

Solomon's Gift

The Spiritual Wisdom of the Bible

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What is Spiritual Intelligence?

Any form of human intelligence will allow us either to *understand* something, or to *create* something.

Scientific intelligence allowed Einstein to go more deeply than anyone before him into the mysteries of time, light and space – and to propose the theories of relativity.

Musical intelligence gave Mozart an extraordinary gift for musical composition, from childhood on.

But those who have so far written on spiritual intelligence have been vague on what it actually does. They tend to be eloquent on the poetic and mystical elements of Eastern religions such as Buddhism, or impressively learned on modern research into the human brain – but unable to define clearly what spiritual intelligence will allow us to *understand* or to *create*.

Even more strange is the fact that although these books are written in the West – in the UK or the US – they make little reference to the West's basic spiritual text – the books collectively known as the Bible.

One reason for this is that the Bible is still a major source of tension in the West between Christian believers and secular unbelievers. Because many of the believers mistakenly interpret the Bible as a source of literal historical and scientific – rather than spiritual – truth, most unbelievers see it only as a source of bigotry and confusion.

This small book, intended for the general reader, aims to clarify the nature of spiritual intelligence, and to defend the status of the Bible as the world's greatest source on the subject. It argues that spiritual intelligence is what the Bible calls wisdom, and that this wisdom allows us to go the root of all the major problems of the modern world – and to find our way through.

Understanding 'Mimetic Desire'

What do these four stories have in common?

Mary had not intended to visit the cosmetics counter, but had been told by her friend Susan that a particular lipstick was all the rage. She noticed the brand name as she passed, and that there was only one stick left. In two minds, she saw a rival, **Clare**, approaching, with her eye apparently on that lipstick also. Mary immediately asked for that last stick in the shop, and placed it triumphantly in her bag as Clare watched in exasperation.

Anne leafed through her favourite magazine until she came upon the ad she had been scanning for weeks. It showed the very watch that could be seen on the wrist of her favourite pop star on her latest CD cover. If she saved carefully she would be able to afford it by the summer. But would it still be on sale at that price then? And if so would it still be in fashion? She had noticed that this celebrity seemed to change jewellery very often, and might have a new CD out by then.

Peter knew he wasn't very good at football and felt bad about this. As he watched an exciting game on Saturday night with his friend John, he saw David Beckham wearing a distinctive pair of boots with a white stripe running from heel to toe. "Beckham's wearing *Benders* – they're specially designed to help him bend free kicks!" John told him. A minute later Beckham scored the winning goal, a free kick from the edge of the penalty area that swerved at least two metres on its route to the net. Peter knew now what he wanted for Christmas.

Richard didn't know he liked paintings until one day at an auction he saw two old high-flying school friends eying a watercolour. How delicately it was coloured! And it would nicely fill a space in his living room. He realized that he could probably afford it. There were four people bidding at first, but when his two friends dropped out Richard knew he couldn't let it go. He got it for £460. "Lucky sod!" said Jim, one of the two disappointed friends. His wife was surprised he had spent so much on a painting when he had gone to the auction rooms looking for a bookcase. He was able to assure her it was a good investment, as his friends had briefed him well on its merits.

In all four cases an object becomes desirable to someone because it is, apparently, *desired by someone else*. That is to say, in each case a new desire was created by the experience of someone else's desire for, or possession of, some object. None of the four desires is truly independent, a desire that can be said to be completely original and uninfluenced.

In other words, we can acquire desires from others, by unconscious imitation or absorption of their desires. This kind of desire is mimetic desire – desire based upon imitation – or 'miming' – which may well be unconscious. Unconscious imitation is mimesis.

Mimetic desire begins because we either admire the person we are observing, or because we are in rivalry or competition with them.

Notice too that Anne's desire may not outlast her favourite pop star's desire for the same watch, so that the desirability of the watch is clearly conditional and temporary. It is in a sense merely borrowed desire.

Mary's desire for the lipstick had been aroused by Susan's report that it was 'in demand' – but she wasn't sure she wanted it until she suspected a rival was bent upon getting the last sample. If Clare acquired it, Mary could not have it – and this increased its desirability to the point that Mary could no longer resist.

Notice also that in two cases – Peter's and Anne's – celebrities were involved – famous people. The design of Beckham's boots and the

visibility of the pop star's watch on her CD were calculated to produce mimetic desire among those who watched that match and saw that CD. Anyone involved in marketing knows what we are calling mimetic desire – although they may not know it by that name. 'Brand association', and 'brand visibility' they know well. Put those two together and you exploit mimetic desire for commercial purposes. Much of the global economy is based upon the ability to exploit mimetic desire through the media.

We should by now have learned six things about mimetic desire:

1. It is acquired through experience of the apparent desire of others.
2. We either admire that other person, or are in rivalry or competition with them.
3. Mimetic desire can be magnified if the object of desire is associated with a famous person, creating multiple desires in many people;
4. It is exploited in most advertising, and is therefore an inescapable and important reality;
5. It can greatly influence the way we behave;
6. It explains the power of *fashion*.

And now we can learn something else – something of extraordinary importance.

Mimetic Desire and Conflict

How did Clare feel about being beaten to the last stick of that oh-so-desirable lipstick? Let's find out.

What **Mary** did not know was that **Clare** had raced through traffic to make sure she got this very last stick, getting a public scolding from a vigilant policeman. The shop had said on the phone it couldn't hold the last sample for her, as this was against company policy. Hot, annoyed, and now frustrated, she saw the glint of triumph in **Mary's** eye as she placed the lipstick in her bag, and – without thinking – she

Well, what does Clare do now? There is an opportunity here for bitter words at least. We do not yet know the details of the rivalry between these two, but clearly this rivalry could escalate into actual violence if these two cannot 'wise up'. And something as insignificant as a cosmetic could be the trigger.

Now this is very important, because it means that our own desires (which may well not truly be our own desires) can place us in real conflict and danger.

- These days teenagers in America can be murdered by other teenagers for their sports shoes.
- The ancient war between Greece and Troy was said by the great poet Homer to have been caused by the desire of two men for the same woman, Helen.
- In 1982 UK Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher fought a war to retake the tiny Falkland Islands, eight thousand miles away, which she had not bothered even to protect until they were seized by Argentina. 1006 lives were lost in that war.

So, mimetic desire can get mixed up with other kinds of desire, and change history. It is therefore a matter that everyone needs to understand, and *can* understand.

We can now define mimetic desire as:

The new or added desire we acquire by observation of someone else's desire for – or proud possession of – something. Where two or more people desire the same object, mimetic desire can involve us in competition and conflict.

To be able to further understand, and to resist mimetic desire – and to communicate the importance of doing so to others, you need spiritual intelligence.

The Bible is the world's greatest source on mimetic desire. Soon enough we will explore this.

You should by now have realized the extraordinary importance of something that affects us all – our tendency to absorb the desires, or apparent desires, of others. As global over-consumption is closely related to this tendency, the wisdom to overcome mimetic desire is essential for the future of the planet.

Mimetic Desire for Non-Material Things

Now read these short stories, looking for the ways in which they are similar to, yet also different from the first four stories.

After the hardest year's work of his life, **Henry** felt gutted. He had been told a year earlier that he was in line for promotion to marketing manager, but that others were being assessed also. Certain that all was going well when he suggested four different strategies for marketing his firm's latest product, he learned in the end that the job would go to **Jeff**. And Jeff's only asset appeared to be a flair for ingratiating himself with people - including the head of the firm - whose very homely daughter he had romanced for fairly obvious reasons, or so it seemed to Henry.

Tony and **Gordon** were the most brilliant younger figures in their party, and when the party leader suddenly died, found themselves competing for the position. Tony won the leadership election, probably for his verbal brilliance and all-round mastery of policy and political strategy, and went on to become Prime Minister. Gordon became the Minister for Finance in the same government, a job that suited his abilities perfectly. Although the two agreed on most major issues of the day, they simply couldn't get along amicably. Their rivalry became a running story for the media.

Mick was a very shy boy with very fair skin, and he was so self-conscious that he blushed easily and often. Some of his classmates exploited this, knowing they could 'fire him up' anytime by jeering in the silliest way. Then in his last two years at school Mick showed an astonishing flair for football, and was picked for the school's first team. When he kicked the winning points in the final of the schools competition in his last year he became the class hero, and now took delight in taunting his tormentors whenever he came across them on the pitch.

Linda and **Jennifer** had always been close friends, but when they were both fifteen, Linda won the leading role in the school's annual musical. It was a singing as well as acting role, and though Linda looked well and acted beautifully she just hadn't the vocal range to sing the songs. Reluctantly the producer told her she must give up the role. Jennifer meanwhile had been listening and practising the songs, and when she auditioned for the role (to Linda's astonishment) she got the part. By the end of the year she had triumphed, but her friendship with Linda was at an end. Linda was so angered by what had happened that she persuaded her parents to take her from the school.

Here we find four other stories of desire, but the thing desired is not a material object like a lipstick, a pair of football boots, a painting or a watch. Instead these seven characters have desires for a job, or role, or place or position – and in each case their failures or successes profoundly affect their relationships with others.

In each case also, the relative status of the characters is affected by their failures or successes. We can say confidently that this connection with status was almost certainly a major factor, if not the decisive factor, in the desires that led them towards the roles they sought.

Can we say that in all four cases mimetic desire is involved? In the case of Henry and Jeff, their firm is in fact exploiting it to motivate their up-and-coming employees. A desirable position is being held out to more than one competitor, and this will indeed increase its desirability, just as the final lipstick's desirability is increased by virtue of the fact that only one of two rivals could possess it. Had Henry been the only contender for the job, his sense of achievement would have been far less, and he might have had a far less hectic year. But now his defeat makes him bitter. How will this affect the firm in the future, especially if Henry's judgement of Jeff's abilities is well founded – or if Jeff is actually more able, but Henry remains bitter and cannot work with him?

This does not mean that mimetic desire alone is involved here. If Henry has a family of five children, and wants to send the eldest to an expensive school, then there is also a simple economic motive. But apart from raising the further interesting question of what makes the expensive school so desirable, this does not fully explain why Henry worked so hard, and was so disappointed. When more than one person is involved in competition for any role or position, mimetic desire is likely to become a part of the complex of desires that motivate the competitors, because of the connection we generally make between the esteem we receive from others and our own self-esteem. Henry is angry for his failure to become Sales Manager for much the same reason that Clare is angry over the lipstick: frustrated mimetic desire.

And the same is true of Linda and Jennifer. A school musical gives some children an opportunity to shine – but this is a sure-fire way to provoke mimetic, or imitative, desire. Only one girl can have the leading female role, just as only one woman could have the final lipstick. When one of two friends acquires status or success through such an achievement, at the apparent expense of the other, this is very likely to damage the relationship between them.

Uniquely desirable objects or jobs or roles inevitably provoke strong mimetic desire, in which two or more people focus their attention and effort identically upon that object or role. In the event that there is only one contender, desire will almost certainly be less. Henry might even have wondered if the job was really all that desirable if no-one else wanted it. Mimesis adds intensity to desire – with potentially destructive consequences for human relationships.

As for Tony and Gordon, their mimetic desire for the party leadership has made them rivals, and this rivalry continues after Tony wins the leadership. The reason is that both are still very much in the public eye, and Gordon has something to prove. There is the possibility for a reversal of their fortunes if the public and their party judge Gordon to have performed better in his role.

We are now in a position to define rivalry.

Rivalry is conflicting mimetic desire for the greater self-esteem and status that attaches to possession of some valued object or position or role.

In the last chapter we learned that Mary and Clare were rivals before the lipstick episode. We do not know what the object (or objects) of their initial rivalry were – but all of these are possibilities: captaincy of a school team; the post of Head Girl of the school; top academic honours in their year group; the role of girlfriend to the same ‘fancied’ boy; best liked member of their class. Or any combination of these.

All of these possibilities have something in common – *only one person can achieve them*, so that this achievement may be considered a victory that gives a superior status to the ‘winner’.

Self-esteem, Other-esteem and Shame

Why had Linda reacted so badly to the loss of her part in the school musical?

Because she had suffered public humiliation or shame among her peers. Her initial success in winning the leading role in the musical had raised her status. That is to say, she was now receiving esteem from more of her peers – probably the whole year group, and the year groups below hers. And this had boosted her self-esteem.

Notice something of very great importance here: *our self-esteem is usually closely related to our perception of how we are esteemed by others*. From now on I will use the term *other-esteem* for this esteem received from others. It is directly related to the greater status or dignity attaching to the winning of the object of mimetic desire.

We could also use the term 'success' of course, but I wish to be very clear on the degree to which the regard or esteem of others is crucial to our own sense of self-worth and success. 'Success' might well be defined differently than other-esteem, for example the quality of work done by someone.

This is why mimetic desire for non-material things such as positions of importance is so powerful. Any such position becomes increasingly desirable as more people know about it. An entire school will be focused upon a school musical – so that Linda had become a notable person in the school, a celebrity in her own world. She has maximum other-esteem.

But for this very reason her humiliation is also maximised by the loss of the role. Her self-image has undoubtedly come to depend upon retaining the role, as she thinks ahead to the public performances when her parents and their friends will see her on stage. For this reason the producer of the musical had been seriously at fault in casting the parts initially, as he has now given her a great shock. Linda's humiliation will be school-wide, and she will probably fear that behind their sympathy her year group may always say: *"Nice girl, Linda – pity she couldn't sing."*

Humiliation, or shame, of this kind causes enormous pain, because we cannot live happily without self-esteem. If we are deeply wounded by a loss of other-esteem, deep anger is likely to follow. Jennifer bears the brunt of this, as she will now receive the esteem that should, from Linda's point of view, have come to herself.

Spiritual intelligence sees this connection between self-esteem and other-esteem and asks the question:

Is it wise to depend for self-esteem entirely upon other-esteem?

The answer is, of course, no. For if our self-esteem is entirely dependent upon the esteem of others, and those others are changeable in their esteem, we have no real personal security or strength. We are entirely at the mercy of others, whose esteem for us can evaporate as circumstances change.

What if, in her next school, Linda finds that the 'in' group in her year group has a test for entry – experimentation with hard drugs – and that this group's acceptance of her will depend upon her falling in line? She will face another test of character.

Where does strength of character, a spiritual matter, come from? Spiritual intelligence is certainly required if Linda is to find it. If she is to separate her self-esteem from her need to be esteemed, she must see the need for that separation, and begin to base her self-esteem on something less fickle and fragile than the other-esteem of her peers.

If Linda's family is supportive, and she has learnt that the esteem of those who are closest to her is of greater importance, she may well have rebuilt sufficient self-esteem to resist the peer pressures of her new school, and give a new leadership there. She will have realized, perhaps, that if other-esteem from peers is so fickle, it should not be over-valued. But if her self-esteem is still low, and she has an overwhelming need to 'fit in', she may be under greater pressure to simply conform.

Apart from the esteem of other humans, is there another, unshakeable, unvarying, source of self-esteem – a relationship or state-of-consciousness that will provide self-esteem and never let us down?

The great spiritual masters would all say yes. In the Judeo-Christian tradition this unshakeable relationship is with God. So spiritual intelligence will investigate this possibility also – in an intelligent way.

Other-esteem, Status, Celebrity – and the ‘Wannabe’

We have seen the relationship between self-esteem, other-esteem and status. Linda’s originally high status in the school was connected with the fact that she had apparently won a widely known and prized role.

If status is linked to ‘knownness’, then celebrity brings the highest status, because there is no greater degree of knownness and other-esteem.

Does celebrity actually explain most mimetic desire?

Remember the story of Anne:

Anne leafed through her favourite pop music magazine until she came upon the ad she had been scanning for weeks. It showed the very watch that could be seen on the wrist of her favourite pop star on her latest CD cover. If she saved carefully she would be able to afford it by the summer. But would it still be on sale at that price then? And if so would it still be in fashion? She had noticed that this star seemed to change jewellery very often, and might have a new CD out by then.

If Anne’s desire for the watch is dependent upon the pop star’s continuing to wear it, is it really the watch that Anne wants? Probably if the star’s next CD shows her wearing no watch, but a distinctive bracelet – and this bracelet is advertised in her magazine – she will spend her money on that instead. What do watch and bracelet both have in common, apart from being jewellery? The answer is, of course, an association with the star. Anne really desires that association, because, wearing the bracelet will link her with a celebrity, allowing her, at least in her imagination, to share in the most desirable thing that the star has, which is celebrity, or maximum other-esteem.

