
SIN

Focus

The Greek understanding of sin (hamartia) was *missing the mark*. This idea is more complicated than it seems at first glance. A sinner must have knowledge of moral righteousness, a target if you will, and have knowledge of its bull's-eye. Over the history of Christianity that target, along with its bull's-eye, has often been referred to as God's law.

- Our Jewish siblings conceived of sin as largely communal, with one member able to pollute the whole group.
- Christians emphasized personal sin, our salvation was in our own hands.
- Since early Christianity, the concept of "sin" has developed into many targets, all hanging on a backdrop of "original sin."
- Are we to understand sin as vice; as brokenness from God, ourselves, or others; as willful disobedience of God; is it dependent on our intentions, weakness to temptation, or just inevitable in life?
- Is our ultimate relationship to God dependent upon God's grace or embedded in our deeds?
- Contemporary Christian theologians have articulated modern sins: racism, social injustice, debt, even un-medicated depression.
- Marriage equality has been denounced as sin. The theological stigma of the LGBTQ community is so often that of "sinner." How do we choose to reclaim our belovedness and grace in the face of this?
- How do we still understand our moral shortcomings in Christian terms?

Some Centering Quotes about Sin

Wherever there are humans, there will be sin. (John Portman)

History will absolve me. (Fidel Castro)

To define sin as an act that is a violation of the law of God leaves room for differentiating sin from crimes, the latter being acts that violate human laws. (Marguerite Shuster)

Sin is a sign of our brokenheartedness, of how damaged we are, not of how evil, willfully disobedient, and culpable we are. Sin is not something to be punished, but something to be healed. (Rita Nakashima Brock)
Sin is not felt while it is being committed. (Martin Luther)

Early in Christian history two lists arose: the seven deadly sins and the seven virtues....each of these seven sins betrays profound suspicions of the human body. The body, especially in its sexual dimensions, often evokes anxieties about mortality, loss of control, contamination, uncleanliness, personal inadequacy, and a host of other fears. Thus, we sorely need body theologies that will illuminate our experience.... (James Nelson)

Everything I've ever done, Everything I ever do, Every place I've ever been, Everywhere I'm going to... It's a sin. (the Pet Shop Boys, *It's a Sin*)

Claiming Our Grace as LGBT Persons

A Testimony about Sin and LGBT Identity by an MCC Member in the UK

I am really concerned that there is so little emphasis on “confession our sins” within MCC. If we do not recognize our shortcomings how can we seek forgiveness for them? Social action and “justice” is too easily about other people and their failings, societies failings. It is always other people’s sins that are “so bad.”

In the past being GBLT+ was the “sin celebre.” It was as if it would be better to be a gangster or murderer. But TLGB+ people will have shortcomings and selfish ways like anyone else. We need to remember that people who come to services at some time, may have a great need for confession—there may even be people who have committed murder, rape, sexual trafficking, or vulnerable people, knowingly and recklessly passing HIV through unprotected sex, abuse, blasphemy, drug trafficking, racial attacks, theft, or arson. That along with lesser things like betraying a partner, mental, physical or emotional cruelty, or simple selfishness. We might choose to rank these, placing our own shortcomings at the end of the list, but it is all sin, the one thing that can separate us from God... unless acknowledged, confessed, and apologized for to the Almighty Loving Creator.

A Testimony about Sin from Kelsey Pacha, Pacific School of Religion

I first learned about sin while going through the sacrament of Reconciliation (Confession) in Catholic school when I was seven years old. We were told that there were different levels of sin, and that you must confess everything you could remember doing and everything you might have done. As second graders, we repeated the same things—“I mouthed off to my parents,” “I hit my little brother,” and compared notes afterwards.

When I was 8 or 9, I had a friend whose mother was very conservative. She once asked me at her daughter’s slumber party whether I had gone to Confession that week. I replied that I hadn’t. She said, “It’s Saturday, so you better make sure you confess before Mass. If you die in a car crash with your mom, you will have all those sins on your heart and you’ll both go to Hell. Your heart has to be clean before you receive communion.” Even though this isn’t my theology now, these words still haunt me.

The concept of sin has primarily been used to make me fear punishment. The focus on sexual sin has been particularly damaging to me as a queer transperson, as I got the impression that no matter how strong my relationship with God is, and how much compassion I tried to cultivate, my attraction to women as someone born female is what really matters. Bullying or gossip was not as bad as “homosexual thoughts,” and there was nothing more shameful for me than having to tell a celibate male stranger that I was having impure thoughts about my girlfriends.

I find it more useful now to look at sin from a more systemic perspective—the sins of exploitative corporations, etc. It’s not that I don’t believe sin exists on an individual level, but I prefer to see it as falling short—not of perfection, but of my great potential to be kind, patient, and most of all, authentic.

How has “sin talk” hurt the LGBT community? Question posed by Religion Dispatches to Patrick Cheng. Feb 4th, 2013 (<http://religiondispatches.org/sin-is-not-a-crime-a-conversation-with-patrick-cheng/>).

It’s not just here in America but in Asia, Africa, and Latin America—there is such real harm that comes from sin talk. People get hurt and get killed. I think if we’re more rooted in being confident in God’s love for us and Christian doctrines it helps us to have armor and these attacks can bounce off.

My husband, Michael, and I have gone to church and we just sit on edge during the sermon wondering if the pastor would go anywhere near the “S” word, “sin,” and if so, just the thought of that would trigger us and make us want to leave. It takes on such a powerful life of its own, versus really understanding that sin is universal for us who walk the Christian path. I think it’s an empowering concept—it’s not just us, everyone needs to work on it, and especially those who call us “sinners.” One of the things we can do is call them out on that.

