

Some Comments on the Doctrine of Sin

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THE PURPOSE of this paper is to suggest the importance of more careful attention to the doctrine of sin, not only by technical students in the field of theology, but by ministers and religious technicians—particularly of the more liberal schools of thought.

The doctrine of sin has been neglected in much theological discussion of relatively recent years. This is understandable. The traditional doctrine of total depravity has lost its meaning for many persons; on the contrary, the teaching of the worth and dignity of the individual has been stressed. Thus, there has been a shift of emphasis from the sinfulness of man to the goodness of man. The evolutionary hypothesis has been interpreted as a basis for hope in the thinking of many, so that sin has seemed to some not a matter for major concern, but merely something to be outgrown by waiting for the sure workings of evolution. Thus, many a modern Christian has been lulled into a sense of relative complacency and satisfaction with the optimistic doctrines that God is kindly, that man is essentially rational and upright (although perhaps a little immature at times), and that somehow the evolutionary process guarantees inevitable progress. These have been pleasant doctrines to hear.

However, the facts of our world and experience do not permit us to rest content with a doctrine which is all sweetness and light. This is true in the realm of religion. There are evils and potential evils to be recognized and realistically faced in our quest for the

values of religion. Religion is in part a quest for hope, but in the long run that hope can be found only in terms of a realistic interpretation of the world and of man which comes to grips with factors within man and his environment which operate against the religious life. This leads directly to the problem of sin.

This is a matter of concern not only for the technical theologian, but for the minister, the religious technician, and the layman.

Any significant approach to the religious life must involve an awareness of the pitfalls along the way, and the obstacles to be overcome. There is need therefore for a credible doctrine of sin. One task of the contemporary church is to make explicit such a credible doctrine of sin.

I

Sin refers to that which hinders or impedes the religious life. It is the barrier between man and his attainment of the benefits of religion. As has been frequently pointed out, sin is a distinctively religious term, belonging to the vocabulary of religion. As such, it is to be distinguished from crime, which refers to offense against civil law, and from vice which refers to offense against socially approved standards of behaviour. Sin is offense against those laws in terms of which religious values are achieved. It means missing the mark of those values which are found in and through religious practice.

At the heart of the religious life is man's awareness of God, together with his devotion to God. It is in seeing his life in relationship to the dominant reality which he calls God, that man finds the sense of peace and importance

and hope which is the fruit of religion. Religion as a resource, and religion as a responsibility is rooted in a larger loyalty and a more comprehensive reality than that suggested by any isolated event or experience. The foundation of religion is awareness of, devotion and submission to, and cooperation with an enduring reality greater than self.

This God-Man relationship suggests the fundamental nature of sin. Those inclinations, attitudes or actions are to be regarded as sinful which tend to exclude God from the individual's consideration, or permit something to usurp the place of God in life, or isolate the individual from the trends, processes, and resources which are related to God. Insofar as we arrive at a more precise conception of God, we may read more definite content into these general ideas. However, under any conception of God the basis of sin is the isolation of the individual from that which is ultimate or most enduring in the structure of reality, and which thus is the final ground of hope.

We are not here concerned with the question as to a possible distinction between conscious and unconscious sin, or between sin for which an individual is responsible and sin for which he is not. Attention needs to be focused on the actual results in the religious life of given inclinations, attitudes and actions. The final test of sin is in the results in the quest for religious values. In that quest, the finding of God as the controlling reality of our universe, and a devoted cooperation with God, is essential. Sin is the barrier between God and man.

It is the fundamental importance of this God-Man relationship which accounts for the fact that traditional theology has stressed the danger of two sins above all others — pride and sensuality. Pride suggests the loss of perspective. It involves orienting life around self to the exclusion of God. Sensuality involves immersion in tran-

sient and at best partial goods with the attendant loss of enduring and greater goods. Innumerable treatises have been written on various aspects of pride as sin, and sensuality as sin. The heart of the matter however is this — pride and sensuality are among the basic sins in that they involve supreme devotion to something other than God or less than God. Ultimate trust is placed in that which is not ultimate.

