

# SIN, SPIRITUALITY AND THE SECULAR

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CHRISTIAN SPIRITUALITY IS ABOUT answering the call of Jesus. However, Jesus has said very categorically: 'I have come to call not the just but sinners'. Therefore, it looks as though in some way or other there is an essential linkage between spirituality and our being sinners.

Sometimes spirituality is presented as though it had nothing whatsoever to do with sin. At our baptism we have renounced sin and so it is presumed that sin should play no further part in our lives. Sin is viewed as a regression. It is something we 'fall into'. This suggests that we are falling below what is seen as an acceptable standard for Christian and human life. It is hard to reconcile this perfectionist approach with Jesus saying that he has come to call sinners. Calling sinners suggests our being called out from our sinfulness, rather than our attempting to live some kind of perfect life free from sin. This would seem to imply that our sinfulness is actually the starting point for our spirituality. In this article I would like to approach the linkage between Christian spirituality and our sinfulness from three converging directions. I would like to look at Christian spirituality first of all in terms of its being a lifelong growth-process out of our being 'victims of sin', and secondly in terms of its being a lifelong growth-process out of our being 'agents of sin'. Thirdly, I would like to grapple with the objection that the notion of 'growth out of sin' seems to imply too negative a starting point for Christian spirituality.

(1) *Christian spirituality as a person's lifelong process of growth out of being a 'victim of sin'*

If spirituality is to be viewed as a lifelong process of growth out of being a 'victim of sin', the question immediately arises: where does each person find his or her particular agenda for this growth? In other words, how am I to discern what Christ is asking of me, victim of sin that I am?

There is a tendency to answer that question along very individualist lines. Each of us is unique. We are not mass-produced on an assembly-line. Consequently, Christ calls each of us as unique

persons. Each of us has his or her unique personal vocation. Following out this approach, we try to discern in what special ways each of us is a victim of sin, since it is there that we will discover our own personal woundedness and so our own unique need for healing.

That is fine as far as it goes. However, it does not go nearly far enough. To focus on what is unique about me is to take a very partial and impoverished view of myself as a human person. An absolutely essential dimension of my being a human person is the fact that I am, always have been and always will be bound up in a whole series of relationships of interdependence with other human beings. This has enormous implications for me if I am to arrive at a full diagnosis of where my personal woundedness lies. We are not disembodied, other-worldly, spiritual beings. We are creatures of this world, secular beings. As such we are essentially corporeal, sexual, spatial, relational, social, historical, cultural beings. Yet we are also secular beings endowed with an openness to the transcendent.

In his seminal article, 'Artificial insemination: ethical considerations', in *Louvain studies*, 1980, pp 3-29, Louis Janssens suggests that there are, in fact, eight fundamental dimensions of the human person. The human person is (1) a subject; (2) an embodied subject; (3) part of the material world; (4) interrelational with other persons; (5) an interdependent social being; (6) historical; (7) equal but unique; (8) called to know and worship God. Janssens was drawn to produce this analysis of the human person by his recognizing the need to put more flesh and blood on to the Vatican II teaching that the determination of what is right and wrong must be 'based on the nature of the human person and his acts' (*The Church in the world of today*, n. 51). Although this teaching occurs in a passage dealing specifically with family planning and birth control, the conciliar committee responsible for drafting this document stated that this passage was enunciating a 'general principle'. Hence, it applied to the whole field of human morality. It formulated this basic principle as follows: 'Human activity must be judged insofar as it refers to the human person integrally and adequately considered' (*Acta synodalia Concilii Vaticani II*, vol IV, part 7, p 502, n. 37).

Spurred on by this teaching, Janssens saw the importance of explaining with much greater precision what was meant by 'the human person integrally and adequately considered'. His analysis of the above eight dimensions has been recognized by many moral theologians as a valuable contribution towards attaining this precision. Consequently, it has provided a useful tool in the development

of a positive post-Vatican II moral theology. In fact, a major section of my forthcoming book, *Moral theology in an age of change: the challenge of being human* (Geoffrey Chapman, 1992) is devoted to drawing out some of the pastoral implications of this analysis by Janssens.

