

What is *SINFUL* in a Sin?

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 (Courtesy: AUC Journal, Pune)

Sin is one of the experiential realities of our lives. It is as natural as the experience of love, friendship or hunger. One may not be able to define sin, but one can easily recognize what a sin is. Like St. Augustine said about time that he knows what it is if no one asks about it, but he cannot say what it is, if someone asks about it. Similarly one can say that we all know what sin is, though we may not be able to verbalize it. Yet some sort of discussion and investigation of the nature of sin will help us personally and also others. We need to know the personal dimensions and the practical implications of sin. But, nothing is practical like a good theory. Hence, let us look into some of the theoretical aspects of sin, before we come to the practical considerations of it. This will help us to avoid unnecessary guilt consciousness in our daily lives and to overcome a state of life, where we tend to be completely oblivious of the reality of sin in our lives.

Thus, this short essay has a moderate aim: to discuss some theoretical aspects and practical implications of sin in our lives, in order to arrive at a workable and simple understanding of sin.

1. The Ontological Ground for Sin

The very experience of sin is possible only because of human freedom. Only free human beings can be meaningfully said to have committed sins, not a machine or a non-rational creature. Further, only humans have the sense of moral discretion of seeing something as right or wrong, and good or bad. This moral sense is innate to us and there is always an experiential urge to follow what is good and right. Even a robber is made to see some good in robbing and so he or she does it deliberately. [That is why, 'the formation of conscience' is a very important aspect in moral theology and philosophy]. Since God has created us in an evolving world, in which we find ourselves constantly 'moving' towards perfection, we find a sort of incompleteness and vacuum within ourselves. However, this cannot be made an excuse for our sinful and selfish acts, because, our ability to reason and the reality of our freedom are sufficient to make us responsible for what we think, speak and do. Freedom makes us responsible, without which human lives will be mechanical, having no place for love, compassion, justice, friendship etc. True, this freedom is limited from *within* and *without*. Yet, it gives us the capacity to decide who we shall be and this implies the freedom to move towards love or against love. Freedom is said to be our transcendental capacity, enabling us to go beyond ourselves, to become someone other than who we are.

2. Sense of Sin

The sense of sin seems to be waning because of several reasons: Undue stress on sin in the past; a reaction against the legalistic notion of morality & sin; overemphasis on sins related to sex and a negative view of sex; more stress on individual conscience; a decreasing sense of God; an unrealistically optimistic view of evolution and human progress, where evil is seen as an essential dimension of the evolutionary process; confusion between irrational guilt

feelings and the real moral sense of guilt feelings; highlighting only the collective responsibility for structural evils and exonerating the individuals from their responsibility.

3. The Concept of Sin and its Effects according to the Bible

As soon as one thinks of sin in the Bible the immediate thought that comes to our minds is the concept of *Original Sin*. Original Sin has often been misunderstood and misinterpreted. The Catholic Church teaches us this: “Adam and Eve transmitted to their descendants human nature wounded by their own first sin and hence deprived of original holiness and justice; this deprivation is called “original sin” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, No. 417; hereafter CCC.). A proper understanding of the concept of Original Sin is needed to avoid unnecessary confusion. We are told that we are born with the effect of Original Sin. One must not take it literally to mean that it refers to the fact that when a child is born into the world, a stain on the otherwise pure soul, like a red jam applied on white bread! It may be a helpful imagery to explain to the children in their catechism classes, as the children need a picturesque language to understand difficult concepts. But as we grow into mature and thinking adults, we must make efforts to go beyond the childish metaphors to see the deeper meaning of these concepts. We need to be alert, while interpreting the Genesis, not to mix up *what* is said, with *how* it is said.

Original Sin can be seen as referring to the sinful situation which was created by the first parents’ disobedience. By this humans have been distanced from God, losing their state of grace, which had been bestowed upon them at the time of creation. For, in fact, “God created human being in his image and established him in his friendship. A spiritual creature, human being can live this friendship only in free submission to God... Man is dependent on his Creator and subject to the laws of creation and to the moral norms that govern the use of freedom” (CCC, No. 396). After the Fall, they lost the state of grace and were driven away from the garden of Eden. Further, the Church believes: “...The whole human race is in Adam ‘as one body of one man’...By this ‘unity of the human race’ all humans are implicated in Adam’s sin, as all are implicated in Christ’s justice. Still, *the transmission of original sin is a mystery that we cannot fully understand*. But we do know by Revelation that Adam had received original holiness and justice not for himself alone, but for all human nature. By yielding to the tempter, Adam and Eve committed a *personal sin*, but this sin affected the human nature that they would then transmit *in a fallen state*... It is a sin which will be transmitted by propagation to all humankind, that is, by the transmission of a human nature deprived of original holiness and justice. And that is why original sin is called ‘sin’ only in an analogical sense: *it is a sin ‘contracted’ and not ‘committed’ – a state and not an act*” (CCC, No, 404).