But if the star has ditched the watch, maybe it’s because she has decided she no longer really rates it. And if she’s wearing no watch,

maybe it's actually a bit 'last year's thing' to wear a watch at all. Anne will be safer with the bracelet. She has made this celebrity her supreme guide to what to wear.

We tend to be fascinated by people we believe to be fascinating – because *we* want to be fascinating. Along with celebrity we always find 'wannabes'. The reason is simple – the celebrity of some people depends upon the relative obscurity or unimportance of many others. The celebrity is caught in a spotlight of fascination, but most others are in relative shadow. The celebrity is to society what the favourite child is to the family – a distracter of attention and esteem from others.

The spiritually intelligent person will therefore ask serious questions about celebrity as such, asking in particular whether anyone ever should actually be considered more valuable as a person, more significant and important, more 'worth it' than anyone else. What if this happened:

Anne had saved all the money she needed to buy the star's bracelet, and knew that, since she had started saving a year ago for the watch, she would certainly be the first of her own year group to own one. She got her father to sign a cheque for the amount, and was on the point of posting it when she received another short letter from her friend **Anata** in Africa. It said simply, in an awful scrawl, 'My mother is gone blind and needs to pay the doctor to make her see again,' and gave the cost of the operation. When Anne converted the amount into her own currency it came to slightly less than the sum on the cheque.

Anne was torn. She wanted the bracelet, but what would she think of herself if she valued it more than her friend's mother? Looking up at her wall photos she imagined seeing a photograph of herself there wearing the bracelet, and beside it a photo of Anata's mother, still blind. She knew she would never be able to bear that – especially since the star would next be seen wearing an expensive anklet or necklace or whatever. "I'm worth more than this," she said – and sent the value of the cheque to her friend in Africa, who needed it far more.

Every day we are presented with choices of this kind. Anne's decision shows she is learning from what happens to her, and growing in spiritual intelligence or wisdom. Her compassion is a 'grace'. If she thinks a little further she may well ask: "Is anyone ever really more important than anyone else?"

If everyone could answer "No!" to this question, the world would change forever at that moment.

The reason this will take some time to happen is that Anne's sacrifice for her friend will never become as well known as the celebrity she admires – because the media too are fascinated by celebrity.

Even so, Anne is now a different person, feeling good about herself, because she has done far more for Anata's mother with her savings than she could have done for herself with the same money. She won't be a celebrity fashion follower this Summer, by her own decision. Will she go on wanting to be that celebrity? Will she need to?

The pop star's celebrity was certainly a powerful force in Anne's case, but we need to understand the reason for this. *Anne was not content initially to be simply herself.* She lacked the self-esteem that would have freed her from her need to buy other-esteem.

And this in turn explains the power of mimetic desire. We humans are self-esteem-seekers, and seek to possess those things we associate with greater other-esteem.

Is this true of Mary and Clare, whose desire for the lipstick does not seem to be associated with celebrity? Yes. Even if we are 'bested' in a tiny rivalry over a small object we tend to suppose that our rival now has more worth by virtue of the fact that she possesses what we also desired, but now cannot possess. Notice the word 'bested' – even the simplest words can reveal deep truths about the real purpose of much human desire – to add value to ourselves. This was why Mary just had to have the last lipstick – as otherwise Clare would have possessed the value that it symbolised for both girls – and Mary would have lost that value.

This tells us that our self-esteem tends to be fragile, vulnerable to the possibility of even one other person scoring a small victory over us.

And this in turn explains the wannabe, whom we can now define as:

Someone who wants to be someone else, because that other person seems to have more value as a person. The wannabe is therefore someone who has too little self-esteem. He or she covets, or mimetically desires, the 'being' of another person.

Another word for too little self esteem is *shame*. Many of us are ashamed to be ourselves. All of us fantasize occasionally about being other people, but the wannabe tends to want to live in that fantasy, usually to escape from a reality that is painful or oppressive. Anne has found self-respect in another way – through an experience of compassion for someone far less fortunate, but actually more important to her than the star she admires.

Is Spiritual Intelligence Different from Other Kinds?

This true story may help here:

Isaac Newton was one of the greatest scientific minds in history. He discovered that white light was composed of all the different colours we see in the rainbow – as well as the laws of motion and gravity. He used this knowledge to solve the greatest scientific mystery of his time: why our planet earth, with all the other planets, moves in orbit around the Sun. Without this insight, humans would never have understood planetary motion or landed on the moon in 1969.

Newton also developed an entirely new branch of mathematics called **calculus**. However, his mind was so busy on so many different things that he did not publish his work on calculus as soon as he might have done. Then in 1684 a German mathematician called **Leibniz** published a paper describing calculus, which he had discovered independently. Newton could not accept this, and claimed that Leibniz must somehow have stolen ideas from him. A deep enmity developed between the two, which Newton continued even after Leibniz died. Newton even pressurised his students to attack Leibniz in their own work. For the last 25 years of his life Newton remained obsessed with this conflict.

There is no question about the outstanding scientific and mathematical intelligence of Newton. But what about his spiritual intelligence?

We have already seen the very strong relationship between self-esteem and other-esteem, and the wisdom, or spiritual intelligence, of separating the two. We can explain Newton's behaviour towards Leibniz only in terms of his failure to do so. So important was it for Newton that everyone should know that he was the discoverer of calculus that he could not admit the possibility that someone else might have discovered it independently, as he had done. This closing of the mind to the possibility that another mathematical mind

might be as brilliant as his own was without question a failure of wisdom, or spiritual intelligence – and it actually diminished Newton’s reputation on the continent of Europe in his own lifetime.

It follows from this famous example that one can demonstrate other kinds of intelligence to the highest degree without using or demonstrating spiritual intelligence in a matter of the greatest importance.

And there are other examples from more recent times. Some scientists have laboriously faked research data, over many years, to prove conclusions they had become famous for. Only an overwhelming need for other-esteem can explain this behaviour – so overwhelming that it brought disgrace instead.

The Newton-Leibniz example shows also the spiritual danger of receiving great other-esteem, or fame. Had Newton not been already known as a ‘great mind’ he might not have behaved as he did. The need to maintain a great reputation, and then to stand by his attacks on Leibniz, was so strong that it prevented Newton from giving proper consideration to the means by which Leibniz might have discovered calculus independently.

Supposing Newton at some point before his death had said publicly:

“The Leibniz business ...maybe I was wrong. After all, the work of earlier mathematicians had helped me to discover calculus, so maybe they helped Leibniz too...”

Would we now think more or less of him for this? It would have been difficult for Newton to do this, for he was so justly proud of his gifts. But he would have demonstrated that in addition to his scientific and mathematical genius he had great wisdom and spiritual strength also.

There is indeed such a thing as spiritual intelligence, and it can indeed be absent where other kinds of intelligence are clearly present. Clearly Newton was capable of spiritual intelligence, for he also said:

“I don’t know what I may seem to the world, but as to myself, I seem to have been only like a boy playing on the sea-shore and diverting myself in now and then finding a smoother pebble or a prettier shell than ordinary, whilst the great ocean of truth lay all undiscovered before me.”

Quoted in *Joseph Spence Anecdotes* (J. Osborn, 1966)

Why can this wonderful picture of the child absorbed with the wonder of the world not be the full story of this altogether extraordinary man? The answer has to do with the power of other-esteem. It is far easier to diagnose someone else’s failures of wisdom than to see one’s own – and the more celebrity and other-esteem a person has, the more difficult it is for that person to be spiritually wise in relation to his own affairs.

Understanding Competition

You are driving at your most comfortable cruising speed, within the speed limit, on a motorway or freeway, with no other car visible ahead. Someone passes you, driving just a little faster, and then slows down ahead of you until he is moving at the same speed. You have not been impeded but you are now in tail position.

How do you feel about this?

Probably irritated, and inclined now to overtake by increasing your speed.

The reason is that the car in front has just deprived you of something – *priority*. And this niggles you. Why did that driver need to do that if his preferred speed is no greater than yours?

Almost certainly because when he was behind you he had the same irritation. He desired what you had and he did not – *priority*.

This is another example of mimetic desire. This driver has not impeded you in any way, and since you are still travelling at the speed you set for yourself he is not delaying you either. Yet he has deprived you of something you enjoyed a minute before, so you now have a new desire – the desire to accelerate.

Everyone knows what can develop out of this. You may well overtake, and so again may the other driver – and a deadly rivalry may follow. Stephen Spielberg's first successful movie, *Duel*, was based upon this simple phenomenon that everyone experiences. It was this very simplicity that gripped – the film had almost no dialogue, as the drivers never exchanged a word.

And of course this desire for priority was also the simple origin of the deadly sport of actual duelling with swords and pistols, just as it is the source of most human competition and conflict.

We are all fascinated by competition. It creates a tension and excitement we are all gripped by, to some degree, because it is a drama in which there will be winners and losers. This fascination has

become the bread-and-butter of junk TV. We are even assured that our global economy cannot function without it.

The problem is that in real life it often leads, almost inevitably, to excess, danger and tragedy – just as the Spielberg film *Duel* illustrated. Just as duelling with deadly weapons is no longer considered 'wise' we need to be always aware that any rivalry can get out of hand.

And even competitive economic achievement is dangerous. Vastly wealthy individuals now set a standard of showy private wealth that creates mimetic desires that the planet's resources and environment simply cannot sustain.

We need to ask: is competition in itself intelligent behaviour?

And the answer has to be: only within limits that pose no threat to our welfare and peace.

To set such limits we need to understand exactly what is going on when we are irritated by the person in the car in front, or the ostentatious neighbour, or the loudmouthed colleague, or the auction room rival who always wants to outbid us – or the swaggering foreign leader.

We need to understand, and to laugh at ourselves – for our vulnerability to mimetic desire.

The Bully, the Victim and You

Leona knew she wasn't very pretty or clever, and didn't much like what she saw when she looked in the mirror. But was she really so awful that so many must pick on her? Phil especially. "Slag" he called her every time he saw her, and Leona knew this was an invitation to everyone else to jeer her. Once she thought she had a friend when Betty sat beside her and said "Don't mind him!" But Phil had then picked on Betty as "Slag's friend", giving her an even worse time. Everyone fell in with Phil in the end – it was so much easier than opposing him.

Why does this sort of thing happen? Because some people, hungry for other-esteem, try to win it by humiliating the person they see as the weakest in a group. They usually have some physical advantage – height or strength, say – and so have no fear of physical retaliation. Often too they have a gift for identifying the person who has lowest self-esteem, for that person may well accept further humiliation. The problem here is as old as the human race. Let's look at it from Betty's point of view.

Betty didn't much like Phil, and felt bad about him picking on Leona. She had also been bullied like this, and knew what it felt like. So she had tried to befriend Leona. But then Phil had turned on her, sneering at her appearance and making comments about her 'sucking up' to teachers. He had even threatened her physically one day when no one was about. *"Ever seen what a broken bottle can do to someone's face?"*

It's clear that Phil is using two different weapons here at the same time. One is humiliating language – the public withdrawal of esteem. Jeering, sneering – these are expressions of contempt aimed at solidifying Phil's own power over the rest of the group.

What is happening here is that Phil with these insults is making a bid for the role of 'banker' and owner of class other-esteem. He is doing it by using essentially the methods of a warlord – terror, contempt and intimidation. If Leona and Betty are 'slags', and no-one dares to contradict this, then he, Phil, can dispense, and withhold, esteem as he chooses. His intimidatory style frightens others into making no opposing bid, so Phil's insults, and his bid, are allowed to stand. Esteem is withdrawn from the two girls, and given to Phil. He is apparently in control of class other-esteem.

This is the great danger of a society that does not insist upon basic respect as the right of everyone. We treat property rights as of greater importance than the right to esteem – handing bullies the initiative in dishing out insults as they see fit.

If we do not have a basic obligation to respect one another, we effectively declare our culture one in which other-esteem can be seized, as Phil is doing.

Phil's other weapon is terror – Betty's likely reaction to the physical threat. Notice that he doesn't make this threat publicly, knowing the legal danger.

Almost all of the power of the bully comes from the fact that esteem within groups can be manipulated if the right to esteem is undermined by a cult of unrestrained competition. Everyone's need to belong makes us vulnerable to insults, the withdrawal of esteem. Of all the things we fear, public humiliation is probably the worst. Just the thought of it – of being constantly the butt of everyone's contempt – can make us despair.

We have seen already why this is: our self-esteem is usually closely related to our experience of other-esteem.

But we have also seen in the case of Linda that it is dangerous to be entirely dependent for self-esteem upon other-esteem. Both Betty and Leona need to understand this too. If they can't esteem themselves in spite of Phil, they will remain passive, and Phil will remain in control of the dispensing of esteem. Someone has got to challenge Phil's bid for esteem-power.

Bullies must be confronted by someone. If the danger of doing so is very great, the situation must be made known to someone who can do this. But confrontation requires self-esteem.

Obviously when considering this, Betty will know well how Phil will react if she confronts him – with more insults and threats – designed to undermine the respect her other classmates will have for her. What if this happens?

Betty was frightened by Phil's threats – but she was also angry. Phil thought he had her frightened off, so he bullied Leona more than ever. Next day, Leona's look of reproach towards her for deserting her was more than Betty could bear. Knowing that Phil would be out of school that afternoon on work experience she called a meeting of the class. "I've had enough of this," she said angrily. "*Who does Phil think he is?* There isn't anyone here he hasn't insulted. Now he has threatened me with GBH, and any one of you could be next. He can't beat us all up. If we all tell him to get lost together, what can he do? When no-one spoke Betty went on: "Choose between us and Phil. I'm sitting with Leona from now on. I'm also going right now to the principal and the police about Phil's threat."

Betty is taking a great risk, but she is dealing with the problem in a straightforward way. Neither she nor anyone else in her class has any obligation to protect Phil, while Leona needs protection from him. By declaring openly what she is about to do, Betty is showing honesty and leadership, and can't be accused of being disloyal.

She is also challenging Phil's position as supreme dispenser of esteem, for Phil does think he has cornered the class esteem 'market'. Who indeed does he think he is?

Bullying costs lives, even when it doesn't involve physical abuse – because people cannot live without self-esteem, and victims will often kill themselves if no one tells them they are as deserving of respect as anyone else.

And if adults do not teach that principle at every opportunity they are at fault. Unfortunately, many schools mirror their society and so also

suffer from over-competition, unknowingly teaching children that self-esteem and other-esteem are inseparable, and that other-esteem is the rightful monopoly of the strongest and the loudest – or the ‘brightest’. If we do not start teaching the principle of inalienable self-respect, which logically also requires us all to give basic respect to others, we will be complicit in bullying and murder.

And this is why spiritual intelligence should be on the curriculum of every school. Our society cannot recover until we all understand that self-respect is a right and an obligation we each of us owe ourselves, and is not for anyone to take from us. If western society remains a free market for other-esteem, in which people can be robbed of this birthright by the ‘free enterprise’ of the esteem-greedy, it has no future – and could make the planet uninhabitable.

Murder By Media

Philippa hated what she saw in the mirror. All her magazines showed slim and sexy girls with the kind of Goddess features that boys competed for. Movies and TV did the same. Philippa tried so hard with her clothes and make-up and dieting to look like them, but her basic proportions and looks were just *wrong*. It was so important to her that someone should tell her she was beautiful, but what a joke! It could never happen. She might as well be dead. So what if she *was* starving herself now?

In the last chapter we saw how Phil had tried to control the bank of other-esteem in his class, so that he would be sure that no one would laugh at him.

Our western media often do essentially the same, selecting stereotypes of physical attractiveness and focusing the spotlight of public attention upon these. With TV and video and film, these physical stereotypes dominate our visual culture. The spotlight thrown on them creates a tiny aristocracy of the physically desirable that implies that anyone outside it is undesirable and unattractive. Here too our culture insults millions, persuading them to embark upon self-destructive dieting, plastic surgery and self-contempt.

Who on earth knows what human physical beauty is? Who has the right or authority or expertise to decide such a question? Why on earth do we have such respect for the celebrity media, when they insult us just as Phil insulted Leona and Betty?

