

EDITORIAL

The Outbreak of War on Empathy

Given the military setting of all four verses of their national anthem, Americans have unsurprisingly employed the same rhetoric to declare a “war on poverty” (Lyndon B. Johnson, 1964), a “war on drugs” (Richard Nixon, 1971), a “war on terror” (George W. Bush, 2001), and an ongoing “war on crime.” Nevertheless, commencement by some Americans of a “war on empathy,” not coincidental with the second Donald Trump administration, is shock, but not awe.

While discussing immigration on “The Joe Rogan Experience” podcast last year, Elon Musk declared that “the fundamental weakness of Western civilization is empathy” which people “exploit.” By then adding that “we’ve got civilizational suicidal empathy going on,” he conjured up horrors of the white Christian nationalist great replacement theory. It served as a dutiful call to arms, and the American political and religious far right mobilized on multiple fronts. Their attacks on empathy in recent publications have escalated from vilifying empathy as forthrightly toxic, to downrightly sinful, to outrightly suicidal.

In *Toxic Empathy: How Progressives Exploit Christian Compassion* (2024), white Christian podcaster Allie Beth Stuckey explains that “Feeling too much for someone can blind us to reality . . . it can cause us to ignore the truth, the objective truth, in favor of how a person feels.” So, for example, empathizing with gay people is “satanic.” Hence, as painful as it may be now, denying them equal human rights or even basic human dignity can save them from hell, and is a deeper form of “tough love.” Likewise, the never-married mother, the substance-dependent deviant, the poverty-plagued immigrant, and so on.

In *The Sin of Empathy: Compassion and Its Counterfeits* (2025), white pastor Joe Rigney acknowledges that “the Scriptures command us to have sympathy and a tender heart,” but he defines empathy as “an excess of compassion, when our identification with and sharing of the emotions of others overwhelms our minds and sweeps us off our feet.” Empathy can be sinful if it is “untethered” to biblical truth, as he defines it. For example, he parrots the patriarchal argument that women are inherently disqualified from leadership because they are too prone to empathize with others. As the “empathetic sex,” women are “ill-suited” to apply Christian doctrine because they favor compassion over church teachings. Progressive political values of social justice are therefore merely “a culture of victimhood flowing from toxic female empathy.”

In *Suicidal Empathy: Dying to be Kind* (2026), professor of marketing Gad Saad, who poses as an evolutionary psychologist and rubs shoulders with eugenics, follows up on his *The Parasitic Mind* (2021) in which he explicated the “woke mind virus.” He sounds the alarm that

empathy has become a “cancer” because it allegedly has no “stopping mechanism” and will eventually kill its host — the human race. The image on the front cover of *Suicidal Empathy* is a sheep holding up a protest sign demanding “Free the Wolves.”

Other commanders of this ongoing culture war blitzkrieg include pastor Josh McPherson on his “Stronger Man Nation” podcast: “Empathy almost needs to be struck from the Christian vocabulary... Empathy is dangerous. Empathy is toxic. Empathy will align you with hell.” Albert Mohler, president of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary: empathy is “destructive” for immigration policy because “empathy means never having to say no.” Charlie Kirk: empathy is “the No. 1 psychological trick of the left.” Ben Shapiro: “facts don’t care about your feelings.” And so on.

During the National Day of Prayer Service at the Washington National Cathedral shortly after Donald Trump’s second presidential inauguration, the Right Rev. Mariann Edgar Budde appealed to him saying, “In the name of our God, I ask you to have mercy upon the people in our country who are scared now.” (After a year of his administration’s actions, even more people were even more reasonably and acutely afraid.) Budde’s plea for mercy triggered an immediate, fierce backlash from some of Trump’s supporters, such as Stuckey tweeting that “toxic empathy is in complete opposition to God’s Word and in support of the most satanic, destructive ideas ever conjured up.” Rigney fumed that “Bishop Budde’s exhortation was a clear example of the man-eating weed of Humanistic Mercy.” Christian podcaster Ben Garrett adamantly insisted, “Do not commit the sin of empathy. This snake (Budde) is God’s enemy and yours too. She hates God and his people. You need to properly hate in response.” So “onward Christian soldiers!”

Of course, the war on empathy turns on its conflicting definitions. Translated from the German term *Einfühlung* (“in-feeling”) early in the 20th century, empathy is best understood today as feeling sorry *with* another person. As both a cognitive and affective process of imagining ourselves in their position, it is seeing and feeling their pain and suffering through their senses, vicariously experiencing the same circumstances, thoughts, and feelings they are living. It is the moral imagination and moral imperative to walk a mile in their shoes to the very limited degree that is even possible.

Notably, empathy is not mere sympathy, which is standing still at some distance and feeling sorry *for* the other. But neither is empathy alone yet compassion, a much older English term, which means doing something to relieve the suffering of the other. This activated “common passion” is the polar opposite of indifferent bystander apathy. Indeed, empathy can motivate the altruistic action of compassion, whereas mere sympathy does not. Helping behavior is not compassionate if it is not driven by empathy, because providing help can also be the unfeeling practice of a moral principle, or the uncaring execution of a job description in

some human service profession. But in everyday life, it is empathy that most frequently and reliably activates altruism. Empathy is a useful tool, a means toward the end of compassion (Glanzer 2022).

