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MORAL THEOLOGY

A Reader

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SIN AND SINFULNESS

— Hugh Connolly —

> We are separated from the mystery, the depth and the greatness of our existence. We hear the voice of that depth; but our ears are closed. We feel that something radical, total and unconditional is demanded of us; but we rebel against it, try to escape its urgency and will not accept its promise ... Sin in its most profound sense, sin as despair abounds among us. (Paul Tillich, *The Shaking of the Foundations*)

The idea that men and women are morally responsible outside of particular social practices and conventions of praise and blame requires at the very least a conception of someone to whom or something to which they are responsible. To the Judaeo-Christian mind the immediate tribunal before which the self is summoned has always been 'conscience upon which is engraved the law of God'. Norms of responsibility are not therefore to be to simply considered a matter of individual choice, or preference, or even social convention. Ultimately the individual is responsible for herself or himself and the demand for an authentic coherent ethical stance is thus fundamental to the moral life.[1]

Ethics in the Christian tradition presupposes therefore accountability, answerability and responsibility. These notions

are the means by which we also attribute culpability to persons. William Kneale has noted that moral reasoning 'began with an extended use of debt words' and that the language of debt also 'permeates religious discourse'.[2] Religious debate, in turn, and in particular Christian theological ethics, affirms that the coherence and integrity of life is fundamentally linked to what transcends individual and community life – namely God. This insight gives rise to an 'imperative of responsibility' which in some sense articulates the prophetic call to seek justice, love and mercy and walk humbly before God.[3]

Responsibility is therefore a core tenet of the Christian faith – responsibility to oneself, to others and to God. This 'expectation of response', as Niebuhr calls it, encapsulates the Christian imperative to turn away from attitudes and behaviour which demean and destroy the integrity of life and to move toward a moral stance which respects, enhances and promotes right relations. It follows then that failure to respond, failure to strive toward right relations, and failure to be fully responsible is the very essence of sin. This understanding underscores the inadequacy by itself of a 'debt-language' that places too much reliance on those models of law and obedience that tend to characterise and indeed caricature sin in a mechanical, individualistic and actualistic way.

Equally inadequate and unhelpful is the removal of debt language altogether or its replacement with a vocabulary and imagery of fault that relieves persons of all responsibility for their actions. Those psychological, sociological and anthropological approaches that advocate what might be called a 'hard determinism' may succeed in their own terms in lifting the burden of guilt from the shoulders of the sinner. They do this at the cost, though, of severely diluting our understanding of personal freedom and of rendering the ethical dimension well-nigh irrelevant. Wiping out guilt by wiping out the very identity

and self-understanding of the person is, by any standards, a rather crude approach. Besides, it would seem that even in terms of the therapeutic goal the strategy is not an entirely successful one.[4] There is a tension, a tensive quality in the concept of sin, which must be respected and retained if the term is not to be devalued and to lose all currency and meaning. The urge to counter a reductionist or deflated account of sin with an expansionist, inflated by ultimately trivialised understanding, is great but must be resisted. The answer must therefore be a more nuanced and synthetic approach.

That said, an important service has been rendered in disentangling, insofar as that is possible, the separate notions of psychological hurt and moral guilt. One can indeed resonate with Denis Potter's observation that all too often religion was 'the wound and not the bandage'.[5] There are 'guilt laden counterfeits of responsibility', human projections which often do 'colonise religious experience' and have the capacity to damage and distort one's image of God and of self. Theological ethics owes a real debt to the modern sciences for their work in exposing such counterfeits and in highlighting the dangers and deficiencies of a theology of sin which becomes too preoccupied with precise deterrents and precise merits. Sin and its remission can too easily be reduced to some manner of theological calculus. Misguided methods of evangelization and exhortation, which either wittingly or unwittingly inflate the understanding of guilt in order to manipulate it, are ultimately perverting the Gospel message of good news and at least to some extent are guilty of producing what Nietzsche called 'a slave morality'.[6]

