SIXTEENTH AND TWENTIETH-CENTURY THEOLOGIES OF SIN

Can we still give the text as it stands?

By JOHN COVENTRY

Theologies of sin

TODAY THEOLOGIES of sin abound, and this section will try to sketch some of them. Their one common and overriding feature is to insist that we do not first understand sin, and then salvation (or redemption, or whatever general word one uses). Sin is a theological and not a merely moral concept. If there were no grace, there would be no sin. It is in knowing God as giving himself to us, transforming us, calling us to share his life, redeeming us in Christ, that we begin to understand sin. Sin is all that opposes salvation. It is not sinners who have a deep sense of sin but saints.

1. The idea of sin develops progressively in the Bible. It is very difficult to generalize in a specialist area, but broadly speaking one may say that in the older layers of the Old Testament God's election comes first: Israel is God's people by his choice, not if and in so far as she obeys cultic and moral commands. Commandments are soon added as man's moral response, but they are simple and easy to keep. Goodness, righteousness, is a quality of God: his covenant love and his faithfulness. Man is righteous because he is an Israelite, faithful to the covenant, trusting in God. Fidelity and infidelity on the part of man are a communal idea, not yet much concerned with moral behaviour. In the history of the monarchy faithfulness to the cult is the test; infidelity is adultery. But the commandments grew in complexity and their codification gave rise to the idea of an external code of behaviour as a measure of what keeping the covenant meant. The idea of personal guilt was at first too interior and individualistic: sin was thought of as communal and as disturbing an external objective order; an evil act (e.g. killing a man) and its consequences were seen as a single whole and as endangering the community.

Priests decided on whether and how sin could be cleansed ritually, to save the community; if it could not be expiated (cleansed), the individual would bear the curse (excommunication, death) to avert it from the people. The dominant idea is of solidarity in righteousness and sin: the sins of one generation are visited on the next. Not till Jeremiah and Ezekiel does the idea of personal responsibility begin to come through. The 'new covenant' proclaims an interior and subjective idea of righteousness. After the Exile the drift towards legalism is greatly accentuated with the growing power of the priests. (Did not this happen again in christian history?)

So Jesus recalls Israel to its earlier and more basic inspiration: to the centrality of personal relationship with God. It is in knowing God that we know what love is, and therefore what sin is. A new covenant, a new communion of men with God and with each other, is inaugurated.

2. Paul sees man as experiencing himself (his bodily self, *soma*) both as 'flesh' and as 'spirit'. As flesh in that he is assailed by sin and death, which are cosmic and demonic forces of destruction; he knows himself to be fragile, mortal and perishable, threatened by what we would call disintegration, incapable of living up to his ideals and vision. He knows himself as spirit in that he experiences his body-self as open to the conquering, liberating and transforming action of God.

Man-in-Adam (flesh) is involved in the complex of law-sin-death. Man-in-Christ is set free from this complex. He is set free from the Law, not just as a set of rules, but as a dispensation governing his relation to God. He is set free from law as code, but not from law as compulsion, as imperative: 'The law of the Spirit of life in Jesus Christ has set me free from the law of sin and death' (Rom 8,2). But he is under a new compulsion, a new imperative (Rom 7,5-6): Paul even calls it a new slavery (Rom 6,15-18). But the Christian is not under a new code: no code could ever free us from sin and death, only the Spirit can do that, for 'where the Spirit of the Lord (the risen Christ) is, there is freedom' (2 Cor 3,17). Christ, not the written *Torah*, is God's Wisdom: his Spirit dwelling in our hearts is the new obligation and driving force (Rom 8,12-14). That 'law' can never be codified: one can only say that love is the fulfilment of (the) law (Gal 5,13-14; Rom 13,8-10).

All the same, there is a code of christian laws. Paul does not hesitate to promulgate some of them himself. But they do not justify, any more than did the old Law. The life of the Spirit does not consist

in obeying rules. They are a rough guide to the personal demands of the Spirit, a pedagogue to Christ, a help to the struggling sinner who is not wholly driven by the Spirit.

