

# Opinion | The Strange Persistence of Guilt

*David Brooks*

American life has secularized and grand political ideologies have fallen away, but moral conflict has only grown. In fact, it's the people who go to church least — like the members of the alt-right — who seem the most fervent moral crusaders.

We're living in an age of great moral pressure, even if we lack the words to articulate it. In fact, as Wilfred McClay points out in a brilliant essay called "[The Strange Persistence of Guilt](#)" for The Hedgehog Review, religion may be in retreat, but guilt seems as powerfully present as ever.

Technology gives us power and power entails responsibility, and responsibility, McClay notes, leads to guilt: You and I see a picture of a starving child in Sudan and we know inwardly that we're not doing enough.

“Whatever donation I make to a charitable organization, it can never be as much as I could have given. I can never diminish my carbon footprint enough, or give to the poor enough. ... Colonialism, slavery, structural poverty, water pollution, deforestation — there's an endless list of items for which you and I can take the rap.”

McClay is describing a world in which we're still driven by an inextinguishable need to feel morally justified. Our thinking is still

vestigially shaped by religious categories.

And yet we have no clear framework or set of rituals to guide us in our quest for goodness. Worse, people have a sense of guilt and sin, but no longer a sense that they live in a loving universe marked by divine mercy, grace and forgiveness. There is sin but no formula for redemption.

The only reliable way to feel morally justified in that culture is to assume the role of victim. As McClay puts it, “Claiming victim status is the sole sure means left of absolving oneself and securing one’s sense of fundamental moral innocence.”

“If one wishes to be accounted innocent, one must find a way to make the claim that one cannot be held morally responsible. This is precisely what the status of victimhood accomplishes.”

I’d add that this move takes all moral striving and it politicizes it. Instead of seeing moral struggle as something between you and God (the religious version) or as something that happens between the good and evil within yourself (the classical version), moral struggle now happens primarily between groups.

We see events through the lens of moral Marxism, as a class or ethnic struggle between the evil oppressor and the supposedly innocent oppressed. The moral narrative of colonialism is applied to every situation. The concept of inherited sin is back in common currency, only these days we call it “privilege.”

As the political scientist Thomas U. Berger put it, “We live in an age of apology and recrimination.” The conflicts on campus take on a

Salem witch trial intensity. In the Middle East, the Israelis and the Palestinians compete for the victimhood narrative. Even America's heartland populists see themselves as the victims of the oppressive coastal elites. Steve Bannon is the Frantz Fanon of the whites.

Sin is a stain, a weight and a debt. But at least religions offer people a path from self-reflection and confession to atonement and absolution. Mainstream culture has no clear path upward from guilt, either for individuals or groups. So you get a buildup of scapegoating, shaming and Manichaeian condemnation. "This is surely a moral crisis in the making," McClay writes.

I notice some schools and prisons have restorative justice programs to welcome offenders back into the community. They tend to be more substantive than the cheap grace of instant forgiveness. I wonder if the wider society needs procedures like that, so the private guilt everybody feels isn't transmuted into a public state of perpetual moral war.