Holy Conversations: Exploring My and Our Understanding of Sin

Points of Reflection (Small Group Discussion): What is the relationship of sin and grace? Sin and guilt? Sin and shame? Sin and redemption? Sin and Jesus?

Points of Reflection (Small Group Discussion): How do we begin to change religious discourse about sin to focus on the sin of homophobia rather than the “sin” of homosexuality?

Points of Reflection (Small Group Discussion): How do your intersecting identities impact your understanding of sin? (i.e. race, gender identity, sexual identity, class, etc.) The feelings of shame and guilt correspond to sin. How do power and authority effect your understanding and felt response to “sin”?

Points of Reflection (Large Group Discussion): When was the first time you were told your sexuality or gender identity was sinful? How has your understanding of your faith changed as you accepted God’s belovedness and grace for who you are? How has MCC helped you think about sin and grace?

Additional Thoughts about Sin

Varieties of Sin: Historical Perspectives and Definitions

There are so many ways to sin. There are almost as many ways to understand what sin means. What follows is a brief overview of some key terms and historical theories on the nature of sin.

Original Sin

Original sin is a doctrine originally articulated by the North African theologian Augustine of Hippo (354–430). It is based in the story of Adam and Eve and their first disobedience of God. Our first parents passed down this original sin through the addition of lust to the act of procreation. The fall, according to Augustine, created lust; procreation would have occurred without the fall but only without lust. And so their sin becomes our sin as it moves from generation to generation. Each child is born with the stain of an original sin that only baptism can wash away. It is worth noting that neither Jews nor Muslims recognize the condition of Original Sin even though they share with us the sacred text of Adam and Eve.

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Ancestral Sin

In the Eastern Orthodox tradition, Augustine's idea of original sin held sway in the 17th-19th centuries. But in the twentieth century, the Orthodox rediscovered an earlier idea of *ancestral sin*. Human beings are born without inheriting a sinful nature from their parents, but into a world already disfigured by the effects of sin. Under these conditions, it doesn't take long until we, too, are affected by our surroundings. We bear no culpability for the sins of those who came before us, but soon must come to terms with our own complicity with the ways of a fallen world.

Venial & Mortal; Omission & Commission

The Catholic Church still distinguishes between venial and mortal sins. The former are smaller sins that can be easily confessed and dispensed with, while mortal sins entail a clear knowledge of guilt, a full consent of the will, and it is a "grave matter." Sin can be active (commission), or it can be a failure of duty or responsibility to God (omission).

Sinning Like a Saint

St. Basil (329-379) defined sin as an abuse of God-given powers to do good. St. Augustine (354 -430) and St. Aquinas (1255-1274) defined sin as "an offense against reason, truth, and right conscience" (Portmann, 6). Peter Abelard (1079-1142) thought moral goodness could only be understood by looking at intentions. He believed that all actions were morally neutral.

Deadly (Generative) Sins

Thomas Aquinas established the seven deadly sins. These sins are not called deadly because of the punishment they deserve or the damage they cause, but because they are the source of other sins. We might better understand them as generative sins. The generally accepted list of deadly sins includes pride, envy, anger, sloth, greed, gluttony, and lust.

Sinning Like a Reformer

Both Martin Luther and John Calvin were admirers of Augustine, and so thought of sin in terms of *concupiscence*, a term that refers to a strong compelling desire, especially like sexual lust. Both Protestant Reformers conceived of human beings as totally depraved, entirely sinful, and therefore entirely dependent on the grace of God. But because of this total dependence on the love and grace of God, and the inevitable marring of sin that will be upon all our deeds, Martin Luther famously advised us to sin bravely.

Modern and Social Sins vs. Personal Sin

The emphasis on personal sin that is characteristic of Christianity has begun to change with contemporary theological analysis of social sins and so called modern sins. "[Modern] sins include harming the environment, engaging in racism, denying the Holocaust, being depressed and not seeking pharmacological relief, not reaching your potential, and being overweight" (Portmann, xix). We have begun to consider the role of systemic oppression like racism and sexism and its impact on how we think of sin. For example, traditional notions of sin have emphasized sin as over-reaching due to pride, where feminists have identified sin for women as not reaching high enough and not having enough self-esteem. There are plenty of opportunities to sin using technology. The conditions of the world have changed and we are capable of

sinning on the internet, both communally and on our own. How are we to make sense of all of these new ways to access vice and hurt one another?

In *From Sin to Amazing Grace*, Patrick Cheng argues for LGBT specific understandings of Christ that can help invert traditional categories of sin for LGBT persons. One such model is the Hybrid Christ – both divine and human. Singularity is the sin that the hybrid Christ can help us to overcome. The Hybrid Christ allows us to be both/and rather than having to choose certain identities we have at one time, like *LGBT*, and other – seemingly or historically incompatible – identities at another time, like *Christian*.

Pulling it All Together: Ritual

(Supplies Needed: Stones)

Give everyone a stone that they can hold. Ask them to silently think about the sins that come to mind: personal, institutional, committed long ago and recently. Have a center or place where everyone can lay their stone down, in recognition that the sins are there but do not hold power over them. And then have the group speak, with the names of all present included in an affirmation: e.g. “Peter, John, Marcie, know that you are loved, that sin does not hold power over you. Know that the love eternal is greater than all we can do and nothing can separate you from God’s love. Out of this love, feel the strength for your life today, tomorrow and every day. Amen.”

Sources and Additional Resources

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