

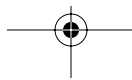
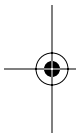
APPENDIX

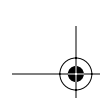
Perfectionism in History and Religion

Throughout history we have dreamed of improving and perfecting ourselves. Plato, Karl Marx, B. F. Skinner and others have written of utopian societies. In this appendix I summarize the history of the pursuit of individual perfection in ancient Greece, Christianity, Hinduism and Buddhism, with the hope that this will help to put our discussion of perfectionism in contemporary culture in a larger context.

IDEAS OF PERFECTION IN ANCIENT GREECE

Plato believed that for every thing in our world there was a perfect, or ideal, form or template. This concept is called metaphysical perfection. For a physical object, like a chair or table, there exists an ideal form of that object somewhere in the universe. For a personal being, there is an ideal, perfect, Supreme Being—and some human beings can share the metaphysical perfection of the Supreme Being. Aristotle believed that ultimate peace of mind and perfection were ac-

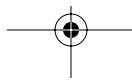




quired through the development of the highest part of his being, his reason, and by acquiring intellectual knowledge.¹ This was later taken up and elaborated by Thomas Aquinas within a Christian worldview. Plato believed that only an elite few could achieve such refined perfection through education, by withdrawing from the world or by living in a perfect society. He also held that most people cannot attain such levels of knowledge and, therefore, remain imperfect and have a lower level of morality.²

This ideal that Plato and, centuries later, the philosopher Immanuel Kant believed in was not arbitrary or relative. It was somehow a given in the order of things and had to be discovered by humans. Jews and Muslims believe that God has given us the ideal in written form in the sacred scriptures of the Torah and the Qur'an. The Christian believes that God has given it in written form in the Bible and in personal form by coming to this earth as a perfect human being. So the most fundamental disagreement between the Greek and the Jewish, Christian and Muslim views is whether we are left on our own to discover or create the ideal, the standard of perfection, or whether it has already been given to us. John Passmore, philosopher and author, points out that

in some ways, the most influential Jewish idea of all, and the least Greek, was the idea of a sacred book, holy scriptures, a solitary and complete source of revelation, given by God to Moses. . . . This was to act as a permanent restraint on Christian, as on Muslim, theological speculation. . . . Christian disputes about perfectibility, therefore, are in part—in a manner very disconcerting to a philosopher—a battle of texts. The true view, it is presumed, must at least be consistent with what has been revealed in Scripture, and ought, in so fundamental a matter, to be deducible from it.³





CHRISTIANITY AND PERFECTIONISM

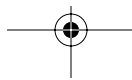
Christianity grew from its original Jewish roots into a cultural environment heavily influenced by Greek ideas. Most Christians equate perfection with sinlessness, and there have been many debates through the centuries about whether or not it is possible to achieve such perfection in this life. Jesus taught his disciples that they should be as perfect as his Father in heaven. A few interpreted this to mean that perfection was possible in this life, and they worked very hard to achieve it. The majority interpreted this command, in the context of the rest of Scripture, to be something to aim for rather than a goal that could be achieved in this life.

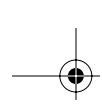
However, the core of Christian teaching is that human beings, although created in the image of God and retaining some remnants of that glory and dignity, are thoroughly corrupt, sinful and unlike God, and so cannot hope to achieve perfection by their own efforts. Both the Hebrew Scripture and the New Testament stress the greatness and holiness of God in contrast to the smallness and sinfulness of human beings.

Yet the early Christians couldn't escape the influence of Greek thought. Passmore writes:

Gnosticism has been a constant temptation to Christianity: the view, at least, that Christians could perfect themselves, if once they were prepared to withdraw from the world, to mortify the body, and thus to soar above the flesh is one which constantly recurs in Christian thinking.⁴

Early church fathers. Passmore quotes Clement of Alexandria who taught that "the 'perfected Gnostic', the man who has reached the heights of Christian knowledge, is 'assimilated to God', he has 'undisturbed intercourse and communion with the Lord', he is 'trans-





lated absolutely and entirely to another sphere.”⁵ This could be achieved by perfect obedience to the commandments. Clement said, “He who holds conversation with God must have his soul immaculate and pure, without stain. It is essential to have made himself perfectly good.”⁶ Clement’s pupil, Origen, again with strong Platonic influence, taught that perfection could be achieved by a rejection of the external world, the emotions, the body and the sex drive. Only a few enlightened people achieve such a level of existence. Dionysius, in the fifth century, asserted that men can be perfected and even deified. He had an enormous influence on medieval theology, and his writings have been called “a charter of Christian mysticism.”⁷ (Martin Luther later condemned the teachings of Dionysius as “‘pure fables and lies’ and ‘sheer nonsense,’ the work of a man who is quite obviously a disciple of Plato, not of Christ.”⁸)

In the fifth century a British monk, Pelagius, attacked Augustine’s view that man cannot reach perfection in this life. Pelagius believed that God would not tell us to do something that’s beyond our reach. He denied the doctrine of original sin and taught that people are born with “a capacity for perfecting themselves or corrupting themselves, by the exercise of their free-will.”⁹ Augustine responded with a series of tracts emphasizing human corruption and the necessity of divine grace to enable us to have a relationship with God and begin to be changed in the direction of perfection. Augustine affirmed the ideal of perfection as the greatest good but taught that it was only reached in eternity.

Throughout the centuries, theologians, in the Augustinian tradition, have emphasized the foundational sin of pride, the belief that we do not need God’s help and grace to become who we are supposed to be.

Monasticism. Some monks followed the path of good works, poverty and chastity in order to achieve perfection. Others followed the

