

Chapter 1.04 Religious Ideals and Practical Reality

Jesus' message is a superb ideal but it cannot serve as the basis for a practical real society or practical real government. We have to think about what fails, how Jesus' teaching points us in the right direction, what we need other than Jesus' message, and how to bring the ideal and real closer together. All major religions have long traditions of practical advice. This chapter does not describe them. This chapter describes the problems that we have to face in trying to hold ideals while making a real society in the real world.

Practical Failure; No New Ideals; Standard of Standards.

I do not know any set of ideals that is both really ideal and something we can live up to everyday. No people fully live up to any morality, religious teachings, or philosophy. No good government was ever based only on moral or religious ideals, not even theocracies such as in old Israel or modern Iran. No Christian nation ever ran primarily according to the teachings of Jesus. We need ideals and we need real guidelines in addition to our ideals.

When people realize the world cannot live according to ideals, they tend to get discouraged and sometimes they even do foolish things such as crusade. It is better to admit the gap between ideal and real, and deal with it. Only then can we get the best of the human situation and come closest to ideals. Because human nature plays a large role in the gap, it is better to admit the realities of human nature and strive to manage human nature to achieve the best we can.

It seems we should pick the best set of ideals, even if we cannot live up to them. This way is tricky. Ideals are what we use to measure the best. We do not have ideals outside the ideal to compare ideals to see the best. If we had a best standard, that best standard would be part of our ideals. That standard would not be apart from our ideals by which we measured our ideals. The problem of a "standard of standards" recurs in various ways later in the book so please remember it.

Despite the logical puzzle, it still makes intuitive sense to say we want the best set of ideals, and makes sense to use a general standard to judge particular ideals. In fact, we do use several general standards already, such as the greatest good, right, applies to everybody equally, allows people to best get along, and is merciful. We use general standards when we figure how other ethical systems can work with the teachings of Jesus, for example whether we can follow Political Correctness and Jesus too or can follow Conservative Republicans and Jesus too. We use a general standard when we pick among items in sets of ethics, as for example choosing the best of both the Taoist advice to "let go" sometimes and Jesus' advice to "hold on" sometimes. We still do not have a single highest general standard that allows us to combine all various ideals into one set.

The teachings of Jesus offer the best set of ideals. They best approach the general standards that we use to measure any set of ideals. The teachings of Jesus give us ideals that we can realistically approach even if we cannot fully meet them.

Best Practical Ideal.

If we accept both the impossible ideal and our realistic practical limitations, then it seems reasonable to combine them into a best practical ideal. Instead of shooting for an impossible ideal, we set up an ideal that we might actually achieve. In fact, this is what a lot of people do, and this is what I suggest. This is what the practical traditions of most major religions struggle to achieve. This strategy brings us back to the problem of the standard of standards but we just have to live with that problem.

Unfortunately, people differ even on the best practical ideal. Without going into a lot of argument, I think the best practical ideal now is the teachings of Jesus combined with pluralistic democracy, capitalism, the correct oversight of capitalism, social justice, and care of nature. Making this all work is hard but might be doable.

Good Self-Government and the Real World Again.

Self-government fails for many of the same reasons that ideal morality fails. Even when we take into account that practical good government is part of what we need to supplement morality, democracy can still fail because of human nature. We are just not good enough and smart enough to govern ourselves. Again we face the problem that God gave us a task which he also ill-equipped us to carry out.

Jesus Points the Way; Jesus Completes Human Nature.

People are a mix of good and bad. We can see what is good but we can never fully live up to it. When we try to be perfect, we only make life worse. We compound bad behavior with guilt and fear. Our inability to find the best balance leads us into bad situations from which we cannot escape. Sometimes the events of the world lead us into bad situations from which we cannot escape.

Jesus' teachings point the way toward the good without requiring us to be too good. Jesus inspires us to be good without using goodness as another source of guilt, tyranny, and failure. Jesus' teachings complete human nature without requiring it to be more than human nature too much of the time. Jesus' teachings can often lead us out of bad situations even if they cannot lead us out of every bad situation. Jesus' teachings can serve as the ideal toward which we lead real life and real government as long as we understand that we cannot get there right now.