The point Janssens is making is that these eight dimensions are dimensions of each of us as human persons. Though they can be analysed individually, they cannot in fact be separated from each other: 'These aspects or dimensions belong to one and the same human person: they are interwoven and form a synthesis because each is proper to the integrity of every person' (p 4).

Why this is relevant to our present topic is because my woundedness as a human person is likely to be spread, more or less, across all these eight dimensions. Moreover, because one of those 'inseparable' dimensions is my interdependence, it also means that my personal woundedness will be connected to the woundedness of other people. Obviously, this does not mean that we are all wounded in exactly the same way. Nevertheless, it does mean that my personal woundedness will be linked to the woundedness of all the significant others in my life. Moreover, these significant others in my life will be found within an ever-widening series of concentric circles—my parents, family, educators, friends, neighbours etc. Their woundedness is likely to have an impact on me in the various dimensions of my being a human person. For instance, how I develop as a sexual and relational being will be affected by the woundedness of the people who are close to me as I am passing through the key developmental stages of my life. An American theologian, Beverly Wildung Harrison, has brought this out very powerfully in speaking of what she calls the 'formidable power' of nurturing:

. . . we have the power through acts of love or lovelessness literally to create one another . . . . Because we do not understand love as the power to act-each-other-into-well-being, we also do not understand the depth of our power to thwart life and to maim each other. That fateful choice is ours, either to set free the power of God's love in the world or to deprive each other of the very basis of personhood and community . . . .

It is within the power of human love to build up dignity and self-respect in each other or to tear each other down . . . . Through acts of love directed to us, we become self-respecting and other-regarding persons, and we cannot be one without the other. (pp 11-12)

My woundedness will also be influenced by the woundedness of the institutions which form part of my social existence—including the

Church. Furthermore, it will also be marked, to a greater or lesser extent, by various forms of social woundedness such as patriarchy, racial prejudice, national and cultural deficiencies, homophobia, ecological insensitivity, my belonging to a developed world whose affluence seems to be irretrievably linked to structures of exploitation, etc.

If some or all of these factors go to make up the way I, as a human person, am a victim of sin, by that same token they should also feature on my personal agenda for 'growth out of being a victim of sin'. In other words, they will constitute the complex medium through which the sinner that I am hears the call of Christ. This means that they will form an essential part of the 'secular' agenda for my personal spirituality.

If all this is true, it means that my growth out of sin cannot be something that I can achieve on my own. Nor, in fact, can it be a growth that takes place in me alone. For instance, where my woundedness is relational, the growth in healing must necessarily be relational too. Likewise, where my woundedness goes back to structural roots, growth towards healing may well demand of me some kind of personal involvement in working for structural reform. Theologically, this is a strong argument in favour of the communal celebration of reconciliation. It does not argue from convenience—lack of opportunity for individual confession due to excessive numbers or paucity of confessors. It is based on the essential social dimension of our being sinners and the corresponding social dimension of our healing and reconciliation.

In his brilliant essay, *The power of the powerless*, Václav Havel gives a very striking example of how our social interdependence can have a far-reaching impact through what might seem to be the trivia of everyday life. He tells the story of a shop-keeper to whom a Communist Party official gives his regular Party poster to be displayed in his shop window. The shop-keeper knows that no one will actually read what is written on the poster, just as he himself will not read it. Nevertheless, by displaying the poster he plays his little part in maintaining the lie on which the whole system is built. He is living within that lie like everyone else. However, if the shop-keeper decides not to display the poster, the whole system is threatened. That is because, by refusing to live within the lie, he touches a raw nerve in everyone else. That nerve is the openness to truth deep within everyone living the lie. His action, therefore, is radically subversive. Without a lot of ordinary people doing similar down-to-

earth small actions like this, there is no way the community as a whole can grow out of the sin of communist domination.

