

# SIN AND EXPERIENCE

By EDWARD YARNOLD

THE TITLE the editors have chosen for this article is unquestionably accurate, but it does not exactly rivet the attention. If I were allowed a more catchy substitute it would be 'What it feels like to be a sinner'. It would be a slightly dishonest title, suggesting revelations of first-hand experiences of sinfulness which the readers have not been privileged to share, whereas in fact one of the few things that we all have in common is that we have felt what it is like to sin. The only strange thing is that the better human beings seem to feel the experience much more vividly than the rest of us. St Bruno, for example, the founder of the Carthusians, wrote to his monks: 'I lament and am ashamed that I lie inert and torpid in the filth of my sins'.<sup>1</sup> We should not take such language as an empty pious convention. The greater a person's love of God, the more discerning his conscience becomes; the saints are aware of failings in love which we lack the clarity of vision to notice in ourselves.

## *The place of sin in christian proclamation*

Christianity is a religion of sin. It is so in particular because it is a religion of salvation; but the christian's consciousness of sin is the context of all his faith. We do not understand God, or his incarnate Son, or the life-giving Spirit, or ourselves, unless we take account of the fact of sin, which includes our own sins. 'If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us'.<sup>2</sup>

The fact of sin is at the heart of the New Testament accounts of Christ's life. In the matthaean infancy gospel, the angel tells Joseph that Mary 'will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins'.<sup>3</sup> (The name Jesus means 'the Lord saves'; the meaning of names given by God – like Abraham, Israel, Peter – is of great importance to the semitic mind.) Luke also states with emphasis that the name Jesus is God-given, though

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted from the *Office of Readings* for October 6, in the translation approved by the Hierarchies of Australia, Ireland, England and Wales, and Scotland.

<sup>2</sup> 1 Jn 1, 8.

<sup>3</sup> Mt 1, 21.

he does not explain its meaning. He does however give an explanation of the child's saving mission on the lips of the christmas angel: 'to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord'.<sup>4</sup>

In all the accounts of the Last Supper, the sacrificial language implies a link between the Eucharist and man's salvation from sin. Matthew makes the point explicitly, by adding to Mark's words, 'This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many', the phrase 'for the forgiveness of sins'.<sup>5</sup>

Forgiveness of sin features in Luke's account of the first preaching of the apostles at Pentecost: 'Repent, and be baptized every one of you . . . for the forgiveness of your sins'.<sup>6</sup> And in the fourth Gospel, the Baptist describes Jesus as 'the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world'.<sup>7</sup>

The same emphasis on sin is present in the liturgy. To set the tone for the Mass, the priest at once invites the people to call to mind their sins in a little rite of self-examination, confession and absolution; for it is in this spirit that the Eucharist should be approached. The *Gloria* echoes more than once John the Baptist's words just quoted, and the priest repeats them again just before communion, when he holds up the host to the people. In fact four of the seven sacraments – baptism, and penance most obviously, but also eucharist and anointing – include the forgiveness of sins among their effects.

*Why do christians place such emphasis on sin?*

It would be a mistake to regard the christian attitude to sin as masochistic; the christian must not stop at the contemplation of his own unworthiness. He is asked to acknowledge his past and present sins, and his tendency to sin, above all because this is the only way to understand the greatness of the love of the Saviour who takes away the sin of the world. We cannot understand God's love for us unless we see it as the love of the Creator for creatures who reject his love. 'God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us'.<sup>8</sup>

If a drunken driver kills a child, and the child's parents forgive him so deeply that they receive him into their friendship, he has never the right to presume on that friendship, but needs to remem-

<sup>4</sup> Lk 2, 11.

<sup>7</sup> Jn 2, 29.

<sup>5</sup> Mk 14, 24; Mt 26, 28.

<sup>8</sup> Rom 5, 8.

<sup>6</sup> Acts 2, 38.

ber that he is a guilty and forgiven person. He will not be expected to talk about the past, but the relationship is falsified if he allows himself to forget it.