While it is true that Christianity brings with it a perception of the human being as guilty in its doctrine of Original Sin, this teaching only has relevance in the context of Jesus' liberation of all humanity in his passion and death. Original Sin is therefore

essentially about the detection of and 'unmasking of a lie'. The lie in turn, as we have already suggested, is a distorted and flawed self-image which has become internalised and which orients us toward a 'dehumanising self-sufficiency and self-justification'.[7] A wholesome, synthetic account of original sin therefore, far from being at odds with balanced psychological and sociological insights, is in fact engaged in large measures in one and the same project – namely the unmasking of flawed images of God, of self and of the world in which we live. It has been a constant theme of Christian theology from the time of St Paul that divine grace enables us to avoid sin. This implies, however, an acknowledgement of the fact of human wrongdoing, infidelity, selfishness and so forth and of one's accountability for failure. Responsibility and sin are therefore corollaries of each other. In other words, 'to establish the possibility of sin is always simultaneously to confirm the potentialities of human agency and human nature and so, in the final analysis, sin is not an indictment of human nature but a vindication of it.[8] There is a paradox then, an 'inherent irony' in that the very theological concept which more than any other depicts the fragility of the human person and the fragmentary nature of our engagement with the moral life also celebrates the human capacity for change and for the good. This paradox at the heart of the doctrine of sin means that, despite having to grapple with the reality of failure, the teaching bears witness to a very positive underlying theological anthropology.

Viewed in this light it is not altogether surprising that the idea of sin has fallen on such difficult times in the last half-century or so. Modern western thought has tended to abandon the notion of the *Imago Dei* and with it the idea of the intrinsic worth and dignity of the self. Hans Jonas observes: 'the paradox of the modern condition is that this reduction of man's stature, the utter humbling of this metaphysical pride, goes hand in

hand with his promotion to quasi-God-like privilege and power'.[9] Whatever about the centrality or otherwise of this 'will to power', there are two very different and competing theological anthropologies or accounts of humanity at play here. The first one, which asserts the sinful nature of the human condition, seems on the face of it to be a gloomy assessment but is in fact the gateway to an exalted understanding of human persons as created in the image of the three-in-one God. Here, each person is viewed as a unique, distinct and unrepeatable person. Each human being has a personal, existential distinctiveness and because of their personal communion with God each partakes in Being, each is therefore more than their biological individuality.

Unlike the second anthropology, which presents the person as an 'individual', a segment or a sub-division of human nature as a whole, the Christian understanding of person is different in that it 'represents not the relationship of a part to the whole but the possibility of summing up the whole in a distinctiveness of relationship in an act of self-transcendence'.[10] In a remarkable way every man and woman encapsulates in his or her own existence the universality of human nature. And this existence is characterised by freedom and distinctiveness. Each human being is given the invitation and the offer of freedom in love and in personal communion. Each may accept or refuse the offer, which is essentially a choice between going along with the process of being or cutting oneself off from being together.

Evidently at the root of these differing anthropologies there are conflicting views of freedom. Modern western liberal thought has gradually moved away from the idea that freedom may be guided by truth about what is good. Some of the existential philosophers (for example John Paul Sartre) have for instance put forward an 'ethic of authenticity' where freedom is understood in a radical way, almost as a law unto itself. Sin,

in this philosophical outlook, insofar as it has any meaning, is about failure to break the shackles which hamper authenticity – natural law, religious belief and external value systems. To live authentically one must live radically, and if one lives virtuously one does so, in the words of Camus, only 'by caprice'.

> If there is nothing definitive in nature, no structure in its products, which responds to a purpose, then it is licit to do with it whatever one wants, without by this violating its integrity. For there is no integrity in a nature conceived exclusively in terms of natural science in a nature that is neither created nor creative. [11]

The productive and social changes of the last two centuries have vastly multiplied our choices, and with this has come the championing of the right to choose. Someone has described modernity as the transition from fate to choice. Freedom has been exalted as a core value. But freedom is nevertheless elusive and unsatisfying and is too often confused with independence. The result is the relentless pursuit of a phantom freedom that is in fact only a new form of enslavement.

