

**The Box We Live In: Self-Betrayal, Christian Practice,
and the Distance Between Kathmandu and Canada**

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Author Note: *The author is a Canadian of white settler-colonial heritage, writing from Treaty land in Canada. This article is offered as much as an act of self-examination as a public education. Its questions are directed at the author no less than at the reader.*

Abstract

Distant suffering reliably produces a predictable sequence in comfortable societies: shock, sympathy, a brief impulse to help, inaction, discomfort, and finally forgetting. This article argues that the sequence is not compassion fatigue but self-betrayal, a concept developed by philosopher C. Terry Warner and disseminated publicly through the Arbing Institute. Self-betrayal occurs when a person fails to act on their own felt sense of what they should do for another, and then reorganizes their perception of themselves, the other person, and the world to justify that failure. Drawing on empirical literature in moral disengagement, psychic numbing, moral licensing, just-world belief, and system justification, the article shows that Warner's philosophical account is corroborated from several independent research directions. It then applies the framework to two events in Nepal: The Bhote Koshi flood disaster of August 2026 and the Gen Z uprising of September 2025. This pairing allows a direct examination of a common moral question: whether the aggrieved's disruptive behaviour or the privileged's comfortable inaction is more destructive. Read through a Christian theological lens, the pattern names a gap between orthodoxy and orthopraxy that scripture itself treats as disqualifying. The author, a white settler Canadian, writes as an implicated participant rather than an external observer.

Keywords: self-betrayal, self-deception, moral disengagement, Nepal, settler colonialism, orthopraxy, Christian ethics

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On August 26, 2026, an ice and rock avalanche near Langtang Lirung collapsed into the Lhende Khola in Nepal's Rasuwa District, releasing an estimated 100 million cubic metres of debris-laden water into the Bhote Koshi and Trishuli river systems. Water levels rose as much as nine metres in thirty minutes. The surge destroyed the Rasuwagadhi border post, swept away bridges and hydropower installations, and reached Gyirong in Tibet within minutes, leaving effectively no time for warning. By August 30, Nepali authorities reported 903 dead and roughly 2,500 people missing; within days those figures had risen to approximately 1,000 confirmed dead and nearly 3,900 unaccounted for, with more than 11,000 people rescued (Al Jazeera, 2026; Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Nepal, 2026). Nepal's finance minister estimated losses above US\$4 billion. It is the country's deadliest disaster since the 2015 Gorkha earthquake.

Eleven months earlier, between September 8 and 13, 2025, tens of thousands of young Nepalis filled the streets of Kathmandu and other cities. The immediate trigger was a government order deactivating twenty-six social media platforms, but the deeper grievance was entrenched corruption, made vivid by a viral campaign contrasting the imported cars and foreign educations of politicians' children with the labour migration and unemployment facing everyone else. Security forces fired on demonstrators. Seventy-six people died, and thousands were injured; Parliament and government buildings burned; Prime Minister K. P. Sharma Oli resigned on September 9 (Human Rights Watch, 2026; The New Humanitarian, 2025). An interim government under former Chief Justice Sushila Karki followed, and a snap election on March 5, 2026, brought thirty-five-year-old Balendra Shah to office as the country's youngest prime minister.

These two events are ordinarily filed in separate moral categories. The flood is a natural disaster and invites sympathy. The uprising is a political disturbance and invites judgment. This article argues that they belong to a single sequence and that the mechanism connecting them lies not in Nepal but within the observer.

The sequence is familiar to anyone who has watched distant catastrophe from a comfortable country. We see the devastation and are genuinely shocked. We feel an urge to help. We do very little. Within days our own inaction becomes uncomfortable, so we look away and let the pleasant and ordinary things around us close over the gap. In time we are blind again, and the blindness comes furnished with reasons: it is far away, it does not affect us, it is not our issue, we are already doing enough. Nothing changes. The same pattern is visible in the histories of Black civil rights, Indigenous rights, and women's rights movements. When nothing changes for long enough, people who have been unheard rise through movements, activism, disruption, and sometimes violence. Those who were ignoring them then become offended and locate the problem in the aggrieved's behaviour.

The question this article pursues is which reading is correct. Are the victims the problem because of how they react, or is the problem the accumulated consequence of comfortable people declining to be inconvenienced? The argument developed here is that the question, as usually posed, is itself a symptom, and that C. Terry Warner's concept of self-betrayal explains why.