Havel's story is very much *ad rem* in these momentous days during which I am working on this article. Even as I write, 'people power' seems to be liberating the Soviet peoples from the tyranny of the Communist Party. It looks as though the apparently small and individual decisions of a lot of ordinary Muscovites not to stay at home watching TV, having a drink, or making love etc., but instead to go out and show solidarity in front of the Russian Parliament building, will probably have played a major part in altering world history for decades to come.

The fact that we are 'historical' beings is another of Janssens's eight dimensions of being a human person. We are the product of history, we live in the midst of history and we ourselves play our own unique part in fashioning history. History is full of ambiguity. Some opportunities are seized, others are lost. Nevertheless, although Christians do not believe in inevitable progress, they do believe that God's Spirit is present and active wherever true human progress occurs in history (cf *The Church in the world of today*, n. 26). This belief in the Spirit active within history should make us sensitive to 'the signs of the times'. These signs of the times constitute part of the call of Christ to the historical sinful persons that we are. Through them we discern some of the growth out of sin that we are called to be part of in our contemporary world. It is significant that, when Council Fathers at Vatican II turned their attention to what was implied in being a Christian in the world of today, the very first thing they did was to try to interpret the signs of the times (cf *The Church in the world of today*, nn. 4-10). For my part, I am convinced that a spirituality cannot be truly Christian today if, for instance, it turns a deaf ear to what the Spirit seems to be saying to us through the voices of so many committed women who are articulating the deep sufferings and injustices inflicted on their sisters by patriarchal institutions, including the Church. The same would seem to be true of the voices of those calling us to a greater ecological awareness and responsibility.

(2) *Christian spirituality seen as a lifelong growth-process out of our being an 'agent of sin'*

In saying that we are all in our different ways 'victims of sin' I have been using the word 'sin' to denote the evil which is done or brought about by us as human agents. In other words, the evil done or brought about by other human persons has had its effect on us.

When sin is used in this sense, the only place where it can be located is in the secular, since that is where human life is lived. In fact, it could be argued that a constant error the Christian Church is in danger of falling into is to divorce sin from the secular and turn it into something purely religious. This would make it some kind of *direct* offence against God rather than an offence against the creatures whom God loves. This would play right into the hands of those who are violating the secular through their injustice and oppression. To confine sin to the sacristy is to leave our world and its peoples defenceless before all kinds of predators. It is within the secular that we live out our relationship with God. As Aquinas has reminded us: 'God is not offended by us except insofar as we harm ourselves or each other' (my own paraphrase of *Contra Gentiles*, III, n. 122).

The way we human beings bring about evil is not just to do with the consequences of our actions. It also has to do with ourselves as the agents of these actions. We cannot repeatedly act in an unloving way without becoming unloving persons. This would seem to be where the tragic linkage between victimhood and agency is located. If our capacity to act lovingly and justly has been seriously wounded, then that will show in the way we behave towards others. In fact, experience seems to show that it is a very short step from being a victim of sin to becoming an agent of sin. This is very understandable. After all, part of the evil of sin in this sense is that it can injure and deform us as persons. That is why healing is such an urgent priority and this healing involves some sort of growth out of the woundedness inflicted on us by sin.

It would seem, therefore, that our growth out of being an 'agent of sin' is necessarily linked to our growth out of being a 'victim of sin'. I believe that, in general, that is basically true. And it makes good sense too! Moreover, its pastoral implications can be far-reaching. For instance, it implies that Christian spirituality needs to lay much more emphasis on the root causes of why we do the evil that we do. It needs to recognize the inadequacy and unreality of demanding a massive act of naked will-power ('a firm purpose of amendment') through which we are immediately expected to be able to cease from the evil we are involved in. Because we are so interdependent and because this interdependence operates on all the various dimensions of our being a human person, it may well be that, for the present and while other factors remain as they are, it is morally impossible for a person to break free from the evil he or she is involved in. In reality, this is a fact of human life which has always been acknowledged and

allowed for by wise confessors, even though they did not have the benefit of our current understanding of just how multi-dimensional and far-reaching our interdependence on each other actually is.

