

What Are We to Make of Ourselves?

The great mid-twentieth century American theologian, Reinhold Niebuhr, is often quoted as saying, “The doctrine of original sin is the only empirically verifiable doctrine of the Christian faith.” I might agree with Niebuhr, except that I don’t think his explication of human sin actually fits the doctrine in its orthodox formulations. Yes, I find evidence of human sin writ large on the pages of human history, and in the biographies of every individual human being. But I don’t think human beings are born sinful, depraved, or in need of redemption. We don’t inherit sin through biological transmission. In Adam’s fall we did not sin all.

I believe that human beings are basically good, and that it is extremely important to regard ourselves and others in that light.

That said, one can hardly deny that the empirical record is replete with excruciatingly painful evidence of humanity’s perversity, wickedness, and inhumanity to humanity, and not merely on rare occasions but all the time. You do read the newspapers, don’t you?

In the preface to *Three Came Back*, Agnes Newton Keith’s extraordinary memoir of her three-plus years as a POW in North Borneo during World War II, Keith writes: “The Japanese in this book are as war made them, not as God did, and the same is true of the rest of us. We are not pleasant people here, for the story of war is always the story of hate . . . The hate destroys you spiritually as the fighting destroys you bodily.”

Consider also these perceptive words from Stephen Toulmin, historian and philosopher of science: “Unfortunately, the more I read of history, the less I’m convinced that the events of the Holocaust were unparalleled. I think to say that is to underestimate the capacity of people to be beastly to each other. I think there are other things that have happened in history that are as awful, and likely to happen again. It’s a very optimistic view to imagine that the Holocaust is unique. I’m afraid it’s the kind of thing that could happen again in the name of a different gospel and with different victims.”

Basically good human beings are, under various circumstances, capable of utterly heinous and unconscionable actions. This we must never forget, both so that we do not demonize those with whom we are at odds and so that we do not underestimate the potential for evil in the world.

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