

Spiritual Apathy: The Forgotten Deadly Sin

Abbot Christopher Jamison

In an exclusive adapted extract from his forthcoming book, *Finding Happiness*, Abbot Christopher Jamison examines the modern attitude to the Seven Deadly Sins, and re-introduces us to the sin that never made the list. How has our neglect of *acedia*, or spiritual apathy, affected our culture?

Seven Deadly Sins

In 2004, a MORI poll commissioned by the BBC asked over 1,000 Britons if they had ever committed any of the Seven Deadly Sins, namely, pride, envy, anger, sloth, greed, gluttony and lust. Top of the list was anger, committed by nearly 80% with all the other sins being committed by well over half those interviewed. But when asked 'Which is Britain's deadliest sin?' they mostly ignored the traditional seven and went for cruelty and adultery as the two worst. When asked which of the deadly sins they enjoy, the easy winner was lust followed by gluttony. In the subsequent reporting of the survey, the list of Seven Deadly Sins was treated as a bit of a joke. Some writers and actors were asked for comments on the deadly sins and said they couldn't frankly see what was wrong with most of them. "Whatever you're doing, with pride you never drop below a certain standard." "Anger isn't a sin; it's good to let off steam." "Sloth is doing nothing. How can doing nothing get such a bad press?" The fundamental attitude was 'where's the harm in a bit of pride or sloth?' In a world where 'avoiding harm to others' is the overriding moral rule, the Seven Deadly Sins seem to have had their day.

Yet looking more closely at the responses to the opinion poll, it is surprising that those who saw cruelty as the top sin did not connect it to anger as the source of cruelty and that they did not see lust as the source of adultery. People today see wrong doing

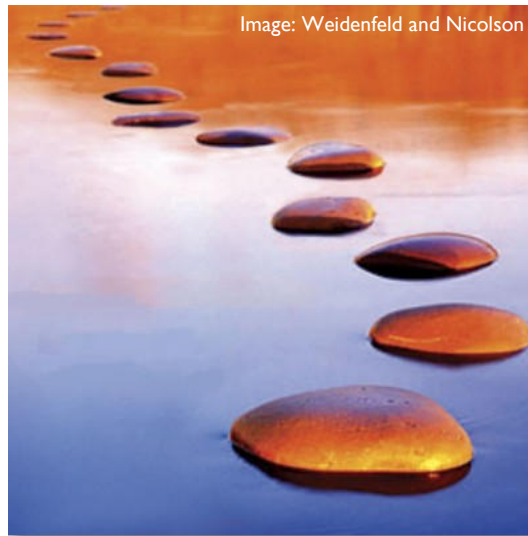


Image: Weidenfeld and Nicolson

solely in terms of outcomes. The private sphere is mine to command exactly as I like and in the public sphere I have only to avoid harm to others. In so far as they are seen as key actions that harm others then the Seven Deadly Sins are indeed unhelpful. They are only useful when seen as describing the principal human tendencies that lead people away from living well towards harmful actions. In other words, their usefulness

is dependent on believing that spiritual awareness is a vital dimension of human life and that without such self-awareness there is no happiness. The Seven Deadly Sins were never intended as a guide to harmful actions but as a guide to the roots of harmful actions; when viewed in that way, their insights continue to challenge us to greater personal honesty about our innermost thoughts.

The Seven Deadly Sins are derived from the Eight Thoughts of John Cassian, the monk who, in the Fourth Century, systematically recorded the teachings of the Desert Fathers and Mothers. He described how monks and nuns were always afflicted by Eight Thoughts or Demons. The transformation from Eight Thoughts to Seven Sins begins with Pope Gregory the Great in the Sixth Century. Gregory began this process by removing one vice from the list: *acedia*, a Greek word which can be translated as spiritual apathy. The disappearance of *acedia* from ordinary people's vocabulary deprived Western culture of the ability to name an important feature of

the spiritual life, namely, loss of enthusiasm for the spiritual life itself. While the word has disappeared, the reality of spiritual carelessness is strongly present in our culture.

The purpose of all such lists of thoughts or sins is to provide a framework within which people can develop their self-awareness. Self-awareness here has a particular meaning that we need to distinguish from introspection; introspection is only looking at me, whereas self-awareness involves considering how I interact with the world around me. Self-awareness is attentiveness to my way of relating to people and things. In particular, it involves understanding how my outlook affects the way I see the world and how it affects the world itself. This self-aware life does not accept that there is a private world of introspection and a public world of actions. It insists that my interaction with the world includes my attitudes as well as my actions. This approach refuses to accept the modern belief that something is good so long as it does no harm to others. My own inner world is a place that can do harm or do good not only to myself but to other people as well. Simply being angry, for example, is bad for me and bad for those who have to deal with me; the vibrations of my anger affect others even if I never do anything bad. So self-awareness here means an awareness of my place in the world.