Jesus' Morality Piggybacks Christianity.

Jesus' teachings are not the same as standard Christianity. Christians do not always carry out Jesus' moral teachings, and Christianity has many ideas that are not found in Jesus' teachings. Jesus' teachings ride along with official Christianity as a kind of "sub-message". Jesus' moral message rides piggyback on the doctrine that Jesus is God. Even from this subordinate position, Jesus' message still gets through, teaches people, changes hearts and minds, and changes behavior. Christianity is like the "carrier wave" for the core of Jesus' teachings. Jesus' teachings are like a bottle of honey immersed in a bucket of scented water. The core message operates within the official doctrine to make people better. People want to believe in magic and miracles such as the virgin birth of Jesus or that the Buddha could walk and talk at birth. When people believe in magic, they are more likely to go along with the morality that the magic packages. When people believe in the virgin birth or the resurrection, they are more likely to go along with the moral teachings. The moral teachings of Jesus are not easy. Most people would not

have gone along with the teachings if they did not also believe the magic, especially the magic that Jesus' crucifixion absolved them of their sins and saved them, and the magic of Jesus' resurrection and its promise of eternal life. If people had not believed that Jesus' death and resurrection were magically effective, we would not have hospitals, schools, capitalism, science, ethical business, workable democracy, and the Golden Rule. If people were not self-interested so as to want forgiveness, salvation, resurrection, and immortality for themselves then we would not have the selflessness of the Golden Rule and we would not be working toward the Kingdom of God.

Repeat Warning: The Kingdom of God and the State.

In saying that the best practical realization of our ideals now is pluralistic democracy, I imply that pluralistic democracy is today's version of the Kingdom of God. In a way, that is true; but we should not get misled. No kind of government is the same as the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom of God is in relations of God, people, and nature. Some particular kind of government might help those relations along but it cannot substitute for them. The Kingdom of God is bigger than any real government of any type. Real governments only approximate the Kingdom of God. Not the United States, a Libertarian minimalist state, a Christian fundamentalist state, any church, Israel, any Muslim theocracy, or any Hindu theocracy, is the Kingdom of God. The state is not the same as God. Conservatives of all faiths, and politically correct people, need to keep this in mind when they want the state to be the instrument of their morality and religion.

Practicality.

People are not perfect, and cannot be perfect, but people are remarkably good and have done pretty well despite all the possibilities for failure. The point of the list below is not to show that people are fallen, depraved, too selfish, or there is no hope. The items below are facts that we have to face to get over discouragement. Then we can see there still is much possibility for ideals and we can get to work. You don't need to read the whole list straight through. Scan it, and then come back. If you try to read it straight through, you will get needlessly depressed.

No amount of religious or PC harangue can make us perfect. We cannot base real institutions on unrealistic views of human nature, too good or bad. We have to construct institutions to take advantage of our good abilities and to minimize bad. All the points in the list have roots in our naturally evolved human nature. Our evolved human nature both makes us pretty good and insures that we cannot be perfectly good. Keep this in mind for Part Five and Part Six. Do not blame yourself if you did not make people perfect and change the world. We have all struggled and failed. Do not blame Jesus if he did not succeed either. Do not blame Jesus if his followers are not perfect. It is easy to see the faults below in other people; they apply to us too. All the points were bitter hard lessons for me from real life. By accepting that people really do behave this way, we can see how the message of Jesus can make us better.

(1) Some people are just stupid. Plain talk is better here. Nearly everybody, including people that are not bright, can understand basic morality and the teachings of Jesus, so this point is not cynicism or an excuse. Yet some people do have trouble understanding some ideas, and we have to be realistic about this human limitation.