Homo modernus, whether as a taxpayer, worker or consumer, is increasingly considered a mere digit, a unit of production, consumption or fiscal reckoning. Emptied of the respect, dignity and indeed of the love due to a person, the human being becomes increasingly viewed as a thing. Man turns into a grain of sand and human society becomes a desert. The relentless pursuit of freedom that severs the 'ties' of religion and off-loads the 'prejudices' of tradition and morality leads only to a mirage. Perhaps part of the wrath and bitterness that was unleashed in sometimes anarchic and violent anti-globalisation protests at the beginning of the third millennium

was due to this kind of growing disillusionment. There is an increasing realisation that grandiose promises of freedom have led not to real liberation but only to the dull conformity of fashion and to the influences of the utterly hollow and ephemeral. In the same way the irony of the Judaeo-Christian stance is that it is an ethic that at first glance appears constricting and even suffocating but which in fact holds out the promise of real freedom.

The key of course is in the acceptance of the human being as essentially relational. Viewed in this light, the ties that really bind us are not bonds of imprisonment at all but bonds of attachment of communion and of love. The freedom we enjoy is a 'created freedom', and therefore the fundamental choice is not really between dependence and independence: it is a decision between a living dependence, which is open to growth and development, and a dead dependence, which refuses to acknowledge our creature status and therefore cuts us off from the sources of life.

These competing versions of freedom were also to form the backdrop to the 1994 papal encyclical *Veritatis Splendor* and to the episode of the rich young man's encounter with Jesus (Mt 19:16-22) which inspired and informed the encyclical's reflections on this topic. Jesus' response to the young man's enquiry about what he must do to gain eternal life was prefaced by a reminder that human good or moral good finds its ultimate source in the absolute good – the 'one who is good'. The aspirations to freedom and to the good are but particular articulations of the desire for the infinite. In this way 'human freedom bursts open to dimensions for which only God is the answer because only the absolute Good satisfies the restless heart'.[12]

Evidently future receptivity to a doctrine or even a sense of sin are inextricably linked to humanity's willingness to remain open to the transcendent. Sin can only be truly understood in

terms of the living and personal bond between humanity and God, which is in turn the foundation of all human relationships. That is why 'the second commandment is like the first'. To love one's neighbour as oneself is, above all, to respect the freedom that he or she holds from God. As Paul explained in his image of the 'Body of Christ', each member of the living organism develops freely so long as it is intimately joined to the rest of the body. So the foundation for the injunction to love one's neighbour as oneself is the intimate relationship and relatedness of human beings. I love you not because you are giving me this or that, but because in a certain sense I am you and you are I in communion with our common source which is the triune God. This is the idea that is the common focus, the synthesis and the regulating centre of all our individual freedoms.[13]

If such are the philosophical and theological underpinnings of the Judaeo-Christian account of sin it should also be acknowledged that it has been the genius of the same tradition to propose side by side with the formal doctrine of repentance a tradition of sacrament, ritual and religious practice. This has provided another means by which to understand and to concretely experience the mystery of sin and conversion. Recourse is made here above all to the language of symbol, metaphor and bodily enactment (which is the language of Scripture after all) in its attempt to embrace in a holistic and accessible way the human experience of wrongdoing, repentance and reorientation. In more recent times this kind of indirect language has attracted the attention of philosophers such as Paul Ricoeur and Réné Girard who have shown how symbolic and mimetic communication can speak beyond logic to the human heart. In particular they have drawn attention to what Ricoeur calls the 'double intentionality' of metaphor, that is, the literal and latent layers of meaning.

