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SACRAMENTS

Here, “sacraments” means sacraments, rituals, ceremonies, and holidays. I include more than Christian sacraments although I use those as a model. I include what most people would call a sacrament such as baptism and include non-religious regular behavior that carries meaning, shapes behavior, and orders society such as casual Friday at work, birthdays, and the Fourth of July. I use “God” to include Dharma, Tao, Heaven, Nature, etc. although I have in mind the Judeo-Christian-Muslim God. I include prayer as a sacrament, especially formal prayer.

Maybe because modern people don’t have as much official “churchy” connection with time and place as did Europeans in the Middle Ages, modern people tend to take a ritualistic-sacramental view of aspects of ordinary life such as movies, a TV show, some music, sports, and national holidays. People have always linked art and religion as in the work of Bach and Handel. Now that feeling attaches to secular music, where people find much of the meaning for their lives, as in the Blues, Beatles, Punk, post-Punk, “metal”, “country”, and Hip-Hop. When useful, I draw on material that has been “sanctified” in modern life but this essay is not primarily about that development. It is mostly on what we traditionally think of as religious sacraments such as liturgical worship of God.

The Important Background Issues.

I dislike:

- Superstition such as that God will answer every prayer exactly as we wish or that dead people can help get God to do what we wish.
- Much of religion consists of what non-believers dismiss as magic such as giving God a token gift to get on his good side or keeping a ledger of good deeds and bad deeds.
- Too much of religion does not lead people to think adeptly but hides the truth from people and enables bad thinking such as wish-fulfillment magic. Giving us something to think or do instead of leading us to think about life and what to do is bad too. It is a fairly serious sin of omission.
- People worship God instead of doing as God wishes, doing the right thing for the right reasons, working hard to make the world better, and following the teachings of God’s prophets. Worshipping God instead of doing as he wishes is superstition and magic.

-People mistake-and-substitute prophets of God for God, such as Jesus, Mohammad, and the Buddha. People effectively worship the prophet, even when the prophet has made clear that he-she is not God and should not be worshipped.

I fear sacraments are like superstition, magic, worshipping God instead of doing as he wishes, and mistaking God's prophets for God. I fear sacraments let people not think, avoid hard thinking that needs to be done, and avoid doing what God wants. I confess that sacraments such as baptism and Eucharist often seem to suffer these faults. I know that sacraments such as bad preaching and zealous national holidays can lead people to violence. I sometimes wish to stop all sacraments not because they are bad in themselves but because they enable so much bad thinking and evasion.

On the other hand, sacraments might work, they might be true, they don't have to enable bad thinking and acting, they can aid good thinking and good acting, and they are often beautiful. They need not be superstition. They can do a lot of good. They can even lead people to correct belief and acts.

People think "our sacraments are true, work, promote a right relation with the one true God, promote a good attitude, and promote good acts while their sacraments are false, never work, promote idolatry and other bad religion, promote bad attitudes, and enable people to act immorally". I cannot accept that sacraments in only one religion work and work only for good while sacraments in all other religions never work and always lead to bad belief and bad acts. Yet I dislike relativism that allows all sacraments in all religions to be true, work, and to lead to more good than bad.

As evolved beings, we need sacraments. We cannot get rid of sacraments any more than we can get rid of sex, booze, and politics. In fact, we can't even consciously mold sacraments very much so as to keep the good and get rid of the bad, or to help support church and country. We pretty much have to accept sacraments that arise naturally through life and evolved human nature.

I am not sure if the good outweighs the bad overall. Which prevails depends on time and place. I have ideas of how to shape institutions so sacraments lead to more good than bad but it is unlikely anybody will put my ideas into practice.

Still, we need to preserve what is good and get rid of what is bad. I don't know how to keep the good aspects of sacraments while avoiding the bad.

This essay is not a new insight or new judgment but a request to do what is obviously right. If you have good ideas on how to make sure good always clearly outweighs bad, please email me.

Synopsis of Conclusions and Advice.

-Your participation in any sacrament should depend on a sacrament being basically good, instilling good attitude, and leading to good acts. You should refuse a sacrament that is bad, instills bad attitude, or leads to bad acts. You should refuse any sacrament that leads you to overlook the other hard thinking

and hard work that you need to do. Nearly all sacraments in major religions are good enough so you can participate. Feel free to err on the side of participating – don't get moralistically "high horse" - but don't let this freedom be a license to indulge in silliness and badness.

-Enjoy the sacraments of your heritages (plural). Don't disparage them or the sacraments of any other people unless those sacraments do harm.

-Don't let sacraments substitute for open eyes, hard thinking, and hard work. God is not happy if all you do is say stock prayers, bang your head against the ground, or bang your head on a wall. Don't let participating in a sacrament be your only way to serve God, others people, and nature. Let sacraments be decoration on top of other hard thinking and hard work.