Suppose you started a magazine called "Violent Crime" that carried lip-smacking stories of successful criminals and 'How To' articles on mugging, rape and bank robbery. You would expect, would you not, a howl of public outrage.

But most magazines for women highlight a few dozen women who have hijacked the global bank of public admiration – and billions of other women who will never appear there actually pay money for

these monthly insults to their own uniqueness, their own divergence from that stereotype.

And essentially they are being manipulated by exploitation of their own mimetic desire, evoked simply by the camera and by print and electronic display media. Our internal logic works like this:

They are photographed. *Here* are their photographs, visible to millions. *They* must be desirable. *My* photo isn't here. *I* look different. *I* am undesirable, unless *I* can look like *them*.

It is the wannabe problem all over again. It is also the problem of the driver being passed unnecessarily by another.

Spiritual intelligence tells us that diversity, difference, is the necessary basis of individuality and uniqueness. We humans have an incredible gift for discerning tiny variations that allows us to look at a million human photos, finding no two exactly alike.

So why, when we look at some photos, do we say '*I wish I looked like that!?*'

Because our self-esteem is always vulnerable to hijacking, unless we develop our spiritual intelligence.

Abraham Lincoln showed it when he said: "The Lord prefers common-looking people. That is why He made so many of them."

The point is that no one in the world has a greater right to tell you who is beautiful than you do. If you think otherwise, why? Have you handed Godlike power over your self-esteem to someone else? To agree that some people have authority to decide the beauty or otherwise of others is as dangerous as handing a loaded pistol to a bully – as it deprives people daily of a sense of their own incredible uniqueness.

Here too we see the necessity of separating self-esteem from other-esteem. And the need to question the role of the media in our society.

Just as we must confront the Phils and ask them who they think they are, we need daily to question the role of the media in deciding who is valuable in society, and who is not.

The Paradox of Esteem – and ‘The World’

Place in a room twelve people who own nothing and who survive by begging for money. Let no one else enter. Keep them there for an hour, and then let them out. How many will leave richer than when they went in?

Place in a room twelve people who lack self-esteem and who are avidly seeking other-esteem from everyone they meet. Keep them there for an hour also. How many will leave that room satisfied and pleased with the experience?

The answer, of course, is none – in both cases. Just as none of the beggars can afford to give money to one another, none of the esteem-seekers is capable of giving esteem to someone else. All are ‘look at me’ people seeking attention, so none can give it. They are esteem-poor, and are in the same fix as the twelve beggars who must beg fruitlessly from one another.

But add to those twelve in that second room someone who knows she is infinitely loved and lovable, and is just bursting to tell everyone that this is true of them also. How many now will leave that room happier than when they went in?

Probably all thirteen – because all have received something from the experience: the twelve esteem-seekers have met someone who can esteem all of them, and most will respond appreciatively – so the esteem-giver has achieved her purpose also.

In many ways this is a parable about modern society. We are taught to be ambitious, to seek ‘success’, to go out and astonish the world. But if everyone is saying ‘look at me’ to achieve success, no one can be fully satisfied. “What a bunch of egotists!” each of us may say, in great disappointment, but this may be true of ourselves also. An egotistical world is the saddest and poorest possible.

And this is why the search for self-esteem through the achievement of other-esteem so often ends in disillusionment. Undoubtedly this is part of the mid-life crisis that afflicts so many in the West today. Despite our astonishing material success there is an esteem famine

there. Why else would children be shooting one another in search of respect?

But if the search for self-esteem through acquiring other-esteem is unlikely to succeed, how else are we to find it? If you are asking this question now, you are using spiritual intelligence, for this is one of the five or six great human questions.

And one of the most surprising things about the answer is that it is often found in total solitude – in the desert, or on the ocean, or in the forest, or in the darkness of night underneath the canopy of stars – when no other human voice is heard.

The reason is that in that solitude we may suddenly stop comparing ourselves with others and experience giftedness – the truth that all that surrounds us is a gift to us.

To honour someone we give them the greatest gift we can afford – its value is a symbol of the value to us of the person we give it to.

Every single one of us has been given the gift of the Universe – which has always proved vaster than our ability to measure it. So every one of us is infinitely loved and esteemed.

From this consciousness an unassailable self-esteem can be acquired – one that the world of mimetic desire cannot give, and cannot take from us either. We are obviously using that expression 'the world' in a special sense here, and it is important we pin it down.

'The World' is competitive human society – which deprives us of self-esteem by taking from us our sense of our own giftedness from birth – and by enticing us to compete with one another for other-esteem.

If you lack self-esteem, it may well be 'the world', and especially your own experience of it, that has done this to you. It does not have the authority to do so.

You must repossess your own giftedness, the honour you have been given by the giver of everything, remembering also that everyone else has been given the same gift.

For you are needed in that room.

Who is the Giver?

What prevents us regarding everything as a gift?

Suppose you were born within a large prison but were raised by a loving parent who gave you everything you needed as a child.

Suppose you had room to play with other children as you pleased, and food to eat. Suppose one night your father asked you to look up at the stars, and told you that all of that magical space was a gift to you.

You might ask at that point: "Who gave me this?"

Is the question childish, or intelligent?

It is both. If everything is a gift, then someone must have given it.

Certain that the concept of God belonged to the childhood of the human race, many intellectuals today laugh at the notion of a personal God. But a creation that has made us as personal beings must be in some sense personal.

By personal we mean 'having personality' – a unique identity and value which is far greater than the collection of atoms and molecules that make up our bodies. Included in the notion of 'person' is the idea of 'spirit' – a 'being' which is non-material. A person is a spiritual being.

At this point the sceptical intellectual will probably say: "But I do not believe that creation is intentional. We exist as we are as the result of a vast chain of circumstances and coincidences occurring over vast periods of time."

He may go on to give an account of the 'Big Bang' as described by physicists – a theory that every atom that exists in the whole universe emerged out of a singular event or explosion of matter. He may then go on to give a summary of evolutionary theory, which proposes to explain how every life form that now exists arose gradually out of very simple life forms. These may in turn have emerged originally from an accident involving certain kinds of acids and natural electricity in the form of lightning.

Is this intellectual's faith in his own theory greater or less than the child's faith in the existence of a great giver?

It is, I suggest, at least as great. But the child's question is more intelligent. For the acceptance of everything as *gift* gives us a route to self-esteem that frees us from the *need* for other-esteem, the source of most evils.

The existence of personal, conscious beings like us proves that creation is at least as great as personality and consciousness, neither of which are capable of being analysed, let alone explained, by science. It is simply unintelligent therefore to deny the possibility of a personal creator – a creative intentionality or purpose that is personal. Especially because we humans are obviously less than creation itself – enclosed by it as we are, like the child within the womb.

Modern atheism partly arose out of Christian clericalism – the clerical attempt to hold onto intellectual supremacy when the scientific revolution brought by Copernicus, Galileo and Newton offered new routes to truth. Science could verify some theories and discover new truths, and so raised questions about the derivation of all truth from religious texts such as the Bible. Atheism arose, in other words out of mimetic competition for intellectual supremacy between secularist and clericalist forces. As both generally seek dominance rather than truth, neither is completely authoritative.

And that is why we need all of us to understand the wilderness experience of the great mystics and saints – because their moral victory over mimetic desire – the desire for human other-esteem – gives them greater authority than those who try to impose their certitudes upon others – whether they be secular agnostics and atheists or religious authoritarians.

To accept everything as gift is to declare the existence of a giver greater than all. Think of this giver as creation itself, if you wish, but remember that since it created you as a conscious person, and is greater than you, it is altogether likely that this giver is both conscious and personal.

Further, the texts associated with this Giver in the Judeo-Christian tradition reveal more clearly than any other the origins of human evil in mimetic desire.

The world of mimetic desire is the prison that surrounds the child – the prison that will soon enough presume the authority to take from him the gift that was his birthright, the gift of knowing he is already esteemed. One day soon he will be told he is son of a criminal, and therefore worthless.

Nothing but 'the world' stands between ourselves and the truth of our own giftedness – which is the real truth.

When read correctly the Bible restores the gift stolen from the child by the world. It can also restore the gift seized by the atheistic intellectual – the gift of spiritual self-esteem.

Genesis as a Parable on Mimetic Desire

“You shall be like God!”

According to Genesis Chapter 3 Verse 5 (*Gen 3:5*), the first book of the Bible, this was the first and greatest temptation humans were exposed to. It can be translated as “You shall have whatever makes Gods Godlike”.

This, clearly, is a temptation to the greatest possible mimetic desire – the desire to possess what Gods possess.

In the ancient world, the world in which Genesis was written, Gods were, of course immortal – and at the summit of the human pyramid of power and esteem.

Gods had everything mere humans lacked. They were self-sufficient, invulnerable, powerful, celebrated and immortal.

Did some people actually want to be Gods back then? Yes, indeed – and the ‘greatest’ men were often thought to be divine. And the ‘greatest’ men were all conquerors of some kind, who received the adulation – or maximum esteem – of the masses. The victorious general must have the favour of the Gods, it was thought, and so might be, or become, a God. This was precisely what happened to people such as Alexander the Great and Julius Caesar.

And out of this desire of men to acquire divinity through force, great persecution and bloodshed came – as well as evils like slavery.

So Genesis is telling us that humans in the ancient world mimetically desired divinity, and that great evil came from this. Nothing could be more true and more simple in both an historical and explanatory sense.

So what the Bible is saying is that the evils that humans inflict upon themselves began with our mimetic desire for ‘glory’ or celebrity.

And of course a kind of immortality could be achieved through celebrity – for the celebrated individual will be remembered in oral tradition, and his deeds will be recorded in writing if this is also possible. Alexander, we know, desired and fought for this kind of

celebrity and immortality – and is still accorded it by historians today. Genesis was written before Alexander lived, so it is both accurate and prophetic.

Cain – the First Deadly Rival

The first blow struck in the Bible arose out of Cain's jealousy of Abel – as God appeared to favour Abel's sacrifice more than his own.
(Genesis Chapter 4, Verses 1-8 – abbreviated as Gen 4:1-8)

So violence arises out of rivalry, and can arise out of even religious rivalry – a competitive desire for the greater favour of God.

This too is both true and prophetic.

The Bible, then, is a series of books or texts which explore the origins of human good and evil – with the intention of revealing us to ourselves.

Our greatest mistake, then, is our tendency to search for self-esteem through other-esteem. This is the source of all rivalry and conflict.

But if creation wishes us well, why allow us to develop this flaw?

Because mimesis – imitation – is an essential part of our ability to learn from one another.

Children learn from their parents by imitation – for example to speak their parents' language – and their willingness to learn is reinforced by praise and encouragement. At all stages of life, in order to adapt to new circumstances, we need to watch closely as people introduce us to our new roles, tasks and duties. Mimesis is an essential part of our response.

And this is why we can behave as though all esteem is ours to give – which in turn reinforces our tendency to seek esteem exclusively from one another. We mimetically learn to bestow and seek esteem. And unfortunately we learn to withhold esteem as a means of gaining and asserting power and control.

We also learn to insult, humiliate and shame one another.

But the central teaching of the Bible is that God wishes to free us from this tendency – to bring us to a higher level of consciousness.

Fathers, Mothers and Children

Abraham's wife Sarah had not borne a child, and so was treated with contempt by her slave girl Hagar, who had borne a son to Abraham at Sarah's bidding. When Sarah too bore a child, Isaac, she took her revenge – the expulsion of Hagar. (*Gen 16-21*)

Isaac, son of Abraham, had two sons, Esau and Jacob – and they were rivals. Both coveted – mimetically desired – the favour of their father. When Jacob tricked Isaac into giving him, rather than Esau, his special blessing, Esau vowed revenge. (*Gen 27*)

This theme of rivalry recurs constantly in the Old Testament. Brothers conflict over inheritance, birthrights and their father's favour, and women are often rivals over fertility or the lack of it. In both cases, there is a status attached to the object of rivalry – and conflict and bitterness follow.

So does victimisation, a constantly recurring theme in the whole of human history.

Jacob had seven sons, and his favourite was Joseph. Envy of him the favour of their father, Joseph's brothers planned to kill him – and then instead sold him to merchants who took him to Egypt. There he was again victimised by an unjust accusation, and yet survived.

Joseph later forgave his brothers and embraced them. (*Gen 30-50*) The story foreshadows another far greater – in which another man is victimised and yet forgives.

Forgiveness is necessary, as we are all of us equally covetous. The withholding of forgiveness is spiritually unintelligent, as it maintains the rivalries that destroy our peace.

Today when conflicts occur we tend to ask: Who is right? As though conflicts must arise from the greater 'badness' of one party. We do not look simply for rivalry caused by mimetic desire for the same status-giving object or role. The reason is that if we realized that possession was the root of rivalry and conflict we would then question our own possessiveness – our own mimetic desire.

Do Not Covet

Those who miss the extraordinary wisdom of the Old Testament often cite the Decalogue, the Ten Commandments given by God to Moses on Mount Sinai. (*Exodus 20*)

"Who nowadays covets his neighbour's ox?" they ask, scornfully.

In fact the commandment lists also spouses, tents, servants – finishing with 'or any of your neighbour's possessions'.

So it is covetousness itself that is forbidden – mimetic desire for what belongs to others, desires we develop for what belongs to people we admire or envy.

Covetousness :

- constantly threatens our peace;
- has caused most of the horrific violence in history;
- underlies the current 'War on Terrorism';
- alienates our children from their own spiritual beauty;
- now threatens our planetary environment.

In warning us against it for so long, and in giving us so many examples of how it influences us, the Bible proves itself to be the greatest of all books.

The fact that covetousness is now almost a forgotten word, and now needs to be re-explained as mimetic desire, is in itself very significant. We live in an era when most educated people enjoy the benefits of mass production of food and almost every other article we could desire. We can trace this unprecedented technological power to an historic event called the *Enlightenment* of the 1700s. This was a reaction against the intellectual supremacy of Christian clergy, and it included an attack upon the Bible as a source of little but bigotry and false ideas.

When Christian fundamentalists mistakenly responded by insisting that the Bible must be taken as a true account of history and science, this intensified the intellectual assault upon it by those who are non-religious. As a result, there is still deep prejudice against it among most western intellectuals.

Even now, when authors from this tradition explore the concept of spiritual intelligence, few have yet grasped how crucial the Bible is as a source for the understanding of their subject – and for the development of a spirituality that will enable us to apply it.

This is crucial in an era when our powerful media are exploiting mimetic desire to a degree undreamt of in the ancient world, and in a manner that threatens all of us.

How Israel Became a Kingdom

The people of Israel had traditionally been led by prophets like Moses, who scolded them for their mistakes but did not claim the Godlike power and status that went with kingship. The Kings of the time tended to make war to boost their own status – something that prophets, being spiritually wise, did not favour. The Book of Samuel tells us:

So all the elders of Israel gathered together and came to Samuel at Ramah. They said to him, "You are old, and your sons do not walk in your ways; now appoint a king to lead us, such as all the other nations have."
(1 Samuel 8:4,5)

Notice 'such as all the other nations have'. This tells us something of crucial importance – that the earthly kingdom of Israel arose out of mimetic desire, or covetousness – the desire to possess that which is possessed by others – *because* they possess it. The perceived greater power of the surrounding king-led systems – especially that of the Philistines – led Israel to envy them, to suppose that it was these systems that gave them this greater power, and to undervalue the system they already had – one in which prophets and judges ruled in a relationship of equality and familiarity rather than hierarchy and splendour.

The text goes on to tell us that Samuel was displeased by that request, but that the Lord told him:

"Listen to all that the people are saying to you; it is not you they have rejected, but they have rejected me as their king."

So, according to the text, the kingdom of Israel essentially involved the rejection of an earlier 'kingdom of God' over which the Lord 'reigned' through the prophet Samuel, but without placing Samuel on some sacred plane above other men – a 'kingdom' that God preferred, and one without a palace or court. The word 'kingdom' in

that context obviously has the widest possible connotation: that over which there is some kind of rule or dominion.

The text therefore tells us that the kingdom of Israel was itself inferior to an earlier system that had no reigning human king. It was flawed from the beginning by mimetic desire.

This fact is usually missed, because Christian clergy came later to accept the privileges of power in a world of kings, and preferred not to notice it.