Symbols and metaphors give rise to a 'spontaneous hermeneutics', a struggle toward newer and fuller levels of meaning. This insight has led to several attempts in recent years to revitalise and re-energise the theological language of sin by re-examining the underpinning imagery. More particularly, these theological initiatives have sought to shift the emphasis away from juridical/criminal models which tend to reinforce a highly individualistic anthropology toward more therapeutic and communitarian paradigms which successfully evoke the universal struggle with the crippling and disintegrating power of sin.[14] These approaches are at once more coherent with the wider scope of biblical wisdom and more receptive also to the interdisciplinary, synthetic approaches that are found in recent theological debate and research. But they are only useful insofar as they are tolerant of the actual blend of metaphor and imagery, which emerges from the scriptural and doctrinal tradition. There is no one paradigm or metaphor that holds the definitive key to the understanding of sin. Each must dialogue, modify and, as Ricoeur puts it, 'struggle' with the others. Any attempt to underplay the 'juridical' model for instance would be just as misconceived and misguided as the well-documented tendency to overlay what it formerly was.

Among these theological voices the contribution of those writing from the political, ecological, liberationist and feminist perspectives have also been very much to the fore. While feminist theologians have tended to concentrate less on the theme of sin and more on the patriarchal identification of women with sin, their work has on occasions lucidly demonstrated how prone our religious imagery and theological paradigms are to distortion and bias. Such bias they contend may also express itself in ethical theory and in the basic understanding of the moral life. Spiritual and moral machismo, for instance, may be found in inordinate preoccupation with

victory over individual sins to the neglect of responsibility for nourishing and nurturing relationships.[15] Some critiques go much further and argue that there is a tendency within traditional conceptions of morality to legitimate so-called 'feminine virtues' thereby actually perpetuating injustice and oppression. Whatever the validity of these claims, there is no doubt that feminist thinkers have done a great service in highlighting the 'sin' of sexism. The blatant dishonesty at the root of a 'belief that gender is the primary determinant of human characteristics, traits, abilities and talents and that sexual differences produce an inherent superiority of a particular sex'[16] has been exposed for once and for all.

This theological critique also raises questions about the accuracy of *hubris* as a type for universal sin since this very concept 'mirrors chiefly the experience of men' who aspire to positions of power and influence.[17] But perhaps this criticism implies a too facile identification between *hubris* and the traditional Judaeo-Christian conception of sin. The latter, as we have tried to point out, was more concerned with an integral account of human sinfulness, of which *hubris* was but one expression. To be sure, the classical theological conceptualisation of sin has its limitations. Nevertheless the underlying understanding of sin as a negation of who one truly is called to be rendered this theology at least potentially open and receptive to new experiences of sin such as those evoked today by those who reflect feminist, ecological and social concerns. What is more, there would seem to be some validity in the arguments of those who suggest that the notion that 'men sin through pride and women through weakness' is itself a stereotype which has become a little dated at the beginning of the third millennium.[18]

Even so, patriarchal structures and sexist attitudes are still a reality in society generally and in Christian churches and communities more particularly. Like liberation theologians,

feminists have drawn inspiration from the central prophetic tradition of Judaeo-Christian ethics which emphasised God's defence of the oppressed, as well as the need to criticise oppressive power structures in society and the importance of recognising ideological elements in religious belief. They have also critiqued an overly spiritualised account of original sin that fails to respect the 'earthedness' and bodiliness of human life. Reuther argues:

> The Big Lie tells us that we are strangers and sojourners on this planet, that our flesh, our blood, our instincts for survival are our enemies. We have fallen to this earth and into this clay through accident or sin. We must spend our lives suppressing our hungers and thirsts and shunning our fellow beings so that we can dematerialise and fly away to the stars.[19]

It is one thing to acknowledge with the author of the Letter to the Hebrews that 'we have here no abiding city'; it is quite another to use this as an excuse for avoiding the individual and societal responsibilities which are an essential part of our human calling.

But feminists such as Reuther do see within the tradition seeds of a new way of imaging God, sin, conversion and so forth. They point to the maternal love and compassion of Yahweh, the presence of Wisdom conceived of as a feminine reality, and the as-yet underdeveloped female imagery associated with the work of the Holy Spirit. Although there is a great variety and divergence of opinion and of intensity among feminist reflections on sin, one senses here a thrust toward a more fully human and inclusive understanding of fault and finitude. Construed in this way the universal sinful tendency 'consists essentially in denying the co-humanity of the others one

experiences'.[20] Such reflections have made an invaluable contribution to unmasking the dehumanising side of sin. In doing so they are broadly at one with theologians who argue that sin is essentially about refusing the invitation to play our part in the human family's journey towards becoming more fully human.[21] The fact that Christian theology, and in particular its reflection on sin and evil, has until very recently been constructed predominantly by men, to the near exclusion of the experience and insights of women, inevitably means that there is essential corrective work to be done. Only thus can theology itself hope to be freed from the dehumanising effects of sin.