Commenting on the fact that many Christians are experiencing a 'shift to an awareness of collective responsibility for individual sins, and individual responsibility for the collective sin', Monika Hellwig notes that:

Sin and conversion for these Christians are seen in a new light. The question of imputing guilt, calculating the degrees of culpability of freedom and knowledge, simply does not arise in the consciousness of such Christians. They are concerned with discerning patterns of disorientation in their society and in their own lives, without reference to the question of whom to blame. Instead their focus is on who can make a difference in the sinful situation, how, why, when and where . . .

They feel a certain impatience . . . with a spirituality much preoccupied with the quest for perfection in an introspective fashion. They have an urgent sense that the real agenda of continuing redemption is written on a far larger canvas, and that endless preoccupation with perfecting oneself and eliminating personal faults is petty and irresponsible in face of the terrible and unnecessary sufferings of vast masses of our times . . . . (Theological Trends: 'Sin and sacramental reconciliation', I, 'Contemporary reflection on sin', in *The Way*, 1984, pp 221-222)

I would interpret Hellwig as saying that it is not for us to judge the culpability or not of people who are doing what we consider to be evil. We do not know how minimal may be the personal resources individual people have for coping with the extreme pressures they may be under. Hence, it is not for us to set ourselves up as 'sinless' and demand that these 'sinners' overcome these pressures by an act of will which, for all we know, might be completely outside their personal capacity. Rather, the credibility of our opposition to the evil these people are involved in will depend, to a large extent, on how far we are committed to identifying and combating the social pressures which might be part of the 'sin' of which these people are 'victims'. Moreover, recognizing ourselves to be linked in interdependence with these fellow 'victims of sin', we should perhaps be on the lookout for ways in which our own interests might be bound up with the maintenance of these social pressures which result in these people 'sinning' in this way. Any such complicity on our part would reveal our shared 'agency' in their sinning. Maybe the words of Jesus to the

accusers of the woman taken in adultery are relevant here: 'Let the one who is without sin cast the first stone'. An example of a pastoral strategy which would seem contrary to this sobering pastoral principle is the aggressive tactics of some sections of the pro-life movement. It is significant that many of the women who attended Archbishop Weakland's 'listening sessions' on abortion focussed on a wide variety of social factors which resulted in many women experiencing enormous pressures to resort to abortion. Among these pressures the Archbishop's report instanced 'economic pressures, increased violence, feminization of poverty, consumerism, a continued male dominated society' and it noted that these pressures weigh most heavily on the increasing numbers of women caught in the poverty trap. (Full report in Milwaukee *Catholic Herald*, 24/5/90.)

(3) *Does 'growth out of sin' imply too negative a starting point for Christian spirituality?*

In his book, *Creation and redemption* (Gill and Macmillan, 1988), Gabriel Daly examines the theological significance of the long and slow development of *homo sapiens* from the animal world which leads to the stage of 'hominization' where for the first time a creature becomes 'conscious of itself'. With this self-consciousness, bringing freedom of choice with it, sin becomes part of the story of evolving humanity. Daly sees original sin as linked to the feeling of alienation that human beings experience as they undergo this slow process of becoming human. It is the tension between what they have in common with the animal world (the instinct for self-preservation, survival of the fittest, etc.) and what makes them different from other animals (the struggle to love in a disinterested way, the power of human reasoning, etc.). According to this understanding, original sin expresses the shadow side of our graced humanity and our graced world. The maturing of humanity, as with other forms of slow evolution, is a goal to be achieved through trial and error, chance and necessity. It is not some paradise-state of original perfection which has been lost.