Augustine, who dealt in moral psychology rather than the metaphysics of nature and grace, took this up with his idea of *gratia liberatrix*: the personal self-gift of God sets me free from rules, from weakness, from disintegration; it creates my freedom.

3. Perhaps the most striking feature of modern theologies of sin is their return to an awareness of the corporate or social dimensions of sin, in reaction against an almost wholly individualistic understanding of sin (and salvation) which prevailed in european moral philosophy and in the development of moral theology: the Old Testament awareness of solidarity in sin and in righteousness is reinstated, but with new content.

This is due to the birth and development of a sense of history, a realization of the degree to which in all ages perceptions of value are culturally and socially conditioned. Indeed, our moral awareness is first a sharing in, a being conditioned by, the moral perceptions of the society into which we are born, and only slowly do personal assimilation, assessment, criticism and innovation emerge. We do not arrive on the scene as fully constituted persons, separate centres of awareness, self-determination and responsibility; we are able to move in that direction only in interaction with the expanding society of persons we encounter and relate to. In so far as we mature as persons, we come to realize that the good and bad in our society can only be developed or changed by corporate opinion and action. Our responsibility is not just for personal integrity, but for changing society. On a theological plane the concept of covenant has received new emphasis: it determines our relationship to God, not as separate individuals, but as a people he has chosen for himself.

4. Within the very general perspective of the previous section one may further reflect on the processes by which we discover and construct our own identity. We need to identify ourselves with the secure and familiar group in order to grow as persons. And inevitably, tragically, in the process we identify ourselves *against* other groups; our family, our village (if it is Cana, can any good come of Nazareth?), our class, our nation, our race. . . . 'That by which we identify ourselves and have our sense of identity, significance and belonging, is that by which we dehumanize others'.[1] There is, perhaps fortuitously, an interesting sequence of us-and-them passages in Luke 9,49-56, in which Jesus breaks through the

barriers. God's election and new covenant call and challenge us continually to break out of all our tribalisms, and to accept, respect, and relate more deeply to wider and wider groupings of persons. This is the process of becoming human, in the image of the New Man, Christ — for each of us, and for the human race. It is the building of the kingdom of God, an eschatological goal. 'No one can be fully human until everyone is fully human'.[2]

5. Another obvious feature of modern theologies of grace and sin is that they think in dynamic terms, categories of growth, not in terms of timeless essences and laws. Teilhard de Chardin may have convinced neither the scientists nor the philosophers, but he caught the imagination and responded to the aspiration of a generation by transposing christian doctrine into the key of growth, development, evolution. The chief dogmatic shift is to see the final kingdom as God's first and only plan, and creation as the 'first step' to its fulfilment. There is only a supernatural order: nature is the material on which God works, and which he transforms. It is the goal, the omega, which explains the alpha and all that lies between. This perspective reinforces that of the solidarity of man in sin and salvation.

Categories of individual and generic growth, however, raise far-reaching questions about understanding sin. In general, salvation would lie in response to God's call to grow, to break through into new relationships, into deeper inner awareness and outer relation, new appreciation of others' needs, new understanding of prevailing injustices. Sin would lie in selfish clinging to myself as I am (perhaps in preoccupation with my authenticity?), clinging to security in the familiar and in structures that meet my needs. But at the same time, if God has created a human race that is summoned, not to obey timeless natural laws, but to develop, to respond progressively to his transforming grace, it is not blameworthy that we are not at the omega or end-point of his purposes, but only somewhere along the way. Nor am I guilty or blameworthy for the inability to be perfect here and now which involvment in a growth process necessarily entails: only for the degree to which I resist God's transforming and expanding power.