At the same time, a new awareness of the fragility and delicate ecological balance of the environment has led to increased reflection on the human duty of stewardship for all creation and what this means in terms of concrete individual and collective moral responsibility. Here there are really parallels with the classical Christian view of justice as right relationships. Sally McFague explains: 'If the most basic meaning of justice is fairness then from an ecological point of view justice means sharing the limited resource of our common space.'[22] Ecological sin is quite simply then refusing or neglecting to share these resource with those who are most in need of them. It is also a failure to recognise the inherent goodness of the natural world. That goodness is a deeply rooted conviction throughout Scripture. After each of Yahweh's acts of creation the creation accounts recall that 'he found it very good' (Gen 1:31). Similarly the Psalms proclaim that 'the earth is the Lord's and all that is in it; the world and those who live in it, for he has founded it on the seas, and established it on the rivers (Ps 24:1-2).

There is a pervasive recognition here that the world is not ours and that human beings are part of the created world. Made in the image of likeness of God, human beings are to reflect God to the rest of creation, to look after and care for the world and its

natural resources. There is the implication here of a caretaking role, a duty of stewardship, which is part of a grace-filled respect for the integrity of all creation. Such an attitude is directly opposed to the purely utilitarian stance, which considers natural resources to be expendable and disposable commodities. It is also a relational attitude, an attitude that calls for a rediscovery of our connectedness to and dependence on the earth. This sense of justice toward all creation had once found expression in the ancient Jewish tradition of the Sabbath law and the Jubilee Year. There was a sense of allowing the earth to replenish its resources and restore its energies during a fallow period. For theologians like McFague, Dorr, McDonagh and others, traditions like these bespeak a practical and ethical wisdom, which understands that the relationship between the earth and human beings, like the relationship between persons, must be one of mutual giving and receiving.

Failure to respect this mutuality and reciprocity is a failure to act honestly and is therefore sinful. 'A land ethic that aims to preserve the integrity, stability and beauty of the biotic community is an example of living appropriately on the land and refusing to live the lie that we are the conquerors, the possessors and the masters of the earth.'[23] One can speak meaningfully therefore of ecological sin and of the need to encourage awareness of sustainability issues. *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* argues for a greater realisation of 'the limits of available resources and of the need to respect the integrity and cycles of nature', as well as the 'mutual connection in an ordered system, which is precisely the cosmos'.

Reverence for the earth is an ethical and religious imperative that touches our self-understanding in a profound way and which asks searching moral questions of our individual and collective lifestyles. Insofar as we refuse to recognise these questions or reject their import or fail to answer them in an

adequate way, we also disregard the perennial summons to 'act justly, love tenderly and walk humbly with our God'. This rejection is what we have learned to call sin.

The fields of political theology and liberation theology are the locus of some other recent attempts to contextualise the concept of sin. As with the ecological and the feminist perspectives, one cannot do justice to the breadth of industry and scholarship being undertaken in this field in a brief *tour d'horizon* such as this. In large measures the preoccupations of these theologies such as those of Johann Baptist Metz and Dorothee Sölle have sought to develop theological reflection on sin and guilt in the context of contemporary social relationships in the modern world. Their approach sets out specifically to challenge and critique the individual bias, which is a part of modern western culture. Metz's theology was influenced by his traumatic experiences of the Second World War. He and Sölle raised the question of the suffering of innocent victims and of the large groups of people who are denied the opportunity of becoming 'subjects' due to political and social repression. According to them, there is a need for people to liberate themselves from the structures that impede their integral growth and development. What is required is a collective conversion, an 'anthropological revolution' where people emancipate themselves from the influences of 'privatism' and from the sinful tendencies of consumption and domination. This can only be achieved when collectively we are prepared to leave behind the competitiveness and egotism of our 'success ethic' and to realise the full implications of our status as essentially social beings. According to this view we must commit to an acceptance of responsibility for ourselves, for the human family and for the world.

