

Sin: Is It All Bad?

Jim Sanderson

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Looking out on our world it often seems that there is something terribly wrong. I think we have all felt it, a sense of unease, concern, sometimes even of horror. We try to comfort ourselves by opining that after all the media only bring us the bad news, that good news is no news. Alas however we know that, at least for the most part, the media is not making this stuff up.

Every day we hear and read of stunning acts of violence, of rapes and murders, of child molesting and spousal abuse. We get a daily reminder of the inability of religious, ethnic and racial groups to coexist, of the hatred and abuse they direct at one another. We learn of corruption and worse among our governmental officials, we see popular figures in sports and entertainment and other fields fall from grace as their darker sides are revealed. We see media types take a sadistic pleasure in pursuing celebrities.

Meanwhile manufacturers knowingly peddle dangerous, even deadly, products making huge profits and constantly planning to increase their market both domestic and international. Governments meant to protect the populace have been caught suppressing information that could harm corporate profits and their own political donations and tax revenues. Organized crime makes huge hauls from traffic in illegal drugs often abetted by foreign governments, even by the church putting forward the argument that these drug lords do much good locally (not to mention the generous support they give to church and state). Meanwhile, self righteous authorities meet out maximum punishments for the possession of minute amounts of these same drugs.

Corporations find it more lucrative to pay slap on the wrist fines than to modify their processes to help preserve the environment. Individuals ignore concerns over endangered species and the diminishing ozone layer in order to enjoy fur coats and air conditioning. Advertisers expend major energy to create artificial needs that their clients can then fill while many peoples' basic needs go unmet.

I could go on and on like this but you get the idea by now. There is a lot of bad stuff being done by the human race both individually and corporately. We cannot afford to be complacent or smug about this as we all participate to some degree, both deliberately and inadvertently. We all have to face the problem of evil in our world and what to do about it.

This brings me to the notion of sin. Sin has not been a very popular concept in recent decades, although it seems to be making a comeback. In some ways this is to be welcomed, in other ways it should be feared. The concept of sin can be employed in both useful and destructive ways.

Unitarian-Universalists often seem to believe that we have gotten past the concept of sin, that it is not of much use to us and that it is far to negative a proposition for our positive faith. We have even been known to scoff at those who accept sin or to pity them as the dupes of hypocritical religious authorities. There is some merit in this later notion.

The belief that humans are inherently sinful has indeed played a negative role in Western civilization and lead to a denial of the worth of humanity. The fear of the consequences of inherently sinful behavior has been used to impose control and authority on the masses. However that is not all that sin is for.

So what is sin, what are sins? The answer of course is not simple and varies based on one's theological perspective. Let's start with the old notion of original sin. You all know the story: Adam; Eve; Snake; Lunch: SIN. In the story the snake tempts Eve who tempts Adam who disobeys God and "in Adam's fall sinned we all." Well the story is actually a little more complex. Adam and Eve lived in a state of grace terminated after they ate the apple. Actually it is never called an apple, it is the fruit of the "Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil," and that is the point. Adam and Eve could not sin before they had a concept of the difference between good and evil. They were not able to make considered, responsible choices to do right or wrong. After they ate of the fruit however, they knew the difference and thus acquired the power to make moral judgements. They did indeed become "like unto God." Before they were merely in God's image, now they moved closer to him in power. Disobedience to God and the acquisition of knowledge, not sex, was the original sin. Alas one of the first things they became aware of was their own nakedness, ever since there has been a tendency to equate sex and sin. Relax. It ain't so.

On the face of it none of this seems very fair. God sticks a tree with pretty fruit in the middle of the garden and tells the kids that they can do anything except eat the fruit from that tree. Any parent can tell you what happens next. Then because of Eve and Adam's choice the entire human race is branded sinful for all eternity.