Samuel's rebuke to the monarchists of his own time is one of the greatest of all prophetic texts, with a truth that will never disappear:

"This is what the king who will reign over you will do: He will take your sons and make them serve with his chariots and horses, and they will run in front of his chariots. Some he will assign to be commanders of thousands and commanders of fifties, and others to plough his ground and reap his harvest, and still others to make weapons of war and equipment for his chariots. He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers. He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive groves and give them to his attendants. He will take a tenth of your grain and of your vintage and give it to his officials and attendants. Your menservants and maidservants and the best of your cattle and donkeys he will take for his own use. He will take a tenth of your flocks, and you yourselves will become his slaves. When that day comes, you will cry out for relief from the king you have chosen, and the LORD will not answer you in that day."
(1 Sam 8:11-18)

What is being described here is clearly subjection: a loss of dignity and freedom. The sons who ran in front of the chariot would be the first to die in battle – for the glory of the person they served.

Samuel's criticism of ancient kingship could have served perfectly the causes of revolutionary America and republican France when they opposed their kings nearly three millennia later. It is still relevant wherever sole rulers bid for, or enjoy, power based upon a personality cult.

Although the three great kings of Israel – Saul, David and Solomon – were all anointed to signify their relationship to God, all three had the same flaw as those who wanted the kingdom to begin with. We will look at each of them in turn.

Saul – The First King of Israel

Everyone knows the story of David, the boy hero who toppled the Philistine giant Goliath with a sling. They may not know that this very deed earned him the murderous hatred of the man he had saved – Saul, the first king of Israel.

When Saul and David returned from their victory over the defeated Philistines they were greeted with the following tribute in song from the women of Israel:

“Saul has killed his thousands, and David his tens of thousands.” (1 Samuel 18:7)

The Bible then tells us:

Saul was very angry; this refrain galled him. “They have credited David with tens of thousands,” he thought, “but me with only thousands. What more can he get but the kingdom?” And from that time on Saul kept a jealous eye on David. (1 Samuel 18:8-9)

You will spot straight away what had happened here. In being the first man raised to the kingship, Saul had become the greatest man in Israel, a celebrity admired by all. His self-image depended upon this status. When David replaced him in the admiration of Israel’s women, he lost this unique status, and could lose more. He now mimetically desired, murderously, what David had deprived him of – making sure that he would be remembered as the lesser figure.

It is quite astonishing that this text should be so starkly honest – as the very first historians in all other cultures were obliged to record only the greatness of their kings. The first unmistakable revelation that murderous mimetic desire could follow any elevation of one

individual to political celebrity, and would lie at the base of all political intrigue and assassination, is found in the Old Testament. It predicts three millennia of such behaviour, and will never lose its power to do so.

Saul's jealousy of David led to a war between them. The Bible tells us that David did not enter into rivalry with Saul, going to great lengths to placate him. But Saul was irreconcilable, and was eventually killed by David's men.

"He was a winner; I was a loser!"
Sirhan Sirhan, assassin of Robert Kennedy in 1968.

David

David is one of the most compelling characters in the Bible. His courage and daring made him the greatest of all Jewish heroes. Yet we are told that, when he had succeeded Saul as king:

One evening David got up from his bed and walked around on the roof of the palace. From the roof he saw a woman bathing. The woman was very beautiful, and David sent someone to find out about her. The man said, "Isn't this Bathsheba, the daughter of Eliam and the wife of Uriah the Hittite?" Then David sent messengers to get her. She came to him, and he slept with her. (2 Sam 11:2-4)

Clearly David's sin here has to do with lust as well as covetousness, but when Bathsheba became pregnant David was in danger of exposure by her husband, Uriah. The story continues:

In the morning David wrote a letter to Joab (his General) and sent it with Uriah. In it he wrote, "Put Uriah in the front line where the fighting is fiercest. Then withdraw from him so that he will be struck down and die." (2 Sam 11:14-15)

Like Saul before him, David had chosen to murder someone rather than lose other-esteem. Again the text pulls no punches, and the prophet Nathan then challenged David, who admitted the sin.

Another disaster followed. David's son Absalom plotted against him, and was killed in the violence that followed. Such is the power of mimetic desire for other-esteem. This theme of father and son divided by the hereditary prestige that the son may not inherit until the father's death is a recurrent one in all cultures.

The frankness of the text in revealing the main cause of violence in mimetic desire for the same prize – that is, in rivalry – is a distinctive characteristic of the Bible throughout. That it should be so candid in relation to the greatest of Jewish heroes is all the more remarkable.

This frankness helps to explain why God had rebuked the Israelites, through Samuel, for desiring a monarchy to begin with. It was a mistaken desire as it inevitably elevated one person above all others, exposing that individual to irresistible temptations.

Notice that the Bible does not say: 'Saul was a bad man', or 'David was a good man until he coveted Bathsheba'. The truth is that we all have the ability to be good, but also the tendency to make mistakes and do evil. We need to stop the childish habit of trying to divide the world up into good people on one side, and bad people on the other. We are essentially all the same – but with the capacity to choose correctly, and incorrectly, between good and evil.

To make good use of this capacity we must develop our spiritual intelligence, or – as the Bible would say – 'grow in wisdom'.

Solomon's Gift

Solomon was the second son of Bathsheba by David. In time David died, and Solomon then said this beautiful prayer:

"Now, O Lord my God, you have made your servant king in place of my father David. But I am only a little child and do not know how to carry out my duties. Your servant is here among the people you have chosen, a great people, too numerous to count or number. So give your servant a discerning heart to govern your people and to distinguish between right and wrong. For who is able to govern this great people of yours?"
(1 Kings 3:7-9)

Notice Solomon asked for a *discerning heart* – sometimes translated as 'a heart that is wise'. This is the simplest definition in all literature of 'spiritual intelligence'. Ancient Hebrew did not have separate words for 'heart' and 'mind'. So Solomon was aiming to think with a heart that was pure, that is, a heart that loved without ambition.

The text continues:

The Lord was pleased that Solomon had asked for this. So God said to him, "Since you have asked for this and not for long life or wealth for yourself, nor have asked for the death of your enemies but for discernment in administering justice, I will do what you have asked. I will give you a wise and discerning heart, so that there will never have been anyone like you, nor will there ever be.
(1 Kings 3:10-15)

The most famous example of Solomon's spiritual intelligence is the story of the two women who claimed the same child, after one had smothered her own while sleeping. (1 Kings 3: 16-28) Only one claim could be valid, but which? Solomon ordered the child to be divided between them, whereupon the real mother prevented this by giving it up. Solomon then returned the child to her unharmed.

Obviously we focus here on Solomon's discernment that the genuine love of the real mother may have precisely this result, but we usually miss the reason that the other woman will not make the same offer. The text tells us.

But the other said: "Neither I nor you shall have him. Cut him in two!" (1 Kings 3:26)

Imagine the plight of this careless mother when she woke up and found her child dead beside her, through her own fault. Remember the prestige that a child gave to a woman in that world – and the shame that would now be heaped on her for killing her own. How could she avoid that shame? Only by stealing the live infant nearby while its mother still slept. Otherwise she must soon hear the taunts of its mother, and all the other women who will soon learn about her carelessness. The live child will save her that humiliation – and so will even a half child, for this result leaves open the question of which of the women was at fault.

Solomon must have understood this – and why the switch had been made. The gift of wisdom that Solomon received from God included an understanding of covetousness, and of how in this instance it explained the theft of the child.

How is the purity of love best tested? By seeing if it is willing to suffer on behalf of the person loved. The child's mother would certainly have been indignant if the prestige of having a child was lost to another unjustly – but far stronger was her love for the child. She would bear the shame and pain that would follow from losing it rather than see it harmed. The other would not, for she had no equivalent attachment to the child.

No wonder Solomon became famed for this story. His grasp of the way in which mimetic desire explains criminal behaviour would have had application in many different contexts.

The story also helps us to see clearly the distinction between love and desire, which we often confuse. Love seeks the good of the person loved, without self-regard – while desire is essentially self-centred.

Yet fame was also Solomon's undoing, as it brought him wives from other cultures, who brought their Gods with them.

He followed Ashtoreth the goddess of the Sidonians, and Molech the detestable god of the Ammonites. So Solomon did evil in the eyes of the Lord; he did not follow the Lord completely, as David his father had done. (1 Kings 11:5-6)

So Solomon was not so wise that he could always remember who had given him wisdom when he had humbly asked for it – and his weakness was connected with the renown it brought him. The story is a warning to all who seek spiritual intelligence. In our day too the prestige awarded to intelligence misleads intellectuals into arrogance – the very source of the evil of mimetic desire.

Even our desire for wisdom may be mimetic. Because it is now fashionable we may covet even spiritual intelligence, seeking to be known for it. The desire for other-esteem can trip us up at any turn.

It is as well to underline this warning at this point. The Spirit of truth cannot assist anyone to become *greater* than anyone else, because it loves us all equally.

Caesar

The Making of a Pagan God

It is now fashionable to believe that the pagan culture that Christianity replaced in the centuries after Christ was somehow superior to it. Because both Greece and Rome had attained a high level of culture before Christ, and because we have no real experience of that world, we can make the mistake of supposing that everything about it was ideal.

In fact that ancient world was gripped by violence and terror. The power of Rome was based upon the brutal subjection of many different peoples in the Mediterranean world – including the Jews, Jesus' own people.

Internally too Rome was a violent society, in which there was a long tradition of successful generals seizing power by force.

The greatest of all these warlords was Julius Caesar, an extraordinarily talented man, who lived in the century before Christ. Plutarch, the Roman historian tells us that :

After reading some part of the history of Alexander, Caesar sat a great while very thoughtful, and at last burst out into tears. His friends were surprised, and asked him the reason of it. "Do you think," said he, "I have not just cause to weep, when I consider that Alexander at my age had conquered so many nations, and I have all this time done nothing that is memorable?"

So, covetous of the 'glory' of Alexander, Caesar then conquered what is now known as France, adding it, and part of Germany, to the Roman state. He was the first Roman general to invade Britain. He was also a brilliant administrator and writer – recording his exploits for all to read back in Rome.

Then in 49 BC Caesar marched his army back to Rome and seized supreme power. Fearing what might happen next a group of leading men in Rome began to plot against him. Many centuries later William Shakespeare wrote a play about this conspiracy, again using the work of Plutarch.

Shakespeare here puts words in the mouths of two of the plotters – Cassius and Brutus – discussing Caesar’s growing power. The ‘Colossus’ was a giant statue that once stood across the entrance to the harbour of Rhodes – one of the wonders of the ancient world. Cassius speaks first:

*Why, man, he doth bstride the narrow world
Like a Colossus, and we petty men
Walk under his huge legs and peep about
To find ourselves dishonourable graves.
Men at some time are masters of their fates:
The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars,
But in ourselves that we are underlings.*

*Brutus and Caesar: what should be in that "Caesar"?
Why should that name be sounded more than yours?
Write them together, yours is as fair a name;
Sound them, it doth become the mouth as well;
Weigh them, it is as heavy; conjure with 'em,
"Brutus" will start a spirit as soon as "Caesar."*

*Now, in the names of all the gods at once,
Upon what meat doth this our Caesar feed
That he is grown so great? Age, thou art shamed!
Rome, thou hast lost the breed of noble bloods!
When went there by an age since the great flood
But it was famed with more than with one man?*

You will notice here that Cassius is speaking the language of simple rivalry, mixed with flattery of Brutus, who had a great reputation for patriotism. Cassius is jealous of Caesar's power and glory, as he finds it insulting to himself.

Cassius' own ambition is clear, but here is how Brutus replies:

*That you do love me, I am nothing jealous;
What you would work me to, I have some aim.
Brutus had rather be a villager
Than to repute himself a son of Rome
Under these hard conditions as this time
Is like to lay upon us.*

Here is a man who listens to flattery, who cannot hear the naked ambition underlying it, and who wants to believe that his own motives are pure.

It is remarkable how well this illustrates a theme already familiar to us from the Bible. When one man rises above others to supreme power and adulation, his hold on power is almost immediately envied and disputed. The story of Caesar shows how mimetic desire, mere rivalry, lay at the root of the bloodshed of that Pagan system.

Caesar's route to power over the bodies of hundreds of thousands in France and Germany, and even northern Italy, had put his own life in danger.

But his death tells us something else – about the making of pagan Gods. Calpurnia, Caesar's wife, was said to have tried to persuade Caesar to stay at home on the day of his assassination. Here again Shakespeare brilliantly puts words in Caesar's mouth that summarise Calpurnia's dream the night before:

Caesar speaks of Calpurnia, his wife:

*She dreamt tonight she saw my statue,
Which, like a fountain with an hundred spouts,
Did run pure blood, and many lusty Romans
Came smiling and did bathe their hands in it.
And these does she apply for warnings and portents
And evils imminent, and on her knee
Hath begg'd that I will stay at home today.*

Shakespeare's Caesar offered this as an excuse for staying at home that day, but one of the plotters explained the dream as follows:

*This dream is all amiss interpreted;
It was a vision fair and fortunate.
Your statue spouting blood in many pipes,
In which so many smiling Romans bathed,
Signifies that from you great Rome shall suck
Reviving blood, and that great men shall press
For tinctures, stains, relics, and cognizance.
This by Calpurnia's dream is signified.*

Shakespeare's Caesar supposed that it was from the living Caesar that Rome 'would suck reviving blood' – and went to the Forum that day, where he was stabbed to death by each of the plotters in turn.

In fact we know now that it is possible that Caesar was well aware of the plot to kill him – and went to his death anyway because he wanted to live forever – as a God.

For a remarkable thing happened next. Caesar's friends and relatives declared Caesar to be indeed divine, a God who would now watch over the Roman Empire, and from whom new rulers, to be known as Emperors, and as 'Caesars', would derive their authority. This new Roman empire was to last for over four centuries, and it

was into this empire that Jesus was born – in the reign of the first Emperor, Augustus, Caesar's nephew..

So pagan Gods could arise out of murder and assassination, and pagan society was founded upon violence of this kind. There is no reason why human history should not have continued forever in this way.

Spiritual intelligence, alive to the spirit of truth which influences all great art, can penetrate to the heart of an ancient culture, asking: What is the connection between the life and death of Julius Caesar, and the life and death of Jesus of Nazareth? We can see already three very strange parallels: both men were murdered, within a century of one another; both were then proclaimed Gods by their supporters; and both became great founding figures.

But there the similarities end – for Jesus of Nazareth was remarkably different from all the great men who had 'bestrode' the ancient world – from Alexander to Caesar. Especially in his attitude to mimetic desire. Where Alexander had set out to outdo his father and conquer the known world by force, and Caesar had sought to follow Alexander, Jesus set out to build a very different kind of kingdom – *without imitating anyone, and without striking a single blow.*

Jesus – The Story Begins

Although we are told (*Matt 1*) that Jesus was a descendant of David, on his foster father Joseph's side, the Gospel story of the birth of Jesus emphasises the poverty and simplicity of his parents. This emphasis continues throughout the story – as if the Gospel writers wanted everyone to realize that Jesus owed nothing to wealth and power, and spent almost all of his time with the humblest and poorest.

In other words he did not desire what made important people important – political power and wealth. Immediately this gives us an inkling of what made him different from all the great kings of Israel who had preceded him: *he coveted nothing; he was free of mimetic desire.*

On the other hand, we are told, (*Matt 2*) the reigning king, Herod, plotted Jesus' death as soon as he heard that another king had been born. From what has gone before – especially from the story of Saul – we will immediately understand what was wrong with Herod. He could not bear the thought that he might lose other-esteem, and power, to some boy child born in his own lifetime in his own kingdom. From this murderous fear of shame came the crime of the slaughter of the innocents – the putting to death of every young boy in the town of Bethlehem where Jesus had been born.

But Jesus' parents had already fled to Egypt with him, from where they journeyed to Nazareth once they knew it was safe to do so. Nazareth, like Bethlehem, was a humble place where we can assume Jesus grew up like any other small boy in a small town.

We can assume also that it was in Nazareth that he heard for the first time all the great stories of the Old Testament, which was for all Jewish parents the most holy of all books.

We know nothing for sure of the questions that must have sprung to life in his mind as he heard these stories. Theologians do not generally believe that his mind would have grasped from the

beginning the meaning of those stories, or understood straight away what his own life was to be.