> When Christianity takes its place in the movement towards the development of world-wide

> community it will be able to express, in and for that great community, its understanding of a solidarity that is free from violence and hatred.[24]

It is not hard to see how so-called political theology became the forerunner of so many contextualised theologies in the latter half of the twentieth century that were to lay great emphasis on the 'primacy of praxis' and the search for universal justice. That said, despite the radical tone of this approach there is also recognition here of what Metz calls the 'eschatological proviso'. This is an acknowledgement that God's promise of salvation will never be fully realised within history and that only the 'God of the living and the dead' ultimately can fulfil the promise of history.

Western political theologies were to provide much inspiration for liberation theology, especially in their critique of a 'privatised ethic' that only camouflaged the true causes of sin. Many of the liberation theologians went for a distinction between social sin and individual sin which had social repercussions. They tended to do this by pointing to the differences between sin understood as 'communal', that is pertaining to the interpersonal dimension of primary relationships, and as 'societal' sin, which concerns the more complex, impersonal and structural secondary relationship. The human being was therefore at the nexus of a set of two-way mutually impacting relationships, each of which was vulnerable to the damaging and destructive effects of sin.

Advances in human, political and economic science also provided the opportunity for a penetrating analysis of each of these relationships, thus bringing them into the theological foreground. In this way society's mechanisms were laid bare with the birth of the social sciences. They teach us that poverty, hunger, ignorance and misery don't just happen but are the demonstrable results of socio-economic and political

relationships.[25] And so liberation theologies argued for a social prismatic in all theological accounts of sin that would serve as a necessary antidote and corrective to a too-privatised moral climate and culture. They placed the poor at the centre, as those who most embodied the hope for change and liberation. They also reworked the great biblical motifs exemplified by the Exodus event as well as the New Testament emphasis on Jesus' compassion toward the poor. This they saw as only underscoring the importance of liberation in Christian life. In other words, liberations had to be seen in concrete, practical and tangible, as well as spiritual, ways.

The sheer multiplicity of views within the liberation perspective makes any general comment on their theology of sin quite difficult. At one level it is but a reflection of the broad post-conciliar trends towards a renewed appreciation of the dignity of the human person and of the demands of social justice and is therefore advocating a more thorough and integral understanding of sin in all its dimensions. At another level some of its more radical exponents have been accused of substituting political salvation in history for external salvation and of underplaying 'the full ambit of sin whose first effect is to introduce disorder into the relationship between God and man and cannot be restricted to "social sin"'.[26] In any event, liberation theology has unquestionably been instrumental in the repositioning of theological emphases from the universal to the particular, the privileged to the deprived and the systematic to the narrative and performative.[27] It has drawn much-needed attention to the disastrous human suffering caused by unjust institutions and structures, and has urged humanity, and especially faith communities, to take a responsible rule in fighting injustice and building solidarity. Perhaps though it is here that the advocates of social sin, understood in the 'hard' sense, are on their weakest ground. If one is really to urge

responsibility in social justice one must be prepared first to acknowledge the facts of responsibility and accountability as human possibilities and realities, otherwise the same determinisms which explain why sin will just as surely erode the very grounds for social action and responsibility.

If there is a common strand or unifying theme in the so-called contextualised theologies it is their insistence on sin as opposition to Jesus' message, where kingdom is no mere extension of intrinsic human possibilities but a radical restructuring of inter-human relationships grounded in justice. What is more, this justice is not simply about corrective action or redress for wrongs that have been done; instead it is truly restorative and re-creative. Sin is understood as nothing less than the rejection of God's plan for filial and fraternal relationships, while justice on the other hand 'concretises the praxis of love and so realises the Kingdom'.[28]

In this optic there is room for much common ground between classical and contemporary theology because each in its own way presents sin as the human failure, whether individual or collective, to be what one is called to be and to realise the fullness of one's individual potentialities. A more dynamic understanding of creation and of the human person can thus allow the classical and the contemporary views to speak meaningfully to each other.