To many persons the term sin suggests flagrant evils which all the world would recognize as being evil. As a matter of fact, we should probably be nearer the truth if we were to pursue the idea that the most pernicious sins are in relationship to inclinations, attitudes, and actions which often seem relatively harmless, which are condoned by groups in which the individual moves, and which are conducive to a sense of complacency. To be sure, the flagrant evils are real and destructive; but the things which do the most to prevent or make difficult the religious life, are oftentimes exceedingly subtle. It is precisely for this reason that the church needs to go further in making explicit the nature of that which thwarts the growth of the religious life.

Much traditional Christian thought has been characterized by an austerity born of the conviction that man by nature is sinful. He is bowed down with the burden of inherited sin. He is under condemnation not only for an accumulation of sinful deeds, but for a depraved nature. Over against him is God, the Judge.

Theologies have differed somewhat on the question of the degree of man's depravity, and the degree of his inability to do good; but the doctrine of original sin has stressed the idea that man by nature is sinful and inclined to evil. Salvation, then, consists of the appropriation of divine provisions whereby original sin may be eradicated, and forgiveness achieved for actual sins along the way.

In more recent times many persons have discarded the doctrine of original sin on the basis that it belongs to a pattern of theological thought which is no longer tenable. That many interpretations of the doctrine cannot bear careful scrutiny in the light of contemporary knowledge and experience is true. On the other hand, any theology is unrealistic which fails to recognize that man by virtue of being man possesses within himself interests and impulses of tremendous power which are fundamental in his makeup, but which under given circumstances may create problems of the first order in the living of the religious life.

In the Introduction to his *Selected Papers*, Bertrand Russell writes of the disillusionment which was his during and after World War I. He writes:

It became obvious that I had lived in a fool's paradise. Human nature, even among those who had thought themselves civilized, had dark depths that I had not suspected.

Traditional theology has not hesitated to point to the "dark depths" of human nature. Contemporary theology is in a position not only to point to them, but to understand them better, and perhaps to a degree show the way to dealing with them. There is this enduring truth in the traditional doctrine, inadequately as it was oftentimes interpreted — man is a problem to himself as he ventures out on the religious quest. There are "given" elements in his makeup, sometimes seemingly contradictory, with which he must contend as well as use.

The fundamental desires for security, new experience, response, recognition and power are recognized aspects of human nature. Man is motivated by these and related desires whether he wills it or not. He may seek to run away from one or more of these desires, but almost inevitably the desire will reappear in some more acceptable and perhaps disguised form. Man cannot escape from himself.

Many of man's noblest achievements and greatest satisfactions are associated

with the above-named desires and the quest for their fulfillment. On the other hand, some of the greatest human tragedies are associated with these same desires. Seeing the tragedy, traditional theology has too often damned human nature as being evil, overlooking the quite obvious fact that the impulses which sometimes lead to man's downfall are likewise required for his preservation and development. The will-to-live and the will-to-power are tremendous drives in the human makeup. In terms of them some individuals have risen to heights of greatness and service, and in terms of them destructive competition has emerged leading to untold suffering. Instead of damning human nature as utterly depraved, or lauding it as perfect, we ought to regard it as potential. Man is a creature in process. The problem of salvation, then, is not absolute transformation of human nature; rather it involves the establishment of objectives, goals, and techniques for control and direction of energy and emotion.

A problem with special implications for the religious quest is created in that the basic desires of many may so easily be given a strictly individualistic turn. That is, he may think of his goods as isolated from the goods of his fellow-men or some other frame of reference more inclusive than himself. The satisfaction of the will-for-recognition may be regarded as an end in itself, and that end may be sought without reference to the needs and interests of others. A potential danger in the basic interests of mankind is that they may lead to the ingrown life, which is precisely the thing which religion seeks to avoid.

The "given" elements in man are not confined to his biological inheritance. Man is a social creature; his life is bound up with the lives of his fellow-men. On that basis he partakes of the group life and the group life becomes a part of him. It is impossible to draw a sharp line of distinction between the individual and his group.

So it is that man is conditioned by the group — for better and for worse. Where there is injustice, where there is error, where there is evil within the group, man almost inevitably is affected by it and participates in it. Where there are attitudes and actions which run counter to the religious life, individual man cannot easily remain untouched. Thus, there are tremendous limiting factors within the makeup and experience of man.