(2) Some people are morally stupid even if they are otherwise intelligent. They do not see right and wrong clearly. They are morally shortsighted. They do not see that there is a greater welfare and that we should contribute toward it. They do not see that a small sacrifice on their part provides a much greater benefit to the whole. They think their little bit of benefit outside the rules does not make a difference. They know they should not steal because they might get caught and punished but not because stealing is wrong. They understand a hostile business takeover but they do not understand business ethics. These people usually do not have bad intentions; they are just morally stupid. None of us is perfect but some people are so morally “dense” that they make things break down.

(3) Some people are bad. Some people understand morality well enough to fake it and to use other people but they do not really get it in their hearts. On the mild end, these are the people who will screw anybody to get ahead and cannot see the damage they cause. They are the “users”. They are the bureaucrats that delight in causing trouble just to show they have power over us. In the middle, are sociopaths who do not worry about spreading venereal disease or do not mind socking somebody. On the far end are the killers with the cold eyes or the killers with the fake warm eyes.

(4) Some people learn to be bad and have great trouble unlearning. Some people cannot unlearn badness by any normal human means.

(5) Nature (evolution) gave to people many abilities that ordinarily would help them in their quest for food, mates, housing, children, and success. These abilities include the ability to flirt, take risks, fight, tell stories, influence people, use force, share, tell the truth, lie, improve nature, and gain possessions. These abilities include the capacities for morality and for belief in gods and God. These abilities can be used for good or bad. Some lend themselves easily to good uses, such as sharing, while others easily support bad uses, such as force. All our abilities can be turned to bad ends, often by taking them too far. Flirting in its place is fine but when it leads to habitual casual sex it hurts us and hurts other people too. Moral rectitude is notorious for going too far. Once we get on a bad track (item 4), we often find it hard to backtrack to better uses. We easily get hurt by bad people and experiences; we learn to respond with bitterness and spite; and without realizing it, the bitterness and spite become a way of life. Nearly all the rest of the items in this section are variations on the theme of this item but I do not usually draw out the explanation.

(6) People are nearly always self-interested and sometimes selfish too. Selfishness does undermine morality. Self-interest can undermine morality but it does not always undermine morality. Often self-interest supports morality. We will see later that the capacity for morality evolved out of self-interest. It is too easy to say that people are too selfish to be moral, cannot learn to love other people as they love themselves, or cannot learn to see that other people are people like themselves. That kind of glibness allows us to avoid hard thinking about what really does undermine morality. We need to be clearer about what kind of self-interest or selfishness is at play and what it leads to. We have to be specific about what is going on without getting lost in rationalizations for self-interest or selfishness such as “greed is good”.

(7) For the very large majority of people, success is comparative and competition is comparative. This problem includes “keeping up with the Joneses” but the full scope of the problem is much more pervasive and has worse long-term results. Most of us do not have an idea of success apart from what other

people achieve. We have to measure our success in comparison to the success of others. We do not want only a comfortable house - we want a house that is a bit bigger than the average house. We do not want only a car that can get us around reliably - we want a car that other people admire and that pushes us back in our seat while we accelerate past traffic. Most importantly, we measure the success of our children and other family members in comparison to other families. Our children must have a better chance of getting a good job than other children. If we can afford it, our nieces, nephews, and grandchildren must have a better chance of getting a better job than others people's kin. To make sure we are doing at least as well as others, we easily learn to be selfish, to overlook rules, to bend rules, break rules, and forget about the greater welfare in the long run in favor of our own welfare right now.

(8) Family overrides morality, especially family security. This is the greatest arena of comparative success. In many ways, this is the hardest category in which the ideal diverges from the real because it puts us in genuine contradictions that cannot be fully resolved. We can grumble about people that are personally selfish but it is hard to fault a poor mother for stealing to feed her children. We recognize that somehow morality arose from social life, and recognize that family life and social life are deeply mixed. We do not know when family life should come before morality or the other way around. On the one hand, we see people putting their families above general welfare or even using their families as an excuse to take advantage. Business people often use their family as an excuse to work long hours and thus not see their family; or as an excuse to ravage other families. We want to help poor mothers but some people abuse welfare. As I wrote this item, the country was enraged over the woman who already had six children and then had eight more. On the other hand, we have to defend our families, sometimes with guns, and sometimes with legislation. So we both see morality in acting for the family and see the breach of morality in acting for the family. Clearly there are forces apart from morality that we have to take seriously.

