

## Theology Update

# The Spirituality of Justification

By Ted Peters

**Abstract:** The doctrine of justification-by-faith has gathered enough dust on its shelf in the museum of antiquated doctrines. When we draw justification-by-faith out where we can take a good look at it, it glistens like a mirror. It reflects back to us human beings who we are. We are self-justifiers. In the name of justice, we perpetrate violence. The pursuit of justice does as much damage as the pursuit of injustice, unfortunately. Like a mirror, justification-by-faith reveals who we are and announces that God justifies us by grace. This means we do not have to self-justify. Liberated from self-justification, the Christian is free to love for the sake of the beloved.

**Key Terms:** justification by faith, grace, self-justification, spirituality, violence, patriotism, drones, Hitler, Obama.

Why is it that conscientious theologians debate and re-debate the doctrine of justification-by-faith? For nearly five centuries theologians have parsed and re-parsed, disaggregated and re-constructed, analyzed and re-synthesized the components of this theological *locus*. Why? Is because we want to get it right, exegetically right? Is it because the Lutherans want to decimate the Catholics or the Catholics want to annihilate the Protestants? Is it because *reine Lehre* is at stake; and because we want our church to be grounded in the purest of pure doctrine?

Regardless of the reason, the result is pretty obvious. The doctrine of justification-by-faith has become a museum piece. It sits on a back shelf in the basement of our religious repository of remembered doctrinal conflicts. When an ecumenical conference calls for us to exhibit it, we dust it off and put it out for display, while manipulating it once again. When the conference is over, we put it back on its shelf and turn out the light. As we approach the 500th anniversary of Martin Luther's

commemorated Halloween "trick with treat," the *95 Theses*, I forecast we'll pull out justification-by-faith to tighten a few screws and tinker with the adjustments once more.

Does justification-by-faith have more than museum value? Is justification-by-faith more than a mere theological artifact? Yes. I believe it has untapped value for daily spirituality.

Since I wrote my book on sin back in 1994, I have been wondering: could the realization that we are justified by God's grace—signifying that we need not justify ourselves—have an existential impact?<sup>1</sup> Is there a value to justification-by-faith for Christian spirituality? I believe there is. I believe that living daily by faith makes one's life better. I believe that trusting in the God who has justified us by grace softens the impact of anxiety and relieves us of the onerous burden of making ourselves look good. Once relieved of the burden of self-justification, we can live the life of freedom Luther touted: "A Christian is a perfectly free lord

Ted Peters is Professor Emeritus of Systematic Theology and Ethics at Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary and the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, California. He is the author of *God—The World's Future* (Fortress) and former editor of *Dialog*.

of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all" in love.<sup>2</sup>

Perhaps Thomas Oden best sums up my thesis here:

"We in our self-assertiveness would much prefer to justify ourselves rather than receive God's free gift.... The message of justification is difficult to accept because it seems too good to be true. It says: Stop trying to justify yourself. You do not need to."<sup>3</sup> If we wake up one day and realize—"Hey! I don't need to justify myself"—then shackles will fall like dropped pop corn, and our inner soul will feel an exhilarating liberation. This is the spiritual value of the truth theologians try to express with *justification-by-faith*.

In addition to a new burst of freedom for the person of faith, this realization will greatly reduce human violence. Why? Because the pursuit of justice reaps violence. The pursuit of justice is equally as violent as the pursuit of injustice. When we set our minds on justifying ourselves, watch out! Somebody's gonna get hurt.

## The Dynamic of Self-Justification

Why might we *Homo sapiens* wish to engage in self-justification? Why might we wish to draw a line between good and evil, and then place ourselves on the good side of the line? We are naturally inclined to self-justify because we intuitively think—rightly or wrongly—that the good is eternal. Self-justification is, phenomenologically speaking, our own farcical attempt at self-eternalization.

Philosophers such as Plato and theologians such as Augustine tell us the good is eternal. That this belongs to human intuition is exemplified in common parlance as well as philosophy. "Diamonds are forever," we are told in jewelry stores. One of the most frequent words to find on body tattoos is, "forever." America, said Abraham Lincoln, should "never perish" from the Earth. Players remembered in the Baseball Hall of Fame are sometimes dubbed "immortal," and one or another will be said to be the "greatest of all time." Theologian Derek Nelson quips that all too easily we crave the steak of

eternity, but satisfy our hunger with the SPAM of the temporal.<sup>4</sup>

It may appear on the surface that we justify ourselves only because we want others to think highly of us. In Plato's *Republic*, Glaucon goes so far as to assert that it is more important to appear to be a just person than to actually be a just person. We "ought to seem only, and not to be, just."<sup>5</sup> We might nickname this the *Glaucon principle*.