The essence of recent assaults on empathy is the insistence that feeling with another person can be misguidedly harmful to the other by legitimating their vice or self-harm, and can thereby ultimately be both individually and collectively self-destructive. The example used is that a parent should not empathize with their child wanting to touch a red-hot stove, but should rather prevent their harm by slapping their hand away. As Stuckey wrote, “Toxic empathy claims the only way to love racial minorities is to advance social justice, but ‘justice’ that shows partiality to the poor or to those perceived as oppressed only leads to societal chaos.” And in defense of such fear-mongering, she accuses progressives of “empathy-mongering.”

The irony, if not hypocrisy, of these assaults on empathy is that those who wage them do so selectively and unabashedly promote empathy for their own political, religious, racial, cishet, conservative coalition. In their mind, they are the real victims in current American society deserving empathy, not the immigrants living next door. General Donald Trump and his warriors, they say, are the truly embattled, persecuted, and aggrieved. Hence, it is supposedly only tribal empathy that is useful and good. For example, Lieutenant General J. D. Vance misused the traditional Catholic concept of *ordo amoris* (the “order of love”) as just war theory to defend his own against the other, before promptly being corrected by Pope Francis.

In everyday reality, emotion-driven decisions and actions are no more or less reliably virtuous than motivated reasoning or authority-driven decisions and actions, because the latter are equally vulnerable to being made and taken according to self- or group-interest. For example, in her notorious novel *Atlas Shrugged*, Ayn Rand (1957) reasons that selfishness is virtue, altruism is vice, and the survival of the fittest is the long-term best policy for civilization. But unless we try to understand and feel what others understand and feel, we cannot know them well, much less know how to relate to them most justly. Empathy enables us to be more aware of, and less arrogant about the diversities of lived human experience of reality, and is often the voice of good conscience that ought not be silenced.

From a Christian perspective, empathy is both commanded and modelled in the scriptures. The command to the Israelites in Exodus 23:9 appealed to their presumed empathy: “You shall not oppress a resident alien; you know the heart of an alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt.” Presumably, the same could also be demanded today of all non-Indigenous peoples who were once aliens on Turtle Island, despite the military power with which they arrived and the colonizing hostility they practiced upon arrival being diametrically opposed to what the Israelites brought to Egypt. The Book of Ruth then goes on to narrate how the situational mutual empathy modelled by some Israelites and Moabites (descendants of Lot

whom the Israelites avoided during the exodus) overcame their historical mutual antipathy, as exemplified by the Moabite Ruth declaring to her widowed Judahite mother-in-law Naomi that “your people shall be my people.”

More cosmically, Jesus perfectly embodied empathic compassion in that his incarnation represents the ultimate act of empathy by God coming to earth and enduring human experience all the way to the cross. Throughout his life, he modelled it by, for example, violating Jewish norms by speaking privately to not only a woman at a well, but a Samaritan woman at that. And Jesus called his followers to do the same not only in the second commandment, but in explaining to an expert in Halakha (Jewish law) what he must do to inherit eternal life by telling him the parable of the Good Samaritan where the hero of the story tends to the needs of a religious and cultural enemy.

Written millennia before the concept of empathy emerged, the biblical text is nevertheless replete with references to God’s compassion. As such, the weakness of modern Western civilization is not the empathy that leads to compassion, but rather its completely contrary self-centered individualism and its newly emergent demonization of empathy. With the hot explosion of artificial intelligence, our capacity to truly understand and care for one another may well be what preserves our humanity as uniquely reflecting the image of God.

Thankfully, there have been many recent both academic and journalistic reports from the front of the war on empathy that seek its cessation. For example, in *Empathy: A History* (2018), historian of psychology Susan Lanzoni concluded that “the disparagement of empathy is ... a deliberate effort to set up a permission structure to dehumanize others... (and) marks a step in the destruction of our multicultural democracy.” In *The End of Empathy: Why White Protestants Stopped Loving Their Neighbors* (2020), political science professor John Compton concluded that “Everything about Trump flies in the face of orthodox Christianity ... His policy agenda is the opposite of traditional Christian compassion.” In “Loathe Thy Neighbor” (2025), *The Guardian* journalist Julia Carrie Wong concluded that “we are witnessing the construction of the ideological architecture to excuse violence and suffering on a mass scale. While the religious right attends to a moral justification, the secular right is hard at work on a pseudoscientific one.”

Decades earlier, having escaped the horrors of the Holocaust, Jewish-German political theorist Hannah Arendt (2006) reported on the trial of Nazi official Adolf Eichmann. She described him not as a sociopathic lunatic monster, but rather as an ordinary thoughtless bureaucrat, the epitome of “the banality of evil” who committed atrocities through simple obedience and lack of empathy. Contrary to Musk, she concluded that “the death of human empathy is one of the earliest and most telling signs of a culture about to fall into barbarism.”

The message board at Baptist-affiliated Judson Memorial Church in Manhattan suggested a preventive by adapting and adopting Martin Luther's famous phrase: "If empathy is a sin, sin boldly."

Acknowledgment and Addendum

This reflection first appeared as a *Christian Scholar's Review Blog* on March 11, 2026: [The Outbreak of War on Empathy - Christian Scholar's Review](#). A second blog the next day dialoged with this reflection – [The Empathy Wars: A Further Christian Analysis - Christian Scholar's Review](#) – and a third blog a week later debated it – [Don't Idolize Empathy - Christian Scholar's Review](#). While both the latter two blogs acknowledged the merits of empathy, their critical counterpoints mostly highlighted "the dark side of empathy," arguing for the priority of reasoned moral judgmentalism and guarded self-protectionism in human relationships as more effective means of promoting human flourishing. I question whether those are primary Christ-like practices, and whether flourishing is even a primary Christ-like goal.

References

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