

About Sin or Better, Vengeance

Anyone exposed to even a smattering of Christianity is bound to get a mouthful about sin. Emphasis will vary from denomination to denomination, church to church and author to author. Because some people associated with religion are fond of talking about sin with almost complete abandon, it's worth taking a look at why this is so, especially with the rise of religious conservatism. For about a year I was desirous of putting down some thoughts about the matter and got the final push from listening to an evangelical radio station. I never listen to such stations at home, just when driving, and derive pleasure at the sometimes naive way they talk about sin. I especially look forward to those preachers proclaiming that most folks are going to hell. If he doesn't, then it's time to switch stations. This blanket condemnation extends to those of us who aren't 'saved' as well as every non-Christian who ever existed. I have to admire their certainty if nothing else. On the other hand are the Catholics for whom the issue isn't addressed so stridently. They have a more diffuse, subtle focus, characterized by a desire to make people feel guilty. 'Give the guilt which keeps on giving. Give Catholic guilt' as the expression goes. I figure a popular conception (or misconception) has arisen concerning sin from both extremes, so I wanted to throw in my two cents. Being Catholic, I'm more familiar with that perspective. Also I come from the Boston area where the Church had been long-dominated by the Irish who have their own special slant on the matter. This doesn't apply just to Boston nor even to the Irish but to most metropolitan areas within the United States where Catholics traditionally have taken root. Nowadays the Irish are often held up as scapegoats for having introduced the specifically Catholic take on guilt. Regardless, here we are, Catholic or otherwise, with this ball of wax called sin which all camps are quick to employ as a weapon in order to keep their adherents in line. Fundamentalists and Catholics represent two extremes of the spectrum but by no means have a monopoly. All you have to do is look at the Bible (let alone Christian history) where everyone seemed preoccupied with sin. More often than not they were quick to settle matters either with sword in hand or excommunication. It's too bad since life was pretty grim in the best of times, and to add spiritual grimness didn't improve matters.

Often when dealing with a topic which has broad social ramifications I like to hearken back to biblical sources. For example, a quick glance at a concordance gives three solid pages—and these pages are divided into three columns, all in fine print—of references to sin, both Old and New Testaments. With a Bible program I could have gotten the actual stats plus distinctions as to nouns, verbs and so forth. Just a glance at the huge selection in the concordance told me there was no need to proceed further. As soon as I made this initial discovery I was struck by the condemnatory, absolute use later generations had made of them, often lifting them from context. However, an important exception is in order. I narrowed down my search to the Gospel excerpts of sin which totaled to not quite half a column. All the other New Testament citations were from St. Paul, a revealing insight by itself. Generally Paul's take on the matter is more severe and might be worth considering at another time. I suspect a lot of our notions about sin derive from him...not only Paul, but those who built their theological systems upon his insights. The conclusion of my unprofessional, cursory survey? Statistically speaking, Jesus has very little to say about sin. Because Jesus is not an unimportant person, I decided to take another glance at the concordance citations and examine the context of the word reality as he dealt with it. In brief, he loves to speak about forgiving sin. We all know that, but I think we've allowed other perceptions from the Old Testament and St. Paul to crowd this out. To top it off, most preachers and theologians down the centuries preferred that approach over the Gospels. Maybe we unconsciously subscribe to this omission because it suits our tendency to think in terms of absolutes, a comfortable approach. If we don't take into consideration what Jesus actually had to say about sin we stand in danger of not allowing his words to take root. That's quite a challenge when we have in our train a long history of theological and cultural baggage.

It's refreshing to single out the precise words of Jesus concerning sin even though we're not sure if they belong to him or had been inserted into his mouth by later generations. However, there is a compelling reason for the genuineness of Jesus' words. He takes such a radical stance about forgiveness which lies beyond the ability of humans to fabricate. Another reason why forgiveness is noteworthy is that when a person renowned for this characteristic dies, chances are he or she will be remembered for many a year. It's almost as though the essence of forgiveness has a life of its own beyond the grave by reason of participation in something superhuman. We are so prone to harm other persons as well as to extract vengeance when wronged that forgiveness appears jumps out at us, not in tune with our inbuilt sense of justice. In fact, forgiveness severely grates upon our notion of right and wrong. We're also familiar with the saying, "Forgive but do not forget." That's a halfway type of forgiveness, worse for ourselves in the long run because it allows an indefinite period of time to carry around memories of past injuries.