-Criticize the sacraments of your group, and other groups, that do lead to harm or enable harm, such as sermons that extol us while condemning them, or that excuse terrorism. Question sacraments that allow people to blindly follow the faith and feel good about being in the group while not having to think or to ask what God wants us to do for the good.

-Participate in the sacraments that are most meaningful to you, kin, and friends. Try to make Mom and Dad happy as long as you don't feel like a bad hypocrite.

-Participate in the sacraments that have developed among your peer group and other important groups to you such as Sunday ritual special TV with pizza and a beverage.

-You don't have to participate in all sacraments or all equally.

-Study the sacraments of your traditions and the sacraments and traditions of other peoples. Use sacraments to understand your group and other groups. Use sacraments to know your religion and country. Compare sacraments and groups.

-Sacraments work mostly because people believe they work. God attends sacraments but he does not have to actively participate for the sacrament to work. God does intervene rarely, sometimes in ways not anticipated by the human participants. I do not know much about God's participation in these extra other ways.

-Don't think you can get more of God's grace by being hyper-fastidious. God pays attention to intent more than to letter. Don't fear you will be punished if you are not letter perfect. To vex other people with "letter perfect" is wrong. You can reasonably expect them to get the idea of the sacrament and to perform it with appropriate sincerity, belief, and understanding.

-Use your sacraments as tools for identity in ethnicity, gender, age, nation, sport, religion, occupation, neighborhood, etc. as long as you do no harm.

-Don't think your sacraments must bring more grace to you and your group than the sacraments of another group bring grace to individuals and the group. Don't think God plays favorites with you and that your sacraments are the high road to insuring his favor.

-Sacraments can never be used for badness. God does not enter into a sacrament aimed at a bad end such as to madden people so they can commit terrorism. God gets angry at such abuse.

-Don't substitute sacraments for thinking. Don't think that, because you perform sacraments, you don't also have to think about how the world works, world problems, and solutions. Don't let magic cloud your thinking. Don't hold magic above science and reason.

-Sacraments NEVER compel God. You cannot compel God.

-Sacraments almost never cause obvious miracles and rarely lead God to interfere. Rather, God set up the world so we can get what we need if we look (with some obvious exceptions, such as a cure for the cancer of your mother, which I don't go into here). Sacraments put you on the right road to using God's world as God intended. They put you in the right frame of mind toward God and people.

Two Examples.

One of my favorite passages in all of literature is Malcolm X's account of his pilgrimage to Mecca. He went an embittered Black man with a small heart and he left a clean healthy human who could look past skin color and who had a big heart. At Mecca, Malcolm saw people of all races and he knew that they, and all people including non-Muslims and women, are important to God, are equal, live under one God, are equal under one God, and should work together. Mohammad, the founder of Islam, intended this when he had people go to Mecca. Read "The Autobiography of Malcolm X" if you have not already. His new better attitude got Malcolm X murdered by Black extremists. If you can find the story, read how Muhammad Ali (Cassius Clay), at first a close friend of Malcolm X, rejected Malcolm and the new ideas, and later how Ali came to deeply regret his rejection and came to embrace Malcolm's new ideas. The Ali we remember is the one who came to the new Malcolm, not the old racist.

I like what Christians call "Eucharist", "The Lord's Supper", or "The Last Supper", although I think of it differently than does orthodox (traditional) Christianity. Jesus wanted us to see his ideas throughout the world and throughout our interactions with the world and each other. To think of his ideas, it helps to think of him. Jesus meant us to think of him and his teaching at every meal. The bread and wine represent the hard and soft staples of the world, from all hard food (bread, pizza, or rice) and soft liquid (wine, water, grape juice, beer, or soda), to the components of the world such as hard rocks and soft water, to human institutions (hard) and ideas (soft). Saying "Grace" at any meal makes that meal into the Lord's Supper. I the excitement Christians feel to put the actual body and blood of Jesus into their own bodies. I know awe at the real presence of the Lord. But Christians miss something when they think of the Eucharist only these ways. Jesus meant less and so more. (Please do not see my ideas in terms of yin and yang, Hinduism, or Transcendentalist pantheism.)

Not all sacraments can be like the adventures of Malcolm and Jesus. We can't expect marriage to link us all together with the universe. Still, we can avoid sacraments that go against this spirit. We can criticize them. Feel free to join sacraments that do not contradict this spirit or that go along with this spirit. Birthdays and most sacraments of major religions are good. Do not re-interpret a sacrament to make it "politically correct" along these lines. Go with what the sacrament already is as long as it is not bad.

Optional: Two Social Science Issues to Skip Over.

Sacraments often are "all or nothing" affairs. Either you are baptized or not, married or not, a priest or not, and the battleship has been blessed or not. Some sacraments could work by degrees but I am not sure enough to pick out those. Some people say they are "sort of married" or "mostly married" but that seems odd. It is more like ignoring or abusing marriage as a sacrament, more like following a different logic, than like getting the effect of the original sacrament.