Warner's Account of Self-Betrayal

C. Terry Warner, a philosopher at Brigham Young University whose work forms the intellectual basis of the Arbinger Institute, offered an account of self-deception that differs sharply from the ordinary picture of moral failure. In the ordinary picture, we know what is right, lack the willpower to do it, and feel guilty afterward. Warner's claim is more unsettling: we do

not simply fail to act well; we then alter our perception of reality so that failing looks reasonable (Warner, 1986, 2001).

The Structure of the Box

Warner's account begins with a sense of what one ought to do for another person: not an abstract duty, but a specific, situated impulse. Self-betrayal is the act of going against that sense. What follows is not primarily guilt but a reorganization of perception. Having failed the other person, I now need to be the kind of person for whom that failure was justified. So, I inflate my own virtue, deflate their worth or the legitimacy of their need, and reconstruct the situation so that my inaction reads as prudence rather than refusal (Warner, 1986). In the Arbinger Institute's (2018) accessible restatement, this self-justifying condition is called being “in the box.”

Two features of this account matter for what follows. First, self-betrayal is self-obscuring. From inside it, the distorted perception does not feel like distortion; it feels like clear sight. Second, and more disturbingly, self-betrayal creates an ongoing interest in the other person's remaining exactly as I have characterized them. If I have justified my inaction by deciding that a distant population's suffering is chronic, self-inflicted, or beyond remedy, then evidence of their agency, dignity, or legitimate grievance becomes threatening rather than welcome. Warner and Olson (1981) described this dynamic in families, where each party's self-justification requires the other's continued offence. Warner (2001) called the wider social version collusion: a mutually reinforcing arrangement in which each side's behaviour supplies the other with grounds for their own.

Why This Is Not Simply Hypocrisy

It is tempting to reduce Warner's account to hypocrisy, but the two are different. The hypocrite knows the gap between profession and practice. The self-betrayer has closed the gap

by moving the standard. This is why appeals to information rarely change behaviour in these situations. A person in the box does not lack facts about Nepal; they have already assimilated whatever facts arrive at a framework in which their own response is adequate. Warner's therapeutic claim is correspondingly demanding; what is required is not better behaviour but a change in how one holds other people, after which behaviour follows on its own.

What the Empirical Literature Corroborates

Warner's account is philosophical rather than experimental, but several independent research programs have documented mechanisms that closely fit it.

Psychic Numbing and Compassion Fade

Slovic (2007) demonstrated that human concern does not scale with the number of people suffering. Compassion is strongest for a single identifiable victim and diminishes as the number grows, a pattern he termed “psychic numbing.” Västfjäll et al. (2014) found the effect appearing at the smallest possible increment: donations dropped when a second needy child was added to one. Crucially, Cameron and Payne (2011) showed that this insensitivity is not passive exhaustion but active regulation. People anticipating a costly demand on their compassion down-regulate the feeling in advance. This is, empirically, what Warner describes philosophically: the numbness does the work on our behalf, and it arrives before the demand does, not after.

Moral Disengagement and Moral Licensing

Bandura (1999, 2002) catalogued the cognitive operations by which people commit or permit harm without self-censure: moral justification, euphemistic labelling, advantageous comparison, displacement and diffusion of responsibility, distortion of consequences, dehumanization, and attribution of blame. Every element of the inaction sequence described above appears in this list. “It is not our issue” is displacement of responsibility. “We are already

doing enough” is advantageous comparison. “It is so far away” is distortion of consequences.

Monin and Miller (2001) added a further mechanism: prior evidence of one's own virtue licenses subsequent failures. A small donation, in other words, can function less as help than as permission to stop.

Just-World Belief and System Justification

Once inaction has hardened, it requires a supporting account of why the sufferer suffers. Just-world theory holds that people are motivated to believe outcomes are deserved, and this motivation predicts derogation of victims (Hafer & Bègue, 2005). System justification theory extends the finding to social arrangements: people, including those disadvantaged by them, are motivated to perceive prevailing hierarchies as fair and natural (Jost & Banaji, 1994; Jost, 2019). Warner's insight is that these are not merely cognitive biases but interested ones. They are the intellectual furniture that self-betrayal installs.

Nepal in Sequence: From Flood to Uprising

The Flood and the Arithmetic of Attention

The response to the Bhote Koshi disaster has followed a recognizable curve. Canada announced \$5 million in humanitarian funding on August 28, 2026, deployed consular officials, and offered relief supplies through the Canadian Red Cross (Global Affairs Canada, 2026). This is a real contribution, and it should be said plainly. It is also useful to notice what happens next, because the historical record is unambiguous. After the 2015 Gorkha earthquake, the United Nations flash appeal sought US\$421.9 million; five months on, it was 57% funded, and years later roughly a third of the requirement remained unmet (United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs [OCHA], 2015). Funding was also strikingly uneven

across sectors, with camp management funded at under 12% while coordination exceeded its target.