It's not my intention to define sin nor to give theological reasons for it, something beyond my capacity, let alone forgiveness. A lot of books and articles on the matter which I've sampled over the years has shed little substantial light on the matter. Perhaps a bit harsh or uninformed, but sin is a mystery, and you can't explain away a mystery. It's claimed that sin depends upon the exercise of free will which was bestowed by God. That seems to be it, a simply fact demonstrated by experience. At the same time there's a cultural context in which sin is articulated. Like most Christians and more specifically Catholics, I grew up with a heritage where sin played a dominate role. I did not attend parochial school but only Sunday school. For one day a week (fortunately not a full school week) I did receive my dose of sin from the good sisters. It was couched in terms and expressions we now like spoof. Despite the humor, a lot more residue about sin abides in our memories...perhaps more than we wish to admit. In general the sisters did a good job at communicating a sense of fear which they got from their teachers and so on back down the line. When and where that slant with which we've become familiar emerges is beyond my knowledge. Some attribute it to Jansenism; maybe so or maybe in part but there again, I'm not sure. All the while the local parish priest stayed in the background compared with the sisters. On special occasions such as Confirmation classes he was rolled out to re-enforce the nuns' teaching; maybe the nuns could threaten us with venial sins, but the priest was held in reserve for mortal ones. And those were tossed around with a free abandon that is amazing. As for the current state of affairs, of how parochial schools operate, I have little or no idea except that many lay teachers have assumed the traditional role of nuns. And for the priest, he's still there but probably doesn't speak about mortal sin partly for fear of being ridiculed.

Sin has been taught in Catholic schools pretty much as a means to keep young people in line and perhaps with the hidden intent to continue this submission upon reaching adulthood. While some people are still struggling with the aftermaths of this tradition, I offer some remarks about the role of sin in spirituality. Let's situate sin as it relates to the practice of contemplative prayer in contrast to railing against iniquities, an easier approach which rarely has positive impact. An interesting sidebar is that talk about contemplation spirituality is recent. It was considered the preserve of saints and more specifically, those saints belonging to Catholic religious orders (which comprises the vast bulk of them). Even members of those orders were not exactly encouraged to practice contemplative prayer simply because it was terra incognita. Unfortunately this was true for so-called contemplative orders. Take this hand-in-hand with the way many Catholics had been formed regarding sin, and you have a double estrangement: from one's conscience and from God. I also suspect that generations before the advent of psychology—and that wasn't terribly long ago—handled sin differently from us moderns. We see traces of this in elderly people, for example, our grandparents. They possessed what seems to us an inbuilt knowledge of how human behavior should be ordered, usually in a no-nonsense fashion.

The simplicity of this approach allowed little tolerance for gray areas which are now out of place in a complex world. Nevertheless, these people had a sense of compassion which was equally simple and quick to embrace those who committed offenses. In other words, it was catholic (with a lower case 'c')...universal...despite their limited circumstances. However, recent decades have seen a renewed interest in contemplation, that it's part and parcel of our Christian heritage. It's pretty much off limits to some Catholics as with those older folk who prefer a traditional expression of faith marked by devotion. To step outside that is to enter unfamiliar, even dangerous, territory because any prayer perceived as passive was suspect. However, many good books have been written on contemplation enabling potential practitioners to better appreciate what it means to be made in God's image and likeness. It takes some acquaintance with that basic concept before we can move on to a maturer understanding of sin. Once we do, we have a better appreciation of Christian doctrine on the matter.

As any serious follower of Jesus Christ knows sin as an obstacle blocking the way to the realization of God in our lives. It's difficult to apprehend, resting upon a kind of inbuilt recognition that we lack something at the core of our being. Nowadays the sense of sin is diminished due to advances in psychology and related sciences. These disciplines allow us to better see how we're conditioned, the operations of the unconscious as well as various mental syndromes. Admittedly, this makes the playing field more foggy than in the past. After having been exposed to such information, are we in a position to identify sin as quickly as we had been before? The whole situation is too muddled to see clearly with any accuracy; it also puts us on guard not to be hasty in labeling such-and-such an action as sinful. At the same time we have plenty examples of evils perpetrated against large segments of humanity. As one anthropologist said on the radio not long ago, our primitive ancestors practiced extermination regularly and was considered the most natural thing to do. While that may be debatable, today's large scale horrors make us pause and think. One of the most well documented facts among modern atrocities is that the people who carried them out, the actual hands-on instruments, were ordinary, not monsters.