Some sacraments are reversible such as becoming a priest and some are not such as baptism. You can lapse from the grace of baptism, and you can even deny baptism, but, once baptized, that is it. You can think for yourself about marriage and other sacraments.

Do Religious Sacraments Work?

Sacraments work mostly because people believe they work. In specifically religious sacraments, God is there but he doesn't have to play an active part if people believe and if the sacrament is well ordered. Most often he does not play an active part. Sometimes God does play an active part but I don't know when he chooses to do so, how often, what he does, or why. Guesses are not worth stating. Sometimes the part God plays is not the traditional religious idea of his role.

It helps to look at Christian tradition, as best I know it. Sacraments work if, and only if, participants are sincere, believe, and have a good idea of what is going on. For example, baptism removes sins only if participants know that is what baptism is for and they believe God forgives sins when we are baptized. If participants believe, are sincere, and have some idea of what is going on, then baptism will lead God to forgive sins. People could believe but not care about the ritual, or could do it for wrong reasons such as to impress a potential mate, in which case they are not sincere. The conductor of the sacrament need not be a priest or even believe. The sacrament need not be carried out to-the-letter of a code although the performance can't deviate too much, and I don't waste space wondering about "enough". All that is needed is faith, sincerity, and some knowing. The power is in the sacrament and in the interest that God takes when it is performed.

It helps to see how a scientist might interpret the situation. Whether the scientist believes in God etc. is not relevant. Because God is not a well-established scientific fact or theory, the scientist cannot use God to explain. This is not bias by the scientist, this is simply sound practice. If ever God does become established fact or theory, the scientist can use God in explanations.

Without God, the scientist falls back on psychology or society. Psychology can be based in evolutionary theory or not. If not, it need not be antithetical to evolutionary theory. I include physiology (biology) in psychology. The same is so of society. I do not quibble about any of this or offer theories of mind, body, or society. I only point out where the scientist has to look and not look.

If the participant sincerely believes, then the sacrament likely works regardless of whether God is real and whether God actively does something in the sacrament. If a person feels that baptism forgives sins, then the person is likely to feel forgiven and to act like a forgiven person. If a person believes baptism fully integrates him-her into a church, then baptism does that. If the person does not believe, then the sacrament will not work no matter if God is real. The scientist explains in terms of: what a participant believes, expects, and receives; where participants get beliefs and expectations; how participation affects individuals and society; and how society affects individuals, actions, and interactions.

The conditions-and-markers of success for Christian practice and for science are nearly the same and it is hard to tell them apart. If the participant sincerely believes, the sacrament works. If it works because of belief alone or because of belief-and-God, we can't tell. A religious person insists the sacrament works because of the combination of belief and God while the scientist insists it works because of belief alone. The scientist is not blasphemous or irreligious. In private, the scientist might believe that the ritual only really works if God also participates but the scientist has no way to get at the role of God.

(1) God is not needed in a scientific explanation. Some people have said this non-need disproves God. That leap of argument goes too far. The fact that science does not need God does not disprove God. It only shows that science does not need God in its realm. I go into this issue in other writing.

There is a possible way to get at whether God plays a role. If true belief in the true God is needed, then sacraments ought to work only in the one religion that correctly worships the one true God. We look for a similar sacrament in several religions. The sacrament ought to work only in the one true religion of the one true God. If the sacrament works in one religion but does not work in others although people in all religions sincerely believe, then the difference is evidence that the sacrament needs both sincere belief and the one true God. This effect could be strong evidence for God and his participation.

The problem is that sacraments work in all religions regardless of which God etc. Prayer works and fails about equally in all religions, as does confession, marriage, ordination, etc.

Again, it is hard to tell. If sincere belief is necessary, and a sacrament seems to work for some people in one religion (A) but not for some people in another religion (B), then the problem is not necessarily that God is correctly identified-and-worshipped in one religion (A) but not the other (B). The problem could be that this selection of people is more sincere in one religion (A) than the other (B). God respects the sincerity of the people in (A) in this case and disallows the sacrament in (B) because the people in (B) are not sincere enough in this case. In cases where the people are reversed in sincerity, people are insincere in (A) but sincere in (B), then the sacrament works in (B) but not in (A), and the root problem again is not

presence or absence of God but enough faith or not enough faith. If the sacrament works in (B) but not in (A) that is because the people of (B) are sincere while people in (A) are not. Working and not working is not direct evidence for the presence or absence of God, the existence or non-existence of good, but likely is only evidence for sincerity or its lack. This attitude of “sincere enough” plagues Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and, I think, Hinduism.