6. Augustine understood man as driven by a divine discontent, restless, searching, always reaching beyond his present into a greater future. Man is made for God, whether he knows it or not, and his inner driving force, which gives him all his creative power, his hunger to know more and more, his artistic talents, his self-

transcendence and spirituality, is in fact the force of God's self-communicating love drawing man to himself. Hence man's capacity for both joy and suffering, for love and for hate, for creation and destruction, for hope and despair. In his heights and depths he reaches for and becomes aware of absolutes of the divine and the diabolic, heaven and hell. Here one touches on the deep mystery of good and evil, and human understanding can at best point in the right directions, without encompassing or exhausting. But obscurely one can see that there can be no sin without grace; that the *same* force of God's love gives man the power to create and to destroy, to love and to hate; that God is God and in an ultimate sense is responsible for the human condition; that God is God and does not need vindicating; that talk about God tolerating evil never reaches the heart of the matter.

At a point in history where the options before the human race seem increasingly apocalyptic, where the first time man has the possibility of either total self-destruction or of breaking through into a new 'one world' of interdependence and trust, one is forced to admit that there are no guarantees from within history and the human track-record that he will choose aright. The christian message then has to be one of hope, one of trust in God's fidelity and the proclamation of the Easter gospel. The victory of Christ does not hang in the balance: it has already been achieved.

7. Out of some of these contexts there arises a distinction between sin and sins. (What John the Baptist said was, 'Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the *sin* of the world'). If 'sin' be taken to cover the need the world has and that I have in it for salvation — its frailties, inadequacies, dislocations, distortions, blindness, smallness of heart, in short the distance it falls short of the glory of God — then we are not personally responsible for its givenness, though our inheritance creates manifold responsibilities and opportunities for us. 'Sins' would be our personal contributions, by omission and commission, to the sin of the world — though of course God's grace makes us capable of establishing something of his kingdom in our world as well.

These paragraphs are purposely skating round the question of original sin. There is an imbalance in the traditional doctrine. We inherit the sin of the world, no doubt about it; but we also inherit the history of grace, the story of man's fidelity to the self-communication of God. Maybe we have an inclination to evil, and Paul at places picks up the biblical and rabbinical doctrine of this 'slant'; but we

also have an inclination to good, because God's grace gets in first. Catholic theology resists going on and on about sin, and tries to hold the two in balance.

There should be no sense of guilt about sin, because it is forgiven. We can *celebrate* our forgiveness at the beginning of Mass. Not only is God compassionate towards our frailty, our growth pangs, because he has made us that way; but his grace is a force which heals and effectively overcomes both sin and sins. That is forgiveness as a reality, and not just as a sort of mental discounting on the part of God.

Sin is profoundly important, though not a matter for guilt, and a sense of sin is crucial for christian life. Jesus's saying, 'I have not come to call the just, but sinners to repentance', can be understood as meaning that those who are complacent, closed, self-righteous, are impervious to God's call to grow into the likeness of his Son; only those who know their need and sickness will be open to the transforming power of his healing Spirit. There must be conversion, a turning of the heart to God.

Sins, at least in those who are sincerely trying to serve God, are trivial, repetitive and boring: the regular laundry list we present to God, asking for his forgiveness and help. They are more a symptom than a cause of disorder, though they would reinforce the degree to which we share in sin if they were unacknowledged, if they were simply accepted without resistance as part of being human.

8. Theology today is variously seeking to overcome, or to get beneath, the idea that our moral life is a series of disparate acts, which can be separately weighed by ourselves or by anyone else (a confessor). They are searching for the unity of the person which underlies the acts, and for the person-to-person relationship with God that is going on. Our friendship with God and share in his life cannot be totally lost by sudden particular acts (mortal sins), any more than it can be totally gained by single conscious acts.

Rahner, Schoonenberg, Fuchs, Häring and others explore the central and unified commitment of the person that underlies particular choices.[3] They write of basic freedom, basic moral acts, fundamental option, transcendental freedom; of the underlying commitment by which we progressively determine ourselves as persons. As with knowledge, so with freedom: man has a capacity to know or to opt for historical persons and realities, because he has a capacity to know and opt for God. So, God is present in every free act as its horizon, as its fundamental impulse and final goal. Not every free

act achieves the same depth and thoroughness of self-commitment, but in his free acts man is always realizing or constituting himself in response to God, in loving acceptance or in rejection.