The pattern is not that people refuse to care. It is that caring has a short half-life and a narrow aperture, exactly as Slovic (2007) and Cameron and Payne (2011) would predict. Attention arrives with the images, peaks with the death toll, and departs before reconstruction begins. What remains is a population living inside consequences that the rest of the world has stopped counting, and a donor public who, having felt something and given something, has acquired moral credentials (Monin & Miller, 2001) that quietly authorize disengagement.

The Uprising and the Reversal of Blame

The September 2025 protests illustrate the second half of the sequence. Young Nepali people had been raising grievances about corruption and opportunities for years through entirely conventional means. The grievances were not addressed. When a social media ban removed the last accessible channel of expression, the response moved to the streets, and then, after security forces killed demonstrators, to arson and the destruction of state buildings. Seventy-six people died (Human Rights Watch, 2026).

International commentary predictably divided along a familiar line: sympathy for the dead, discomfort with the burning. Research on protest reception explains why that division is so reliable. Feinberg et al. (2020) found that extreme protest tactics reduce popular support for a movement even among people sympathetic to its cause, because observers come to see the movement as unreasonable and identify with it less. Simpson et al. (2018) reported similar effects for violence. Yet Wasow (2020), examining Black-led protest in the 1960s United States, found that nonviolent protest that met with state violence moved elite discourse, public opinion, and voting toward civil rights, while protester-initiated violence moved them away. The lesson

usually drawn from this literature is a tactical one addressed to the aggrieved. The lesson rarely drawn is the one that matters here: these findings describe the moral standards of the audience, not of the movement. They measure how easily a comfortable public can be given a reason to stop listening.

This is where Warner's framework does its sharpest work. The question “which behaviour is more destructive, the uprising or the indifference?” assumes the two are independent moral objects to be weighed. They are not. Collusion means each is producing the other. Years of unaddressed grievance produce escalation; escalation produces offence; offence supplies the justification for continued non-response; continued non-response produces further grievance. Asking which party is at fault is a question generated from inside the box, because the answer it seeks is a verdict that would let the questioner stop. The honest question is not who is worse. It is what my own position contributes to the cycle, and what it costs me to keep asking the other question instead.

A Christian Reading: Orthodoxy Without Orthopraxy

Much of the privileged public in Canada and comparable societies is nominally or actively Christian. This raises a specific question rather than a general one: does Christian belief, as commonly held, function to interrupt the sequence described above?

The Road to Jericho

The parable of the Good Samaritan is preceded by a detail that is easy to skip. A lawyer asks Jesus what he must do to inherit eternal life, answers his own question correctly, and then, “wanting to justify himself,” asks “And who is my neighbour?” (Luke 10:29, New Revised Standard Version Bible, 1989). The question is not a request for information. It is a request for a boundary, an attempt to establish the outer limit of obligation. Warner could not have

constructed a cleaner example: the self-justifying move precedes the story, and Jesus answers by refusing to supply the limit.

Darley and Batson (1973) tested the parable directly. Seminary students, some on their way to give a talk on the Good Samaritan itself, encountered a slumped and groaning stranger in a doorway. Whether they stopped was predicted not by their religiosity or by the subject of their talk but by whether they had been told they were late. Situational hurry overwhelmed both belief and content. The finding is not that religious people are uncaring. That professed belief is a weak predictor of enacted compassion when acting is inconvenient. Saroglou et al. (2005) refined the picture with projective measures and peer ratings, finding that religious prosociality is real but bounded: it extends readily to close and familiar targets and much less readily to unknown ones. That boundary is precisely where a flood in Rasuwa District falls.

The pattern extends further. Allport and Ross (1967) distinguished intrinsic religiosity, in which faith is lived as an end, from extrinsic religiosity, in which it serves as a means of security and social standing, and found prejudice associated with the latter. A meta-analysis by Hall et al. (2010) found a persistent positive association between religiousness and racism across decades of studies, driven largely by extrinsic and fundamentalist orientations. More recently, Whitehead and Perry (2020) and Perry and Whitehead (2019) have documented that Christian nationalist commitment predicts individualistic rather than structural explanations for racial inequality, which is to say that it predicts the very account of suffering that licenses inaction.