The Glaucon principle accounts for a significant amount of our behavior, to be sure. Yet, I believe our motive for self-justification is rooted in something deeper. It is rooted in what we deem immortal, perhaps even eternal. We declare ourselves just by identifying ourselves with eternal justice. It would be intolerable for us to think of ourselves as unjust, as immoral and hence temporal or passing. The good justifies us. The good eternalizes us. Well, at least we think so.

In this analysis, I want to dwell less on the eternity of the good and emphasize more the magnetic draw the good places on our psyche. We daily draw a line between good and evil, and we place ourselves on the good side of the line. This is the essence of self-justification. Whether we call it *rationalization* or *self-justification*, it consists of making an old bicycle look like a new Lamborghini. We discover this about ourselves when we look in the mirror, the mirror provided by justification-by-faith. "Thus the knowledge of God in the crucified Christ takes seriously the situation of man in pursuit of his own interests, man who in reality is inhuman, because he is under the compulsion of self-justification, domination, self-assertion and illusionary self-deification," writes Jürgen Moltmann.<sup>6</sup> Self-justification does not rid us of evil when making us look good; rather, self-justification actually spawns heartless dispositions and violent actions toward others.

## Self-Justification in Common Parlance<sup>7</sup>

If you remove the wax from your ears, you'll hear the screeching of self-justifying rhetoric every day. You'll hear it among your friends, your family, and even when talking to yourself. It consists,

figuratively speaking, of drawing a line between good and evil and placing oneself on the good side of the line.

For physical exercise, I used to jog. Now I swim. Earlier, while jogging one day at a local community college track, my ears picked up the sound of squealing tires on asphalt. I looked up just in time to see the front bumper of a school bus hit a pedestrian, catapulting the pedestrian a dozen feet where she landed in a heap. As long as I was already running, it was easy to race to the scene of the accident. Before I got to the scene, the bus driver had opened the door and was descending to street level. The driver was hollering, "It's not my fault! She stepped right out in front of me!" I along with other onlookers ignored the driver and raced to the injured woman. As it turned out, she had suffered broken legs but nothing life-threatening.

In my own mind, I want to reconstruct what I heard from the bus driver. Here is the logic of what I believe she said. "There is a line between good and evil. Good people remain on the curb to let traffic pass, whereas bad people step in front of oncoming traffic. The pedestrian had walked in front of my bus, and this placed her on the evil side of the line. I am an innocent bus driver, and I jammed on the breaks to try to prevent injury. Despite this pedestrian's injury, I am right and she is wrong." Not only was the bus driver trying to convince us of her innocence as Glaucon might, she was trying to convince herself as well. So it seemed to me. I ask: What impels a person to self-justify?

One more thing. It appeared to us onlookers that the bus driver was much more concerned about her own self-justification than the possible suffering of the woman lying in the street. Self-justification takes energy, energy for self-protection that could be utilized to aid others in need. Self-justification numbs the heart, leaving us heartless.

### *Self-Justification in Political Parlance*

Even with wax in your ears you can hear self-justification in political rhetoric. My son Paul works in private industry, but as a contractor he occasion-

ally visits U.S. government weapons test sites. On one occasion he brought me a gift, something he bought from an alleged secret facility. Because of secrecy, he could not divulge the site. He claimed it is government issue. In the coat of arms on the tee shirt we find a hand grenade surrounded by laurel branches—that is, war surrounded by peace. The words on the shirt read: "Admit Nothing. Deny Everything. Make Counter Accusations."

Whether a society is democratic or fascist, its leader wants to look good. Every leader has learned the Glaucon principle. In democratic societies, candidates for office must publically identify with whatever goods the electorate identifies. In autocratic societies, despots similarly identify themselves with some form of higher good in order to sugar coat their repression. Regardless of the political system, leaders know they need to look good for their constituencies and to the wider world.

