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## The culture of narcissism chapter summaries

Here is the penultimate post in a series inspired by Christopher Lasch's book, *The Culture of Narcissism*. Back in 1987, when the New Age movement had not yet become just another part of the spiritual background noise of postmodern America, ABC television mainstreamed one branch of the movement in the miniseries "Out on a Limb," which was based on actress Shirley MacLaine's autobiographical book about her adventures in New Age spirituality. Just over a decade had passed since my own brief involvement in the New Age, so much of the mindset and the jargon was familiar to me. One scene in particular epitomized the Westernized Hindu pantheism infusing the non-traditional spirituality of the 1960s and 70s; a scene which also stands out for its tragic silliness. MacLaine is at a beach with one of her "gurus," both with arms outstretched, and he encourages her to gain a new understanding of herself by chanting with him, "I am God." They turn and face the ocean stretching out before them, continuing to chant, "I am God." The chant was the Americanized version of the "Grand Pronouncement" in the Hindu Upanishads, "tat tvam asi," which is usually translated "thou art that." In Advaita Vedanta (pantheistic) Hinduism, the pronouncement is interpreted as declaring the identity between the individual self, atman, and Brahman, ultimate reality. Not that it's right (or even makes sense), but in Advaita Vedanta Brahman is the One—ultimately impersonal—"Consciousness," and the world of multiple things and selfs is but the One forgetting it is One and "dreaming" it is Many. Ultimately, every individual "drop" of self is lost in the "ocean" of the One. The Americanized New Age version, in its cultural retention of individual self-hood, just comes across as the ultimate narcissistic self-affirmation: "I'm good enough, I'm smart enough, and doggone it, I am God!" The infiltration of cultural narcissism into American spirituality began with the shift, analyzed in 1979 by Christopher Lasch, from religion to therapy. Assessing what he called the "Awareness Movement," Lasch argued that "people today hunger not for personal salvation, let alone for the restoration of an earlier golden age, but for the feeling, the momentary illusion, of personal well-being, health, and psychic security." The turn to therapy as the paradigm for "spirituality" was more recently documented by Christian Smith and Melinda Denton in their book, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (2005). Smith and Denton have named and identified "moralistic therapeutic deism" (MTD) as a primary spiritual sensibility of American adolescents. Two core traits of this sensibility are that "the central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself" and "God does not need to be particularly involved in one's life except when God is needed to resolve a problem." Teenagers who believe in MTD look to individual personal experience, particularly emotional experience, as the source of truth and morality. God is important but not really all that involved in our daily lives. The replacement of more traditional or biblical concepts for salvation—such as "eternal life" or "redemption from sin"—with "be happy and feel good about myself" reflects Lasch's earlier observation that, "the modern equivalent of salvation [is] mental health." Seeing God primarily—or solely—as the instrumental means for one's personal happiness and self-esteem reflects the cultural narcissism that sees the world—even the transcendent world—as merely mirrors reflecting one's own ego needs. Smith and Denton recognize that these views actually reflect what a large segment of American society believes, not just adolescents. Teenagers did not invent MTD; they have absorbed it from their parents, church leaders, and much of popular culture. MTD has infused every manifestation of American spirituality, including Christianity. The culture of narcissism reaches even into what is considered conservative evangelical Christianity. The problem is not a Christian or biblical approach to counseling, therapy, or mental health, or even a recognition of the importance of the affective aspects—emotions, desires, self-understanding, etc.—of ourselves and our salvation. Narcissistic leadership is a problem, but it has been since the apostle Paul sarcastically put down false teachers who regarded themselves as "super-apostles" (2 Corinthians 11:4-15). The larger and pervasive problem is a therapeutic approach to Christianity: the Gospel of Jesus Christ and the encompassing Biblical-Christian worldview reduced to aids to our self-esteem, social adjustment, and personal success. God, in Smith and Denton's analysis, is reduced to "something like a combination of Divine Butler and Cosmic Therapist." We could add God reduced to "glorified lifestyle concierge" or "security blanket." The result is a shallow religion, abetted by the constant recycling of the same self-absorbed surface of feelings tied to ego needs, self-esteem, and self-gratification. This emotional surface is itself reflected in the music and books that are the products of Christian popular culture. For example, the devotional book by Sarah Young, *Jesus Calling* (2004), purporting to be first-person encouragement from Jesus Christ, has been at the top of best-seller lists for years, selling millions of copies. The book has its defenders and detractors and has been criticized for its supposed "New Age" aspects and as contrary to Scripture (a good summary is here). Even a sympathetic reading reveals a preoccupation with the self. Jesus is presented, in line with both Lasch's analysis and the therapeutic sensibility identified in *Soul Searching*, as primarily the source and mediator of a sense of "personal well-being, health, and psychic security" who wants us to be happy and feel good about ourselves. Cultural narcissism and a therapeutic approach to Christianity are also manifested in what is called the "health and wealth gospel," of which the current most popular spokesperson is mega-church pastor Joel Osteen. All his books—*Your Best Life Now*; *Become a Better You*; *You Can, You Will*—focus on the "power of positive thinking" enabling the individual self to gain what it desires, with God as sort of one's "life coach." In Osteen's most recent book, *The Power of I Am*, the self is elevated to nearly god-like status: Whatever follows the "I am" will eventually find you....Get up in the morning and invite good things into your life. I am blessed. I am strong. I am talented. I am wise. I am disciplined. I am prosperous.' When you talk like that, talent gets summoned by Almighty God: 'Go find that person.' Health, strength, abundance, and discipline start heading your way (2). Each chapter of Osteen's book is titled as a positive "I am" affirmation: "I am blessed," "I am talented," "I am healthy," etc. There are no chapters titled, "I am a sinner, saved by grace," or, as with the prophet Isaiah's declaration, "I am ruined!....I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips" (6:5), or with the apostle Paul's admissions, that "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst" (1 Tm 1:15) and "I am unspiritual, sold as a slave to sin....What a wretched man I am!" (Rm 7:14, 24). I suppose Christianity would have been much more "positive" had the prophets and apostles seen God and salvation as Osteen does. Osteen also seems not to have noticed—or cared—that "The Power of I Am" was already the title of a book specifically identified as New Age, edited by writer David Allen, an "ordained minister" of the Movement of Spiritual Inner Awareness. Allen's *The Power of I Am* consists of excerpts from various New Age and neo-Gnostic authors, and it displays the same approach to "positive thinking" and personal affirmation as Osteen's book. Narcissism is endemic in American culture, in religion, sex, and politics; in entertainment, sports, education, and business. While this doesn't mean that every one of us suffers a clinical case of Narcissistic Personality Disorder—any more than the doctrine of total depravity means every one of us is as bad as we could possibly be—it does mean that we all suffer from exposure to the cultural background radiation of vanity, self-centeredness, and egocentricity. Perhaps the Amish in their blessed cultural isolation are exempt. The rest of us need an antidote. Introduction E.J. 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