All this is well-known, but we need to see if sin can be apprehended on a more concrete, familiar level. Chances are that most of us are afflicted with varying degrees of psychological disorders or tendencies that can cause disruptive behavior. On top of it are religious notions about sin, and combining the two is a deadly mixture. My own guess is that we are still too immature for this, that first we need to sensitize ourselves to our consciences. One way of achieving that is to come up with a better term for sin, one which pertains to how we really think and feel. That term I venture to say is vengeance. Strictly speaking vengeance doesn't have the theological impact as sin but can move in that direction, being a concrete expression of a vicious inclination in our human nature. Vengeance is also a self-enclosed loop. It starts with having vindictive thoughts towards another person which retain their venom whether or not the plans are put into action. During the planning stage vengeance is enjoyable. 'Sweet' is more accurate and characterizes the delight of mulling over scenarios of revenge. In brief, the mental pleasure we take on has its beginning with sweetness but its end in bitterness. This is no secret. Anyone can observe this for himself. Chances are that the element of sweetness makes vengeance the most difficult tendency to eliminate. It eggs us on despite our knowledge that it leads nowhere. By way of quick observation, I recently had a conversation with a local peace activist. What sets him apart is not simply the serenity he radiates but his ability to insert his academic standing into social involvement. In other words, his action is informed in the best sense of the word. My friend also seems to completely lack vengeance, though I suspect he had undergone many unseen struggles to get this way. At the same time I saw residual effects of this struggle. They were manifest when he referred negatively to himself albeit in a joking fashion. All in all he came out well and fortunately has many years of productive work ahead which can only improve.

So let's say we've narrowed down our search for sin to the more specific trait of vengeance. It isn't operative all the time but remains as a latent threat because of our desire to get back at people who may harm us. To deny this fact is like hiding our heads in the sand like an ostrich, so vigilance is in order without getting overly uptight. Sometimes just facing this tendency is difficult enough, but it's half the battle. The state of readiness to exact vengeance is not continuous but resides in a semi-twilight area of our consciences. Therefore it differs from being constantly on the look-out for threats to our well-being. Apart from those instances which activate our desire to get vengeance, our sense of it can be awoken when we engage in a religious activity ranging from attendance at a service or reading the Bible. Often these activities have as a theme our sinful propensities which, in turn, feed directly into a heightened self-consciousness. So the transition from vengeance to sin (and visa versa) appears to be a malaise of the spirit just below the surface and activated when we come into contact with religion. The situation gets complicated because our Western tradition has added the adjective 'original' to sin in reference to the garden of Eden, a story central to our collective heritage for explaining the human condition. Personally I don't care for the adjective in light of the Hebrew original; it seems an add-on from a different tradition. Nevertheless, for generations original sin was a way of trying to explain the unexplainable. Part of this background impelled me to examine vengeance as a more specific trait which can substitute for the common understanding of sin. Another element closely akin to sin is evil. From what I gather, the common understanding of evil is a more intense form of sin with broader social implications. It seems endowed with a reality of its own with application to an immaterial being, for example, the Devil. So not to complicate matters, let's stick with vengeance (as opposed to evil) since it hits closer to home.

What's especially interesting is how we deal with being wronged or to be more specific, the vivid pictures and concepts we devise as coping mechanisms. A crucial point because hurts are amplified when we bring them home, more so at night when they assault us with special ferocity. I've heard this process likened to a video tape (it might be more up-to-date to say like a DVD) that constantly plays back upon itself, an infinite loop. What makes this sinister is that we enjoy working and re-working them...in other words, the infinite ways at how we can get back at our tormentors real or imagined. The very act of doing this is (and we hate to admit it) is the pleasure or sweetness we derive. However, it quickly gives way to bitterness. All the while our desire for vengeance (and I mean the garden variety, not the dramatic kind) is stronger than the person who perpetrated them in the first place. When we lash out at them they're usually astounded at the ferocity of our reaction with barely a clue as to our behavior. The point? Somewhere we have to shake off this process or it'll kill us. Literally.

The transition from living our normal lives to being offended happens so quickly we aren't aware of any time gap between the two events. This process catches us off guard and is supported by the usual train of thoughts...distractions...which muddles our thinking. Being aware of it is essential to see how vengeance erupts into our lives and to make the necessary preparations for our eventual cure. The primary step is to consider how faithfully thoughts accompany us day and night. But if our familiarity with them were to be suddenly interrupted by an especially ferocious attack, we'd be taken aback. Such an affront appears as single event but actually comprises two parts: an object (thought) affecting a subject (us). This is not unlike two electrodes, one positive and the other negative, which are suddenly put together. That is to say, the space between them where the flow of electricity transpires is brought to a halt. Something more serious than sparks results: we get a short-circuit which blows out both poles. Would we call the short-circuit a sin? Probably not though theologians can debate the matter; most likely the short-circuit is a contributing factor. In this instance it's best to omit theological reflection which can confuse matters all the more. That can be brought in later at an appropriate time. Our primary task is to understand the apparent immediacy of this short-

circuiting process. Employing the image of electricity, what interests us is its almost immediate passage which precludes time for reflection, and I assume that sin involves some reflection followed by a choice. Practically speaking, any attempt to grasp this transfer of energy (and now I put it within the mental sphere) which happens in less than a blink of an eye is a futile effort. Nevertheless, we feel that an interval of time exists, albeit fleeting. We try to pin down this uneasiness but can't no matter how hard we try, so an analogue from the physical world may help. Let's take that interval as a nanosecond, one billionth of a second. While this measurement of time is real, it remains imperceptible. Still we know its exists and have an insatiable desire to get into that minuscule gap. This frustration can get the better of us if we're not careful; it demands that we back off from our usual approach to doing things going, as it were, from the macro to the micro world.