It is here perhaps that the personalist and process perspectives are at their most valuable. While Boethius' definition of the human being as 'an individual substance of a rational nature' has proved a timeless insight and has become the bedrock of much ethical reflection and rights language and legislation, it does not capture in itself the fullness of the Judaeo-Christian concept of the person. In particular it fails to do justice to the 'dynamic nature of human existence, with its movement toward the fulfiling of aims or goals'.[29]

One thinks here of Amos' concept of justice as represented

by the river gently growing deeper and flowing toward the sea, of the case of an incremental line of advance and progression throughout the moral life. Perhaps there is a sense too in which the moral life may be seen as a task of becoming human, a task in which one is called to co-create with God. One is invited also to accept responsibility for one's life, and to gradually realise agapeic love both in one's own person and in communion with others. Understood in this light, sin is, above all, the failure to incarnate love and to cooperate with God in a great act of giving birth to a new *koinonia*. The recreative, regenerative process takes place first and foremost in the human heart, and all that is required is the cooperation of human free will – the willingness to surrender one's aspirations to self-sufficiency and to accept God's love and the implications of that love in outreach to others.

This dynamic and synthetic view of creation and of human person sees the *Imago Dei* as at once gift and task. Each human being has been created in the image and likeness of the triune God and is therefore conferred with an undeniable dignity, but each is also called to make real that 'communion of love' which is the hallmark of the same triune God in his or her own life. This is the awesome but also potentially tragic adventure of human nature. Sin therefore represents one possible expression of that freedom which is ultimately 'a refusal, whether small or great, of human destiny in its noblest reach'.[30]

Columbanus, the great Irish pilgrim monk, and author of a penitential handbook, once suggested in one of his sermons that each human being may ultimately determine the 'picture' that is to be painted in and through their lives. 'Let us not be the painters of another's image ... for righteousness and righteousness ... are opposed to one another. Then lest perhaps we should import into ourselves despotic images let Christ paint his image in us.'[31] According to this view the moral life works gradually either to confirm the imprint of the *Imago Dei* upon one's entire being or

else to slowly replace it with the image of the tyrant – to whom or to which one has become enslaved.

Even in these earliest theological reflections there was evidence of a synthetic, integral and holistic approach. There was also keen awareness of the continuous as well as the immediate aspects of moral behaviour. Indeed, it has also been the tenor of the vast learning and practical wisdom of the Christian tradition to regard both the immediate and continuous dimensions as co-essential aspects of the moral life. In other words, one has to allow each of these dimensions to co-exist in creative and complementary tension.

Recent theology has therefore sought to root its reflections on sin in a more adequate synthetic and integral understanding of the human person. It has rediscovered the dramatic and incredible assertion at the heart of Matthew's account of the final judgment that 'as often as you did this to one of the least of these my brothers and sisters you did it also to me!' (Mt 25:31-46). To love others is therefore to love God, and conversely to fail others is to fail God. Sin is therefore not only a moral fault but also a religious failure. Recovery from sin challenges us in turn to a renewal of faith, to a renewed acceptance of the fact that the path away from sin and toward healing and wholeness cannot be travelled alone. Growth out of sin is but another way of describing our own personal part in the ongoing story of humankind as it continues its struggle toward the realisation of the kingdom of God.[32] It is here too that the lament for sin and the sadness of the contrite heart become a joyful sorrow. For in truth we are only able to mourn and lament when we really appreciate what we have lost. A genuine grasp of the 'reality of sin' becomes therefore the first moment of our encounter with God. This is the moment when we truly discover the awesome extent of His love.

Notes

1 W. Schweiker, *Responsibility and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge: University Press, 1995), 73f.

2 W. Kneale, 'The Responsibility of Criminals', in James Rachels (ed.) *Moral Problems: A Collection of Philosophical Essays* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 172, cited in Schweiker, op. cit. p. 75.

