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Sin: against Whom or against What?

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Summary

This work concerns changes in the doctrine of sin in which the following traditional understanding of sin is taken as our starting point: sin is “a culpable and personal affront to a personal God” (C. Plantinga, Jr.). Sin refers to ‘evil’ in the religious relationship with God. The study examines the consequences for the doctrine of sin when God is no longer seen as person but rather as spiritual principle (something divine, spirit, higher law etc.). It finally aims at the formulation of a post- or non-theistic concept of sin.

1. Introduction

In Western Christianity (Europe, North America), the doctrine and understanding of sin reached a crisis in the second half of the twentieth century. This crisis was stimulated by at least three developments. One was a steady change in religious experience among many Christians, which entailed a shift from a traditional theistic concept of a personal God to a more *en*-theistic idea of God or the ‘divine’ as an immanent principle, as force or spirit. This has consequences for the more traditional doctrine and experience of sin.

A second development, more directly connected to the theme of sin, was boosted by the theological critique of the doctrine of (original) sin. This was first done by Catholic theologians after Vatican II, but they were quickly followed by Protestants. The critique was connected with the experience of believers – ‘we are not that bad!’ – and found an echo in the liturgy. In the new service book of prayers (1998) for the Protestant liturgy in the Netherlands¹, the weekly confession of sin was either toned down or largely replaced by the *kyrie*. The previous confession of common and personal sin was transformed in many cases into an understanding of tragedy and of the imperfect world, as well as of human powerlessness over against the ‘powers’ of evil. ‘Forgive us our sins’ changed into: ‘Lord, have mercy with those who suffer’. The notion ‘sin’ retreated more and more to the background.

This study focuses, however, on a third development more outside official Christianity, namely, the movement since the 1970s that has become known as New Age. The label ‘New Age’ can cover a wide range of movements and activities, but with respect to the doctrine of sin, there are two motifs/ideals deeply embedded in the New Age movement that are important. The first is the inclination to relate God and the human being, or, rather, the divine and what is essentially human, very closely, often extending to an ontological identification. Second, New Age contains a strong positive understanding and high expectations of human potential. Based on these two ideals, there often is (or was) in New Age a twofold reproach of institutionalized Christian faith, namely, that God and human beings were separated and placed over against each other in an antagonistic relationship and that the traditional doctrine of sin led to the neglect of human potential. This double reproach, which was explicitly or implicitly almost universally found in New Age authors, constitutes the starting point for the initial ‘working’ or ‘research’ question for this study. This question is whether this double reproach obtains for two important and more or less complementary theologians of the previous century, i.e., Karl Barth and Paul Tillich.

2. Motivations for this study

This initial working question is not the real goal nor my most profound motivation for this study. It is almost clear from the start that Barth’s thinking is further removed from New Age spirituality than Tillich’s. Our working question allows us to think systematically about the

¹ Adopted in the Dutch Reformed Church of the Netherlands (*Nederlands Hervormde Kerk*) as well as in the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands (*Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland*). These two ecclesial institutions are joined since 2004 as the Protestant Church in the Netherlands (*Protestantse Kerk in Nederland* - PKN).

doctrine of sin and accompanying questions. Here the question of the concept of the human being (anthropology), the concept of God (theology/concept of God), and how those two can be the basis for thinking about the God-human being relationship (religion or spirituality) come together. As far as human relations are concerned, it is when there are problems or when the relationship is under pressure that these issues are thought about most deeply and we discover the most about that relation. As far as the *religious* relation and experience is concerned, one must then turn to the doctrine of sin.

My actual motivation to discuss sin is the fact that this old concept allows a depth dimension of being human to be broached that not only includes more than what is morally good/bad, or, in legal terms, what is/is not allowed but also goes further than believing/not believing in a personal God. From the perspective of the history of religion, the concept of sin has to do with the concept of ‘*taboo*’, with the distinction between clean/unclean, sacred/profane, saving or selling one’s soul. Sin has to do with a personal-spiritual boundary that does not automatically coincide with ethics or juridical law. It concerns a far-reaching boundary that, as a human being, one simply has to transgress or absolutely not, at penalty of ...? It is precisely here that the most important associations and questions concerning the concept of sin are indicated, namely, which important ‘boundary’ is understood here? And what are the consequences if that crucial boundary is respected or not respected? The first question in particular can be heard in the title of this work, i.e., *Sin: Against Whom or against What?*

3. Research

The suggestion above – that sin is not the same as believing/not believing in a personal God – deviates implicitly from the definition that is taken as our starting point but is one of the results/conclusions of this study. To arrive at that point, we proceeded as follows.