Therefore, a child finds itself in the sinful and selfish situation of the world. It has to fight against all these sinful circumstances to be in the state of grace. By the sacrament of baptism the child is enabled to fight it and it becomes a member in the community of the Church, where the others are there to help the child in this struggle; more importantly original grace, lost due to Adam’s sin, is restored back, but he/she has to ‘fight’ to remain in grace: “... [by] original sin...human nature has not been totally corrupted... Baptism, by imparting the life of Christ’s grace, erases original sin and turns a man back toward God, but the consequences for nature, weakened and inclined to evil, persist in man and summon him to spiritual battle” (CCC, No. 405).

Further, sin is understood in various ways in the Bible. Sin is: a) **the breaking or damaging the relationship with God** (Gen. 3: 8, 23, 24), **the neighbour** (Abel, 4:28), **the world** (sweat, labour pain; 3:16,19) and with **the self** (ashamed of themselves and hid themselves, 3:10). All these introduce a sense of disharmony in relationships; b) **a tendency to assert oneself** against the Creator, to refuse to depend on Him and to prefer creatures to God (the golden calf – Ex 32). These alienations result in loneliness and insecurity; c) **an expression of arrogance** (the tower of Babel, Gen. 11:1-9), that leads to confusion and alienation; d) **the negligence of the rich towards the needy** (Amos; Hosea; Jer 22:13-16), which is strongly condemned by the prophets; e) **going against the Law** (Job 1:5; Lev. 4:27); f) **infidelity** to the covenant relationship between God and humans (Jer 3:1-5), equated to marital infidelity; and g) **the rejection of the love for the neighbour** (Ez.18:3-12), because love for God and love for neighbour are inextricably linked (Mt.22:34-40).

For Jesus, sin originates from one's heart (Mt 15:18,19). He condemns the sin of pride, hypocrisy and obduracy of pharisees (Mt 23). He speaks of sin in connection with the forgiveness (Mt. 11:19) and the mercy of God the Father (the prodigal son in Lk 15). In John sin is lawlessness, wrongdoing, lust & pride (1 Jn 3:4); It is darkness (Jn 3:20) and slavery (Jn 8:24) as sinner hates light (Jn 3:20). St. Paul gives the theology of sin in the letter to the Romans and asserts that only Christ can save us, not the Law, because Law only makes us aware of sin (Rom 6:11); sin introduces a division within us, creating a conflict between the flesh and the spirit (7:19). He also sees sin as something that injures the whole body of believers, just as an injury in any part of our body hurts the whole body (1Cor 12:26).

4. Kinds of Sin:

Traditionally there are various ways of categorizing sins:

- a) Sins of **Commission and Omission**, which refer to the bad things that we do and the good things that we do not do.
- b) There are some **sins that cry out to God** - the blood of Abel (Gen. 4:10), the sin of the Sodomites (Gen. 18:20), the moans of the people oppressed in Egypt (Ex 3:7-10), the cry of the strangers, widows & orphans (Ex 22:22; Zech 7:10) and the injustice meted out to the wages of the labourers (Dt 14:14,15).
- c) **Personal and Structural sins**: Within **personal sins**, we can have: *Mortal sin* – it involves a fundamental option to go against love, affecting the totality of our lives; a total destruction of love in the human heart by a grave violation of love, done with full knowledge and willful consent; and *Venial sin* – it involves a decision to do this or that action, but not affecting the personality as such; here we can distinguish between the act and the 'actor'; some actions can be objectively seen to be serious violations of love and others are less in a given situation; the repetition of such sins leads us to a blunt conscience, which distorts our inability to discern good and evil; **Structural Sins (or Evils)**: It refers to the unpleasant and inhuman contamination of evils in the society. We see the prophets of the Old Testament vehemently denouncing the collective blindness and pride, racial and regional conflicts, religious fanaticism and gender discrimination etc. All these evils are very often embodied in political, economic and social structures in such a way that they become deep-rooted over time. Reckless harm done to the environment, ruthless war-weaponries, the one-sided growth of humanity, developments of technologies that challenge the very identity and dignity of being human, and the biased globalization that increases the gap between the rich and the poor, are some of the structural evils.

5. Practical Relevance and Personal Approach to Sin!

As we are to avoid the extreme positions on sin (namely, being scrupulously preoccupied with it, avoiding people for the fear of committing sins, not trusting in the forgiving mercy of God, and on the other hand taking it too lightly, considering sin only as a mistake), it would do good to keep the following ten aspects in our mind:

- a) **Jesus' attitude to sin and sinners:** Jesus hated sin but not the sinners. He differentiates between subjective and objective aspects of sin. While the Law of Moses stressed objective, legalistic and ritualistic dimensions of sins, Jesus stressed its subjective dimensions. Intention of the doer determines the gravity of any sin.
- b) **Sin of insensitivity:** We may not commit big sins of robbery or murder etc, but we may easily end up being insensitive to others in our words, actions and attitudes. We need to be cautious about this as well.
- c) **Inordinate attachment to power, positions, money, fame, place, people etc.:** This also can easily take us away from God and others. Created in the image and likeness of God; we may end up loving things and using people; We may forget the basic principle of ethics that we can never use people as means, as they are ends in themselves.
- d) **Passing judgment on others:** Very easily we become a prey to this. How often we allow ourselves to be led by our prejudices and hasty judgments, which affect our relationships, sometimes even permanently!
- e) **Hiding the real reason and having hidden agenda:** There may be 100 good reasons for doing something or not doing it, but there can be only one real reason. How often we are led to wear masks in our dealings with others and to hide our real agenda!
- f) **Sins related to celibacy, virginity and sexuality:** It is not a coincidence that I have kept it as the sixth point. In the Ten Commandments God also has kept it at the sixth position. But, maybe due to our cultural upbringing and misunderstanding of the whole issue, we are too preoccupied with only this command. We may even forget all the other nine 9 commandments and sometimes even God; we may be harsh, unjust, dishonest, impolite, insincere etc. but if we are very careful with the sixth command, we think we are pious, spiritual and holy!
- g) **Keeping aloof from others for the fear of criticism, making mistakes and facing failures:** We avoid many chances of doing good to others just for such fears. Sins of omission are equally grave, as sins of commission.
- h) **Not having our priorities checked:** Often we are busy, but 'at what' is an important question. Very easily we give "no-time" excuse; but if we really want, we can always find time. Since our priorities are not properly charted out, we may invest a lot of time in certain things and let some other important things suffer. We will end up absolutizing what is relative and relativizing what is absolute.
- i) **Ignoring others:** This could be the greatest punishment or evil that we can do to someone. It may be because either we don't like them or we are not going to get anything from them in return, by spending time with them. Now the home for the aged is on the increase. In Allahabad after the *mahakumb*, several widows, old women, children had been purposely left behind! This is the reflection of the sad state of being ignored by their people!
- j) **Losing Meaning in Life:** In my humble opinion, this would be a great sin on our part. God has created everybody with a purpose and has given himself that we may have joy and hope in their fullness. When one forgets this, one can easily be led to frustration in life. Some of us always go with a l.o.n.g face. Nothing will interest them; no jokes

will amuse them. If you tell them anything, they will ask, “so what?” Not even gossips will interest them. God has created us to share with others life, joy and hope.

6. Sin – A Deliberate Denial of Love

After all the discussion on sin, we now come a workable definition of love. We can look at sin as “a deliberate denial of love”. This denial of love can be expressed in the form of an utterance or an act or an attitude, which takes us away from genuine love for God, for humans and nature. We must not confuse acts-of-sin and state-of-sin. We are usually bothered about reducing the number of such acts, rather than addressing the root-cause of sin and that is the ‘denial of love’. This love is to be understood in its genuine sense, which implies readiness to suffer and to make sacrifices for great ideals. But the media in today’s world have unfortunately commercialized, misused and even abused the concept of love; love has been wrongly equated with physical attraction and infatuation. Our gullible youth, both boys and girls, with no wisdom or life-experience, tend to take the “reel-life” as part of real-life and spoil their studies, careers and even their whole lives. True, physical attraction or sexual drives are part of being human and it is a gift from God, but it is only one part of human love and *not* the whole of it; and it has its own time and circumstances, where it can be meaningfully lived out.

Genuine love implies love for God, for fellow beings and nature. When any one of these three important aspects is forgotten we end up distorting and deforming our very existence in more than one way. Usually we are particular about love for God, but fail to give importance to the other two dimensions. In fact we need to realize that love for God is incomplete, empty even dangerous, without love for others. As Jesus places both the love for God and love for humans on the same plane, as though two sides of the same coin, we cannot afford to miss one, while focusing on the other. As we are invited to see God in other people, our love for God will not be meaningful, if we don’t include love for humans in the schema of our spirituality. Along with these two, love for nature and the duty to protect our environment also deserve our serious attention. As nature is house of God any ill treatment to nature is a great dishonor to God. As sincere care-takers, we need to protect nature, realizing its intrinsic value. The need and the urgency to be ecologically concerned is very seriously felt today more than ever before. Various biotechnological advancements threaten not only the identity and the dignity of human beings, but also the very fabrics of ecology. In spite of producing millions of tons of extra food-grains, today we have hunger deaths in the world. So it is not because of lack of food-grains, but because of many other serious reasons, like the unequal distribution of the resources and the opportunities, the landless poor farmers, exploitation of various sorts and so on, that we sadly encounter hunger deaths. *In fact, as responsible citizens of the world and the members of the human family, we need to be ashamed even if one person, in any corner of the world, happens to die of hunger.* This painful scenario reveals that we have not taken love in its holistic sense, which includes all the three dimensions of God-Humans-Nature.

Finally, sin can be seen as the acronym of “Soul-In-Need”. Among many other things the existential experience of sin makes us realize that we (our souls) are in need of **God’s pardon** for the sins, **God’s strength** to overcome the sinful inclinations in us, **God’s wisdom** to see through the ways of (d)evil and above all **God’s generosity** to forgive others; as we know, forgiving others is very essential in order to experience God’s forgiveness in our lives. Therefore in a way, sin helps us to realize that how vulnerable we are, and how incomplete

we are without God in our lives. We can, thus, realize that *lack of God* is that which makes something *sinful*, and since God is LOVE, any **deliberate denial of genuine love is a sin!**