If a wife has a sharp tongue and repeatedly allows herself to wound her husband's feelings, but repeatedly asks for and receives forgiveness, their relationship is based on an acknowledgement of her weakness, and on forgiveness frankly sought, given and accepted.

Our relationship with God has something in common with both analogies. We have offended God in the past, like the drunken driver, so that our friendship with him is based on forgiveness made possible by the suffering of his Son. We continue to offend God, so that our friendship with him is based on a repeated need to seek forgiveness. The tax collector's prayer, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner',<sup>9</sup> should be the prayer of every christian.

#### *Insensitivity to sin*

Yet today there has been a wide-spread loss of the sense of sin, inside as well as outside the Church, despite the spectacular evils of the modern world. Several reasons can be suggested:

i) In many countries there is a widespread decline in respect for authority. Of course, sin should not be equated with breaches of law; fundamentally sin is refusal to love the good God rather than refusal to obey his commands. Nevertheless it seems true that in such a climate the sense of sin will not easily develop.

ii) Another factor which seems to blunt people's sensitivity to sin is affluence. 'How hard it will be for those who have riches to enter the kingdom of God'.<sup>10</sup>

iii) There is today much concern for social justice, and protests against injustice are fashionable. It is, however, possible to lull one's conscience with righteous feeling against social ills which are not of one's own making, and so become blind to the sinfulness of one's personal life. 'Charity begins at home'.<sup>11</sup>

iv) Our consciences are often more sensitive to some sins than to others; the sins which move people most vary at different periods of history. Thus in the middle ages people thought less of cruelty than we do, but attached great importance to sins against faith. In the last century people placed great emphasis on sins of impurity, but were more likely to condone sins of injustice. Our own

<sup>9</sup> Lk 18, 13.

<sup>10</sup> Mk 10, 23.

<sup>11</sup> Cf Mt 7, 3: motes and beams.

age follows a very permissive sexual morality, but is sensitive to the sinfulness of racism and international exploitation.

v) A false theological logic is sometimes invoked to justify a lack of emphasis on the idea of sin. It is said, for example, that faith and joy in Christ's resurrection should relegate the idea of sin to a position of relative unimportance in the consciousness. However, faith in the resurrection will have little bearing on the reality of our lives unless we consider our continual resistance to the power of the risen Christ, and trust it to work in us despite the obstacles we erect. Moreover, we have no right to forget that the Christ who rose from the dead is the Christ whom our sins helped to kill.

vi) Neglect of the concept of sin can also be due to a misunderstanding of the psychological term 'guilt'. It is, of course, true – and we shall return to this point in the next section – that guilt-feelings are often misplaced and harmful; but it is wrong to conclude from this that all sense of sinfulness is a morbid aberration. When we have done wrong, we ought to have a sense of guilt, which should lead us on to contrition, grateful love of our Redeemer, and the desire to put right the wrong as far as we can.

#### *False experience of sin*

Reference was made in the last section to the term 'guilt', which is much used by modern writers on psychology. Guilt in this sense is essentially irrational, and is traced to the uncritical and infantile acceptance of moral standards from external sources, especially during early childhood under the influence of parents. Guilt is said to be the product of the unconscious conscience, to which Freud gave the name of the 'super-ego'.

However, the word 'guilt' is also applied in ordinary language to legal or moral culpability, and, though less frequently, in theological language to sin. It is therefore important to clarify the ways in which the psychological and moral senses of the term differ.<sup>12</sup>

i) Moral guilt is a fact which does not depend on the feelings; it is the condition of one who has chosen to refuse to love God and his neighbour. An action, or a refusal to act, which involves such a choice, incurs moral guilt, whether one feels psychological guilt or not.

ii) Moral guilt can only be incurred voluntarily; moral guilt may or may not be the result of a personal choice. I may feel guilty

<sup>12</sup> Cf Uleyn, A.: *The Recognition of Guilt* (Dublin, 1969).