The story of his being found once in the Temple in Jerusalem, questioning the holy men there, at the age of twelve, may well indicate that by then he had already decided to become a Rabbi, or teacher. Had his mother told him of an extraordinary experience when he was conceived? Again we do not know – but can speculate that such an experience would have made her especially careful about his education and training.

We do not know either when he came to think of the God of Israel as 'Abba' – someone as close as 'Dad'. However, we can again suppose that from an early age he prayed to this God of Israel, and received some kind of response in his heart. The story of Solomon is likely to have led him to say similar prayers for guidance in his own life, and to listen very carefully for some of the wisdom Solomon had received – and probably to learn from Solomon's mistake.

From first to last Jesus does not behave in the Gospels as someone demanding to be worshipped, as self-proclaiming Gods of the time were prone to do. The God of Israel was above all a mysterious being, about whom it is difficult for any human to write with any kind of authority. Jesus remained always a very vulnerable human person who got tired, hungry and discouraged – just like the rest of us. If we 'deify' Jesus we must do it in a way that does not presume to understand God – for none of us does. That is to say, if Jesus was God then God is even more anxious to be a vulnerable human being than humans typically are to be Gods – which is to say that God is very mysterious.

Jesus too was very mysterious – especially in being free of mimetic desire – the desire to possess what was considered worth possessing in his world – power, renown and wealth. We must all make of that mystery what we will.

We see this right from the start of his ministry, when he received the baptism of John in the river Jordan.

John was a fiery prophet recalling the people of Israel to repentance. People came to receive his baptism – a half-drowning and cleansing

ceremony in which self-proclaimed sinners had an experience of their own physical mortality, and of reconciliation with God.

The Gospel tells us that John was reluctant to baptise Jesus, but that Jesus insisted. His first public act was therefore one of solidarity with the poorest people, and of humility. In other words he did not seek other-esteem. He did not claim any privilege – especially the privilege of being considered better than others.

The gospels relate that at this point Jesus had a miraculous experience of recognition by God – *“This is my son in whom I am well pleased”*. The point about this episode is often missed. Jesus has done nothing yet but join the sinners, so the story is telling us that God loves the virtue of humility, and loves repentant sinners also.

The reason this is important is that most ‘respectable’ Jews of the time had a very different idea of God, and of what religious leadership should be. In particular they believed that prosperity was a sign of divine favour – and that poverty was a sign of God’s displeasure. In other words, the poor were believed by the wealthy to be sinners, for otherwise God would have made them better off.

It was above all the religious system centred in the Temple in Jerusalem that had led to this attitude. To avail of its services required money, for religious lawyers had to advise people on the consequences of their breaches of the laws derived from the Ten Commandments – what fasting and praying and almsgiving was needed for forgiveness, and what sacrifices should be made. Then there were sacrificial offerings to be purchased and priestly fees to be paid.

In other words, religion was, as often happens, a business – and this meant that the very poorest were also generally considered the least worthy, because they could not afford it.

And this was why John’s baptism was sought by the poorest. Jesus’ acceptance of it was therefore a gesture of solidarity with the least respectable members of that society – and a criticism of the Temple system.

And this was why Jesus became a target of those enmeshed in the Temple system. He had not sought their esteem, as a rising Rabbi

of the time was expected to do. This was one of the reasons for his popularity among the poor of Galilee – but this too was regarded suspiciously and fearfully by the religious elites in Jerusalem – for he seemed to threaten everything they stood for.

We might say today 'he was not a climber'. This is just another way of saying that he was free of mimetic desire – the religious pyramid had no offer to make that he could not refuse.

The gospels tell us this in another way also – in the episode known as the temptations in the desert (*Matt 4.*) Following his baptism in the Jordan he went, we are told, for forty days without food in the desert.

As we learnt earlier, the desert is above all a place of silence and solitude, in which the gift and mystery of life can be appreciated free of the noise and distraction of society. The desert belongs to no-one, so there is there no sense of oppression by human competition and ownership. Without distraction one can pray and meditate, and sort out priorities and objectives. The desert is harsh, but also beautiful, and so especially are the nights, in which the canopy of stars appears in all its darkest grandeur and mystery.

Probably Jesus was identifying there, in that silence, what lay at the summit of his own belief – for he expressed it afterwards with great clarity: God is to be loved above all else – and, next, so is every human being, including oneself.

A sense of clarity and mission can also be a source of temptation – to regard oneself as all-important. In the desert, we are told, (*Matt 4*) Jesus was tempted to throw himself from the Temple summit – so that angels could save him – demonstrating to the Temple elite that he was God's son and representative, to whom they should bow. We can understand this simply as religious ambition – to vault in one bound to the summit of the Temple hierarchy. In rejecting this he was rejecting churchly ambition – or mimetic desire for the esteem of the religious elites.

Then he was shown the kingdoms of the world – which were, of course, already occupied by living kings. In rejecting this offer also he was rejecting mimetic desire for the secular esteem awarded to

political leaders – including, of course, the reigning Roman Emperor, Tiberius.

This second decision was also, of course, a renunciation of the time-honoured route to political power in that world – violence.

And this, of course, endangered him – for he was still determined to tell the truth as he saw it – that the exclusion of sinners from the esteem of that society was an error, and that it was the powerful and well-to-do who had most to fear from God. He would attack the pyramids of esteem of his time, and the false ideas that sustained them – without arming himself against the anger this mission would arouse.

Inverting the Pyramids

In all periods of history the desire for priority – mimetic desire – has led us to build pyramids of power and esteem. In the ancient world these pyramids were built by conquerors for whom warfare was the highest art. Our modern pyramids are based more on the skill of producing wealth, but they remain pyramids nevertheless. The reason is that those who have climbed them believe that they are entitled to their superiority.

Most of us have always taken this for granted, and set out to find a route by which we too can climb. In so doing we strengthen the pyramid by giving it authority over us. We play the game as it has always been played, offering respect to those who can promote us.

Jesus never did this. Instead he tended to insult those who claimed religious esteem in his own world and to esteem those who were considered sinners and outcasts. It is very important to understand the significance of this, because popular belief at the time was that the wealthy and powerful were blessed by God. Instead Jesus said:

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

(Matt 5: 3-8)

When we remember that those who dominated that society thought very highly of themselves, we will understand that by the 'poor in spirit' Jesus meant those who thought least of themselves – those certain that God thought little of them. These would have included not just the poor, but those upon whom the elites looked down. We are speaking of the least esteemed – the cripples, the blind, those with visible skin diseases like leprosy (the 'unclean'), the mentally ill who were often also outcast, also prostitutes, criminals and those who did unpopular jobs like collecting taxes for the Roman government.

It's clear that Jesus is turning upside down the pyramid of esteem of that world, and of all subsequent eras also – challenging above all the notion that the world is ordered as God wants it to be.

No era is better placed to understand this new order than our own. Threatened as we are by environmental catastrophe we are challenged to develop a new attitude towards showy wealth. Those who consume most are now creating a model for over-consumption that is taking the world towards disaster. Knowing as we do that the flaunting of wealth can only promote over-consumption on a global scale, as well as wars of resentment, we must acknowledge also that it is the poor whose deprived lifestyle is least environmentally damaging. The affluent world needs to learn from them – especially that human consumption can be radically simplified with benefit to the health, the peace, and the environment, of all.

Those who understand this will have a new respect for the poor of our own world – those who carry the heaviest burden, but consume the least. This too demands spiritual intelligence.

The Kingdom of God

You will remember that the kingdom of Israel – of Saul, David and Solomon – had replaced 'the kingdom of God' – according to the book of Samuel. That original kingdom of God was one that had no earthly king, no monarch reigning in a vast palace at the summit of a pyramid of esteem. God had reigned then through prophets like Samuel, people whose only glory was a reputation for speaking the truth – even when it hurt.

Jesus repeatedly said 'the kingdom of God is among you' and 'at hand' and also 'within'. We must understand this simply as a declaration that God wishes to reign within us, rather than over us – as he did within Jesus also. That is to say, when we are moved simply by the love of a God who excludes no-one from his love, we will love as he does. We then carry this little kingdom about within us, inviting others into it as equal brothers and sisters. Eventually no one is left out, and there is no pyramid of esteem.

This has frustrated many who have read the gospels, as they are sure that the world must be best ordered from above by some great and far-sighted and just ruler who would do the 'necessary organisation'.

The trouble with this fixation is that it ignores the history of human society since the beginning – which shows that the centralisation of power creates hierarchies of wealth and esteem which soon become unjust, and which merely repeat the errors of all preceding systems. They also deprive people of a sense of freedom and responsibility, leading to a failure to develop their talents and aptitudes.

The search for the perfect ruler is therefore futile. Spiritual intelligence will tell us that instead we need to build the kingdom of God within ourselves, and spread this wisdom to those we meet.

The most important characteristic of the kingdom of God is that when we live in it we are free of mimetic desire, as Jesus was. Because we understand, as he did, that we are already loved, already esteemed, by the giver of all life.

In other words, the world loses its power over us – its power to shame and depress and reject us – and to distract us into futile desires that bring us nothing but disillusionment.

The reason it loses this power is that we know we are already loved and esteemed – and therefore have no need to seek other-esteem from our surrounding culture. The Lord reigns within – so we are closer to God than we can ever get to any worldly ruler or celebrity.

To say that Jesus is God means nothing more nor less than he is the perfect love of God made human, so that God can relate to us as a brother, assuring us that we are his friends, his brothers and sisters.

Moreover, this love is unconditional, so we are now free to be ourselves – because we are now free to love ourselves.

When we love ourselves, it's surprising how little else we need, and how the pressure of pleasing the world eases. We are free to live in the present moment, instead of worrying about tomorrow. Jesus said this best.

See how the lilies of the field grow. They do not labour or spin. Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendour was dressed like one of these. If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith? So do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

(Matthew 6: 28-33)

Spirituality and Religion

The problem with religion is that it is a visible social practice, requiring specialists in ritual, prayer, rules of life, religious knowledge and so on. Unless these specialists have a clear understanding of mimetic desire, and a spirituality of equality, over long periods of time they will tend to become important and powerful – and so become another pyramid of esteem. This pyramid will depend upon the respect of believers, and upon their financial contributions.

Which means in turn that it may become corrupt. Seeking to maximise its income and power it may make the favour of God a commodity to be sold like any other. It may confuse conformity with sincerity.

And this in turn means that it may subtly misrepresent God as someone who doles out spiritual favours in return for cash. And then people may come to believe that God does indeed prefer people who can pay for these services.

For Jesus this was what had happened to the Jewish Temple system in his own time. The legendary Temple built by Solomon had passed away by his time, to be replaced by the Temple of Herod.

Recent archeology shows that this Temple was run in Jesus' time by a wealthy priesthood who lived luxuriously nearby. This wealth depended upon the selling of their priestly services, and of the animals and birds selected for ritual sacrifice – the most important function of the priest.

Religious lawyers called scribes were also part of this system. They were expert in the religious rules that had been gradually constructed since the time of the Ten Commandments. For example, they knew exactly what Jews could and could not do on the day of rest, the Sabbath, which was Saturday for them. Could you, for example, draw water from a well? Yes – but not by using a rope. You must use a woman's belt – otherwise you had incurred sin, and must repent and offer such-and-such a sacrifice.

For Jesus this was all ridiculous nonsense – as the Sabbath had been made to give people a rest, so that they could dwell upon God's goodness for giving them this day of freedom from toil.

For him, the purpose of the laws given to Moses was to simplify people's lives, not to make them more complicated. Ten basic rules had grown into over 600 – and sorting these out was now so confusing that only an expert – the scribe – could do it. In other words, God's laws had been hijacked and obscured for the benefit of another elite.

Another group that drew Jesus' wrath was the Pharisees. These were a sect dedicated to observing the whole system of laws as it stood – and so they were also supporters of an exclusive system – one that kept the poor distant from salvation. To be a Pharisee you had to be well-to-do, because careful observation of all the rules and rituals was a very time-consuming business that ruled out many occupations – the very reason the poor were considered sinful.

And this in turn meant that the truth had been obscured – the truth about covetousness – that its root lay in social, and now also religious, hierarchy. A system of forgiveness that depended upon the wealth of the applicant implied that wealth should be sought for Godly reasons – when the original laws had said exactly the opposite – that covetousness was a sin.

When Jesus started forgiving sins for nothing he caused a sensation – for this implied that the whole Temple system was unnecessary. This drew towards him scribes and Pharisees whose whole way of life he was calling in question. They came to discredit him. When they heard him speak on true piety they became even more annoyed.

Traditionally there were three spiritual practices that people should observe: prayer, fasting and the giving of alms – money for the support of the poor. Here is Jesus on these: (*Matt 6*)

"Be careful not to do your 'acts of righteousness' before men, to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven.

"So when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be honored by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.

"And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

"When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show men they are fasting. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that it will not be obvious to men that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.

Matt 6:1-18

Notice that three times Jesus uses the word 'hypocrites' to describe those who show off their 'goodness'. He is here identifying the spiritual problem of seeking other-esteem – for this declares straight away that one is unspiritual. The truly spiritual person is pure in heart – doing good because of the goodness in it and praying to God because it is good to pray.

Hypocritical religion is deadly dangerous. It either teaches people to be hypocrites, or makes them cynical. In either case it becomes a barrier to true spirituality and sincerity. It undermines true belief by making insincerity honourable.

Religious elites are always in grave danger of hypocrisy – for otherwise they would not be elitist. The elitist seeks to be honoured by others, rather than to give honour to the God who has honoured him by making him his servant. This danger persists for all of us – and Jesus has pointed it out for all time.

When he says three times that the hypocrites *'have received their reward in full'* he means that in winning recognition for their piety they have achieved all they wanted – which was to be *considered* holy.

The word 'hypocrite' meant 'one who wears a mask' – as did the actors in the Greek theatre. This may mean that Jesus had seen Greek drama, as the Greek city of Persepolis lay near Nazareth where he had grown up. Religion is not for actors playing a part, but for truly spiritual people.

But in calling the religious elites of his own time 'masked actors' Jesus was doing something very dangerous to himself – arousing bitter anger in those he had exposed. Their self-respect, and their livelihoods, were now both in question.

The Danger of Rome

For the elites who felt threatened by Jesus the simplest solution to their problem was to provoke Roman power against him. If the Romans who were occupying Palestine eliminated Jesus – as they had eliminated many Jewish leaders in the past – then Jesus' Jewish enemies could not be held accountable for his death. So this happened:

Then the Pharisees went out and laid plans to trap him in his words. They sent their disciples to him along with the Herodians. "Teacher," they said, "we know you are a man of integrity and that you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. You aren't swayed by men, because you pay no attention to their rank. Tell us then, what is your opinion? Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not?"

But Jesus, knowing their evil intent, said, "You hypocrites, why are you trying to trap me? Show me the coin used for paying the tax." They brought him a denarius, and he asked them, "Whose portrait is this? And whose inscription?"

"Caesar's," they replied.

Then he said to them, "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's."

When they heard this, they were amazed. So they left him and went away. (Matt 22:15-22)

"Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar?" There can be no exaggeration of the danger of this question for Jesus. If he justified Roman power in the Jewish homeland he would be seen as a collaborator by many of those now flocking to him. If he opposed the paying of taxes to Rome, this would identify him as a revolutionary – and the Roman

authority would step in. It seemed that whatever answer he gave would finish him.

His response was astonishing. It said clearly that what Jews owed God was not money, which would satisfy the Romans – and this emphasised the unGodliness of Jewish religious profiteers. He had neatly deflected the arrow pointed at his heart, so that it struck the target his enemies were defending – the Temple system.

It is also a turning point in western history, as it is the only statement from a religious teacher of the ancient world that points towards a separation of state and church. Back then it was assumed that all governments would support one particular religion, the religion of the state. This was the greatest reason for Jewish hatred of Rome, as Rome had nothing but contempt for the Jewish faith, and promoted its own pagan Gods.

But Rome had not yet destroyed the temple of Herod. Roman policy in Jesus time was to leave the Temple system in existence – as the Temple priesthood, led by Caiaphas, did not promote revolution against Rome. It was Roman policy to maintain control at the lowest possible military cost – and it recognized that a degree of tolerance for Jewish religious faith was necessary to avoid total revolution.