3 Schweiker, op. cit. p. 133.

4 Karl Menninger's *Whatever became of Sin?* remains a remarkable insight and stimulating essay on the importance of sin beyond the strictly religious and theological worlds. See Menninger, K., *Whatever Became of Sin?* (New York: Hawthorn, 1973).

5 See D. Potter, *Seeing the Blossom* (Faber 1994), 5, cited in Phillips, D., 'Exposing the Wound: A Christian Reflection on Guilt' *Downside Review*, 1999, 408.

6 F. Nietzche, *On the Genealogy of Morals* (Trans. W. Kaufmann), (New York: Vintage, 1989).

7 See K.T. Kelly, *New Directions in Moral Theology* (London/NY: Chapman, 1992), 120f.

8 J. McKenna, 'The Possibility of Social Sin', *Irish Theological Quarterly* (60), 1994.

9 H. Jonas, 'Contemporary Problems in Ethics from a Jewish Perspective' in *Philosophical Essays* (Prentice Hall, 1972), 172, cited in Schweiker, op. cit. p. 73.

10 C. Yannaras, *The Freedom of Morality* (New York: St Vladimir's Press, 1996), 21f.

11 H. Jonas, 'Dalla fede antica all uomo tecnologico', *Il Molino* (Bologna, 1991) 263, cited in May, W.E. 'Veritatas Splendor: An Overview' Communio, 1994, 21.

12 W.E. May, op. cit. p. 23.

13 G. Thibon et al., *Christianisme et Liberté*, (Paris: Arthéme Fayard, 1952), 7ff.

14 See, for instance, P.T McCormick, *Sin as Addiction* (New York: Paulist Press, 1989); my own *The Irish Penitentials* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1995); K. O'Kelly, *The Changing Paradigms of Sin* (New Blackfriars, November 1989) and K. Cronin, 'Illness, Sin and Metaphor', *Irish Theological Quarterly*, 61 (1995).

15 See C. Gilligan, *In a Different Voice* (Harvard: University Press, 1983), 19f.

16 R.E. Coll, *Christianity and Feminism in Conversation* (Connecticut Twenty Third Publications, 1994), p. 112.

17 L. Scherzberg, *Sünde und Gnade in der Feministischen Theologie* (Mainz, 1990); see also Van Heijst, A., 'Sin as the Disruption of Relationship' in F. Vosman and K.W. Merks (eds) *Aiming at Happiness* (Kampen, 1996), p. 141.

18 See Denise L. Carmody, *Christian Feminist Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), p. 113.
19 R. Reuther, *Sexism and God-Talk* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1983).
20 L.S. Cahill, *Sex, Gender and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 118.
21 See, for example, C.T. Daly, *Creation and Redemption* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1988).
22 S. McFague, *The Body of God* (London: SCM, 1993), p. 116. NB: I have relied here extensively on McFague's excellent presentation and analysis of ecological sin.
23 McFague, op. cit.; see also Leopold, A., *A Sand County Almanac* (Oxford University Press, 1949), pp. 224–5.
24 J.B. Metz, *Faith in History and Society* (New York: Seabury, 1980).
25 A. Moser, 'Sin as Negation of the Kingdom', *Theology Digest* 30:1, Spring (1982), p. 29.
26 Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Libertatis Nuntius* (London: Catholic Truth Society, 1984), p. 14.
27 See E. McDonagh, 'An Irish Theology and the Influence of Particulars' in *Irish Challenges to Theology* (Dublin: Dominican Publications, 1986), pp. 102–29.
28 Moser, op. cit. p. 28.
29 N. Pittenger, *Cosmic Love and Human Wrong* (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), p. 13: an excellent essay on the implications of process thinking for the doctrine of sin.
30 Pittenger, op. cit. p. 44.
31 *Sermon*, XI.
32 See K.T. Kelly, 'Saints or Sinners? Towards a Spirituality of Growth Out of Sin', in *From a Parish Base* (London DLT, 1999), p. 166.