First, fascism. When advocating socialism to replace capitalism, Adolph Hitler described *laissez faire* capitalism as cruel to the Aryan people, *das Volk*. In order to rid the nation of such cruelty, Hitler established National Socialism, what we have come to know as Nazism. Because the Christian religion teaches compassion for the weak, Hitler invoked a higher religious power to strengthen his nation. We see how this supra-religious self-justification is invoked in a speech he delivered on September 6, 1938, in Nuremberg. "National Socialism is not a cult-movement—a movement for worship; it is exclusively a *volkic* political doctrine based upon racial principles. In its purpose there is no mystic cult, only the care and leadership of a people defined by a common blood-relationship. Therefore we have no rooms for worship, but only halls for the people—no open spaces for worship, but spaces for assemblies and parades. We have no religious retreats, but arenas for sports and playing-fields, and the characteristic feature of our places of assembly is not the mystical gloom of a cathedral, but the brightness and light of a room or hall which combines beauty with fitness for its purpose... Our worship is exclusively the cultivation of the natural, and for that reason, because natural, therefore God-willed. Our humility is the

unconditional submission before the divine laws of existence so far as they are known to us men.”

The Fuhrer drew a line between good and evil; then he invoked what is good. The sunlight of the open playing-field is good, whereas the worshipful gloom of the cathedral is bad. Aryan blood-relationship is good, whereas mystical contemplation is bad. Brightly lit halls and open arenas belong to everybody and are good, while church buildings attempt to privatize the divine exclusively for their members. Humility in obeying our natural inclinations is good, in contrast to the artificial doctrines of church religion. And, most importantly, the divine laws of existence are eternal. National Socialism, in short, is a faithful embodiment of the eternal divine laws of existence.

The earlier aspiring Hitler wrote in his book, *Mein Kampf*, “I believe that I am acting in accordance with the will of the Almighty Creator: by defending myself against the Jews, I am fighting for the work of the Lord.”<sup>8</sup> Appeal to the divine is the ultimate appeal in the act of self-justification.

The self-justified Hitler was heartless. Most of the world sees Hitler as an incarnation of evil. Intolerable and reprehensible were the devastation of World War Two combined with the attempted genocide of Jews, mentally challenged, physically disabled, homosexuals, gypsies, and communists. The nature with which Hitler identified his Nazism was the nature blood red in tooth and claw, the natural world of Social Darwinism and Eugenics. So horrendous was the global destruction he precipitated, the symbols of Satan and Hitler have become conflated in our imaginations.

Second, democracy. Today’s political leaders have long known how to draw a line between good and evil. In addition, they know how to place themselves on one side and place Hitler on the other. On September 3, 2013, Secretary of State John Kerry was trying to persuade the U.S. Congress to drop bombs on Syria. His grounds: Bashir Assad was suspected of employing gas weapons to kill his own Syrian people. Kerry’s speech included: “It was used by Adolf Hitler to gas millions of Jews; it was used by Saddam Hussein in order to gas [Iranians and his own people]; and now it has been used by Bashir Assad. Three people in all of history.”

Kerry drew a line between good and evil; and he placed on the evil side of the line Hitler along with two other political leaders. This would justify U.S. military action against the nation of Syria. Once the enemy could be identified with Hitler, then Kerry’s nation would be justified in taking violent action. “The Hitler reference can be impactful,” comments Katy Steinmetz. “Poignant or cheap, there’s no doubt that mentioning Hitler is a popular rhetorical device.”<sup>9</sup>

Although Hitler made his own gas, the United States manufactured the chemical weapons Kerry was talking about. The U.S. gave these chemical weapons to Saddam Hussein to be used against the Iranians. It appears that Iraq’s unused weapons were surreptitiously moved to Syria [so some suspect; but as of this writing not yet proven]. By drawing a line between good and evil, those on the evil side use gas to kill. On which side of the line do those who manufacture such weapons stand? Nothing said.

America is good. Syria is bad. Americans are devoted to justice, freedom, and human dignity. Furthermore, Americans are devoted to avoiding war. America only bombs those on the evil side of the line.

## Patriotism and the Justification of War

Now, you might say: “Hey! Wait a minute! What is a U.S. government to do? When foreign dictators are cruel to their people or when they harbor chemical weapons, are Americans not justified in sending the military to take them out?” Yes, of course. But, this is just the point. Self-justification precedes violence. It justifies violence. War is the pursuit of justice, not injustice. When a nation pursues justice, people die. These are the facts. What we are after here is understanding the fact that the pursuit of justice results in someone getting bombed.

