The first movement of the prayer of petition is asking forgiveness A trusting humility brings us back into the light of communion between the Father and his Son Jesus Christ and with one another, so that 'we receive from him whatever we ask.'"

underdog. The man who thus looks up is becoming worthy to be looked up to in turn, and, to this extent, qualifying for leadership." This kind of leadership, Babbitt continued, "may prove to be, in the long run, the only effectual counterpoise to that of the imperialistic superman. . . . Nothing will avail short of humility."⁶⁷ Might the presence or absence of deeply internalized humility be the characteristic that determines whether Christianity produces peace and progress or war and stagnation?

⁶⁷ Irving Babbitt, *Democracy and Leadership* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1924), 257-58.