Yet if we look at what the story is really telling us there is a valuable point being made. Because we humans have a sense of right and wrong, good and bad we can act in either way. Because we know the difference we can make considered choices and having that power makes us responsible for the choices we make. The ability to sin is an inherent part of our humanity. We could not possibly do good if we were not also capable of sin. However the ability to sin is not, in and of itself, a sin or sinful. We are not at the core of our being sinners simply because we have the ability to sin. The Quran makes this point in its version of the Adam and Eve story. Adam is not tempted by Eve, he makes his own choice and faces the consequences of that choice. Allah in an earlier chat with the angels had already announced that humans would be able to be good or bad, just or unjust. Adam makes his choice but it is his, his progeny is not damned by it. Islam thus regards humans as having an inborn ability to do good or evil and the freedom to choose, not as being irredeemable sinners by nature.

So what is this thing called sin? Perhaps not surprisingly it has meant different things to different people at different times. In many early civilizations sin was associated with religious and ritual purity. To sin was to transgress the established religious boundaries and taboos. In Egypt for example the monarchy was religiously established and respect for and obedience to Pharaoh were religious duties. To fail in these was sinful. It went deeper of course. In the Egyptian world view the original state of the universe was chaos, it was the gods who brought and maintained order to existence and Pharaoh as a divinity lived a life dedicated to maintaining order and holding back chaos. All religious ritual had this goal to uphold the fragile order instituted by the gods.

Judaism too contained this concept. Oza is stricken down for inadvertently touching the Ark of the Covenant even though he had no intent to do so. In this world view whatever threatens the stability of the universe by violating divine plans and decrees is sinful. It was a perfectly reasonable response to a world that was indeed physically threatening, a world in which civilizations could break apart without strong discipline. It contains the essential aspect of consequences for actions, but as a concept of sin does not work very well for us. We expect the laws of physics to hold up no matter what we do or fail to do. We do not have to maintain the

fundamental order of the universe in the physical sense. Civil chaos is another story (and in recent generations we have gained the ability to mess things up a bit in terms of the natural balance at least on our own planet but because of our knowledge of physical laws not our failure to strengthen them through ritual).

Judaism however did not stop with this concept of sin. The most common word used for the concept of sin in the Old Testament is “hatta” which means “to miss the mark,” “to fall short” To fall short in one’s relationships with others, to fall short of the standards for relationships set forth by God. Sin is a matter of not living up to the best.

Sin came to require an act of will, a deliberate defiance of God’s will and law(Adam and Eve defied God but they did not know it was wrong, they did not deliberate). Judaic law exists to provide a framework for the avoidance of sinful acts. Sin was seen as a personal offense against God. God could not be harmed by our sins, but as in the case of David and Bathsheba, God could be saddened and disappointed by them. Significantly the sin of David that upset God most was not adultery but the king’s actions against Uriah. Uriah was not a Jew so we learn that moral behavior is expected toward the outsider just as it is toward one of our own.

There was another type of sin in the Hebrew scriptures “pesa” which dealt specifically with the covenant relationship between God and Israel. These Jewish concepts of sin rooted in the idea of relationship provide much for us to consider, whether or not we believe that standards of behavior emanate from the Deity.

Among the ancient Greeks sin was also seen as a failure to reach the best, but they added an ego aspect. The Greek word we render as ‘sin’ translates as “wanton overestimation of oneself” The placing of one’s personal needs and wants at the center. Greeks did have sins relating to ritual purity and maintenance of taboos, but it was the relationship of self to others that concerned them most. For a culture centered on communities this was a reasonable position to take. Little was more important to a Greek than the polis. While Greeks respected and even celebrated individual achievement, they feared the overvaluing of the individual, the urge for self promotion and personal power and satisfaction. Hubris was an overriding fear, and is at the heart of Greek tragedy.

Christianity added its own wrinkles to the concept of sin. Since Jesus’ sacrifice was supposed to be the perfect atonement and to have absolved humankind of sin and reconcile humanity to God and since sinful behavior on our part did not disappear after the crucifixion there needed to be an explanation. Christian thinkers seem to have gone in two directions: an emphasis on human free will which allowed people to reject the gift of God’s grace or an emphasis on human depravity and therefore the special grace of God in allowing anyone to be saved. There was also a reemphasis on Jewish ideas of temptation, the idea that evil had an existence of its own and was able to appeal to the evil within people and lure us from God. Christianity puts great emphasis on sin as transgression against God, in John’s gospel sin is a sense of separation from God leading to a hatred of God. As God is love so sin is hate. St. Paul emphasized the sinful nature of humanity, seeing it as rooted in our fleshy nature. Goodness grows out of the spirit, evil out of the body. The desires of the body lead us away from concentration on God, the desire to fulfil our physical needs and wants leads to a denial of our total dependence on God. Humans are sinful because we are physical.