Something else is a fact: self-justification need not only precede violence; it can come with or especially after violence. Journalist Kevin Sites interviewed a Marine corporeal while under fire in the U.S. war against Iraq, November 12, 2004,

in Fallujah. Sites asked the Marine whether killing people is difficult.

"No. I don't have a problem shootin' shitheads," he answered. By identifying Iraqis as shitheads, the Marine is doing the world a favor by ridding us of them. He draws a line between good and evil, placing Americans on the good side of the line and shitheads on the evil side. This justifies shooting them.

"I shot six people in less than ten seconds," he reported. "I'm glad I'm here defending my country... I'm not here for the Iraqi people. I'm here for the American people... I'm gettin' rid of terrorists... I'm doing my job."<sup>10</sup> He's doing his job. He's loyal to the American people. The president in the White House, his commander and chief, sent this Marine to Iraq so that justice will be done.

Patriotism draws a line between good and evil. This should make matters simple. However, the message that patriotism communicates to our young soldiers preparing for war is double layered. On the top layer we find justice, universal and eternal justice. On the layer just beneath we find loyalty to one's nation as a substitute standard of justice. The moral universe of the top layer includes all persons, every human being regardless of nation. The subterranean layer includes only America, or whichever nation the soldier is loyal to. The top layer is ultimate while the second layer is penultimate. But, on the front, the distinction between the ultimate and the penultimate becomes blurred. In fact, boot camp indoctrination deliberately blurs the distinction so the soldier will shoot first and think about higher justice later. By renaming the people of Iraq "shitheads," no thinking before six trigger pulls in ten seconds is required.

Shortly after the end of World War Two, theologians Paul Tillich and Reinhold Niebuhr along with their historian friend at Columbia University, John Herman Randall, Jr., described patriotism and nationalism as demonic. Because the interest of the nation replaces allegiance to a justice that transcends national interests and that includes the welfare of the enemy in its scope, these thinkers thought of nationalism as the treatment of something penultimate as if it were ultimate. To treat something as ultimate that is less than ultimate is

to succumb to the demonic spirit. The result can only be damage and carnage.

Patriotism is a form of spirituality without religion or, perhaps more accurately, a substitute religion. "Whatever its origin and its ultimate value, patriotism is beyond doubt the most widespread social ideal of the day; it is the modern religion, far stronger than mere Christianity in any of its forms, and to its tribal gods men give supreme allegiance. Nationalism is almost the one idea for which masses of men will still die."<sup>11</sup> The patriot feels justified in his or her ultimate devotion to one country at the expense of others, because his or her nation is allegedly blessed by God.

These three scholars saw the demonic reap destruction in German Nazism, Japanese Imperialism, Soviet communism, and the rising red star over China. In the era immediately following World War Two, they worried about the possibility that this demonic spirit might take over the allies. Might the United States ever succumb? Had these three lived into the second decade of the twenty-first century, what might they have come to think?

## Violence and More Violence

Violence is like a virus. It infects. It spreads. When we engage in self-justification, we can find good reasons to throw the first punch. But, we cannot predict let alone control what happens thereafter.

Jacques Ellul once offered us five laws of violence. The first law: continuity. Once you initiate violence, you cannot put a stop to it. Like a grass fire, the path of violence continues to engulf more and more in its flames. The second law: reciprocity. "Violence creates violence, begets and procreates violence" in response. The third law: sameness. Violence is the same whether justified or unjustified. "It is impossible to distinguish between... violence that liberates and violence that enslaves." The fourth law: "violence begets violence—*nothing else*." Or, to say it another way, it would be unrealistic to think that violence is a means to an end. Realism tells us that the only end to our violence is more violence. Ellul's fifth

law is of special interest to us here: "the man who uses violence always tries to justify both it and himself. Violence is so unappealing that every user of it has produced lengthy apologies to demonstrate to the people that it is just and morally warranted."<sup>12</sup>

This discussion yields two conclusions. First, we are inclined to justify ourselves when preparing to perpetrate violence. Second, we deceive ourselves in the process. Because we exert so much energy in the process of self-justification we overlook what history has taught us, namely, the validity of Ellul's five laws of violence. Once we have released the Sorcerer's Apprentice, we cannot return to a previous peaceful state. At that point, we can either apologize, or, we can continue the process of self-justification to the point of incredulity. In neither case does violence come to a final termination.