(9) The same issues as in item 8 arise also in community welfare or in national welfare. Morality arises as part of group life but sometimes people put their particular group or even the whole general group above common decency. Sometimes the motives are obviously self-centered but too often people can act this way out of misplaced purity of motive. "My country, right or wrong" is not right and it is not good for my country either. Sometimes people appeal to the common good as an excuse for abuse. Sometimes people get confused about when to live by high morals and when to put aside high morals to defend the common good. Americans are still trying to figure out how much personal liberty we need to give up for security against terrorists. It is one thing to say Jesus preferred us to die rather than hurt another person, and we should trust God to protect what is right and to protect our families. It is another thing to stare blankly while bad people destroy our way of life. Somebody has to fight conservative reactionaries, terrorists, theocracy, or PC. To help the poor, we have to mobilize against economic oppression, and mobilizing against oppression often requires stepping on some toes. These kinds of situations remind us that morality and group life have much in common but they might not reduce one to the other.

(10) People use morality as a tool. As an ex-teacher, I cringe when I hear "but that's not fair" because I know what follows has almost nothing to do with fairness but I have to pretend anyway. Parents and politicians feel the same way. A particular group usually appeals to the common good when it really cares about its own good regardless of the true common good. In the economic crash of 2008, bankers appealed to the common good to save their own skins while over-committed home buyers appealed to the common good to save their fantasies. It is easy to understand people who go after what they want

without appealing to morality. It is confusing when people use morality to get what they want because we are not sure what that implies for morality.

(11) Crime pays. Immorality pays. Lying, cheating, stealing, nepotism, sexual display, selfishness, back biting, conniving, cronyism, in-group politics, betrayal, etc. pay. If they did not pay, evolution would have cleaned any basis for them out of our nature. If they did not continue to pay, people would quickly learn to stop. People really do gain from amorality, immorality, or using morality as a tool. Immoral people do not often enough get caught and punished. Too often, they get away with it and flourish. People use morality to get away with immorality. Moral people pay the price for immoral people. Too often we are not sure whether morality or immorality is more likely to succeed. It is often easier to be immoral, so we try immorality, succeed, and repeat.

(12) People will hurt other people to get what they want. People will use morality to hurt other people to get what they want. People hurt other people, and use morality to hurt other people, so as to compete with other people by putting them down. Many drug laws in the United States are not about morality but instead use morality to control the poor to make sure the middle class stays on top. Estate taxes have been used to hurt the rich rather than as a realistic way to gain needed revenue. We demonize other people so that we can do what we want to them.

(13) People delude themselves to get what they want. People think they are entitled. People believe they work harder than they do. People believe the level of their personal exertion deserves much more reward than it really does. People pretend they are the ones who have been hurt when really other people have been hurt worse. I am good; other people are bad. People think they work hard for the welfare of their family when really they work hard to avoid their family – even stay-at-home parents take this attitude. People firmly believe in their own innocence always, and loudly say so. People have to delude themselves when they use morality as a tool. When people delude themselves, they get strange inside, erect walls around their delusions, and tend to hurt others even more. It can be very hard to break the fortress of self-delusion, especially when the self-delusion is needed for security of self or family.

(14) People are amazingly adept at offering rationalizations for what they do in whatever terms will work, including moral terms when those are what the audience wants or practical terms if those are what the audience wants. I send my dog to shit on the neighbor's lawn because she is rich and hires illegal Hispanic workers at below fair wages. We often say that what appears to be for our good is really for the greater good. We want a bail-out for home buyers not because it saves our own over-extended ass but because it is good for the country. Sometimes our audience is ourselves: we delude ourselves with a rationalization that we buy on one level even if we know it is crap on another level. The line between rationalization and self-delusion is hard to draw and they often overlap.