This line of thought suggests that perhaps we should not interpret the 'truly human' as offering us a clearly defined standard for our ethical behaviour, a kind of bottom line, anything less than which is regarded as 'sinful'. Perhaps we should see the 'truly human' more as the goal that lies ahead. This would mean that any partial realization of the 'truly human' in our lives would be seen as an achievement en route. This would imply that even the way we interpret Janssens's eight dimensions of being human should be



understood as no more than a provisional outline of what being human involves insofar as we can envisage it in the light of our current knowledge and experience. Ahead of us may lie possibilities of 'being truly human' which at present we can hardly imagine or can see only as a shadowy dream of an unattainable future.

This would mean that our growth out of sin would be the fruit of our being empowered to leave behind the less-than-human in us. In other words, this growth out of sin is about moving beyond the lower level of being human we have reached and progressing to a higher level of being human. Sin, on the other hand, would consist in our being content to remain where we are. By so doing we would be refusing the invitation to play our unique and necessary part in the human family's journey towards becoming more 'truly human'.

This scenario enables Daly to offer a positive appraisal of the daimonic forces within us. He sees these as being present in

aggression, jealousy, possessive love, hatred, vengeance, fear, and a host of other primal emotions which can destroy us and our interhuman relationships if we do not name these emotions and 'come to terms' with them. (p 146)

He believes that these potentially destructive emotions 'are also the raw materials of holiness'. He even comments: 'We would not be human without the very forces which can destroy us'.

Christ's call to us as 'sinners' is to receive the gift of this raw material which is ourselves and to live as fully as possible out of this bundle of light and shade. In doing so we play our little part in the ongoing story of humankind as it continues its struggle to give living shape and substance to the 'point of life' revealed to us in Christ. Sin, as the etymology of the word suggests, would be 'missing the point of life'. It would be refusing the invitation to be human.

Such an interpretation of spirituality is too solidly based in God-given reality of the secular to have any sympathy for a perfectionist ethic. There is no perfect human being which we are all called to be. In a sense, morality for each of us is a personal affair. That does not mean that it is individualistic, or relative, or something we make up to suit our own convenience. Rather it is personal in the sense that it flows from the person each of us is, 'integrally and adequately considered'. Christ's call to me is myself, the person I am, considered in all the different dimensions of human personhood. Whether I accept this invitation or reject it will be worked out through the medium of my life and the decisions that make up my life. The way I

live my life constitutes my faith-response to God. That is true of every person who has ever lived.

### *Conclusion*

What I have tried to do in this article is to explore some aspects of the linkage between sin, spirituality and the secular. I have argued that sin must in some way be the launching-pad for spirituality since Jesus assured us that he had come to call not the just but sinners. That means that the notion of sin carries overtones of hope in Christian theology. To acknowledge ourselves as sinners establishes our credentials to be called by Christ. I went on to look at spirituality in terms of growth out of being both a victim of sin and an agent of sin, noting the influence of one on the other. Understanding sin as humanly caused evil and so as a this-world, secular reality, I explored how this affected all the dimensions of our being a human person, highlighting how the interdependence dimensions in particular had far-reaching implications for our being victims and agents of sin as well as for our growth out of sin. I concluded from all this that the agenda for a spirituality of growth must be drawn from the 'secular' reality of sin, out of which Christ invites us to grow. Finally, I tried to show that the metaphor of 'growth out of sin' did not imply a pessimistic interpretation of humanity, as though human perfection lay in some paradise state lost to us in the dim and distant past and growth out of sin was simply a process of regaining this paradise. Such a view would be unacceptable on both Christological and evolutionary grounds.

Its essential link with sin and the secular, therefore, ensures that spirituality remains firmly based in the nitty-gritty realities of everyday human life. In fact, the basic thrust of this whole article is captured in the striking expression coined by Schillebeeckx in his recent book, *Church: the human story of God* (SCM, 1990): 'No salvation outside the world' (cf p 5).