Ellul provides illumination for a recent phenomenon: U.S. drone strikes. Presidents John F. Kennedy, Jimmy Carter, and Gerald Ford had firmly stated that no one representing the U.S. government is allowed to commit assassination or conspire to assassinate any human being. Shortly after the 9/11 event, President George W. Bush changed this rule. But he needed to justify it, to disguise the assassination component. He authorized the C.I.A. to employ drone strikes anywhere in the world to kill leaders of Al Qaeda, but it would be called a "military" operation rather than "assassination." It was estimated at the beginning that perhaps twenty or so individuals would be considered "prime" or "senior" Al Qaeda leaders. Once the drone program was underway, the criteria changed. No longer would drone strikes be limited only to prime or senior leaders; drone strikes became authorized to kill anyone considered to be "supporters" of Al Qaeda. At this writing drone strikes under the Bush and Obama administrations have killed more than 3,000 people in Pakistan, Yemen, Somalia, and elsewhere, 300 of whom are designated by the C.I.A. as "collateral damage." What will happen next?

Al Qaeda objects publically to drone strikes, but privately Al Qaeda loves the benefit. Obama's drones recruit new terrorists. In Yemen in particular, as soon as a drone strike destroys a home, Al Qaeda representatives show up with money and a crew for rebuilding. Victims of drone strikes find

shelter and consolation from America's enemies. As the support for Al Qaeda grows, will this justify more drone strikes? How long will this spiral of violence continue?

Recall Ellul's second law, namely, reciprocity. Violence creates violence. It begets and procreates violence in response. While Americans feel justified in bombing targets in foreign lands, the laws of violence kick in and worsen the threat of alienation from peoples of other nations. One difficulty with such self-justification is that it blinds Americans to what they themselves contribute to their own ineluctable self-destruction.

### *Asking God to Justify Violence*

Self-justification is the garden variety thing to do. It's our default. When challenged by either guilt or meaninglessness, a mechanism of self-justification clicks in. This applies to us both individually and collectively, both in Lake Wobegon and on the battlefield. "When someone kills in war there's a psychological triage that occurs," writes Stiles. "The individual must find meaning in the act. Because killing is the ultimate refutation of our own humanity, there must be a justification to prevent the mind from defaulting to the judgment of murderer."<sup>13</sup> It is too much to think of oneself as a murderer. The killing must be just and right. The moral universe must somehow provide the criterion for judging the killer to be performing an act of justice. Would God approve?

Appeal to divine justification is the strongest form of self-justification. On one occasion in the Middle Ages Bernard of Clairvaux delivered a eulogy for the Knights Templar. "The soldier of Christ is certain when he kills....He kills with Christ, for he does not carry the sword without reason. He is a servant of God for the punishment of evil men and the praise of good men."<sup>14</sup> What more sublime justification for violence could one ask for? When necessary, we draw a line between good and evil and place both ourselves and God on the good side.

Such political rhetoric is not subtle. It's public and, to the critical eye, transparent. What is

important for us to note, however, is that this mechanism of self-justification is secretly at work in us every day. It is our first line of self-defense. We invoke self-justification in our private moments as well as when interacting with family, friends, co-workers, and the public. Self-justification is as common as rain drops, burrowing into every nook and cranny until nearly everything is wet with it. We draw an imaginary line between good and evil, and we place ourselves on the good side. To be right is to be attuned, as Hitler says, to the "divine laws of existence."

One of the points I wish to press here is this: when political or personal rhetoric appeals directly to ethereal justice or to Almighty God for justification, it appeals to something less than true justice or the true God. The true God transcends our image of God; and the true God even transcends the concept of justice structuring our moral universe. When we self-justify in the name of God or in the name of justice, usually the concept of the divine or the just has been shaved and trimmed and minimized so as to fit our proposed program. In short, don't believe dictators or presidents or secretaries of state when they justify their policies by appeal to a downsized moral universe.

The true God transcends our worldview, the moral universe we construct. My emphasis here on using the transcendent for leverage against our projected substitute images is not foolproof. So intense is our propensity for self-justification that we can even prostitute divine transcendence itself for our own mundane purposes. Let me provide two examples, both dealing with justification of existing human hierarchy.