“Sacraments work in our one true religion because we have both belief and God. Sacraments work in our religion to a greater extent and qualitatively better than in other religions. Our sacraments are truer and more effective. Sacraments work in other religions only by belief, if at all. Other religions have only belief and do not have belief and God. Sacraments in other religions are only half-true and so really half false and so really all false; and they are really only half-effective and so not effective. Other people are deluded about how spirituality and the world work while we have it right.”

How do we know the people in (B) were more sincere than the people in (A)? Because the sacrament worked in (B) but not in (A). How do we know that God is true in (B) but not in (A) and so caused the sacrament to work in (B) but not in (A)? Because the sacrament worked in (B) but not in (A). In this kind of reasoning, God remains intact no matter what happens. Failure is all always our fault alone.

All this is circular reasoning. It does not prove or disprove anything. The end result is the same as if we did not try to compare religions for proof of God’s involvement.

Both sides in World War Two had priests bless their battleships and munitions (bullets and shells). Both sides sunk blessed battleships and had blessed battleships sunk. Soldiers on both sides killed soldiers on the other side with blessed munitions and unblessed. Soldiers on both sides got killed with blessed and unblessed munitions. There might be “no atheists in foxholes” but it seems God does not care much for the implements of war one way or the other.

We can’t use different religions to show that God is needed on top of faith to make a sacrament work. So the scientist can fall back on belief alone regardless of the reality of God, and can do so without any bad intent. Given the non-outcome of comparing religions, for the scientist to fall back on the efficacy of faith alone and to stop worrying about God is perfectly reasonable.

(2) Sacraments do not seem to respect particular religions, and circular reasoning often is the only way that believers can “show” that the sacraments of a particular religion work. Skeptics use this result as proof that sacraments don’t work and there is no God. This denial also goes too far. All this only proves we don’t know. If we don’t know, we should be careful about what we claim for sacraments and God. This argument is a good lesson to be cautious about what people claim and about what people wish to believe and so think is real, or wish not to believe and so think is not real.

(3) Skeptics about God and sacraments also argue (“Occam’s Razor”): “It is risky and not useful to keep ideas that don’t explain much or that do explain a little but explain less well than other ideas. If two ideas explain about equally well, we should go with the simpler more obvious natural one. We should

not keep ideas that we don't need. If we don't need leprechauns to explain why the milk curdled, we are better off not thinking leprechauns are real and better off using the idea of leprechauns only for fun. The idea of God is the same. It is not needed to explain. If we keep an idea that is not needed, we get confused, especially with an idea as potent as the idea of God. So it is better to deny God exists until we get much better evidence that he does exist." While this argument has some force, it is not as valid with God as it is with leprechauns. I explain why in other essays, so I don't repeat here. We can keep the idea of God as long as we are cautious and clear about use. We can believe in God if we don't force our belief on others either directly or through the state. We can believe God enters into sacraments if we don't demand others follow us in our particular beliefs and we don't ridicule others.

Sometimes sacraments work almost regardless of the initial mindset of the participant as when he-she is drugged or the sacrament is powerfully acted using correct ideas about the mind (I can't go into details). Again, this effect is true across religions so it is not evidence for anything other than human evolution, psychology, society, and the skill of adepts and scoundrels. Cults and practitioners of "black magic" use these devices well. These cases do not go against what I say here so I overlook them.

Religious people say they feel that sacraments convey more force when done in a religious context than when done in a secular context. Religious people say they feel "more married" when the ceremony is done in a church etc. with a priest etc. than when done by a court officer. They feel worse about getting a divorce if they think God blessed the union than if a clerk made them sign a paper. As evidence, they cite the lower divorce rates among religious people. I do not dispute the feelings and the statistics but they still do not prove the existence of God or that he takes a role. This situation still can be explained as well with feelings and society as long as we also take into account that people evolved and so have a certain mindset with certain needs. See below.

To see how this argument can be abused, see how one religion can use it against another: "Roman Catholic weddings are all valid while Protestant weddings are all null" and "Protestant weddings are all valid while Roman Catholic weddings are all null". Rather than open your religion to abusing others or to getting abused in this way, better not to declare all religious sacraments are better than all secular ceremonies, and instead to think through the force of any sacraments.

For the most part, I side with scientists but not always and not strictly. In the vast majority of cases and to the biggest extent, sacraments work because of belief rather than because God intervenes. Yet God does intervene due to a sacrament - rarely. I cannot say when, and it doesn't matter. God is present at all times in the same sense the parents of a child are present when he-she is baptized, confirmed, married, or performs at school. Strictly, parents are not needed, but the parents are deeply concerned, glad when things go well, and are happy to lend a hand if needed. Still, if the child does not do his-her part well, with sincerity and belief, the parents cannot jump on stage and do it for him-her. If the child does his-her job well, then the parents need do nothing, and, in fact, should keep back. To doctrinaire scientists, my belief in God and his occasional intrusion dominates while to a doctrinaire believer, my reliance on naturalistic explanations based in evolution, psychology, and society dominates. Both are short-sighted.