when I am morally guilty; I may on the other hand feel guilty because my parents treated me in a particular way when I was small. There is, of course, the further point that, though guilt-feelings may be beyond our control, we are responsible for the way in which we react to them. I may not be able to avoid experiencing scruples, and no moral guilt attaches to the experience as such; but I am morally guilty if I choose to allow my scrupulous fears to override my common sense and my trust in God. (Of course it would be unwise to put it quite like this to a scrupulous person, or he might get scruples about giving way to scruples.)

iii) Moral guilt by definition is always harmful. Psychological guilt, on the other hand, is sometimes harmful, sometimes beneficial. The feeling of guilt when I am not morally guilty is misplaced and can be damaging; but when I am morally guilty, it is appropriate and beneficial, though still irrational, in the sense that it is an emotional, not a reasoned response to its stimulus. However, the feeling may be disproportionate to the moral guilt. If I feel as guilty about stealing a small sum of money from a millionaire as I do over stealing the same sum from a poor man, there is a dangerous imbalance in my sense of guilt.

iv) Moral guilt is removed by contrition and forgiveness, especially in the sacrament of penance. Psychological guilt may sometimes be removed by drugs or other forms of physical treatment, especially when it is one symptom within a more general state of depression due to physical causes.<sup>13</sup> Sometimes it will respond to psychological treatment. In such cases the psychiatrist's task is to help the sufferer to recognize the hidden causes of his feelings of guilt, and so learn to react to them appropriately. This will not necessarily remove the guilt-feelings, but will sometimes help to do so.

v) Moral guilt can attach only to sinful actions. Psychological guilt, on the other hand, can occur where no sin is present. It can also be transferred from one condition to another. Thus the self-condemnation which I feel in connection with some fairly trivial failing that I cannot bear to acknowledge to myself, like carelessly burning the toast, may be due to some deeper cause which I am incapable of acknowledging even to myself.

Psychological guilt is also experienced as a sense of failure or inadequacy. It is always a feeling of self-condemnation arising from

<sup>13</sup> Cf Dominian, J.: *Depression* (Glasgow, 1976).

the inability to live up to standards we impose on ourselves. But these need not be moral standards: they may simply be ideals of success or competence which we feel irrationally we are obliged to attain. The remedy that goes to the heart of the malady is self-acceptance. It is a remedy which the christian should be predisposed to accept; for he knows that God's mercy is inexhaustible, that the saving power of Christ is limitless, and that 'God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong'.<sup>14</sup>

### *The true sense of sin*

Evangelical preachers, who believe in the paramount importance of bringing their congregation to the experience of conversion and a felt assurance that each one has been personally saved by Christ, often attempt to arouse in their hearers a sense of psychological guilt. This technique however, is not confined to the protestant churches. In the catholic Church, when old-style missions were preached, similar means were used to induce people to come to the sacrament of penance; and even the Council of Trent, when discussing the conversion and baptism of adults, regards as first steps in the process the 'understanding that they are sinners', and 'the fear of divine justice, a fear which arouses in them a beneficial disturbance'.<sup>15</sup>

Such attempts to arouse in people a sense of guilt were connected especially with what catholic theology calls mortal sins; that is, sins by which God is rejected so decisively that the sinner extinguishes all grace and charity in his soul and makes himself God's enemy. But it is perhaps more important here to consider two other ways in which sin is experienced. The first is the experience of mortal sin without any sense of psychological guilt. The second is the experience of venial sin, which does not kill the divine life in the soul or break the relationship of friendship with God, but weakens that life and that relationship, and is inconsistent with them.

i) It is possible that a person can be in a state of mortal sin without experiencing psychological guilt; we might say that his heart is hardened or his conscience dulled. Nevertheless some awareness must be present, for mortal sin can be committed only with full knowledge and full consent. Needless to say, this knowledge and consent do not need to be explicit: a person does not have to tell himself in so many words that he is totally rejecting God,

<sup>14</sup> 1 Cor 1, 27.

<sup>15</sup> Denzinger Schönmetzer, 1526.

and that he fully understands what this means; otherwise only believers, and indeed only theologians, would be capable of a mortal sin. Just as there are implicit christians,<sup>16</sup> there are presumably implicit mortal sinners.