## Blessing the Hierarchy with the Law of Karma

My first example of justifying hierarchy is the relationship between Brahman and the caste system in India. The celebrated advaita philosopher, Shankara (Sri Shankaracharya, 788–820 CE), interpreted the

Upanishads in a dramatic way that should have nullified every social hierarchy.

The term, *Advaita*, usually translated as non-dualism, pursues knowledge or awareness of the differenceless entity, *Brahman*, or pure being. Brahman is the transcendent ground of all reality that is immanently present in each and every finite creature. The human self, the *Atman*, is essentially Brahman. In our daily routine with the multiplicity we experience in the physical world, we don't realize this unifying truth. Through yogic practices, we can bring into consciousness the truth that our *Atman* is really Brahman. "I am Brahman" (*Aham Brahmasmi*).<sup>15</sup> You and I are directly and without mediation one with ultimate reality, with Brahman. Our spiritual task as Hindus, then, is to become fully aware of this ontological truth.

If it is the case that each of us human persons is ontologically at one with Brahman, then this nullifies the caste system, the social hierarchy in place for nearly two millennia before Shankara. The term for caste in Sanskrit is *varna*, which means "color." Indian society is arranged according to race, according to color, with the lightest on top and the darkest on the bottom. Below the caste system are millions of people previously known as outcastes or Dalits. The direct and unmediated access to ultimate reality proposed by Shankara would, in principle, de-legitimize the caste distinctions between people. So, we ask: did the metaphysical insight that each of us is Brahman undermine caste distinctions and promote human equality? Did the followers of Shankara foment a revolution in Indian society? No.

How could such an ontology be rendered supportive of the discriminatory structure of the caste hierarchy? Answer: by attributing caste structures to a penultimate yet still immortal entity, namely, the law of karma. Karma is the metaphysical ground for the Indian concept of justice. Karmic justice is immortal yet still penultimate, something less than ultimate or final. According to Advaita, to fulfill one's caste responsibilities becomes a preparatory step for a later leap into the full realization of one's oneness with Brahman. While the individual is free to affirm "I am Brahman," socially the higher castes continue to rule the lower castes. In

sum, Shankara's ontological doctrine, regardless of how widespread, effected no change on the social status quo.

When modern Christian missionaries arrived in India, they repudiated the inequalities of the caste system. Before Christ, every human person is equal, said the missionaries. It is easy to understand why those who initially found Christianity most attractive were the lower castes and the outcastes. In the Christian Church they found a dignity denied them by the prevailing social hierarchy. Generations later, Indian Christian leaders have developed a religious vision based upon their liberation from untouchability, Dalit theology.

Even though the caste system is outlawed in modern India, it still governs with cultural force. Indian Old Testament scholar Monica Melanchthon feels the pain of exclusion experienced by so many. "The culture of our present-day society . . . produces persons who are excluded and barred from various arenas of life: economic, political, social, cultural, and religious [including] those who are poor, women, Dalits, indigenous peoples, people suffering from HIV/AIDS, and those whose human worth is negated and annulled by society's logic of separation and alienation." For Melanchthon, the message of grace provides a foundation for affirming human equality, regardless of our status at birth. "In this context, the justice of God and the equality of human persons realized by the doctrine of divine grace is a sign of hope."<sup>16</sup>

Shankara the Hindu and Melanchthon the Christian each begin with a sense of the sacred that de-legitimizes all human hierarchies, especially the caste system. Yet, the hierarchy remains an everyday reality that results in passive injustice to millions of persons who are treasured by God. Melanchthon's vision is a sign of hope.

## Blessing the Hierarchy with the Model of Christ

This leads to my second example of justifying hierarchy: the Christian Church. Yes, Christians have

long affirmed human equality and dignity granted each of us by the grace of God. Before the cross of Jesus, we are all sinners saved solely by God's grace. None of us is superior in the eyes of God. Yet, nearly every generation of church leadership has found a way to justify hierarchy, patriarchy, and ecclesiastical power. How?