(15) We do not give up a little now for more later. Instead, they get more now and leave later for everybody else. We do not give up a little ourselves for the greater good of everybody. Often by giving up a little now we get more later. Often by giving up a little to the community we get more back later for ourselves even if it is not directly obvious how we personally benefit, as in paying for public education. Often a little loss on our part can lead to a much greater gain for the community as a whole regardless of whether we also gain, as when we refrain from partying until four in the morning so that people who need to get up to go to work can sleep. Sometimes a little effort-with-loss on our part has the same effect, as

when we pick up litter or care for nature. Sometimes we have to sacrifice for the community and we cannot always stop to go through refined prolonged exact calculations about it. Usually the obvious rules are for our good and the common good. Just do it. Learn the habit of consideration for neighbors and nature. Actually apply common decency. Unfortunately, too many people will not just do it. They have to be forced into doing it. Everybody believes he-she is the exception to the rules. Everybody wants to get away with something and is willing to make his-her neighbors pay the price of his-her indulgence, so we have howling dogs, dirty air, and sell out politicians. Sometimes people do not see the connections, sometimes they do not care even if they do see. Too often, mere words are not enough, and people have to be punished for not being commonly decent. So we have laws about pollution, being a good neighbor, noise, littering, and sending your children to public school.

(16) This case is a variation of 15. If a small sacrifice on our part now always led to a greater reward for us later, then we would probably not have case 15 or this case. A great aggravation of human life is that sometimes people really do gain by doing what they want now even when their benefit hurts the greater group, even when it hurts the greater group more than it helps them, and sometimes even when it might help them more later not to be selfish now. Sometimes it really does pay to be selfish regardless of what happens to everybody else. People put their welfare ahead of the total welfare even when they can see that the loss to the total welfare from their action far exceeds their gain. People put their welfare ahead of the total welfare even when they can see that the gain to the total welfare would far exceed their small loss. People seek gain now even when they can see they will lose even more later, and even when they can see that the group loses much more than they gain. We are ruining nature for our benefit now; our children will pay and so we really will pay too; but we do it anyway. A developer gets the town council to rezone a nice residential neighborhood into mixed business and residence, and then starts putting in professional office buildings and not-so-professional strip malls because a nice neighborhood appeals to those businesses; but in so doing, eventually the neighborhood goes to crap.

(17) It is easier to be moral when we and our families are fairly secure, when we feel that a moral act will not undermine our future. It is hard to save an orphan in Africa by taking food out of our own child's mouth. It is easy to give a tenth of our income to charity when we make ten million dollars a year. Unfortunately most of us never feel secure enough even when we are secure enough by any objective standards. Partly people are just like this. Partly we do not feel secure because we always judge our success and our security by others and we feel that if we give, even out of our abundance, we put ourselves at a comparative disadvantage. A big part of the task of modern states is to make people feel secure enough to be moral.

(18) Morality needs common trust. It is easier to be moral when we can trust other people not to use morality to make claims that can undermine our security and when we can trust other people not to cheat or take advantage. When people make superficially just but really unjust claims, such as when people sue us for a million dollars for tripping over our child's bike, then we deny the claims to protect ourselves and our families even though we might know they are true. Doing that makes us sick at heart. I don't care what you say, it could not have happened that way. We need to feel that, if we give a little, then other people will give a little too, if not now, at least in the future. What they give need not exactly equal what we give but they need to give something unless they are destitute or sick. Especially we need to feel this way about giving for the good of the community.

(19) It is easier to be moral when we feel that our partners in morality are members of the same group, community, or nation. It is easier to trust other people when they are one of us. People in our group are less likely to make damaging claims and are more likely to seek a balance of practical and moral reason. It is easy to be moral with one of us. It is hard to be moral to somebody outside our group and easy to be nasty to them.