God made a wonderful and often rewarding world, including evolved people who are a mix of intellect, body, morality, art, emotions, and social relations. This world often is enough if we take it in the right way. This world is not always enough, and this world can hurt, but those facts do not negate what I say. Sacraments work largely because of how God ordered the world and not largely because he “extends his grace” at each case of each sacrament. He doesn’t have to and he should not. Sacraments put us in the right frame of mind to take the world as God intended we take it. They put us in the right mind to see God’s relation to the world and ours to him. Think of Malcolm X and the Last Supper.

Ask yourself why you think you deserve more than this or why God would give you more than this just because he loves you. You have what you deserve and you have what you get from love. You have more than enough. A sacrament should lead you to appreciate what you deserve and what you get from love.

If you think you deserve more, or God loves you more, because you were born into a special group, adopted a special group, stumbled onto the correct theology, are nice, decent, upright, or cool, love God a lot, or are really willing to serve God, then you are wrong. If you think other people won’t get what they deserve or won’t get the grace of God’s love because they were not born into the right group, did not adopt the right group, or did not stumble onto the correct theology, you are wrong. Wake up.

Two Wrong Extensions.

Taken to one extreme, my view on God in sacraments can imply there is no need for sacraments. If we get God’s love anyway, and God set up the world so it mostly works for us, then why do we have to do anything special to get God’s grace, remind us of our relation to him, and remind us of our relations to other people through him? If people were not evolved natural beings, and we were perfectly rational ethereal philosophers, that might be so. But we are evolved (see below). We have deep roots in the material world. We do need sacraments. It is more an issue of which sacraments, and the proper view of sacraments, than of “no sacraments”.

Taken to another extreme, my view on God making the world and of God in-or-not-in sacraments can imply that sacraments are everywhere always. Many things besides what we usually see as sacraments can be considered sacraments such as eating at a restaurant, going to a ball game, work, mowing the lawn, or going to the toilet. This might be true if we were not evolved beings. There are differences between various events in life, and some event should be marked off by sacraments while others should not. Our history, traditions, and evolved sense give us good ideas of what sacraments are suitable. We learn from other people including people with greater knowledge such as oldsters, priests, and teachers. We learn from the smart good people of our peer group.

Again, think of it like this: God made a pretty good world. The world is a mix of spirit and matter. We are a mix of spirit and matter. We need both. We need a way to approach the mix of spirit and matter so we get it right. Sacraments are a mix of spirit and matter. Contrary to mistaken ideas, sacraments

are not a way for spirit to dominate matter or matter to dominate spirit. They are a way to approach properly the correct mix of spirit and matter. They are like good art where idea and medium find a way to get along. Sacraments make us feel good because they appeal to both of our natures. Sacraments are, are in some events, but are not in all events. Now we need to get a better sense of why and what the “why” might imply.

Evolved Natural Needs and Society.

People evolved. As evolved sentient beings, we need religion, belief, sacraments, and even magic. We need to put sacraments in a context of religion, usually with God or gods. People are fussy about which particular god; not just any god will do. We need the kind of community that comes out of religion, belief, and sacraments. We need to feel that our sacraments are somewhat magical in that they get (good) things done regardless of normal obvious channels of cause and effect. Particular individuals vary in their need for sacraments; but this variation does not change the fact that people in general need sacraments, religious context, and magic. To totally deny or explain away sacraments, religious context, or magic, can be nasty. Such denial invites more problems and worse outcomes. It is bound to fail. It is like American Prohibition of alcohol, American “war on drugs”, or total sexual abstinence outside of marriage. It is like no birth control, divorce, and abortion.

Assume people need some sacraments, need God along with sacraments, and need a particular God rather than God in general. What do we tell people? What sacraments should we advise for? What should we advise against? What should we allow ourselves to participate in and what should we refuse?

At this point, the best advice is to read texts in religious psychology, anthropology, and on the subject from an established reasonable church. Think about what you already know. People need sacraments for the milestones in life such as birth (birthdays), confirmation, puberty, sex, intoxication, marriage, formal education, military service, having children, etc. People need help going from one situation to another as when they go from adolescents to adults. People need help during hard times in life such as during illness or children go to fight a war. People need sacraments around important works of art such as getting together to watch an epic on TV. People need sacraments to tell them what groups they are in, how they stand in relation to their group, and how their group stands in relation to other groups. People need sacraments to tell them what groups and other things make up the world and how we stand in relation to all that. People need sacraments to make them feel comfortable that they will do well after they die. People need sacraments to tell them they are succeeding well in this life, and, in fact, they are succeeding at least as well as the neighbors. People need sacraments to get back on track in case they are not succeeding as well as they would like. People need sacraments to feel that their big groups, such as the state, are on the right track.