St. Augustine defined sin (and he would have known) as word, deed or desire in opposition to the eternal law of God. An entire theology of sin developed and it is rather dreary to read the Church fathers and worthies on this topic, which never seems to have grown tiresome to them. So much ink spilled in the attempt to justify the existence of imperfection in the creation of the Perfect Being. So many ways to try and explain why evil can seduce us away from an all loving

and all good father. Sins are categorized, defined in terms of seriousness and forgivability. Catholicism worked out a whole payment scheme . . . salvation by works, the idea that by doing good deeds one could pay off some of the sin one had committed (sometimes literally “pay off”).

Martin Luther and other Protestant leaders were horrified by this. Luther came to believe that sin was deeply a part of our nature, so deeply that nothing we can do can atone for our sinfulness. Only Jesus could do that and we can only believe in him and his power, salvation through faith alone. Because of our sinful nature, we can only have this faith through God’s grace. This idea led to the development of predestination that there are a very few selected from before the world was created who God will call to himself. Everyone else is toast.

Some believed that the living of a holy life was the outward sign of election. The elect eschewed sin because of their election. Yet others developed the interesting concept that since everything is already settled nothing one can do can harm or help one’s chances. Therefore if you are elect, you may as well do as you please, your going to heaven anyway. If you are not elect, well then nothing you can do can save you from hell, so you too may as well do as you please. Sin was simply the normative state of humanity and insignificant when weighed against the will of God.

All of this is a far cry from what my mother told me as a child. Some things are just bad and some things that are really bad we call sins.

So where does this leave us? Is there any use to which we can put the idea of sin? Well not the elaborate theology of sin and certainly not the idea that the mere fact of being human means that we are in a permanent state of sin. Our faith affirms that human is a good thing to be. Yet as I have often said if we believe that we all can incarnate the divine, we must then also accept that we can incarnate the diabolical. The tension between the two creates the spiritual energy field in which we dwell.

For me the important aspect of sin is our awareness of it. Jewish belief holds that guilt is the consequence of sin and here is why the idea of sin is of value. Guilt is our awareness of wrongdoing.

I would also accept the idea of sin as “falling short” in our relationships with each other and between our communities and with our universe. We often fall short, we do what we should not and do not do what we should. The sense of sin is a wake up call. A reminder that we can do better. It is a sense of sin that makes us not only aware of our wrongdoing but desirous of doing better. We cannot advance without this awareness, without repentance.

The notion of sin is also, at least to my mind, an affirmation of our fundamental goodness. If we were naturally irredeemably evil, then a sense of our evilness would not bother us. That fact that we are bothered means that we both can and wish to live up to our best selves. The worst evil in the world is done by those, like the hell raising pre-destinarians, who have lost the sense of sin.

We may not be comfortable with the old theological words and with the baggage they carry, yet I think they often embody concepts we need to consider. Particularly now near the start of the new year let us be grateful for the sense of sin, the moral compass that reminds us of our errors, that propels us to make amends for the harm we do and prompts us to do better in the future. Grace, whether it comes from without, or as I firmly believe, from within cannot operate without the sense of sin. We are human, we will always sin, that is fall short of the ideal, seek our own benefit at the expense of others, fail to see the long range consequences of short term pleasures. That is our nature, but it is not our entire nature. If it were, we would never know sin. The sense of sin is simply the awareness of our wrongdoing, without it we would never cease wrongdoing. To sin is normal, to repent is normal, to move away from sin is normal.

Jesus once asked, so we are told, “ how can you remove the mote from your brother’s eye when you note not the beam in your own?” We can do others no good if we see only their imperfections and not our own. I fear most those who have lost their sense of being sinners. They either do as they please because they have no concern or set themselves up as pure saviors who may judge and condemn those who fail to be as sinless as themselves.
I am a lot more comfortable with my fellow honest sinners.