Therefore trying to find an analogue outside this nanosecond-like gap for a solution to our problem is futile. Because the temporal interval is minuscule, it demands an equally minuscule adjustment of how we view things in order to make sense of what's going on. Situating ourselves on the macro level by way of experiment is like closing the gate after a horse had escaped. Every time we are offended our reflexes kick in which makes us regret that the gate should have been closed before it was too late. Instead of dwelling on this problem—it's so addictive by reason of being frustrating—maybe it's a signal to look elsewhere, i.e., on the micro level. The problem is, how do we go about finding something of which we have only a clue? Keep in mind that our experience of having been injured occurs immediately after the action has taken place. Therefore the task consists in slowing down our reaction as much as that is possible, a task we will flesh out a bit more.

The just mentioned reaction is a part of the universal experience of cause and effect which is inescapable. We're used to manifestations of this law belonging to a slower order yet are accustomed to respond to them in the same manner as with the really fast ones. Keep in mind that our minds are clouded by distractions which complicate the matter. So maybe we can look as slower manifestations of causality as they impinge upon our lives. For example, ancient peoples paid close attention to the movement of stars and planets. They stayed up all night observing them with a patience we find astounding. After a while they saw patterns which had direct impact on their society such as telling time which, in turn, enabled them to plant crops at the right time and to establish religious festivities. They were untrained as far as cause and effect but were shrewd observers of its larger results. In this instance the ancient star-gazers perceived they were part of a larger whole, a cosmic one. A more mundane example comes when I was in the process of writing these words. It was a lovely mid-winter day with bright sunshine and no wind. At the same time I heard that a fairly large snowstorm was going to hit us tomorrow. A first glance at today's weather revealed no such thing, only the forecast which was based on accurate satellite information...and at root this technology was based on the principle of causality. If I did not have access to such information it would still be possible to predict a snowstorm on the morrow. How? Not by clairvoyance but, like those ancient peoples, upon close observation of the situation at hand (sailors are famous for this). How, then, could today's bright, calm weather be distinguished from other bright calm days? That is, how could it foretell a large storm less than twenty-four hours away? Obviously familiarity with the environment helped to acclimatize me. The same set of circumstances happened before and were bound to happen again, i.e., tomorrow. But what does this ability rest upon? I'd say the atmosphere. When things become unusually quiet you know that something lies just over the horizon, so it's time to get ready for what will appear. There is a subtle, gradual gathering of high, thin clouds on the southwest horizon which makes its presence felt. They can be ignored until it's too late.

Perhaps this ability to foretell something like tomorrow's storm is related to the idea of a cue which serves as a signal or hint to take action. It connotes something small which normally escapes our

attention. Such ignorance (or better, oversight) precludes us from taking the right action. Cues are as abundant as we are willing to make them, so to speak. They are present in daily life on various levels, discrete and not spoken. That is to say, cues are mute objects acting as signs with a language of their own, more suggestive than authoritative. Cues seem to have a dual nature; they both participate in and stand apart from the normal laws of cause and effect. To perceive a cue requires paying close attention which, in turn, requires slowing down our lives. Should we go this route, we soon discover that things start to loosen up. Previously they had a density which seemed impenetrable but now has become lighter, almost transparent. Of course, this derives from our mode of perception, not so much the physical objects themselves...but then again, consider the famous quantum theory where the observer effects the object. So if the observer lightens up, the object is bound to do likewise. Cause and effect? Maybe in part, but we're dealing with the different realm of the mind and spirit.

I began this article with a desire to talk about sin from the perspective of how we experience it as opposed to all the theories out there ranging from the abstract to the devotional level. Following the latter two would be too theoretical, not my intent. Besides, a lot of ink has been spilled over it. Then I shifted emphasis from sin—admittedly a vague topic though tossed around with ease—to vengeance, and that's something with which we can all identify by reason of its concrete, immediate nature. Should we retain a vengeful spirit, it poisons our day-to-day living. Ridding ourselves of this knee-jerk response to being injured is, from what I've gathered from talking with many people, the most challenging task set before us. Even the litigious nature of American society impacts our attitude because we daily hear about various lawsuits which centers around this tendency, albeit disguised in clever language. Vengeance boils down to how and when might I get back at the person who hurt me, the place where, so to speak, the rubber meets the road. That its essence, and I venture to say what sin is all about. As for the latter, it's simply a catch-word for all the manifestations of the first. Once we grasp this harmful dynamic through a slowing-down of response time, then and only then are we capable of appreciating the theological dimensions of sin. And that, I might add, sets us firmly on the road to distancing ourselves from the harmful effects of vengeance.