So Jesus was way ahead of his time in seeing that political and religious authority can be separately exercised. And so political scientists today still routinely speak of the need to separate 'God and Caesar'.

The Problem of Violence

Jesus also famously said:

"You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.' But I tell you, Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if someone wants to sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you.

"You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your brothers, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

(Matt 5:38-48)

As this passage has often been misunderstood we need to emphasise that Jesus is here again speaking the language of resistance to simple repetition of one another's mistakes. To simply imitate the violent wrong another does is to give in to irrational violence. We must look for a way around doing that.

We need to remember that violence arises out of the mimetic desire of two or more people for the same object – either a material object,

or the esteem of onlookers. In the case of the insulting blow to the right cheek – possibly given by a Roman soldier as a provocation in occupied Palestine – it is the esteem of onlookers – other-esteem – that is at stake. The insulted person needs again to ask – and in the most difficult circumstances – *'does my self-esteem depend upon the esteem of those who have witnessed this blow?'*

The spiritually intelligent person knows that it doesn't – that God is on the side of the victim of violence and insult. He also knows that violence is contagious – that one blow can lead to many, with far more harm than the initial blow on its own could do. To say that violence is contagious is just another way of saying that it is often mimetic – driven by unconscious imitation.

So here too Jesus is being absolutely consistent in opposing mimetic behaviour. A blow that strikes the right cheek is a backhanded blow from a right-handed aggressor. For a man, to 'turn the other cheek' to such a blow is to invite a right-handed person to strike the next blow with the palm of his right hand – and this was a woman's blow back then. It is also a totally unexpected response, so it will instantly give the initiative to the person who does this – by making people laugh! The one who has been struck has risen above simple imitation, and above the indignity he has suffered. The tables are turned – without violence. The game has changed from brute force to laughter – a game the striker of blows will not be ready for.

So Jesus is saying also 'find a way of trapping and deflecting violence so that it does not trap you into endless repetition' – for there is no other way of bringing an end to the cycle of violence before it may overwhelm everyone.

This should not be taken to mean that violence should never be resisted. In the case of a war of aggression those who suffer this aggression will not be responding mimetically if they do all they can to defeat this attack. They can do this, however, without engaging in a war of reciprocal atrocity – 'an eye for an eye' – seeking to move instead towards a situation where the aggressor can respond to the better example they set.

It is extraordinary how many professed Christians quote the principle of 'an eye for an eye' as though Jesus had approved it. In fact he

tells us quite explicitly to go beyond it – to the point of taking more pain on behalf of the goal of a less violent world.

This is confirmed especially by the prayer that Jesus composed for all Christians – the Lord's prayer.

*Our Father who art in heaven,
Hallowed be your name,
Your kingdom come,
Your will be done
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our trespasses,
as we forgive those who trespass against us.
And lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil.
(Matt 6: 9-13)*

Notice that if we withhold forgiveness *from anyone* while saying this prayer we are asking God *not* to forgive us. It is a covenant – a two-sided agreement to forgive so that we shall be forgiven. Forgiveness is not just an option, but a basic Christian requirement – to end the cycle of global violence.

The Crisis

Challenged by this teacher who accused them of hypocrisy, and who threatened to undermine their power, the religious leaders of Jerusalem tried another tactic – to reveal Jesus as an enemy of the law of Moses, which was sacred for most Jews.

*At dawn Jesus appeared again in the temple courts, where all the people gathered round him, and he sat down to teach them. The teachers of the law and the Pharisees brought in a woman caught in adultery. They made her stand before the group and said to Jesus, "Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of adultery. In the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?" They were using this question as a trap, in order to have a basis for accusing him. But Jesus bent down and started to write on the ground with his finger. When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, "If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her." Again he stooped down and wrote on the ground. At this, those who heard began to go away one at a time, the older ones first, until only Jesus was left, with the woman still standing there. Jesus straightened up and asked her, "Woman, where are they? Has no-one condemned you?" "No-one, sir," she said. "Then neither do I condemn you," Jesus declared. "Go now and leave your life of sin."
(John Ch 8:2-11)*

This was another deeply dangerous moment for Jesus, and it helps to reveal something 'hidden since the foundation of the world' – *the use of victimising violence as a foundation for social order*. Jesus shows that he understands this by inviting anyone without sin to throw the first stone at this unfortunate woman, for these people were trying to

unload their own sins, and their own anger, by killing her. A ritual murder of this kind was a normal way for an internal crisis to be resolved in the ancient world, where modern policing and lawcourts didn't exist.

Think of what inevitably happens among people living closely together in a city like Jerusalem, as their jealousies and covetousness bring them into conflict with one another. Every offence we commit against one another is remembered, and resentments can build gradually, seeking any opportunity to express themselves.

This is why the first blow struck is so dangerous. It can escalate very quickly into an orgy of violence as people pay off old scores.

But this very danger can be prevented by a process of accusation which focuses upon just one isolated individual – someone who can be shamed and separated from all the rest. For accusation too is contagious. One pointed finger is soon joined by a multitude of others pointed at the same isolated person. Very quickly a mob forms, with just one objective – to kill this person. To use a modern term, it is a lynch mob.

It is now convincingly argued by academics associated with the French anthropologist Rene Girard that this process was basic to ancient culture, and ancient religion. Girard argues that the practice of blood sacrifice – which is found in all primitive religion – was a ritualised repetition of this kind of scapegoating murder.

Think of the crisis that exists before the accusation is made – a crisis that threatens everyone. The ritual murder of just one person would mean that all of this anger was expelled against just one individual, saving the rest. Social disunity and fear would have been suddenly replaced by a new unity, and peace.

But Jesus has saved the woman, so the social venom that has accused her has no place to go – while the particular venom of Jesus' enemies has been frustrated also.

Next time the mob would come for Jesus himself.

In the whole of world literature there is nowhere else revealed the full injustice of the scapegoating process. The reason is that the process

was too terrible to be honestly described – except in these books – the Gospels – the record made of the ministry of Jesus by his followers.

Even the Greeks, who were the best-educated people of the ancient world, practised ritual murder, yet failed to face this truth in their philosophy or histories. Only the Bible faces honestly the origins of all violence in the sin of mimetic desire, and the special cruelty of the scapegoating process. Even the peace of Greek intellectuals rested on slavery, and it was bought by the blood of lowly victims whose sufferings they never acknowledged.

The Bible makes it impossible for us to ignore the plight of victims throughout history, and still today. We humans are still trying to use violence to secure our peace – the very thing that Jesus brings to our attention.

That is why the cross is the most important symbol in the world – so long as we remember it is a symbol of the courage of one man who died the most humiliating death to reveal to all of us the truth about ourselves.

The Lord Who Kneels

It didn't always please his followers that Jesus showed particular respect for the least fortunate members of society. On the night before he died he made sure that every one of those followers would remember that this was to be the mark of a Christian leader.

It was just before the Passover Feast. Jesus knew that the time had come for him to leave this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he now showed them the full extent of his love. The evening meal was being served, and the devil had already prompted Judas Iscariot, son of Simon, to betray Jesus. Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God; so he got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist. After that, he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples' feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around him.

He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?"

Jesus replied, "You do not realize now what I am doing, but later you will understand."

"No," said Peter, "you shall never wash my feet."

Jesus answered, "Unless I wash you, you have no part with me."

"Then, Lord," Simon Peter replied, "not just my feet but my hands and my head as well!" (John 13:1-9)

The Passover feast marked one of the most important events in the history of the Jews – their deliverance from slavery in Egypt. The ritual of the foot-washing, when fully understood, marks the deliverance of mankind from all tyranny.

In those times the washing of someone's feet was the task of a hired servant or slave. To do this you need to kneel in front of someone – a position of inferiority – and then make physical contact with the grime and sweat that has congealed on the foot and between the toes.

In that hierarchical world even Jesus' most enthusiastic supporter, Peter, had problems with this – for if his Lord will wash his feet, then he, Peter, must be ready to do the same for others – and this he finds unacceptable.

But this act follows logically from the way of life (and kingdom) that Jesus is proposing – that the last shall be first, and the first, last. Jesus is prepared to be the last, to put himself at the bottom of the pyramid of that ancient world – finally to undermine mimetic desire.

You will remember that according to Genesis our 'original sin' was the desire to be as Gods. Our sense of our own smallness and weakness overwhelms us – and so we aspire to be immortal and glorious, the elevated and untouchable ones.

It follows logically that if there is a God who is infinitely loving he will want to free us from this fixation by revealing himself as vulnerable and humble – more anxious to serve than to dominate, more ready to suffer than to punish.

This is exactly how Jesus behaved from first to last. The later arrogant and oppressive history of much of western Christianity was a betrayal of his humility – the basic reason for the rejection of Christianity by much of the west, and the world, today.

The Wisdom of Humility

Just as arrogance undermines human relationships by attacking people's self-esteem, humility has the opposite effect of setting people at ease by showing respect, and creating a relationship of mutual support.

Humility isn't a matter of bowing and scraping, but an attitude of respect for others, combined with humorous acceptance of one's own limitations. It is based upon the principle that people are all equal in dignity, that we are all fallible, and that we need one another.

Even though we mostly elect our leaders today, we still tend to see them, at least initially, as superior in some way. Also we expect them to solve all of the problems that beset us, from environmental decay to the cost of living.

The problem is that some of our requirements are incompatible. A low cost of living and a healthy environment are difficult to reconcile. For example, by keeping fuel prices down we raise the consumption of oil, and increase atmospheric pollution.

So, leaders soon find themselves becoming unpopular – and their personal failings soon diminish respect also. In recent decades there has been an increasing problem of disillusionment with leadership in the west.

Another strange fact about life in the west is that although our political systems are based upon the principle of human equality, there is still great inequality – especially in wealth and esteem. And it is this inequality that lies at the root of overconsumption. As the wealthy flaunt the most expensive clothing, housing, transport and technology they set a standard for mimetic desire that threatens global society with endless consumption and competitive violence.

There is no solution other than to separate in our minds and hearts our value from our possessions. We humans are important, valuable, not by virtue of what we own, but by virtue of what we are.

Above all we need a model that we can follow – someone who clearly embodies great wisdom and goodness, an unconcern for what others think, and a willingness to honour others – especially the poor.

Jesus of Nazareth, who was fully human, is the greatest such model in western history. He had great strength – but also great humility, a humility that challenges our western concept of the successful life.

The Crucifixion, Redemption and Atonement

The story of the woman threatened with death by the mob helps us to understand the crucifixion of Jesus. It too was a scapegoating murder – a killing intended to make one person pay for the sins of all. Tension had built up in Jerusalem as Jewish pilgrims came for the passover feast from all over the Mediterranean area, and Jesus had criticised the Temple system – the money-changing and selling of sacrificial creatures. He was questioning this whole system which identified God with the wealthy. Caiaphas, the High Priest, who had more than most to lose, insisted that the death of this one man would 'save the nation'. This is always the excuse for scapegoating murder.

Although he knew he was in danger, Jesus, did not do the only thing that could have saved him – lead a revolt. The reason seems to have been his determination 'to overcome the world' – the world of mimetic desire. To have joined in a struggle for power would have been to imitate those who plotted his death, to continue the cycle of endless violence that had marked all of human history up to that point. Instead he simply submitted to another example of scapegoating violence – revealing clearly the injustice of the process that had been part of human history since the beginning. In this way he was revealing 'things hidden since the foundation of the world'.

He was also demonstrating that it was possible for a human being to overcome mimetic desire completely, to live a completely selfless life. By so doing he was 'redeeming' all of humanity, making it possible for us to move into an entirely new era, and placing all humans in a new relationship with the person he called 'Abba', whom Christians call 'The Father'.

'Atonement' is what Christians call this reconciliation of humans to God. It means simply 'at-one-ment' – the closing of the chasm that separates us from God.

Christian spirituality involves a close following of the path of Jesus, from Bethlehem to Golgotha – the hill outside Jerusalem on which he was crucified. When we do this, and understand that crucifixion in

that world was not only an excruciating death, but a shameful death, we are forced to ask ourselves what could possibly have given him the strength to face that journey.

There is only one convincing answer – that he was indeed closely connected to a source of extraordinary spiritual power, a source that empowered him to expose the trap of mimetic desire, and to avoid it, at a terrifying cost.

Although other great spiritual leaders have revealed different aspects of that spiritual power, none has confronted 'the world' of mimetic desire, and exposed the process of shaming and exclusion and injustice that has tainted all human culture since the beginning.

And none can take us to the source of that spiritual power – the Lord of all creation.

Before he died Jesus told his followers that whoever followed him faithfully would receive a great gift.

"If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching. My Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him." (John 14:23-24)

What could he have meant by this?

Through the Holy Spirit of God, anyone who gives himself or herself completely to the teachings and person of Jesus becomes a home, or Temple, in which Jesus and the Father will also live, as the Father lived in Jesus himself.

Jesus and the Holy Spirit

As we have seen, Jesus of Nazareth gave his life for the principle that no-one is closer to God than anyone else. Everyone is loved equally by the creative power that gave life to us all. The greater value or significance that some people suppose they have is an illusion.

It is for that reason that he calls his followers sisters and brothers, not servants, and tells us to pray to his father as our father also. He quite deliberately refused to place himself in a higher position than us, and died the death of a slave.

He could not have done this if he had not been indifferent to what others thought of him – if he had needed other-esteem to the degree that humans almost always do. So, his self-esteem came from some other source. As we have seen, he was sure it came from Abba, and that this Abba was the God whom his fellow Jews supposed to reside in the Temple in Jerusalem.

Many times in the Gospels Jesus behaves as though Abba is all the time present – right there with him. What was it that gave him that certainty?

The answer is that God is capable of living within us, as the person Christians call the Holy Spirit, if we are ready. And we can be ready only by detaching ourselves from the need for other-esteem, as Jesus did, and by following closely the path he took. This demands the most honest appraisal of our own lives, sincere repentance for any wrong we may have done, and above all rejection of the power of the world, of mimetic desire. We have to let go of our need to be esteemed by others.

Notice that I have not said that other-esteem is in itself always undeserved – but that our self-esteem must not depend upon it. If it does, we are not yet free of the need for other-esteem, and not yet ready for the Spirit.

The Apostles and the Holy Spirit

As Jesus was being arrested the night before he was crucified, his closest followers all melted away. Even Peter, who followed closest as Jesus was brought before the High Priest, could not find the courage to admit that he had been a disciple or follower of Jesus.

The reason was that he could not follow Jesus to a cruel and shameful death. He had not yet fully separated himself from his need to be esteemed. The disgrace of crucifixion, which would rob him of life, would also strip from him his dignity, his self-esteem – and for everyone this is the last thing we will give up.

Yet within weeks this same Peter was risking this very death by proclaiming that the crucified Jesus was alive, and proclaiming the same truths that Jesus had died for. And so were all the others who had deserted Jesus on that terrible night.

So what had changed for these men? First, they were convinced that Jesus had defeated death and returned to reassure them of the truth he had taught – that all who followed him could do the same.

Second, after Jesus had left them finally to return to his father, they had received the Spirit. That is to say, he had fulfilled his promise to send them the 'counsellor' who would keep them true to what he had taught. This is the Holy Spirit of God who can live in the heart of every Christian, once it is attuned to the truths that Jesus taught.

As we have seen, this demands that the Christian is no longer influenced by 'the world' – the culture of imitation of the desires of others. For the Christian only Christ should be imitated, as he is in true relationship with Abba, the father of us all.

If this is difficult to believe, remember that no-one has so completely overcome mimetic desire as Jesus of Nazareth.

Changing Understandings of God

At first sight the Bible seems to be very confused about God. At one moment he is angry and even violent – for example in his punishment of the Egyptians. At other moments he is gentle and compassionate – for example in Psalm 23. How are we to reconcile these contradictory pictures?

Simply by seeing the Bible as an account *of the growth of Jewish understanding of God* – a growth that reaches completion in the New Testament.

This progress follows several paths:

From the mistaken idea that God loves only the Jews (e.g. in the book of Exodus), to a realisation that his love is universal – leaving no-one out – as in the book of Isaiah and the Gospels;

From the mistaken idea that God loves us only if we obey and worship him to the understanding that his love is constant, unchanging and unconditional;

From the mistaken idea that God is far above and distant from us to the belief that he is always present here and now – and may even dwell within us.