With Plantinga’s formula as our reference point, we explore three New Age sources: Jane Roberts (the so-called Seth-books), *A Course in Miracles*, and the work of the former Dominican friar/priest Matthew Fox. Their thinking about the relationship ‘human beings-God-world’ is explored from three mutually dependent perspectives, i.e., *cosmology* (the God-human being relationship), *hamartiology* (their view of sin and evil), *human potential* (their view of the possibilities of human self-realisation). Our fundamental question figures into all three perspectives and is researched via sub-questions like: How do they conceive of the unity between God and human beings? Is something like sin recognized or denied? Is there something resembling original sin (*non posse*) or is there simply an emphasis on ‘human potential’? Is ‘evil’ simply denied? Further questions concern both partners in the sin relation: How is the human ‘person’ viewed? Is God also seen as a person?

The theologians are studied according to the same method. The data we gather regarding the questions we formulated are arranged in an inventory table.

4. Objective

The above discussion is followed by a dialogue, an exchange, and comparison of the various ideas and perceptions of all five sources, with special attention paid to underlying motifs. The objective is to arrive at my own assessment of and choice regarding the various views or parts of them so that I can present a new formulation of sin that is not dependent on belief in a personal God. In short, the objective is to arrive at a non-theistic concept of sin that can speak to non-theistic believers and even possibly to people who call themselves atheists and yet want to be religious.

5. A few findings and complications

Our explorations show that the explicitly theistic concept of sin that is taken as our reference

point is not (completely) shared by any of the sources. Even in Barth, sin as sloth is not directly related to God himself but to the true humanity that *we have in Jesus Christ*. Sin as sloth (*Trägheit*), then, is lagging behind who we already are in Christ.

For Tillich (who does not take an entirely different line on this), sin is primarily alienation from whom we essentially are. He locates the cause for this largely outside and partly within the human being because, for him, being human is realized, among other things, between two poles: destiny and limited freedom – one could say between a greater embedding power and one’s own responsibility. Tillich distances himself explicitly from the theistic concept of God, speaking instead of the ‘absolute unconditioned’ that is unleashing the ultimate concern of human beings. Nevertheless, Tillich can continue to speak in the same way about God on the basis of his doctrine of symbols. The personal God is the highest conceivable symbol of what addresses us absolutely. Seen in that way, Tillich’s type of religion can be labelled *symbolic theism*.

In the New Age sources, theism is completely replaced by pan-en-theism or *cosmo-theism* (Roberts, Fox) or by *a-cosmic pan-theism* (*A Course in Miracles*). According to *ACiM*, and, with some reservations also Roberts, there is only one reality, namely, the one divine or spiritual reality that is manifested in units of creative awareness. In Roberts, these units are connected in networks, and the broader and more extensive the network the closer people approach the ‘All-That-Is), which is Roberts’ equivalent for God, a kind of total consciousness but one that each partial consciousness is a part of. In *ACiM* all human ‘minds’ are seen as extensions of God that, together with their divine origin, constitute one unbroken, pure spiritual ‘brotherhood’.

What is important in both faith systems is, that there is nothing that portrays God and the human being in opposition to each other or any kind of dualism. Nor can there be. On the one hand, in both there is no separate divine person or entity against whom or what something evil can be done or thought to be done. “There is no personal God-individual,” according to Roberts. On the other hand, there is also no identifiable, individual human person who can be referred to as an agent. One’s spiritual, essential self, i.e., one’s true identity – is divine, whereas one’s limited, outward ego-self is not even a fraction of who one truly is. In both approaches, the meaning of evil or sin is weakened or shown to be either illusion (*A Course in Miracles*), or extremely limited (un)wiseness (Roberts).

Fox is a remarkable exception. He is just as assertive in his rejection of theism as he is in his rejection of original sin. Through his radical rejection of the doctrine of original sin and the accompanying Fall/Redemption tradition, he became famous for his provocative book *Original Blessing* (1983). But this does not mean that Fox just denies the reality of sin. To the contrary, sin committed by people is the only evil he acknowledges as evil (in contrast to, for example, nature, which, in Fox, cannot do any evil even via the worst natural disasters). Unlike Roberts and *A Course in Miracles*, Fox thus does certainly acknowledge an apparent, responsible human person as an agent of sin, but this (sinful, religious) evil is directed primarily against the created world, not against a God in the theistic sense. Can it then be called sin – as Plantinga defines it – as *anti-Deum* (in whatever way)? The answer to this is ‘Yes’, for, in Fox’ view, the world is called to life through God’s eternal Word (*Dabar*) or by the Cosmic Christ and remains an inspirited creation of God. Fox (a former Catholic) sees all of creation as a ‘sacrament’ and opts for an undiluted pan-en-theism or *cosmo-theism*, whereby an offense against creation is also an offense against God. For Fox, sin is not respecting, not co-creating, or not joining in celebration and giving birth again to the mystical interior of created reality.

6. The problem of commensurability

When attempting to take stock, the following problem emerges: To what extent is it at all

possible to compare these different and divergent views with each other or to conduct a meaningful conversation about them, both theologically and anthropologically?