Any hierarchy of choice—the choice of those high in the hierarchy—can invent a relationship between God and the world that provides a model that we on earth are mandated to copy. As it goes in heaven, so it goes on earth. If God rules the angels, then the priest should rule the lay people. Yale's Kathryn Tanner summarizes the logic: "God is to the angels as angels are to human beings, as the king to his vassals, as the lion or eagle is to the lowly grasshopper or snail, as a man is to a woman, as a father is to his household, as the head is to the other members of a living organism, as the soul is to the body."<sup>17</sup>

This copy-the-heavenly-model method is the one followed by many of the ancient kings and emperors in Rome, Egypt, or Mesopotamia, who were polytheists. Today's Roman Catholic Pope is a monotheist; yet he assumes the title of *pontifex maximus*, a title borrowed from the former polytheistic emperors of Rome. In sum, we lower heaven low enough so we can photograph it and print out copies here on earth.

Justifying hierarchy within the church becomes a bit more difficult when we emphasize that God is transcendent. When we eliminate what Karl Barth calls the *Anknüpfungspunkt* or connector between heaven and earth, we can no longer photograph heaven or copy it. What happens when heaven gets so mysterious that we are unable to copy it here on earth? Don't fear. The urge for us to self-justify is so strong, even the "infinite qualitative distance" between God and humanity, to use Søren Kierkegaard's allusion, can still be exploited to bless terrestrial hierarchy.

Here's how it works. The pontiff or the king or whatever form in which the ruler comes claims direct responsibility to God. If the ruler reports to God and solely to God, then none of us ordinary people has a right to criticize let alone judge the ruler. In 1585, Queen Elizabeth affirmed

the sovereignty of the ruler. "Kings and Princes Sovereigns, owing their homage and service only unto the Almighty God the King of all Kings, are in that respect not bound to yield account or render the reasons of their actions to any other but to God their only Sovereign Lord."<sup>18</sup> On this form of hierarchy justification, Tanner explains, "a human sovereign is deemed obedient to no one but God; direct obedience to God legitimates a rule that cannot be responsive to, or checked by, those subject to it."<sup>19</sup> Even God's "infinite qualitative difference" can be exploited for self-justification. Our point here is that human power structures—whether secular or religious—exhibit a built-in motivation for self-justification; and they will even domesticate the divine if necessary to shore up their exalted stations in the hierarchy.

The Christian Church remains *simul justus et peccator*. Despite our commitments to God's gift of grace, Cristina Grenholm reminds us that "we have to take into account that we are caste-, race-, and gender-driven cowards who resist the gift of life."<sup>20</sup> We are cowards because we are unwilling to spell out the implications of our graced relationship with our saving God: the implication that before God we are all equal and this should apply to human community as well.

Have I now justified anti-hierarchicalism? Oops! My purpose here is not to justify any ideology, even an anti-ideology ideology. Rather, I wish to show the subtle and incessant thrust of self-justification in our lives. Anti-hierarchicalism is not immune from self-justification and resulting bigotry either. In fact, anti-hierarchicalism may be easier to proffer in our modern post-Enlightenment world with our public stress on human equality. Hierarchialists are everywhere in retreat. It has become easy to justify.

## The Pharisee Within

Jesus thundered judgment against the Pharisees of his time, using the term *hypocrite*. Matthew 23:27 "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which on the outside look beautiful, but inside they are full of the

bones of the dead and of all kinds of filth." Jesus contrasts the outside with the inside. The outside looks moral and just and enviable. The inside, in contrast, wreaks of death.

What if the difference between the inside and outside is less radical? What if you and I try to conform our inside to the image we project on the outside? What if we take our own self-justification seriously? Perhaps Jesus' thundering voice might sound like an alarm clock, waking us up.

John Sanford analyzes "the Pharisee in each of us." Like an actor the hypocrite wears a mask, he says. "The mask is the person we pretend to be—the false outer personality that we turn to the world, but that is contradicted from within . . . The destructive aspect of the mask is our tendency to identify with it, to think that we *are* the person we pretend to be, and thereby to remain unconscious of our real self." We lie, and then we believe the lie. "The result is spiritual and psychological stagnation."<sup>21</sup>

Jesus wants to shock us with judgment. More. By announcing God's grace that bestows the gift of forgiveness, we find we don't need to wear the mask any more. "If we would belong to the kingdom, this false outer front must go . . . We must dare to be ourselves and must no longer hide behind a facade."<sup>22</sup> God's justification of us in faith liberates the soul from its felt need to pretend, its need to put on a mask colored by self-justification.