(20) It might sound grand to say that morality is only really morality when it is not easy: we need to tell the neighbor that we superficially scratched his car even though he will make us repaint the whole thing and we won't be able to pay the rent for three months; we have to let out our one-and-only rental house investment to an immigrant who can barely speak English; and we have to give a job to a woman. It is easy to say we should extend "us" to include everybody. But that is not what human life is like most of the time, and it is not realistic. We should not expect people to be heroically moral on a regular basis in the face of adversity and insecurity.

(21) We need to create situations that lead people to be moral, and we need to avoid situations that lead people to be selfish. We need to create communities of economic security and trust out of people who are primarily interested in their selves and families. Even while protecting individualism and striving, we need to avoid selfish scrambles where nobody feels secure enough to trust. To the extent that the state can help us to create those situations without ruining our lives, that is one good use of government.

(22) In creating situations that turn bad into good, one of the most difficult cases is comparative success (comparative competition). We need to create a situation in which people strive to beat their neighbors; the striving does not get out of control; the striving leads nearly everybody to do better; the striving leads nearly everybody to feel as if he she has enough; and, in the end, paradoxically, the striving leads people to be satisfied with tying their neighbors rather than beating their neighbors. We need to trick people in a good way. Tricking people in this good way helps sustain good situations. In modern successful capitalism, the middle class including the secure working class with good jobs get this trick played on them. The results of the trick perpetuate the middle class and healthy working class. Modern successful capitalism might not be the only way to create this situation but it is probably the only way the modern world will have for the next few decades. We need to make regulated capitalism work. When it does not work, we have a terrible mess with much bad and evil.

(23) Sometimes people hurt others, or more often hurt the children of others, so they can retain security and so they can get the feeling of greater security that comes from being ahead. Spite, revenge, and vindictiveness are real.

(24) People crave unrealistic fantasies, often driven by comparative success. People over-reach. They watch television and then wish they could live in a McMansion. They want a trophy spouse and want kids that can read Dickens fluently at age two. They have too many children that they cannot support, and then rely on public programs such as public school and welfare. We cling to ridiculous self-serving political ideologies and religions. We continue to believe in the end of the world where God floats down to solve all problems. Many silly dreams are fueled by unrealistic ideas of what it means to keep up with neighbors and to give our children success. We owe ourselves indulgence. When we want too much, we cover it up with various rationalizations. The public owes our children an education. Saving our particular house is saving America. We sue the neighbors for two million dollars when a good bandage on our knee

would have been enough. We lie about the scratch on the neighbor's car because we really want to go out to that new gourmet restaurant.

(25) Once we act badly, we feel guilty. To cover up feeling guilty, we delude ourselves and act even worse. When we feel guilty, we do not back off, repent, and make good. Instead, we act even more so. We become stronger in our denials and accusations. We cover up one bad emotion with a barrage of other bad emotions and actions. Once we get into this situation, to repent even of one little part would require unraveling a big web, and so we are stuck. The bad feeling spoils other parts of our lives that initially had nothing to do with the situation.

(26) When we know that: other people feel as if they are on the edge even when they are not, over-reach, will hurt us to protect themselves or to keep their fantasies alive, feel guilt, and act irrationally to cover up their guilt; then we cannot trust them even when we have enough wealth-and-security, and they have enough wealth-and-security, so that we should trust each other. We fear other people. Out of fear, we become the kind of people that we fear. It is really hard to overcome this fear. It is really hard to trust somebody who might take away your house, your savings, and everything you have worked for and dreamed about. When people fear, we act to make other people fear us. The mutual fear increases the irrationality and digs deeper the hole.

(27) So far, I have been talking about personal situations but the same dynamics apply to relations between groups or to relations among a lot of people in a group. This is how we get into international "situations" that last for decades, of which the most obvious to Americans for years have been race relations in our country and the Jews and Muslims in the Middle East. I have lived my entire life in the shadow of race, welfare, badly managed capitalism, the Cold War, and the Middle East.

