

Daily Meditation 08/31/2021
More on Acedia and Ways Beyond It

Good morning.

We're continuing our reflections on one of the capital sins, called acedia or apathy. And I want to kind of point out the general approach that I'm taking here, which I lay out in full in my book on Sins of the Spirit, Blessings of the Flesh: Transforming Evil in Soul and Society, where I'm reaching for a new language to talk about evil.

So first I talk about the chakras because the chakras represent seven points in our bodies and our psychology and spirituality. These are strong points that are crossroads; each one of them are carrying power with them healthy power.

And then I'm proposing that that schema from the East, the seven chakras, may correspond to the seven capital sins, because Aquinas, working from the Jewish tradition, calls sin misdirected love...misdirected love. And that's Jewish because the Hebrew word for sin is an archery term for missing a bullseye.

So I'm saying, well, maybe these chakras, when they're healthy, represent that bullseye, that energy and strength that's positive in all of us. And being off-centered, then that bull's-eye or that missing of the mark where sin is, is named, perhaps, by the seven capital sins.

Now in the west, these sins came from the desert fathers: those young people who quit society in effect because society was becoming more and more linked to the empire. And by society, I mean both society as a whole and also the Christian version of society, because in the fourth century there is that marriage between Christianity and empire.

So a lot of young people of idealism left the whole scene, went to the desert. We call them the desert fathers - they were young people when they left, and there were women too, so it should be fathers and mothers!

But one of the points that they made was taking in an old teaching about seven capital sins that precedes Christianity: in fact, the scholars say that these were, if you will, pagan elements which were the seven cardinal sins.

The babylonians call them the "seven evil keepers"-- the Zoroastrian and agnostic traditions talk about the seven heavens and the seven evil keepers. Babylonians actually named eight sets of evil keepers.

But as scholars point out, the soul journey was based on the sciences of the day, and a late 14th century poem links the seven sins to the seven planets, demonstrating a cosmic linkage to sin that we have lost for many centuries.

So the idea again is also found in the Bible that the pillars of the earth are trembling and broken when injustice reigns, so there's this cosmic dimension to our capacity for evil that is named both in the western or Christian model and Jewish model, but also among other religions as well.

So Evagrius Ponticus was one of these desert fathers. In the year 383 he fled to the desert to live a hermit life, and he laid out the first Christian naming of the seven capital sins. And his theology traveled to Marseille in southern France, to the monk Cassian in the fourth century also in the early fifth century, and then Saint Benedict, following Cassian, brings it up in his Rule written in the sixth century. And then in the sixth and early seventh century Pope Gregory the Great, in his commentary in the Book of Job, brings it up again and develops it.

So the idea that there are these seven basic sins - it doesn't mean they're absolutely the worst, because injustice is not named as one of them, nor is hatred but they're considered the most dangerous because the word "cardinal" links to the word for a door hinge: they open the hinge on the doors, and all kinds of other sins come out with them, come flowing into the human heart.

Now this was beautifully put by a friend of mine who was not Christian or Jewish, not biblical, but Buck Ghost Horse, a Lakota leader, when he said to me one day that "fear is the door in the heart that lets evil spirits in... fear is the door in the heart that lets evil spirits in."

So that's exactly what is meant by a capital sin: that these things are kind of foundational, and if we ignore them or open ourselves up to them, invite them in.... and fear might be one, although that's not traditionally named as one of them in the seven capital sins. But it's a very fine example of what's at stake here when we talk about seven chakras and the seven capital sins.

So this is a bit of grounding for our further discussions and meditations on acedia, and what follows when we let acedia into our hearts and minds.

And as I point out in today's meditation, there's a sourness that results, a cynicism therefore, that has found the etymological meaning of the word in Greek. And there is also the issue of not caring, which can also be classified as selfishness.

Thank you, we'll see you tomorrow.