Cheap Grace and the Faith That Is Dead

Scripture itself is markedly less forgiving on this point than contemporary practice is. James asks what good it does to tell a person who lacks clothing and daily food to go in peace and keep warm without supplying their bodily needs, and concludes that “faith by itself, if it has

no works, is dead” (James 2:17, New Revised Standard Version Bible, 1989). The first letter of John asks how God's love can abide in anyone who has the world's goods, sees a sibling in need, and refuses help, and urges love “not in word or speech, but in truth and action” (1 John 3:17–18). Isaiah defines the fast God chooses as loosening the bonds of injustice and sharing bread with the hungry, and specifically as not hiding oneself from one's own kin (Isaiah 58:6–7). In Matthew 25, the judgment falls not on those who did harm but on those who did not act: “I was hungry, and you gave me no food” (Matt. 25:42).

Bonhoeffer (1937/2001) named the condition in which these texts can be affirmed without consequence: cheap grace, forgiveness held as a possession rather than a call, discipleship reduced to assent. Gutiérrez (1988) approached the same gap from the other side, arguing that theology is properly a reflection on praxis and that orthodoxy severed from orthopraxis is not merely incomplete but distorted. Both are describing, in theological vocabulary, what Warner describes in philosophical vocabulary. A belief system that is affirmed but not enacted does not sit inertly. It becomes an instrument of self-justification, because holding the right convictions can itself be counted as the good deed: the moral credential (Monin & Miller, 2001) that licenses doing nothing further.

So, the question posed at the outset can be sharpened. It is not whether Christians in privileged positions believe the right things. It is whether belief has been integrated into the inner culture and the acting self, or whether it instead functions as the most respectable available reason to remain in the box.

Naming My Own Position

I write as a white settler Canadian. That is not a disclaimer appended to an argument made from outside it; it is the location from which the argument is made and the reason it is

uncomfortable to make. Tuck and Yang (2012) described settler “moves to innocence,” the manoeuvres by which those who benefit from colonial arrangements relieve their discomfort without relinquishing anything and named settler self-absolution as the central risk of well-intentioned solidarity discourse. Mackey (2014) argued that settler distress in the face of Indigenous land claims is a reaction to the loss of an expectation of certainty rather than to any actual loss. DiAngelo (2011) documented the defensive repertoire that emerges when racial comfort is disturbed.

Each of these is a description of self-betrayal operating at national scale. Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission issued ninety-four Calls to Action in 2015. Implementation has been slow, and settler engagement with the process has tended toward witnessing rather than redistribution (Nagy, 2020). Herkimer et al. (2025) found that non-Indigenous Canadians' support for reconciliation and collective action was predicted by collective guilt and postcolonial ideology, that is, by whether people had allowed themselves to feel implicated at all. I include myself in this finding. Writing an article about self-betrayal is itself a plausible move to innocence if it terminates in the writing.

Getting Out of the Box

Warner (2001) is explicit that the way out is not a behavioural technique. One cannot resolve self-betrayal by performing the omitted action while keeping the justifying story intact; that produces compliance without release, and the resentment usually surfaces elsewhere. What is required is to notice the story as a story: to recognize the moment when a person or a population began appearing to me in a way that happened to excuse me.

In practice this suggests a few tests rather than a program. When a distant catastrophe produces in me a reason not to act, I can ask whether I held that reason before I encountered the

need or acquired it immediately afterward; the timing is diagnostic. When I find myself more exercised by how the aggrieved are protesting than by what they are protesting, I can treat that asymmetry as information about me. When I have given once and feel finished, I can notice that the need is not calibrated to my sense of completion; the 2015 appeal shortfall (OCHA, 2015) is what a world of people who each gave once looks like in aggregate. And where the professed faith says love in truth and action, the honest question is not whether I believe it but whether anyone examining my calendar, and my bank statements could tell.

Conclusion

Nepal is currently living through two things at once: a flood that has killed roughly a thousand people and left thousands more unaccounted for, and the aftermath of an uprising in which seventy-six people died demanding that a government stop stealing from them. Neither event requires anything from a Canadian reader. That is precisely the condition under which self-betrayal operates, and it is why the response to both will most likely follow the arc this article has described: real feeling, small action, growing discomfort, and then a set of reasons arriving just in time to make the discomfort unnecessary.

The question of whether the victims are the problem cannot be answered on its own terms, because it is a question the box asks. What can be answered is the narrower and harder one: whether the moral vocabulary I hold, Christian, Canadian, progressive, or otherwise, functions as a call or a credential. Warner's contribution is the recognition that this is not, finally, a question of ethics but of sight. We do not fail to help because we cannot see the need. We stop seeing the need because we have already decided not to help. I do not exempt myself from that sentence.

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