So the Bible is also the story of our gradually developing understanding of God. As individuals we all still go through this process of development.

In Jesus of Nazareth this development reached perfection – but the Gospel of St John clearly tells us that Jesus wanted to draw everyone into his understanding of 'Abba' – and into the relationship that he had with 'Abba'.

So, for Christians, Jesus is the door through whom we come to 'Abba' – into full relationship with the Father – finding that Jesus and the Father are one (*John 14*).

The Trinity

We have seen how Jesus was able to stand up courageously for his belief that no-one is excluded from the love of God, and that all are equal in the sight of God – even though this earned him the hatred of those who believed that they controlled the means of reconciling all with God.

We have seen how this left him completely isolated in the end – ready to face an excruciating and shameful death.

We have seen how only one thing can explain this: his certainty that God, whom he called Abba, was calling him to do all of this.

It was the presence of the Holy Spirit in the heart of Jesus that gave him this certainty. The Holy Spirit lived within him, God's own spirit, allowing him to communicate directly with the father, Abba.

Further, although there is only one Son and one Father and one Spirit, the Spirit is also multiple. That is to say, the same spirit can live within many people at once.

No-one knows how this is possible, but it is true. This truth can bind Christians together in love of Jesus and Abba and the Spirit of love that binds those two together.

This is the mystery of the Trinity, the central belief of orthodox Christians – those who base their faith upon the Creeds. [These are short summaries of faith compiled in the early centuries of the Church. They can be found in the prayer books of the main Christian denominations.]

To help you understand the mystery of the Trinity, think of the close relationships that every person needs to be completely happy – with parents and brothers or sisters. God exists for us as such a family, even if we have lost, or never had a relationship with, our human family. So he completes us, making us whole and invulnerable to any of life's misfortunes. And his presence in and with us is something we can never lose, no matter what may happen.

You will find that many half-educated people will scorn the possibility of a spiritual reality outside our own imagination – a being who can relate to us in these ways. Their attitude can undermine your own capacity to trust in these truths, as none of us wants to be the victim of a 'scam'.

There is only one solution to this. You must reflect upon your own life and your own being, asking if you can take the risk of trusting yourself in prayer fully to the Trinity. This takes enormous courage and honesty, unless you are already at the point of having no other recourse. Whatever your situation, be assured that prayers are heard.

One simple Catholic prayer sums up our belief in the Trinity as the source of all good and all love. Anyone who can say it with full conviction already has received the Spirit of truth.

Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit - as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end. Amen.

'Amen' means 'So be it', or, if you like, 'To this truth I trust myself'. If you can trust yourself to this, you will have found a family you cannot lose.

By now you will understand the importance of awarding glory – that is, maximum esteem – only to God. The mistake of awarding it to other humans, and especially of seeking it ourselves, is the cause of most human unhappiness. When we are wise enough to avoid worldly 'glory' – fickle human other-esteem and adulation – we will have begun to understand why Jesus did the same. His Father's kingdom is one in which the humblest are the most happy.

Be True to Yourself

Every person has a unique 'being' or identity – a 'self'. Our lives have reached maturity when we have learned to love and to live in that 'self'.

Do not confuse love of self with selfishness, which is a failure to love others. We are commanded to love ourselves *and* our neighbour – everyone else.

That is why we need to be aware of our own mimetic desire – as it tells us *'You really do not like yourself!'* For if we were truly happy being ourselves we would not try to be anyone else by imitating them.

We discover this when we find the perfect model, the one whose life was lived with total selflessness – Jesus of Nazareth. For in trying to imitate Jesus we are idealizing selflessness – the extraordinary gift of being able to live without thought of ourselves.

If we have reached that point we should now be able to love ourselves fully for the very first time.

But we must never 'fake it', never simply play a role in order to impress someone – for we will not be able to forget we have done this, and self-dislike will creep in again.

That is why the first rule of spirituality is 'Be true to yourself'.

You will know when you are faking it – there is no deceiving yourself. And God cannot be deceived either.

If you have had a bad experience of religion you may believe that God does not like what he sees – but this is never true. God loves your real self – the honest person lurking within the person who is trying to be someone else.

And that is why you must always be yourself – be the person God loves.

If you are not sure who you are, then turn that problem into a prayer: *'Lord – help me to be myself'*.

This small book cannot tell the full story of Jesus, because its purpose is to show how he overcame the problem that all humans have in living a life of complete integrity. That problem begins with our insecurity – our inability to esteem ourselves unless others do likewise.

For a full picture of Jesus you need to read the Gospels also, to which this book is just an introduction.

Humour and Spiritual Intelligence

Mark Twain's story *Tom Sawyer* tells the story of a boy who is constantly in trouble. To try to regain some credit he swaps his few possessions for coloured tickets awarded to other children for their knowledge of the Bible. Soon he has collected more of these than anyone else. But when he is asked to name two of Jesus' apostles, in front of visiting VIPs, he replies '*David and Goliath*' – who belonged to the Old Testament.

The story reveals the problem that occurs when we try to teach spirituality using worldly means – competition and rivalry.

On another occasion Tom's fellow-rascals lower a cat on a sling just above the head of a teacher as he presents a pompous lesson – and the cat, looking for a place to stand, clutches the teacher's wig and lifts it off, revealing his bald head. If we can forget the cat's predicament for a moment, we will find this hilarious – especially if we are children. Why is this?

It's because we don't like being talked down to. The funniest events are those that puncture pomposity and place everyone on equal terms. Everyone can remember stories from school where bullies or holier-than-thou teachers were brought down to earth.

So the best humour serves a spiritual purpose – to place everyone on a level, setting everyone at ease.

Derisive laughter – laughter aimed at humiliating someone – is another matter. It is never really funny, because its purpose is to imply that those doing the laughing are superior.

The spiritually intelligent person will be aware of this, ready to deflate pomposity, but never ready to participate in derision – contempt for someone else.

World Problems: War

The twentieth century was the most violent in history. Two world wars, and many more regional wars, killed hundreds of millions of people. The twenty-first century could well be worse, unless we learn more quickly than we have done in the past.

Libraries are full of books on violence – many of them proposing elaborate theories of economic and social causation. Intellectuals tend to propose complex theories, missing the obvious. The simple fact is that we humans tend to antagonise one another by seeking dominance or control over living space and resources, or by asserting some kind of superiority.

On September 11th 2001, a group of anti-US terrorists hijacked four jet airliners and flew three of them into buildings in New York and Washington, killing over 3,000 people. These terrorists were Islamic fundamentalists alienated by the world dominance of the United States, which became the world's only super-power after the collapse of Russian power in 1989.

The power of America, dependent heavily upon oil from the Middle East, is seen as threatening by many Arab and Islamic peoples in that region. US support of the Jewish state of Israel – in opposition to the Palestinian Arabs who also have political rights there – is seen as provocative and imperialistic by many Muslims, who are also opposed to western popular culture.

Essentially the problem is that neither West nor East understands properly how each antagonises the other simply through lack of respect. American attitudes of superiority are seen by Americans as mere patriotism, but by Islamic radicals as an insult to Islamic pride. American economic globalism – the attempt to build a global market dominated by American products and companies – is also provocative to cultures that don't fully understand western ideas, and suffer greater poverty as a consequence.

Another factor is the US armaments industry, which has much to lose in a more peaceful world. Those who benefit from this industry tend

to have attitudes of disrespect and impatience towards anti-American movements – and this simply justifies and strengthens those movements around the world.

The Islamic perception of the west as arrogant and unjust is therefore strengthened by the most arrogant western attitudes – and this is likely to prove the main source of international violence and internal terror in the 21st century.

For western Christians of all denominations the great challenge will be to educate our own fellow citizens to the need for a change of attitude in the west, towards developing simpler lifestyles and a more sympathetic outlook towards eastern cultures.

Above all we need to become aware of the origins of all violence in mimetic desire, and to spread this awareness globally. A superpower that flaunts its superiority is in no way essentially different from a bully who swaggers along the sidewalk, challenging all-comers. There comes a point when all humans need to understand this process – and we have surely reached that point now.

When it comes to possession of nuclear and other weapons of mass destruction, the US needs to understand that all of those countries that possess these weapons tempt others within reach of them to possess them also. The tendency of a superpower to grant to itself the exclusive privilege to decide who should possess these weapons is simple arrogance – and this will always undermine the argument against ‘proliferation’ – or spread – of these weapons throughout the world. Inevitably these weapons give status to their possessors, and excite mimetic desire. Non-proliferation will be achieved only through parallel and general disarmament.

When statesmen generally understand mimetic desire, the world will be a different place. The problem is that too many have achieved their status through the form of mimetic desire we call political ambition.

World Problems: Internal Violence

In April 2002 a young German student, Robert Steinhaeuser, shot dead thirteen teachers and two fellow students in his High School – apparently because he had been prevented from sitting his graduation examinations. This was just the latest in a series of school shootings that have led many people to wonder why western society is becoming increasingly violent.

There is a striking pattern in many of these shootings – the fact that the perpetrators tend to see themselves as losing out in the competition for academic and sporting honours that schools tend to foster. Facing shame and humiliation due to low achievement, they see violence as a way out – even as a way of making a statement about their own significance.

In the Columbine High School massacre of 1999, in Littleton, Colorado, USA, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold revealed their thought patterns in videos they recorded before shooting twelve of their schoolmates. Significantly, they were fascinated by the story of Nazi Germany. Hitler's campaign to restore the 'honour' of Germany after his country's defeat in World War I was seen by these two boys as a model for their own plan to retaliate for the jeers they believed they had received from schoolmates who were more successful in class or on the sports field.

Without in any way condoning what such young men have done, we all need to be aware of the very strong need that all young people have for self-fulfilment, and of the cumulative effect of failure, name-calling and exclusion. When combined with the easy availability of drugs, a young person's sense of personal failure may lead him into a fantasy world in which dreams of revenge can turn into a waking nightmare. If the young person concerned has access to lethal weapons, the end result can be horrific.

Most important of all, everyone should understand that a person's self-esteem is vital to his emotional and mental balance – and that the highly competitive ethos of western society is therefore inherently

dangerous. We ought never to forget that everyone has a basic need for, and right to, respect – a right they can never lose. This should be taught in all families and schools, so that everyone knows that although achievement is to be applauded, no one should ever be considered unworthy of respect.

If, on the other hand we go further along the road towards rewarding 'winners' and humiliating 'losers' we can expect increasing internal violence.

Violence arises naturally out of competition – rivalry – for social esteem – and will escalate unless we develop a code that insists upon the inalienable dignity of every human person. People facing exclusion and shame become destructive of themselves or others: this is an iron law of human behaviour that we must learn if we are to develop a more peaceful global society.

"If no-one remembers who you were, you never existed."

These words were uttered by David Copeland who went on a bombing rampage in England in 1999. They reveal the power of the human need to believe that our own lives have some significance. The alienation that can overwhelm the person who loses a sense of his own value will be a growing danger unless we can increase the spirit of compassion in society – and our spiritual intelligence.

Jesus' compassion for 'the lost sheep' – the person who has somehow become alienated from society – reminds us that God does not wish to give up on anyone. If we could make this wisdom part of everyone's experience we would be on the way to a reversal of the trend towards greater and greater internal violence.

Reliance on heavier punishment, including the death penalty, is having no effect, as it simply reinforces the sense of alienation felt by the 'losers'.

World Problems: Media Violence

Between 1962 and 2002 the *James Bond* series of films earned over \$8 billion.

These films all exploit a plotline in which a vicious master villain threatens the world with tyranny and violence, and can only be stopped by further violence – justifying Bond's 'licence to kill'.

This plotline was earlier used by the *Popeye* cartoon series, and has been followed by many of the most popular movies of the past two decades – including the *Die Hard* and *Lethal Weapon* series, and science fiction films such as *Independence Day*.

But the basic storyline is far older. It is the Babylonian creation myth, the *Enuma Elish*. In this story the original great Goddess Tiamat became so annoyed with her children, the lesser Gods, that she planned to kill them. They turned to the strongest one among them, Marduk, and gave him a licence to kill Tiamat – which he did, with great brutality. Her remains became the visible universe.

This legend justified the violence of Babylonian kings – in attacking other surrounding cultures they were simply following the example of Marduk.

In one way or another, the Marduk story influenced many ambitious soldiers of the ancient world, who justified their own violent seizures of power with the argument that those from whom they seized power were even more tyrannical and violent. Only violence, they argued, can drive out violence.

In this way, our western idea of what makes a hero has been influenced down through the centuries by the tendency to glamorise violence.

But it is this very glamorization of violence that gives further life to violence. For example, the greatest war in history – World War II – was started by Adolf Hitler – who was convinced that he was himself a heroic defender of the German people against a global anti-German conspiracy.

It is time we Christians understood that Jesus of Nazareth, in overcoming the mimetic desire that is the real source of violence, gives us a far more heroic model to follow than Marduk – because his humility and love overcame his fear of humiliation.

In fact, the *Popeye* plot that is still used by Hollywood to glamorise violence is a very old lie that helps to maintain the violence of our society. As we have already seen, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, the boys responsible for the Columbine High massacre, cast themselves in the role of Hitler-like heroes, also taking revenge for imagined wrongs.

It is time to identify the *Popeye* plot, the *James Bond* film and the Marduk story as an ancient lie that perpetuates human violence – and to see the story of Jesus as the story of the greatest hero in human history.

The greatest human violence historically has always – like that of Hitler – been excused by the argument that it is a heroic response to a greater evil. So long as we go on telling the *Popeye* story – in *James Bond* or other format – so long will our world be open to violence on that scale.

It is time for Hollywood, and the media generally, to abandon the *Popeye* plot.

World Problems: Environmental Collapse

Everyone knows of the threat to the earth's environment from increasing economic activity.

The burning of fossil fuels such as coal and oil is turning the earth's atmosphere into a blanket that prevents the sun's heat from escaping – so the planet is heating up. This is melting the ice at the earth's poles, so the global ocean is rising – slowly making a large portion of the earth's low-lying land uninhabitable.

Meanwhile over-logging – threatening many plant, animal and bird species – is destroying the earth's forests. And the lakes, rivers and seas are being over-fished and polluted.

Behind all of this activity is human mimetic desire. Over-consumption is setting a standard of wealth that the whole world's population is trying to imitate. The planet simply cannot withstand the pressure.

Already we are seeing a shift in weather patterns in many parts of the world, while vast areas are no longer suitable for growing food.

There is likely to be an increase in both these trends, causing famine and devastation to millions of people.

There is only one possible solution. We humans must become wiser, realising especially the stupidity of competitive consumption.

This too is beginning to happen. In the US there is a growing 'voluntary simplicity' movement, in which people share their ideas on reducing expenditure and consumption, learning to value time more than money. The 'green' movements and political parties are slowly making a bigger impression as the environmental issue becomes more obvious.

The wisdom of the Bible includes the story of Noah's Ark – in which Noah builds a boat to save all the animals of the earth. Our planet is the Ark of the whole human family – our only available home. Unless we can turn away from the ridiculous waste of the earth's resources we will make our own home planet as barren as Mars now is.

Here again Jesus shows us the way by overcoming the temptation to accumulate wealth in order to impress one another.

He insists that our value does not depend upon what we own, but upon who we are – beloved children of Abba, the father who never forgets us.

In saying 'blessed are the poor' Jesus is also telling us to learn from those who consume least – as their way of life is no threat to everyone else. We really do not need much more than love, food, shelter and education to make our lives full of joy. The world is surely now wealthy enough to provide these necessities to all. If giving became more fashionable than getting, our planet's environment could be stabilised in a generation.

World Problems: Addiction

How strange that so many people throughout the richest societies in the world should have fallen prey to addictions of many kinds – from alcohol and gambling to heroin and cocaine. These cause untold harm, and are the root source of much crime.

The more we learn about addictions, the more we understand the need that all of us have to feel good about ourselves.

A recent study of thousands of heroin addicts in four different countries found that most sufferers had experienced difficulties as children in their relationships with their mothers. The illness, death or absence of a mother leaves the young child with a weaker sense of self-esteem and confidence. In later life this can make any person over-anxious to be accepted and easily led into mimetic behaviour. Remember that mimesis is simply imitative behaviour. Nothing is more imitative than heavy drinking or experimentation with drugs.