Remarkably enough, the greatest differences do not appear to be theological in nature, for they do not concern the possible *object* of sin – against whom or what sin is directed. All five sources hold to a transcendent or however described divine or spiritual reality that must at least be affirmed. At the same time, this higher reality is localized by all (!) within the lower or external reality, thus as a form of ‘immanent transcendence’. This is true even of Barth, with the restriction that, in accordance with his doctrine of *en/an-hypostasis*, it is exclusively concentrated in Jesus, namely, as God’s eternal Word (Christ) in the man (Jesus).

In contrast to the theological differences, the anthropological differences are more difficult and diverse. For Roberts, individual identity is completely impalpable: who a human being is does not in any case lie in the externally visible ego-person. In *A Course in Miracles*, each form of separation is seen as an illusion. That already entails the exclusion of the idea that a human being can act in a hostile way or even with a certain distance over against another human being or God. According to *A Course in Miracles*, there is only one harmonious, monistic reality of spiritual brotherhood, and the rest is illusion. The type of miracle that *A Course* wishes to teach its followers – particularly the miracle of forgiveness – is to continue to see a seeming aggressor as what he truly is, namely, a brother and nothing else.

Barth saw the individual person as highly responsible and capable with respect to his/her sinful sloth. But, conversely, other than Jesus Christ, Barth does not acknowledge any responsible person endowed with the ‘human potential’ to actively do the good and to realize true humanity in his own life. In a certain sense, Barth sees the sinful half as the whole human person. Only Tillich, in a limited sense (limited freedom), and, more strongly, Fox see the human being as an identifiably responsible person with ‘potential’ for good or evil.

In order to gain some kind of foothold and clarity in the midst of all these anthropological distinctions, it seemed meaningful to explore the most important historical concepts of person, if only for the purposes of orientation as well as in the hope of finding an anthropology to which as many different aspects as possible from the sources researched can be connected.

Such a doctrine of the ‘human being’ or ‘person’ has to connect at least two aspects:

- First, in accordance with all five sources, if only partially with respect to Barth:
 1. *Who or what is sinned against (the transcendent, God, spirit, higher principle, something absolute ...) must have a place within the anthropology*
- Second, over against the New Age sources Roberts and *A Course in Miracles*, and partly over against Barth:
 2. *There must be a somehow discernible individual in this anthropological doctrine, i.e., a human being with a personal identity, who is demonstrably accountable and responsible as a possible subject of both good and evil.*

7. Scheler’s Concept of Humankind

In the research into and comparison of important concepts of the person, the metaphysical anthropology of Max Scheler emerged as a surprise, for it was unexpectedly useful for several reasons. First, there is a structural correspondence with the sources, namely, in the acknowledgement of two layers in the human being. Second, Scheler does harmonize his view of the human person with other sciences, particularly biological-evolutionary insights, without taking them over uncritically. Third, Scheler’s concept of person can also be used in a Christian theological view of being human, as well as with a more humanistic metaphysical

approach. According to Scheler, on the one hand, the human being is connected with the animal kingdom (the human person is one of them), but, unlike the animals, the human being is above all gifted with a principle from elsewhere. Scheler derives this principle first from God and later from the ground of being. It is this principle from elsewhere, called 'S/spirit (*Geist*)' by Scheler, that makes the human 'animal' a human person. In other words, the psychological-physical phenomenon human becomes the finite person-center in whom the principle 'S/spirit' appears and through whom this principle is represented. The advantage of Scheler's view is, in brief, that the 'spirit-based human person' is drawn as the place of encounter where two dimensions come together: God and creation, or the spiritual and the physical world, the absolute and the conditioned, the inner self and the outer ego. Wherever these two dimensions converge, sparks happen, which sometimes leads to a short circuit (sin) or to the shining of benevolent light (doing good).

8. A reformulation of the concept of sin

In part IV of the study, the announced assessment (see 4. Objective) of the various views of the sources is carried out, and a choice is made between elements from those sources. That's where Scheler's concept of person is used as a guiding principle (§ 11). In the concluding section (§ 12), the choices and conclusions are used to arrive at a post- or non-theistic doctrine of sin:

Sin is S/self denial through personal sloth or laziness;

It implies: neglecting and forgetting my own essential S/spirit, my very human self.

Various aspects from or in reaction to the sources return here:

1. 'spirit' as immanent transcendence (in accordance with all sources)
2. God and the human being can both be conceived in the concept 'spirit' ('spirit' instead of 'personal' as a connecting concept between the divine and the human)
3. the element of opposition (Barth), but not over against an instance that is distant or found outside the concrete individual but over against something (transcendent) in oneself (Roberts, *A Course in Miracles*, Fox, Tillich)
4. the element of an accountable, responsible human person, the rehabilitation of the ego (contra Roberts, *A Course in Miracles*)
5. sin as sloth (Barth, Fox) and as alienation (Tillich)

The advantages and disadvantages of this non-theistic concept are also briefly discussed in this concluding chapter.