The traditional doctrine of original sin insisted that sin is universal and inevitable. Interestingly enough, most theologies which have upheld that doctrine have likewise said that man is to be held responsible for this sin, even though it be inevitable. Perhaps a more realistic approach would be to say that there are limiting factors within the makeup of man, but instead of being held responsible for them, man has the problem of handling them in as constructive a way as possible.

That there are limitations upon man's capacity to do what is good, or in the interests of religious values is a point for serious reflection. It was Paul who said, "I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate." (Romans 7:15). To exhort, then, is not enough. Conditions must be set in terms of which growth is most likely to take place. And this must be done in the recognition that the values of religion are not always easily found, or by the simple expedient of wishing for them. By virtue of his own nature, biological and social, man is a problem to himself.

III

It is generally recognized that effective religion involves beliefs (theology) and practice (rites or techniques). When the religious life of an individual breaks down it is usually at one point or the other. Insofar as religion is to function effectively, there must be a foundation of belief and practice.

This helps us as we endeavor to understand what the major obstacles to

religious living may be. It likewise helps us to understand where to begin in helping an individual establish a working religion.

What, then, are some of the major sins of modern man? What are the points in his thinking and acting which present barriers to the achievement of the values of religion? Following are several suggestions. This list is suggested not in the thought that it is all-inclusive. Rather, it indicates a few of the areas in which individuals are likely to become "lost" in their religious quest.

A. Inadequate Belief

It has been said that there lives more faith in honest doubt than in half creeds. That is perhaps true, insofar as the doubt is a step in moving toward some more adequate statement of truth. However when doubt is the final and dominant attitude of an individual, religion has little chance with him. The religious life requires affirmative belief.

Thus cynicism, in the sense of unwillingness to believe in the integrity of man or phases of his environment must be regarded as sinful. Both the cynical attitude toward life and the essentially pessimistic philosophy are to be regarded as standing in opposition to the life of religion.

This, however, does not imply that an unchecked optimism is to be encouraged. On the contrary, inadequate belief includes beliefs or concepts which cannot stand before the test of investigation or experience. A belief may be ever so pleasing, but unless it can stand before stubborn facts, it can be of little religious value. It may lead to a serious inner conflict when these stubborn facts are encountered. Thus, a very real sin — although it is seldom recognized as being such — is the tendency toward wishful thinking in religion without the discipline of empirical testing.

Again, religious living is sometimes hindered by an individual's failure to

grow in his theological thinking at the same time that his concepts are being re-interpreted in other cases. It is obvious that one's religious ideas must be consistent with his ideas in other areas of experience if they are to prove effective in the long run. To neglect consideration of one's basic religious concepts, or to insist on holding to childhood views, while enlarging or reinterpreting basic concepts in other areas of life, is to create a most difficult barrier for religion.

B. Failure to Cultivate Meaningful Religious Techniques

There are sins of omission as well as sins of commission. The failure to cultivate meaningful religious techniques is one of the most widespread sins of omission. To believe in God in a general sort of way and to be ethically respectable may be the essence of religion for multitudes of people — but the deeper resources of religion are not tapped on that basis alone. The discipline of overt behaviours, religiously interpreted, is required. Some would call these "means of grace."

Worship is generally regarded as one of the basic religious techniques. Its neglect in many circles involves a loss of religious vitality which cannot be measured. The spiritual life is nurtured through the wholesome expression of praise, confession, affirmation, and dedication in response to the recognition of God.

A related obstacle to a meaningful religious life is the employment of techniques which are inconsistent with beliefs held by the individual. In the main, techniques need to be evaluated on a pragmatic basis; those are to be preferred which produce the desired results. However, wherever a technique or rite is quite incompatible with the basic ideas held, we may be reasonably certain that it will not only fail to accomplish its purpose, it may create conflicts in the life of the individual. This suggests the need for a revision of rit-

ual from time to time in the interests of intellectual integrity.