The close analyses found in such writers rely partly on the findings of psychology, partly on understandings of personality and freedom that owe much to the philosophies of Kant and Heidegger. Their analyses do not make easy reading, and do not always carry conviction as true to experience. If one has understood, they chiefly seem to be saying two things. The first is that our relationship to God is a cumulative life-story, a love story, which develops underlying attitudes, emphases, concerns, which our daily living can only by degrees set firmly in one direction or the other. The second is that only in the transition from life to death could our option be totally for or against God, because only in eternity do we wholly encounter him.

9. The word 'alienation' is used widely, one might even say bandied about, in some modern treatments of sin. But one may search in vain for any coherent meaning of the term. Pre-cartesian man saw himself as alienated, estranged, from God by his sinful condition. The more he deviated from the goal given him by God, together with its laws of conduct, the more he disintegrated internally and became estranged from his true self, and the more havoc he wreaked in society. But the philosophy of subjectivity that has developed since Descartes now presents us with the opposite contention: man's future lies solely in his own hands; he becomes estranged from his true self if he accepts dependence on any other; his greatness lies in his inner freedom and in his responsibility for himself and his world; belief in God or in any assured salvation is the extreme and abject abdication of personal responsibility and of the roots of selfhood.

Perhaps the achilles heel of this pervasive climate of philosophical atheism is that it ignores man's first experience, that of being loved, and the need he has of being loved in order to grow into an integrated person capable of giving the self in love and trust. The gospel of salvation then becomes: in this is love, not that we have the resources and the hope of constructing a loving society from the recesses of our freedom, but that God first loved us and gives his love as a free gift to be accepted.

However that may be, we cannot speak convincingly of sin unless we can speak convincingly of salvation, and thus determine the nature of sin and sins as all that opposes it. Otherwise our discourse

and our liturgical celebrations will alienate people, at least in the sense of turning them off. We need to show how faith in the salvation offered us in Christ gives meaning to our lives, and therefore to ourselves; how it gives meaning to our tragedies, losses, frustrations and deprivations; how it creates respect and love for other persons and enables us to create a more human world; how it gives hope.

Exercises on sin

10. We need first of all to recall and face up to certain features of the first four Exercises on sin.

(a) The soul is a prisoner in the body: the whole self is condemned to live in exile among beasts (Exx 47). To help me see the ugliness and deformity of sin, I should consider the foulness and ugliness of my body and see myself as an ulcerous sore (Exx 58).

(b) Many have been lost for a single sin, or for fewer sins than mine (Exx 48,52). Eternal condemnation is a just retribution for one sinful act against infinite goodness (52). I should see myself as a sinner led in chains before the Judge (74).

(c) These exercises are intended to produce a sense of shame (48,74), self-loathing (50), disgust (63), as well as perfect sorrow and intense grief (55).

Even apart from the somewhat lurid details, the soul-body dichotomy, which entered deep into christian spirituality, is not compatible with our understanding of the incarnation, the redemption of the world, the *milieu divin*, the building of the kingdom on earth.

> Though made of body and soul, man is one. Through his bodily composition he gathers to himself the elements of the material world. Thus they reach their crown through him, and through him raise their voice in free praise of the Creator. For this reason man is not allowed to despise his bodily life. Rather, he is obliged to regard his body as good and honourable since God has created it and will raise it up on the last day. . . .[4]

Next, we would be very chary of instilling 'alienating' images of God. And we must note that concern for improving the quality of human life is absent. The thought is of the salvation and damnation of individuals. The spirituality is other-worldly.

Ignatius may principally have intended the Exercises to convert worldly clerics into zealous apostles: hence the colloquy before the

cross of Christ (52). But there can surely be no doubt that he meant these Exercises to be done by people of spiritual quality, anxious to serve God better, and not only by rumbustious sinners. For our part, we would be very chary of encouraging self-loathing. Many will come in need of encouragment and hope rather than of puncturing, in need of finding greater meaning in their faith for coping with life.