(28) Switching gears: some people are too good. These are the opposite of people that do not seem to have enough moral sense. They have too much moral sense. It sounds odd, but being too good can actually interfere with being good enough. The perfect is the enemy of the good. If we have to worry about not taking home a paperclip, then we do not see the co-worker with a problem. We have to think about how the right amount of goodness can emerge out of too little good or too much good.

(29) Ideals are closely akin to emotions and to commitment. Americans like emotions. They like Captain Kirk and "Bones" McCoy as well as Mr. Spock. We need to act sometimes when we cannot act on the basis of reason alone. Emotions, commitment, and ideals get us to act when logic is not enough. Yet emotions and commitment are not fine instruments. It is hard to fine-tune emotions to serve morality best. We cannot always be mean to the dog and kind to the cat. It is hard to love family, spouse, and country sometimes but not other times.

(30) Religion and morality require commitment. Commitment and "sticking to your guns" is often admirable. But people can over-commit. People can blindly adhere to something so much that their commitment interferes with their ability to do good even when the code to which they adhere seems otherwise good. (A) People over-commit to a group such as religious sects, nations, and military groups. (B) People over-commit to a cause or a code, such as Political Correctness or Family Values. Soldiers can feel the idea of a "band of brothers" too much, as when they cover up a bad deed; see "A Few Good Men". (C) People over-commit to a particular item in a code, as when soldiers "leave nobody behind" so

that they sacrifice four men to get one man off a battlefield, or when an atheist destroys the spirit of Christmas to get one tree removed from a public place. (D) Stubbornness is a kind of over-commitment. When we refuse to evaluate ourselves, refuse to admit we might be wrong, refuse to admit the other person might be right a little bit, and we stick to our guns no matter what, we are not always admirable and we sometimes cause considerable harm.

(31) People are susceptible to compulsion and addiction. Even when they know that something is bad, or hurtful, they cannot stop doing it. Lighting up another cigarette or clicking on a porn site is just too easy and too fulfilling in the short run. Bullying, whimpering, or facilitating hurts in the long run but it gets the job done in the short run and so we cannot stop.

(32) Zealotry is a lot of fun, and too often it works. Zealotry is a combination of addiction and using morality as a tool. It is not limited to religious zealots. Political correctness is as big a force as religious zealotry. People need commitment and vigor. It is hard to keep commitment and vigor from turning into zealotry.

(33) Too often actions have unintended consequences. "The road to hell is paved with good intentions". The road to mediocrity is paved with the same bricks. Sometimes people intend well and play fair yet still interact to make a bad situation. Conservatives use welfare as an example. Sometimes a situation goes bad even when people do not cheat. A group of friends end up going to a mediocre restaurant that nobody prefers because they cannot agree on a better restaurant. Sometimes people do not get the best they could out of a situation because they are afraid of cheating or afraid other people will take advantage of them. That is what happens when nobody will rake the leaves off his-her own lawn because they are afraid nobody else will either, and so everybody else's leaves will blow back onto our lawn. Mexican standoff is another example.

(34) Regardless of how we feel about specific programs such as welfare, we have to see that people do tend to get dependent and they do rationalize to continue dependency. People want other people to take care of them. People want other people to protect them from the uncertainty of the world. Dependency is a strong addictive drug. When people can force the state to be the co-dependent partner, dependency is especially likely. People do abuse welfare. Business firms abuse corporate welfare, and abuse programs that were originally intended to provide jobs or to stabilize the economy for everybody. Both people and business firms make up elaborate scenarios in which they are victims and therefore justified in staying dependent.

(35) Once situations go bad, they tend to stay bad. Once people or business firms get dependent, they stay dependent. Once in a bad situation, it is hard to escape without help. Usually we need some intervening greater authority. In modern democracies, and many world political hotbeds, there is no greater intervening authority. Unfortunately, it is far easier for good situations to go bad than for bad situations to go good.

(36) As a result of people using morality as a tool, we do not know what is moral and what is not. People want to keep the poor in line so people say stealing is bad when a mother takes garbage out of a dumpster to feed her children; but the same people excuse the "golden parachutes" of business executives who let a business firm go bust and let thousands of people lose their pensions. So is stealing

bad or not? People often get the most moralistic just when they are using morality as a cover.