We can try to use reason and warm clucking comforting sounds instead of sacraments but those do not work as does a sacrament. Nothing works like a sacrament when a sacrament is needed. I do not here explain why this might be so by referring to our evolved nature or to any other theory. This is a fact that we are better off to get used to.

Even if I did not believe in God, the above questions would still be pressing because of the role of belief and religion in a satisfying and orderly society, and the role of lack of belief and lack of religion in no satisfaction and disorder. We still need people to believe some things and to act out some things, and we need people to not believe in some things and to not act out some things, if only to keep society working well. It is not awful to think in these terms. It is prudent. We only have to think in public and be honest.

People who believe in God naturally wish others to believe as they do and to act to act as they do (or to act in ways that serve them), including participating in the same sacraments for the same reasons. In a modern plural democracy, we can't do this. We have to allow people to believe and act as they see fit as long as they do not undermine order, general welfare, general morality, and plural democracy. So we have to think about how their beliefs and acts affect society. We also have to stop our train of thought if it becomes irrational prejudiced condemnation or hyper-planning for the state.

Because I believe in God, the issue is more difficult. Luckily, I do not need people to think and act as I do as long as people do not hurt democracy or nature. Hopefully they will adopt belief and sacraments that help plural democracy and help nature but I cannot force them to do so.

Assume that people don't believe anything too bad or do anything too bad. (1) Still, because I think my beliefs are true and are good, naturally I would like most people to think as I do and maybe act as I do. Thankfully, I have pretty much given up on this attitude. (2) I still do want people NOT to think in ways that offend God, hurt themselves, or hurt their neighbors; I still want people not to carry out any sacraments that offend God, hurt themselves, or hurt their neighbors. People can offend God, hurt themselves, and hurt neighbors not only through positive bad acts but negatively by thinking and acting in ways that close their minds and hearts, by ways that lead to silly ideas rather than to useful sensible ideas. So I want people not to think or act in ways that close their minds or hearts. Because I can't live up to this ideal fully myself, it is a lot to ask of others; but I can keep it as an ideal for myself and others.

I find few sacraments from any major religion actually actively offensive or hurtful. I do not mention any here. Not even animal sacrifice is harmful, if done kindly, people eat the animal, and the animal is not in an endangered species. People can participate in the traditional sacraments of their heritage without much problem as long as they do not disparage others. I know this resolution is the wishy-washy typical American liberal response but it really is the best response in this case.

New groups develop their own sacraments although they might not think of the events as sacraments, such as Gay Pride parades and festivals for LGBT people and friends, Earth Day for friends of nature, watching particular religious programs on TV, and the drama of mega-churches. This is not silly. I like it.

Since about 1800, clever people have come up deliberately with sacraments that fit the new state and that try to give people the same feelings of dedication, awe, communion, and wishing to help toward the new state that traditional sacraments do for religious and ethnic groups. Communist states were

notorious for doing this. This is a mistake and we should not do it. Nor should we deliberately bend old sacraments to serve national purposes as some Christians seem to wish for Christmas and Thanksgiving. Sacraments arise naturally in new groups including democracies such as America, interest groups such as the NRA, and demographic groups such as “Boomers”. We can go along with natural arising without making up our own or twisting old ones to suit the state. Of course, we can and should oppose bad uses of sacraments such as hate parades.

Active harm intrinsic to a sacrament is not usually the problem. People can pray, chant, dance, call on God, eat things, wear distinctive clothing, observe their own holidays, etc. without causing harm.

The Power of Sacraments, Again.

It is one thing to tell a soldier that the success of the mission, his-her life, and the life of fellow soldiers, all depend on working as a team and trusting each other. It is another to put a soldier through training and rituals designed to instill this knowing as a gut feeling. It is one thing for Christians to tell each other they are all saved through Jesus, have fellowship through him, and will live forever in heaven as a result of Jesus’ sacrifice. It is another to come together to break bread and drink wine as the body and blood of Jesus, and then to help each other pay the mortgage and pay medical bills. It is one thing to clamor for racial justice. It is another thing to actually judge, prosecute, or defend people in a trial with racial overtones. For nearly all people, sacrament is more powerful than any argument.

We evolved to be susceptible to the power of sacraments. Why we evolved thus makes for interesting speculation. It could help us know how sacraments work and how to shape them to work well for public good. But, for now, guessing takes us too far out of the way. For now, we simply need to appreciate and accept this fact.

When we want to convince people of something, and get people to do something, we are more likely to succeed if we can get into the proper sacrament together.

Sacraments, Blocked Good Thinking, and Enabled Bad Thinking.

The real problem with sacraments is that they can block good thinking and can enable bad thinking. In this section, I do not separate religion from ideology. Ideologies often are like religions, even the ideologies of liberals and atheists. Religions and ideologies have their sacraments.