On the other hand, a sense of sin has virtually disappeared from our secular society. And sorrow for sin must remain an integral part of christian awareness and spirituality. So a way must be found to treat sin so that sorrow is a dimension of faith, hope and love.

11. No, we cannot give the text as it stands. That would be sheer fundamentalism. One way ahead would be to argue that Ignatius's text is 'Spiritual Exercises', not '*The* Spiritual Exercises'. His first paragraph suggests that there could be any number of appropriate spiritual exercises other than those he offers in his little book, and the director might be free to put the retreatant through any exercises suited to his needs. On the other hand, the Exercises have a basic structure and aim at specific goals. If we have understood these, we should feel confident about working out our own exercises in terms of modern insights and needs, to reach the same goals.

Another way might be to highlight the contrasts between sixteenth and twentieth-century understandings of sin, to help retreatants to reach their own perceptions, the object of a retreat being to find God, not to work out the perfect theology.

12. One qualification suggests itself. Contemporary theology speaks much of the place that stories have in any religion. Stories are in, myths are out ('myth' being the Greek for 'story')![5] One can hardly over-estimate the influence of the Exodus story in shaping the jewish attitude to God and to life. Much of the bible is narrative. Most people communicate with each other in narrative, rather than in abstractions. Stories encapsulate one's vision of life and its meanings.

Let us tell the stories of the fall of the angels, and the fall of Adam and Eve, precisely as stories and not as dogma. The point is not whether they happened, but the meanings, the vision that they convey.

The fall of the angels is the story of enclosure in self carried to its absolute. We can substitute 'I will not love' for 'I will not serve' without lessening the majesty of God, who is more majestic in loving than in giving commands. The angels put self in place of God, whom we have learned to know as the God who loves unconditionally.

The fall of Adam and Eve is the story of the misuse of creatures.

They put creatures in place of God, which is idolatry. They did not put bad things in place of God, but small things like independence, esteem, success (furniture, colour television . . .). They went out of paradise in coarse garments, showing the degradation of the image of God in which they had been created. If we can take Teilhard's point about the alpha and the omega, the Genesis story is not about a primal innocence man ever possessed, but about what man and woman are called by God to become.

13. The chief thrust of these observations is that you cannot understand sin in itself. It is the obverse of a gospel. In Ignatius's day everyone assumed the gospel as it was then articulated in the characteristically basque and catalonian colours of salvation and damnation. So you could portray sin vividly in terms of millions cascading into hell. Pure El Greco, one might say. Today we must preach the gospel in a world that has ceased to hear it, but a credible gospel in a threatened world. We do not have to paint imaginative pictures to produce grief, sorrow, inadequacy, futility, degradation. The media din them into our eyes and ears every day. There are 50,000 nuclear weapons around. There have been 150 'conventional' wars since World War II. Élitist opulence is surrounded by mass starvation. There are precious few countries in the world where the ordinary freedoms are enjoyed. The problem is not how to portray sin, but how to portray salvation.

One of the pauline theologies of salvation is in terms of reconciliation, and the Church now uses the term for the sacrament of penance. 'God was in Christ', we quote, 'reconciling the world to himself' — and so reconciling men to one another. If we can make that bite, if we can translate it into the realities of what mankind might do, and what we might do in our little areas of life, then perhaps we can bring home to ourselves and to others what it is to preach Jesus Christ today, and what it is to reject him.

NOTES

[1] Jenkins, David: *The contradiction of Christianity* (London, 1976), p 16.
[2] *Ibid.*, pp 36, 102.
[3] Rahner, K.: *Grace in freedom* (London, 1969); Schoonenberg, P.: *Man and sin* (London, 1965); Fuchs, J.: *Human values and christian morality* (Dublin, 1970); Häring, B.: *Sin in the secular age* (Slough, 1974), and *Free and faithful in Christ*, vol 1 (Slough, 1978).
[4] *Gaudium et spes*, n 14.
[5] See Taylor, J. (ed): *Believing in the Church* (London, 1981), chapter 4.