(37) We need secular government. Government has to use ideas that are not based in our morality. The ideas in government not only come from outside our morality but also might contradict it. The police compel a child molester to confess so as to get him off the streets or to save a child at risk now. For the same idea from fiction, see "The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance".

(38) We need and admire secular heroes. We need to admire public officers who use force, such as the police, soldiers, and even fire fighters. We need to admire the person who protects his-her family by killing intruders. We need to admire the small business owner who stands up to thieves, gangsters, and politicians. We need to admire John Wayne and Jimmy Stewart in "The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance".

We have to be careful because we over-romanticize these people in the modern world of moral ambiguity; every would-be artist, writer, musician, critic, tough-guy, PC person, business person, and crusader for the Right or Left thinks he-she falls into this category but really very few do. Despite the danger of romanticizing, the people of this category are real, we need them, and we do not always see how their actions fit Jesus' teachings. Often what makes these people useful to society makes them unable to fit into society. We need them to sustain society but they cannot live in the society that they make for others to live in. Winston Churchill could be tough as nails, and, in his time, that was what we needed; but he could not win a peacetime election. Some of the best examples come from fiction: the John Wayne role in many movies, especially Uncle Nathan in "The Searchers". Could Batman just lead a normal life in Gotham City? The swordsman mouse from the Narnia books is a cute version of this problem.

(39) We have to blend system and intuition. Neither a system of rules alone nor intuition alone is enough. This is a problem in all deep religions, and I have no solution. This problem is strong for Christianity because Christianity developed its idea of intuitive faith by contrasting itself with supposed Jewish legalism and strict adherence to rules.

(40) Real life is complicated and mixed up. The movie "Amadeus" portrays Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart as an "idiot-savant". He can create beautiful music but he is really a crude bumpkin, a spoiled brat who never grew up and who still has "daddy issues". So where does real art come from? If real art has to have some basis in truth, then how can somebody like Mozart create real art?

In our own smaller ways, we are all like that. We are a mixture of good and bad, and often we do not know where the good really comes from. Ordinary people, or even otherwise bad people, can do good things. Gangsters can go out of their way to protect abused children. Even pious people have a streak of evil, as we know from suffering through the high school module on "The Scarlet Letter" or suffering through a slasher movie festival. A man can visit a prostitute from time to time but still be a good husband and father; Ben Franklin did. A wife can have children by a man other than her husband but still be a good mother and still otherwise be a good wife to her husband. A drunkard can lead a nation; Winston Churchill did. It is hard to base a systematic religion on people who are so mixed.

(41) When Christianity works well, it seems too boring to be the proper religion for the mysterious God that made this amazing world. Maybe the closest approximation to successful Christianity in the modern

world is an affluent American middle class suburb whether the suburb is White, Black, Yellow, or Brown. Affluent suburbs in other nations under other religions also come close to meeting the ideals of religion and family values in those lands. Yet people in affluent upper middle class American suburbs have to drink and take drugs to make it through the day. Children run away from there. To find something to dream about, people there have to romanticize fashion, Asian martial arts, somebody else's ethnicity, the ghetto, Zen, somebody else's religion, rock and roll, sex, saving the world, ecology, protecting unborn babies, the capitalist market, terrorism, the American Satan, or anything else that gets you through the night. Bored aimless people cause trouble. Terrorist zealots often come from the aimless middle class. People in boring neighborhoods go from reasonable religions to religious craziness.

It seems Christianity is designed for a world of constant real problems, especially moral challenges, but where usually the problems are not so big that cooperation and a good heart cannot make them better. Christianity needs to respond to more than the pain of a high school crush but less than nuclear holocaust. This world seems capable of endlessly inventing enough problems of the right scope so that most normal people do not have to worry about falling into boredom. Even so, as we realize the dreams of success inherent in religion, we have to wonder if that is really what Jesus and God are all about.