Usually, the problem is not the sacrament itself but in the bad use by some people. Priests etc. can give sermons that lead to good or to bad. Parades can be for love or hate. The cure is not to attack this one sacrament, or sacraments in general, but to attack bad thinking by any group expressed in any way. Go after all bad thinking whether in sacraments or other media such as TV, Internet, or books. Leave alone practices and ideas that usually are neutral and often are helpful.

Abuse of Valentine's Day, Christmas, Mother's Day, etc. to serve commercial interests is bad. I have no idea how to stop commercial abuse since we can't stop giving gifts. Forcibly changing a sacrament so as to fight commercialism would be worse abuse; it would be using narrow dogma as the knife with which to cut off the nose to spite the face. Not acting on commercial abuse shows how to fight bad thinking not by crazily attacking it but with good thinking. Celebrate Christmas and Valentine's Day as you think correct and don't worry about other people. I do like office parties and chocolate.

Another serious abuse occurs when people think that their sacraments are an automatic direct channel to God and that the sacraments of other people are so much monkey chatter. Going to Rome makes sense but going to Mecca is like a gathering of baboons – and vice versa. This is one of many ways that people find to say “my group and me are better than your group and you”. If people are determined, I don't know how to stop it. If people are not determined, a good antidote is to get to know the religions and sacraments of other people. A good way to do that is to read popular books about other religions and other peoples. There are many available now, including cheap used copies, and free in libraries. A similar good way is to read simple clear pieces available for free on the Internet. Wikipedia has several series on the major religions of the world that include their sacraments.

Another, subtler, error happens when sacraments encourage magical thinking too much or encourage bad magical thinking. A little magic of the right kind is fun but too much magic of any kind, or any bad magic, is harmful. We get to rely on magic and don't do the hard thinking work that we should. Blessing guns and bullets is an example of bad magical thinking and of too much magical thinking. Bad magical thinking leads people to kill themselves as they wait for aliens to take them to heaven. It leads to the abuse of women and children. It leads to terrorism.

Major religions are not intrinsically plagued by too much bad magical thinking in sacraments. All major religions do lapse into too much magic, and even into bad magic. Still, the good usually far outweighs the bad.

All religions can be silly, and silliness is usually a sign of too much magic leftover from older times. It is up to people in each religion who think clearly yet do not worship rationality to re-think religions so as to keep good magic and sacraments while discarding bad magic and sacraments. I have ideas about how to do this for several religions but it is much better if I do not say my ideas.

All major religions can rely on sacraments so much that believers overlook real problems and the need to think hard to solve them. It is fine for the Pope, Archbishop of Canterbury, or an Orthodox Patriarch, to bless the poor, but, if we think that will cure the problem, then we only make the problem worse. If we think good hard prayer can make everybody smart enough, and educated enough, to get a great job in modern capitalism, then we only make the problem worse. Blessing banks cannot avert a housing meltdown if we do not also have the correct regulation and enough regulators to carry it out. Praying for girls and women captured by Muslim terrorists is fine but no substitute for local people telling armed forces where the girls are and for armed forces to take back the girls. Praying does not pay mortgages.

God wants you to do well but God does NOT automatically provide. Praying did not end Communism. Praying will not fix capitalism.

When critics of religion get angry at religion and sacraments, I think they are really angry at indulgence in magic at the expense of good thinking, and the occasional use of bad magic. They are really angrier at this abuse than at religion and sacraments as such. I could be wrong. If that is what they are really mad about, I agree with them.

I don't know a reliable formula by which to keep good sacraments with the right amount of good magic but to get rid of bad sacraments with too much magic or with any bad magic, and to make sure that otherwise good sacraments don't become bad by leading us to rely on magic too much and hard work too little. The best antidote seems to require two prongs. First, we should vigorously point out when we rely too much on magic and we do not do the hard work on real problems. Second, we need good practical real-world solutions to real problems. If we have those, then people will use those and will stop relying too much on magic. Of the two prongs, the one where have been most deficient is coming up with good solutions. It is easy to point to the problems inherent in the superstition of ignorant people when they can't do anything else but use superstition to cry out about bad problems. It is harder to come up with real solutions that people go along with – especially in these days of polarized politics with no workable middle.

Sometimes we do have reasonable solutions but religious fervor blocks adopting them. The answer to the abortion problem is that the state should allow people to have abortions when the fetus is young, and for people who believe in no abortion at all not to have any abortions. The state should not ban all abortion. I do not imply abortion is morally good or morally right but only that the state should take the side of self-determination, privacy, and non-interference when it can, and this policy does that. Yet religious people will not see this solution because they are blinded by the need to justify themselves. They think it necessary that the state be the agent of their morality in all cases. (I know that some anti-abortion activists have better motives but I think the majority do not have good enough motives.) This “pro-life” view of religion and the state is bolstered by sacraments such as pro-life rallies, religious TV, and harassing women near clinics. It is bolstered by giving a strong “modern pro-life” interpretation of traditional sacraments such as the Eucharist and Baptism. This approach clouds thinking rather than helps thinking.