Without such self-awareness, the inner life of human beings will lead them to do wrong. Legislation and policing alone will not prevent public harm to others nor will telling people that harm to others is bad. We need people to work on their self-awareness and we need to teach children to do this from an early age. If we want to protect the environment, then ask people to contain their greed. If we want to reduce violence, help people to contain their anger and so on. We have to enable each person to live out the discipline of self-awareness not only for personal happiness but also for society's happiness.

The fundamental insight shared by the ancient philosophers like Plato and by Christ is that an interior discipline of thoughts is needed. The only way to avoid bad actions and promote happiness is to

go deeper than the actions themselves and to train our thoughts.

This deep human insight is expressed by Jesus with imaginative force in the Sermon on the Mount: (Matthew's Gospel 5: 21-22 and 27-28)

You were told 'do not kill' and that if you do kill you will answer for it before the court. But I say anyone who is angry with another person will answer for it before the court.

You were told 'do not commit adultery' but I say that if you look at a person lustfully, you have already committed adultery with them in your heart.

This is not Jesus simply creating impossibly high standards; he is saying that anger and lust are the origins of murder and adultery so get a hold of them before it is too late. As a society, we seem to have forgotten this very simple insight.

Acedia: the forgotten Deadly Sin

One way of viewing our current situation in Western society is that we have suffered a catastrophic loss of understanding of the need for self-awareness leading to widespread *acedia*. Until the modern era, the Church and especially its religious orders provided a constant reminder to ordinary people of their need to examine their conscience every day and to reflect deeply on their way of life. The Church provided a series of exercises, some simple and some complex, to enable people of all kinds to live a self-aware life. At its worst, this provoked unhelpful guilt. At its best, these spiritual exercises enabled people to remain self-aware. Pre-modern European societies were often ignorant, poor and sometimes cruel, but they had a strong sense of the vital importance of the interior world of each human being. That interior world was the resource that enabled them to survive the horrors of their age.

The interior world of human beings is a mixture of irrational and rational forces. The spiritual exercise of reason was the ancient and monastic response to this

world, with daily reflection on the workings of my innermost soul; from such exercises flowed the solutions to life's challenges and temptations. By contrast, in our culture, we are brought up without explicit and systematic spiritual formation, being informed that we can do and think what we like provided that we don't harm others. Spiritual practices such as meditation are considered purely optional extras for an eccentric few and so we are subtly led to understand that the spiritual struggle is not worth the effort. While we want music with 'soul' and condemn 'soulless' bureaucrats, we have created a culture of spiritual carelessness that neglects the disciplined life of the soul. This state of mind is often accompanied by statements such as 'I have no time for that sort of thing', where having no time means both not having enough hours in the day and not having the inclination.

Spiritual carelessness seems to me to underlie much contemporary unhappiness in Western culture. The word is no longer used not because the reality is obsolete but because we have stopped noticing it. We are too busy to be spiritually self-aware and our children grow up in a culture that suffers from collective *acedia*. *Acedia* has so established itself that it is now part of modernity.

A parallel can be drawn with the world of medicine. Before the discovery of germs, hygiene was not considered essential so many deaths were caused by infections that nobody could see. Once the existence of germs had been identified, physical hygiene became rigorous and lives were saved. Similarly, the cause of much unhappiness lies hidden from view but is truly present. Our demons are unseen thoughts that make us unhappy and spiritual hygiene is as necessary as medical hygiene if these diseases of the soul are to be healed. But we are a spiritually unhygienic society. While we know that we must

find time to brush our teeth, to visit the doctor and to take exercise, we have no such shared conviction about the need for spiritual exercises.

Even monks and nuns can experience the temptation to forget about the spiritual life. In one ancient collection of stories about the desert fathers and mothers, the very first story begins with a surprising statement about the most famous monk of all. 'When the holy Abba Anthony lived in the desert he was beset by *acedia*.' Towards the end of that same collection Amma Syncletica offers the insight that '*acedia* is full of mockery.' Our society is 'full of mockery' towards those who insist on the reality of the soul and its essential disciplines, disciplines which have been preserved almost uniquely by the best of the world's religious traditions but which are scorned by increasingly strident atheist commentators.

Our culture implies that indulging the Seven Deadly Sins is the way to happiness; more food, more things and more sex combined with personal aggression and vanity are the way to happiness. This is the message hitting us day by day. The good news is that most people in their heart of hearts know this message is a lie but many lack the means to live out an alternative. This spiritually careless culture does not have to run our lives, however, and helping people to overcome our culture's endemic *acedia* is one of the key tasks of the Church today.

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