But, watch out! The temptation to self-justify never goes away. We can all too easily listen to Jesus' denunciation of the hypocrites and identify ourselves with the humble anti-hypocrites. We can claim that justifying faith is a virtue we possess; and we can become proud that it is our faith alone that saves. We can turn faith itself into a form of self-justification, one more mask that hides the truth. "Faith is not at all the supreme and true and finally successful form of self-justification," Karl Barth reminds us.<sup>23</sup> When this temptation to self-justify in the name of faith knocks at our door, we need to turn to the mirror and laugh at ourselves.

Our faith in the God who justifies takes the form of humility. Humility forms our soul. "For a person to have a soul," says Sanford, "he or she must relinquish egocentric identification with the

outer mask and must be willing to face what is within.”<sup>24</sup> If we realize that we are held in the loving arms of a gracious God, then we can face the truth about who we are. This truth-facing while being held in the arms of grace is what creates an eternal soul.

## Justification by Faith and Christian Freedom

To realize in faith that one is justified by God’s grace produces a double impact. The first impact: a sense of liberation, a new freedom from the compulsion to define oneself as good or just or true. One can discard those wilting fig leaves. Transparency becomes easy. The second impact: without the self-protection that self-justification appears to provide, one is free to love the neighbor for the sake of the neighbor.

Roman Catholics along with Lutherans, Reformed, and Methodists are in concord on this point. §37 of the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* declares, “We confess together that good works—a Christian life lived in faith, hope and love—follow justification and are its fruits. When the justified live in Christ and act in the grace they receive, they bring forth, in biblical terms, good fruit. Since Christians struggle against sin in their entire lives, this consequence of justification is also for them an obligation they must fulfill. Thus both Jesus and the apostolic Scriptures admonish Christians to bring forth the works of love.”<sup>25</sup> Yes, indeed, all stress that the justified believer should embody St. Paul’s “faith active in Love” (Galatians 5:1).

Free to love, that’s the watchword. “Through God’s grace we recognize ourselves as sinful subjects before God, and in the liberation that comes from justification we are freed to love the neighbor,” writes Mary Lowe. “This implies an ought—an obligation to the other. But this service is not done as a work of merit but as an act of love.”<sup>26</sup> Lowe’s assertion is reminiscent of a point Luther makes again and again. “So, also, our works should be done, not that we may be justified by them, since,

being justified beforehand by faith, we ought to do all things freely and joyfully for the sake of others.”<sup>27</sup>

Before we become zealous, we need to relax. This is not lost on a proponent of Roman Catholic Queer Theology, James Alison. “Curiously, a strong belief in ‘justification by faith alone’ seemed to have as its psychological counterpart an extreme need to justify oneself. . . . I had to learn how not to be so concerned with whether I was getting things right or wrong, but to learn instead to relax into the given-ness of things.”<sup>28</sup> Relax.

## God’s Self-Justification

The hinge on which this article swings is the contrast between your or my self-justification, on the one hand, and God’s gracious justification of us, on the other. Marcus Barth (not Karl) suggests that even God engages in self-justification; but when God self-justifies we creatures become the beneficiaries. God’s act of justifying us is the act of giving us new life. “God justifies his work of creation and salvation . . . by showing that he is pleased with the man he has created anew. Resurrection, glorification, clothing over, renewal, changing a fleshly into a spiritual body—all these are designations for one and the same event: the public, glorious, incontestable, and irrevocable justification of man through God’s grace.”<sup>29</sup> Despite this unsurpassable and eternal gift, we follow the path of the fool and try to justify ourselves anyhow.

The thesis of this article is that we human beings engage in self-justification in our daily lives. Declaring ourselves just is the default position taken by our psyche. Our spirituality—whether a religious or non-religious spirituality—consists in forming our soul according to what standards we believe justice requires. We conscript our conscience into providing standards we can attain; and this provides us with the self-satisfaction that comes with our moral embodiments and achievements.

The problem is that frequently somebody gets hurt. Some of us get run over by innocent bus drivers. Soldiers march to the drum beat of

self-justifying rhetoric. When drone strikes kill terrorists and their families, justice is done. Justice is a dangerous thing. It maims and kills and destroys. Yet, under every circumstance, we want to think of ourselves as justified by justice.

It is all too human to draw a line between good and evil and place ourselves on the good side of the line. What would we think in the special case where we draw the line between good and evil and God places himself on the evil side? We would declare ourselves good, and in the process separate ourselves from God. What then?

## Endnotes

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