Religion, sacraments, and politics mix in strange ways that I do not un-entangle here. In our days when politics and PC of both left and right invade everything, often we can see bad sacraments and bad magic clearer in the arena where religion, world view, and politics mix.

The real motive of pro-gun politicians is not to protect gun rights, freedom, or the Constitution but to keep their jobs. They do so by protecting a fantasy that has little to do with real life in the modern world, a fantasy with religious over-tones about self-reliant people in the wilderness, conquering a wild land, turning it into the Promised Land, and holding the Promised Land. Politicians protect this: if we cannot justify ourselves in other ways, we can justify ourselves by fighting evil, fighting evil requires

violence, and evil often lurks in the hearts of people all around us, especially people not like us. Owning a gun in America usually now has little to do with self-defense or home defense but is a sacrament in a religious-political complex. Owning a gun is a magical sacrament, celebrated at every state holiday such as the Fourth of July. It is reinforced through sacramental magic in almost every action movie. Shooting a gun is a magic sacrament. Of course, not owning a gun and not shooting now also are magical sacraments. When I wrote this, I owned four guns, and I like them.

Hip-hop, especially when racist and sexist, is not good listening but is a religious magical sacrament. It promotes the myth of one particular group of self-styled victimized godly people, godlier than others, ripped from their land, kept from the Promised Land even as they live in the midst of the Promised Land, denied what is owed them, denied what they built, denied what they continually rebuild, having to fight back, and finding satisfaction any way they can. They too fight evil and have to use violence. They are tough guys, and tough guys have rough edges, just like in John Wayne movies. They are “realistic” about other races, women, and gays just as religious fundamentalists are realistic about religion, race, women, and gays. Hip-hop is over-indulgence in bad magic, especially when it is blasted out of rolling boom boxes as an insult to all the oppressors. Hip-hop clouds the ability of listeners to see, know, and solve real problems. Instead, it is a sacrament that encourages violence, racism, and sexism.

Now we can return to the relation of sacrament and religious ideas.

I believe in Big Bang cosmology and biological evolution. I don't believe in the Flood story in the Jewish and Christian Bible, the same Book cited by Muhammad. It is one thing for a polite religious person to explain to young Christians that the Flood was real despite scientific evidence. It is another thing to show grouped young people a dramatic movie about finding Noah's Ark with no explanation and no weighing of evidence. It is one thing to hear lectures in a secular school setting that give evidence for biological evolution and another thing to hear strong sermons with no evidence in a holy church building about how the word of God is literally true, including the Flood. Rational people who hold science have no similar dramatic sacraments by which to convince people in general and to convert non-believers unless we count shows on the Discovery channel or exciting Power Point presentations in a high school biology class. This is a case where sacrament supports ignorance and bias.

It is one thing for a school teacher to offer to teach young Muslim girls in school and to explain to them how education is needed for modern life. It is another for religious extremists to force the girls to wear restrictive clothing, march them all together in shame out of a school building, and never again allow them in. Marching in shame is not simply a way to leave a building. It is a forced sacrament of leaving the gates of Hell. It conveys a message not only to those girls but to all parents and all girls, the kind of a message that cannot be conveyed by good reasons and good hearted people.

No one group in America is “in the same boat” as the Israelites wandering the desert, taken in captivity to Babylon, or left behind in Jerusalem leaderless and powerless. No one group has built this country alone, only to have the fruits of labor taken from their children by more powerful groups or conniving politicians, as the Assyrians and Babylonians took what the Israelites had built. Yet, for reasons I can't

go into here, since about 1970, many groups in America think of their relation to the country as a whole, the government, and other groups, in these terms. Even other Americans, if they are not much like us, are the takers, the enemy. The Tea Party thinks of itself this way. When Americans hold political rallies, the point is not so much to see who is there but to provide rhetoric and fake facts to reinforce this view of the world for us. Political rallies are sacraments (rituals) that reinforce a particular wrong world view, and that let us know who is with us and who against us. Political events are like a church liturgy that re-enacts aspects of church history such as the Exodus or the Crucifixion. People think they are immune to this effect but they are not. Smart people are taken in. You will think much more clearly if you look at political events in this way. But you have to put effort into seeing the events as re-enactments of group against group even in the Promised Land of plenty.

Worshipping God instead of Doing Good.

Through personal experience, I found that other people could worship a god, or gods, unlike the God that I think of, yet still be good people, as good as people who did worship the Jewish-Christian-Muslim God. We need to keep this in mind for what follows.

Worshipping the Wrong God, or Worshipping God in the Wrong Way.

Sacraments as the Opium of the Masses.