Many moral theologians explain this total rejection of God in terms of a fundamental option, the orientation of the self at the deepest level either for or against God.<sup>17</sup> This basic drive of the will is for God if it is towards what is seen to be good, that is, towards love rather than towards selfishness and pride. If St Thomas Aquinas was right, this basic decision is made at a person's first moral choice of what is right, for this implies the decision to love God, who is the source of good, and therefore establishes the person in a state of grace.<sup>18</sup> (St Thomas believed that this ability to 'exercise the spontaneous will' developed at the age of puberty.)<sup>19</sup>

The turning of the fundamental option away from God implies, of course, a major upheaval in the personality. Consequently, a person seriously trying to serve God is not likely to commit a mortal sin by a single, uncharacteristic choice. Such a sin is much more likely to be the result of a long chain of venial sins, which blunt the moral sensibilities, weaken the love of God, and establish the self more and more habitually as the central consideration in all choices.

Nevertheless the difference between venial sin and mortal sin is never one of degree, but of kind; therefore the final decision to reject God by mortal sin must always be a particular, conscious and free moment of choice, a turning-point in the development of the personality. As long as this state of mortal sin lasts, in which the self is turned away from God at its very core, subsequent acts of mortal sin spring from the evil fundamental option, and do not require a further radical reorientation of the will. But the beginning of the state of mortal sin must involve such a reorientation, made with complete freedom, and seen with complete clarity, even if the sinner does not spell out this clear decision in words.

Moralists often illustrate this point by the analogy of the breakdown of a marriage. The majority of the misunderstandings and infidelities of the married couple are not serious enough to cause

<sup>16</sup> Cf Rahner, K.: 'Christianity and the non-christian religions', in *Theological Investigations*, vol 5 (London, 1966).

<sup>17</sup> One of the earliest exponents of this view was L. Monden, *Sin, Liberty and Law* (London, 1966), pp 30-33.

<sup>18</sup> Ia, IIae, 89, 6.

<sup>19</sup> IIa, IIae, 189, 5.

such a breakdown, but most breakdowns come about only as a result of an accumulation of these minor incidents. Nevertheless, there is often a particular moment of decision when one or both of the partners is faced with the choice between reconciliation and parting, a choice which will either encapsulate and formalize the growing estrangement, or will halt the drift apart. There may be exceptions among marriages; but there are no exceptions among mortal sins: there is always a moment of decision, a *kairos*.

This direction of one's being away from God perhaps corresponds to what scripture describes as the choice of darkness rather than light, the onset of blindness in the mind, hardening of the heart, and blasphemy against the holy Spirit.<sup>20</sup> St Mark calls this blasphemy an eternal sin and unforgivable,<sup>21</sup> words which tell the stark truth that the sinner has made himself incapable of conversion, though they do not seem to take into account the healing possibilities of grace.

The person who sins mortally extinguishes in himself God's grace, and consequently makes himself incapable of performing a supernaturally good action. Moreover, if we accept the view that all true love of our neighbour involves at least implicit love of God, and that one cannot keep the second great commandment of loving others without keeping also the first commandment (which is 'like it') of loving God,<sup>22</sup> it follows that the person in mortal sin has made himself incapable of loving his fellow men.

Hell is essentially this state of lovelessness, but with all the habits and inconsistencies removed which in this life make the state of mortal sin tolerable and hard to recognize. For in this world no one seems totally without love; even Hitler, who killed millions of Jews with complete callousness and even cheerfulness, could still show affection and faithfulness to Eva Braun. We would not, however, be justified in arguing that for this reason he could not have been in a state of mortal sin. It is possible that a person in that state may perform acts that seem to be due to unselfish love, but in fact are due to respect for convention, a subtle form of selfishness, or even habit. Just as in venial sin we seek, at a more superficial level of our being, an end which is inconsistent with the good which is sought in the core of the self in accordance with the fundamental option, so too the apparently good actions of persons in a state of

<sup>20</sup> Jn 3, 19; 12, 40; Heb 3, 8; Mk 3, 29.