C. Self-Centeredness

As indicated earlier, Christian theology has long recognized the danger of utter self-centeredness in the religious life. It is in devotion to the larger and more inclusive loyalty that man finds the distinctive values of religion. It is on the basis of the more inclusive pattern that the individual may reinterpret the unsatisfactory but uncontrollable situation.

The forms and expressions of self-centeredness are many. Some of the most pernicious from the point of view of religion are seldom regarded as sinful. On the contrary, sometimes they are encouraged in the name of religion, to the loss of that stability and hope which is most to be desired.

Greed which is indifferent to the welfare of others often ranks high on the list of traits of the self-centered person. Self-pity with attendant brooding over personal problems and magnification of personal difficulties is a major barrier in making wholesome religious adjustments to difficult situations. Morbid regret, permitting the sorrows and misfortunes of yesterday to take a disproportionate place in the thinking of today, is another obstacle to be avoided. Some forms of pride are among the major manifestations of the self-centeredness to be avoided for the sake of religion. The pride which assumes self-sufficiency; the pride of self-satisfaction; the pride which craves undue recognition and attention — all these make for an orientation of life about the self which is a barrier to an appreciation of the not-self, particularly needed in situations where personal values are threatened or lost.

D. Unwholesome Attitudes Toward Persons

Here we have a classification of sinful attitudes which might be included under the heading of self-centeredness; however, it is of such importance that

it may be set apart for the sake of emphasis.

Attitudes which isolate man from man frequently tend to isolate man from God. The individual who retreats within himself by building mental walls between himself and his fellowmen will very likely find it difficult to achieve a sense of oneness with God. This is particularly true to the extent that God is regarded as immanent in the world.

For this reason, hatred, ill-will, jealousy, blind prejudice, and vindictiveness are to be considered obstacles to the religious life in most instances. Insofar as these attitudes involve inhumanity to man, the problem is intensified. Likewise, the refusal to recognize merit in other persons, or to endeavor to see situations from the point of view of another is essentially sinful. The religious approach to many situations involves looking at given situations from the standpoint of another.

A major road to religious salvation is the road of sympathy — identification with and feeling with some Real Other. Insofar as one fails to cultivate the capacity for sympathy on the human level, he will likely find it difficult to cultivate it in other areas.

E. Over-Absorption in the Physical: Material and Immediate

The intemperance which is expressed in over-absorption in the physical and material is one of the major sins. It works against the religious life in that it is likely to lead eventually toward cynical or pessimistic views of life; there is a limit to the satisfaction which can be found on the physical and material level. Again, to place one's ultimate trust in the physical and material involves a false sense of security. The physical and material are subject to change and disintegration to a degree which makes them an uncertain foundation on which to build. If an individual's life has been built around the quest for material and physical values to the near-exclusion of all other values, he has little basis for confidence and hope in the presence of life's most

difficult problems and losses. Over-absorption in the physical and material involves the further difficulty in that it automatically tends to minimize one's appreciation of relatively intangible values, in which the divine life often comes to concentrated expression.

Over-attention to or over-absorption in immediate situations represents a similar although somewhat different type of obstacle to the achievement of religious values. To focus attention exclusively upon the immediate situation, without reference to the situation's larger setting, is to be subject to changing fortune to an undesirable degree. Furthermore, it makes the "larger outlook" exceedingly difficult. The principle of alternation, which suggests a movement back and forth between the part and the whole, work and worship, the transient and the enduring, is basic in the cultivation of the religious life.

The above list of sinful attitudes and activities is of course very general. It would be applicable in almost all theologies and philosophies of religion. Insofar as the religious technician is dealing with a specific group of persons in terms of rather carefully defined theories of religion, God and Man, he will perhaps define sin more specifically.

In the field of health, preventive medicine is coming to play an increasingly important role. More and more we see a recognition of the need for health education, together with the building up of resistances to various types of possible infection.

Religion, too, has its preventive phase. It must help individuals build resistance against infections of the spirit and morale. This can be done insofar as there is a recognition of those inclinations, attitudes, and actions which hinder or prevent the living of the religious life and the finding of its attendant values. A recognition of the nature of sin together with the endeavor to eradicate it so far as possible is not merely a negative step; it is a highly important phase of the process of building the life of religion.