Many of these drugs suppress self-consciousness – including any sense of inferiority. So they create a feeling of well-being or even elation – for a time – making people feel more socially relaxed. But the after-effects are always worse than the original self-consciousness. To recapture the original 'high' the dosage will need to be gradually increased – with disastrous consequences eventually. Addiction needs to be seen for what it is – a terminal illness.

Yet there is one really extraordinary fact about addiction. For many it has been a route to a discovery that the whole world badly needs: *that there is a spiritual source of healing outside ourselves.*

For all addictions only one recovery programme has proved really effective – the '*Twelve Step*' programme developed first by two US Christians in the 1930s who founded Alcoholics Anonymous. The very first essential step is for the addict to acknowledge a complete inability to control the addiction. The second is a decision to rely totally upon a 'higher power' for help. For Christians this 'higher power' will be Jesus or Abba – but the method will also work for those

whose 'higher power' belongs to another faith. It seems that our God of compassion will respond to being called sincerely by any name.

There is something else fascinating about the 'Twelve Step' programmes. In all cases, no-one offering the programme claims any kind of superiority over even the newest member. All admit that their addiction could at any time overwhelm them again.

The reason this is important is that it allows addicts to deal with the sense of shame, of low self-esteem – of inequality – that had led them into addiction. Often they can be led back to the life-experiences that had caused this shame – which can be childhood abuse of some kind, or extreme parental neglect, or bereavement. The child's tendency to blame itself for all that happens to it can then be faced and reversed.

Once we are part of a group that honestly shares these experiences, we can lose the fear that lies at the root of most addiction – especially the fear of being humiliated.

In these groups, recovering addicts can often form deep trusting relationships for the very first time, eventually understanding that we humans are all in some way hurt and broken.

And this can mean that the recovering addict can also bond more closely with the person of Jesus – the humiliated and broken figure on the cross. Recovering addicts are often great witnesses to the power and mercy of God.

This is another meaning of the cross – that Abba is reaching out, through Jesus, to those hurt by the world.

The *Twelve Step* programmes for alcoholics, gamblers, and all other addicts are another introduction to the wisdom of the Bible, which is also the wisdom of the heart.

World Problems: Depression

According to the World Health Organisation, 'clinical' depression is set to affect one adult in every three worldwide by 2010, and to become the second leading cause of premature death by 2020. Blamed by many psychiatrists for the growing problem of suicide, especially among young men, it is the most serious cause of disability in our times.

Although depression is often diagnosed as a biological disorder, medical science has failed to establish a clear link between the presence or absence of any biochemical substance and depression. There is good reason to believe that in many cases sufferers are in spiritual pain brought on by a loss of a sense of personal worth, and of meaning and purpose to life.

In some cases psychotherapy can discover underlying causes of depression, to do with problems of nurturing early in life, or the self-doubt brought on by bereavement or loss of employment. We humans are spiritually fragile beings, far more easily disturbed than we would care to believe.

Much depression is undoubtedly caused by ageing in a society that has little respect for the aged – a society that tends to hide them away so that youth can believe it will last forever.

Depression should be seen by the sufferer as a spiritual challenge to a search for personal significance, and for meaning and purpose in life.

Consider for a moment the person entirely trapped in the mimetic desires of youth – for wealth, success, adulation. So long as these desires are encouraged by success, so long may that person seem, and believe himself to be, happy.

But what if someday this person asks the most basic question: about the permanent value of this success?

What if, in other words, 'the world' stops interesting and absorbing us? What if we perceive its essential fickleness and superficiality,

and cannot forget this? What if, when we turn on the TV, we can hear and see nothing but moronic silliness, nothing that is meaningful, nothing that gets to grips with the tragedy of time passing and people's lives passing with it?

What if we become aware that in order to find success in this world we have never discovered who we actually are, because all along we have been selling an image that we have constructed for others?

The result is likely to be what even the doctor calls 'depression' – as though psychological 'normality' is to be defined as 'enjoyment of the fulfilment of superficial desire'.

What I am strongly suggesting here is that much depression has to do with a loss of any sense of fulfilment or interest in a superficial culture – that it is a necessary stage of personal growth beyond never-ending mimetic desire.

Already we have seen how addiction can bring people to a point where they admit they have no control over their lives, where they admit their need to call upon a higher power. And we have seen that addicts recover because they make contact with that power.

In cases where depressed people can find no obvious source of their depression, they could do the same. They could admit their total inability to make themselves happy, and call upon a higher power to take them through that experience.

In other words they could go into deep and sincere prayer. Many who have had no other option say that this was the most important decision of their lives – one that brought them through the 'darkest valley' into a sunlit land beyond imagination.

Those who care for a person who is depressed have a vital role in restoring self-esteem and a sense of purpose. The person who feels unlovable needs to be continually reassured that it is not possible to lose the love of God – and the faithful love of the carer will be the best proof of this.

World Problems: the Power of Media – and ‘Image’

Because they provide a spotlight that displays the image of any individual to millions of people, modern visual media have enormous power to make, and unmake, celebrities. Knowing also the pulling power of competition, TV now increasingly relies upon shows that promise celebrity to those willing to compete for it – often in the most humiliating ways.

This proves that no matter how ‘modern’ we become we remain primitive in our tendency to build pyramids of esteem. It also shows our inability to separate self-esteem from other-esteem – our tendency to accept that the value of a person depends upon the value placed upon that person by others.

Modern media therefore participate in the age-old process of withdrawing dignity from the many, for the sake of awarding a meaningless celebrity to the few.

And since our schools do not yet teach spiritual intelligence effectively, our young people tend to become obsessed by image – by how they are seen physically by others. This is the root of the power of brand imaging, for example – a power that increasingly controls the spending of young people and their parents.

In this way, and very subtly and slowly, young people who feel unable to conform lose self-respect and self-esteem. This is unquestionably one of the causes of depression and addiction – and even suicide – among young people today.

On the other hand, media also have enormous power to restore the dignity of people who have lost it – for example by highlighting examples of victimization and abuse and allowing victims to tell their story.

So it is not the media themselves that are the problem. The problem is lack of spiritual intelligence on the part of those who control media, and those who read or watch or listen to media.

Spiritual intelligence allows us to understand that everyone is infinitely important – and therefore that no one is more important than anyone else. The making of celebrities is therefore spiritually unintelligent. Certainly we should appreciate the gifts of entertainers, entrepreneurs and actors, but this does not mean that such people should become objects of media fascination, as they are essentially no more fascinating than anyone else – as time always tells.

A world in which people compete unreflectively for fame is essentially no better than the ancient world – and our media too must therefore become spiritually intelligent if they are to cease doing enormous harm to the human community.

The media's tendency to scapegoat and shame individuals needs also to be noted. We are as fascinated by scandal as by celebrity, and the tabloid press exploits this human weakness at enormous profit to itself. Compassion and spiritual intelligence will tell us that no one should ever lose that basic respect to which everyone is entitled. The most horrific crimes are committed by people who have lost all respect for human life – usually as a consequence of a shortfall in their own nurturing – and this problem cannot be addressed by joining in a process of vengeful humiliation.

Media scapegoating is media victimization – just a twenty-first century variation on the scapegoating theme that has disfigured the whole of human history.

World Problems: Racism

Racism is usually at its worst in people who are themselves at the base of the pyramid of esteem in their own society – poor whites in the American south, for example, and the unemployed or lowest paid in European societies.

This tells us that it is also linked with the human problem of mimetic desire, which tends to build pyramids of racial as well as social esteem.

The principle of human equality is fundamental to spiritual intelligence – but we need to understand the human frailty that continuously threatens that principle. This is our tendency to believe that esteem is something for which we must compete, not something we should freely grant one another – ourselves included – by virtue of the fact that we are all human.

Remembering that all competition is a consequence of mimetic desire, western intellectuals need to understand that the continuing inequalities of western society feed the competitive tensions that lead to racism.

Racism begins in a human heart that is afraid of *difference*. Spiritual intelligence recognizes difference as an enriching quality. It cannot therefore accept the fundamental mistake that racism makes: that difference is a sign of inferiority and danger.

And so we must look for the root cause of inequality – the most mysterious phenomenon in modern history. This problem deserves a chapter all to itself.

World Problems: Inequality

Less than three centuries ago most intellectuals in the West decided that reason, rather than religious faith, was the key to a perfect world. They supposed that once they were in control of thought, social equality would prevail and a perfect world would emerge.

This outlook, known as secularism, has certainly had many successes – for example in defining basic human rights and freedoms, such as freedom of thought.

Yet no honest intellectual could today argue that real equality has been achieved, or that human rights are secure, anywhere in the world.

This did not even happen under the Communist system – perhaps the most advanced of all rational blueprints for an equal society. The reason was that the Communists insisted on being ‘more equal than others’ – to use George Orwell’s famous observation. The party that seized power in Russia to implement Marx’s theory of society and history would allow no other party to operate – and so claimed social supremacy and superiority for itself. It was this contradiction that eventually led to the fall of Communism, beginning in 1989.

And in the West generally, the ascendancy of secularizing intellectuals has created a new kind of inequality, called ‘meritocracy’ – the ascendancy of the educated classes. Now that our universities educate the classes that own and control the controllers of wealth – the multinational corporations – they have become themselves a source of modern inequality.

Indeed, by giving their support to the principle of competition as the best guarantor of economic progress, they have come round to accepting that inequality is inevitable. The whole principle of competition is that somehow ‘success’ must become the basis of life – and success is a matter of winning. It must therefore be for others a matter of losing also – and therefore of inequality.

Mimetic desire is at the root of this desire to win – so is it spiritually intelligent?

World Problems: Corruption

Corruption is the use of power or office to serve dishonestly one's own personal interests. A politician who accepts a bribe, or a company official who conspires to conceal the real condition of his firm to boost his own income, is corrupt. So is a policeman who looks the other way when a drunken motorist offers him money to do so.

When the US suffered a series of huge business scandals in 2002, involving dishonest reporting of company profits, Alan Greenspan, the man who controlled the financial system of the US, blamed a culture of 'infectious greed' which had taken hold during the 'boom' of previous years.

Infectious greed is greed that we 'catch' – or unconsciously imitate. It is, in other words, mimetic desire that has gone beyond any restraint.

Usually the excuse will be 'everybody's doing it'. A 'grab all' psychology makes it difficult for individuals to stand firm, as this is equivalent to 'losing' in the competition of life. But every person who fails to stand firm adds weight to the temptation that can then undermine the morale, and the morality, of a whole society. What example is then set for young people who idealistically suppose that their elders are idealistic also?

Any society that fails to understand the power of mimetic desire – especially when that power has become so obvious – is headed for corruption and disaster, even in boom times.

In Moldova, the poorest country in Europe, students complain that sometimes they must bribe teachers for grades – and that politicians are also 'on the take'. Such behaviour corrodes the trust that is essential to the health of any society. It also undermines the sense of commitment that every society needs from its young people. No wonder so many young Moldovans want to emigrate.

So corruption is a pervasive human weakness that affects wealthy and poor countries equally. The only solution is to understand fully the power of mimetic desire, and to seek a means of overcoming it.

World Problems – ‘Post-Modernism’

‘Post-Modernism’ is an intellectual tendency with different applications in different spheres of life.

As an outlook it tends to be pessimistic – permitting neither religious faith nor confidence in the power of human reason to make the world a better place.

It is called ‘post-modernism’ because it has largely replaced the optimistic ‘modernist’ belief, originating in the eighteenth century, that human progress, using human reason, is inevitable.

In a sense it is the human mind ‘at the end of its tether’ – unable confidently to face the future and to propose solutions to current problems. Why else would it describe itself as an end to something, rather than as a beginning?

As we have seen, this pessimism is due to a simple inability to perceive that the world’s own greatest literature – that of the Bible and of great writers such as Shakespeare – carefully illustrates the human weakness that now lies at the root of our despair – our inability to replace mimetic desire (which leads us into competition, inequality and conflict) with love (a deep respect for one another, given freely).

As a disease of intellectuals ‘post-modernism’ is probably untreatable – because the secular intellectual’s competitive instinct is to defend the position he or she has taken – especially against any solution derived from the Bible.

However, we can inoculate one another against this despair – by choosing to love one another unconditionally – and especially those who are in that despair. When our own love becomes universal and unconditional, then and only then will we ourselves have conquered our own mimetic desire – to be acknowledged by all, including the ‘post-modernists’, as *right*.

Many Problems: One Solution

As we have seen, many of the world's greatest problems relate to covetousness or mimetic desire, and the injustice and oppression that flow from it. In one way or another, all of the world's great religious traditions teach human equality and peace – and spiritual detachment from the competing desires that afflict us.

However, Christians, and even those who consider themselves post-Christian, need to be especially aware of the Bible's exposure of the problem of mimetic desire – and of Jesus' victory over it. Consider especially the possibility that we need to understand 'salvation' and 'redemption' in these terms. Knowing as individuals that we are loved by the Trinity, we are in a position to overcome the power of mimetic desire that threatens all of us – and to communicate this wisdom to our children and friends.

St Paul wrote:

Our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed ... The creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God.
(Romans 8:18-21)

All those who look to Christ as their own salvation, and the salvation of the world, can rest confidently in this promise.

Conclusion

For the Christian the essential principle of life is to be in relationship with the Trinity, as this is the answer to all of life's greatest problems. Nothing sums this up better than Psalm 23.

*The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want.
He makes me lie down in green pastures,
he leads me beside quiet waters,
he restores my soul.
He guides me in paths of righteousness
for his name's sake.
Even though I walk
through the valley of the shadow of death,
I will fear no evil,
for you are with me;
your rod and your staff,
they comfort me.*

*You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies.
You anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.
Surely goodness and love will follow me
all the days of my life,
and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.*

Desiring this relationship above all is personal salvation from the world of mimetic desire. It is also the secret of global salvation, for which all of us must now earnestly pray. The wisdom found in the Bible is found to some extent in all the world's great religions. In sharing it we can all help to free the world from the power of evil – especially covetousness – mimetic desire.

Glossary

Covetousness : The Bible's name for mimetic desire.

Mimetic desire : The new or added desire we acquire by observing someone else's desire for, or proud possession of, something. Where two or more people desire the same object, mimetic desire can involve us in competition and conflict.

Other-esteem : the esteem received by someone from others.

Pyramid of Esteem : What happens usually in human society as a result of mimetic desire. Greater esteem is awarded to just a few people, while most people lack esteem.

Rivalry : Conflicting mimetic desire for the greater other-esteem that attaches to possession of some valued object or position or role.

Spirituality: A way of being that appreciates life as a gift – a gift intended by God to show us all equal love and honour. Christian spirituality knows the giver intimately as three in one – Father, Son and Holy Spirit – the Trinity.

Status : Our rank or position in a hierarchy or pyramid of esteem. Higher status involves being both better known and more highly respected. For the spiritually intelligent person everyone has the same high status.

Victimisation: The loading of contempt onto to an individual or minority. It often results in exclusion or murder.

The World: competitive human society – which deprives us of self-esteem, by taking from us our sense of our own giftedness from birth – and by enticing us to compete with one another for other-esteem.

Further Reading

Those wishing to explore further the ideas introduced here could try the following works. They are mostly not written for the general reader, however, and so may prove more difficult than this short work.

by Gil Bailie

Violence Unveiled (Crossroad, New York, 1997)

(An introduction to the work of René Girard)

by René Girard

I See Satan Fall Like Lightning (Orbis Books, New York, 2001)

(Girard's own post-retirement introduction to his other works.)

Deceit, Desire and the Novel (John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore) (An investigation of the theme of mimetic desire in the work of novelists from Cervantes to Dostoevski.)

Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World (Athlone Press, London, 1987) (A discussion on the origins of religion in scapegoating violence.)

A Theatre of Envy (Gracewing, Herefordshire, 2000)

(Tracing the theme of mimetic desire in the works of Shakespeare.)

Violence and the Sacred (John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1977) (Advancing a theory of religion as the means whereby violence was restrained in ancient culture.)

by Sean O'Conaill

Scattering the Proud (Columba Press, Dublin, 1999) (An optimistic historical reflection on the dual crisis of Christianity and secular society at the millennium.)

by Richard Rohr and Joseph Martos

Great Themes of Scripture: Old Testament (St Antony Messenger Press, 1988) (A very readable account of the gradual advance in the way biblical writers thought about God in the Old Testament.)