<sup>22</sup> Mt 22, 37-39.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

mortal sin are attempts, at a more superficial level, to seek a good which is rejected at the deepest level.<sup>23</sup>

At this point the objection of common sense must be expressed and met. Does anybody ever totally reject God, or the good, in this fundamental way? It is, indeed, sometimes suggested that it is only at the moment of death that anyone ever has the complete internal freedom and clarity of vision necessary to make a decision so radical as the turning of the fundamental option away from God.<sup>24</sup> On this view, the whole of life is a preparation for the one definitive decision of our existence; in the words of Plato, life is a rehearsal for death.

A more common view, however, among theologians is that mortal sins, though perhaps rare, are still a possibility before the irrevocable fixing of the will at death either for or against God. Nevertheless, such moments of radical decision cannot be certainly recognized either in oneself or in others. Just as, according to the teaching of the Council of Trent,<sup>25</sup> we cannot have complete certainty that we are in a state of grace, so too one cannot place absolute trust in the feeling that one has lost this grace: one may think one has totally rejected God, when in fact one has not. Moreover, since in perhaps the majority of instances the rejection of God, though totally free and clear, may not be present to the consciousness in the form of an explicit rejection of God, the experience of mortal sin is even harder to recognize.

Fiction may provide examples of the direction of the fundamental option away from God. Scobie, in Graham Greene's *The Heart of the Matter*, comes immediately to mind, and perhaps the author's intention was to describe a deliberate mortal sin. But in fact, Scobie is not totally free, as his perception of the good is blurred by his pity for the young widow. More's words in Bolt's play *A Man for all Seasons* describe the situation better: 'When a man takes an oath, Meg, he's holding his own self in his own hands. Like water. And if he opens his fingers *then* – he needn't hope to find himself again'.

ii) The experience of venial sin. It is possible to refuse a demand made by God without diverting one's fundamental option away

<sup>23</sup> On the connection between mortal and venial sin, cf P. Schoonenberg, *Man and Sin* (London, 1965), pp 25-40.

<sup>24</sup> Rahner, K.: *On the Theology of Death* (London, 1961), and L. Boros, *The Moment of Truth* (London, ed. 2, 1969) discuss the irrevocable decision made at death, without going so far as to suggest that mortal sin is impossible earlier.

<sup>25</sup> Denzinger Schönmetzer, 1534.

from him, and therefore without extinguishing the life of grace. Such a refusal is called venial sin; but 'venial' does not mean 'trivial', for anything short of a total rejection of God is venial. The mortal sinner is willing to sever himself totally from God; the venial sinner remains in the state of loving God, but makes a choice which is inconsistent with that love. As we saw, a person in mortal sin is like a man who has abandoned his wife with no intention of returning to her. The person who commits a venial sin is like a man who has quarrelled with his wife while remaining basically faithful to her; he has wronged her, but not destroyed the marriage.

St Ignatius's 'Rules for the Discernment of Spirits' illustrate both experiences of sin. The fundamental principle of these rules seems to be that a choice made in accordance with the fundamental option will arouse a sense of well-being and calm, whereas a choice that goes counter to the fundamental option will cause disturbance or remorse. Thus, if the fundamental option is evil, anxiety and sadness will accompany a good choice; if the option is good, anxiety and sadness will be evoked by a bad choice. The same is true of the less radical decisions that face a person in a state of grace: 'In souls that are progressing to greater perfection, the action of the good angel is delicate, gentle, delightful. It may be compared to a drop of water penetrating a sponge. The action of the evil spirit upon such souls is violent, noisy, and disturbing. It may be compared to a drop of water falling upon a stone. In souls that are going from bad to worse, the action of the spirits mentioned above is just the reverse'.<sup>26</sup>

This quotation can sum up this whole article. To change from a state of grace to a state of mortal sin, and while remaining in a state of grace to commit venial sin, is experienced as a confrontation between one's direction of will and the new choice. To remain in a state of mortal sin, however, may cause no sense of moral conflict or guilt, for the personality is integrated in the rejection of the good.

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<sup>26</sup> Exx 335; cf 314-15.