

SIN IN THE LIGHT OF TO-DAY

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WITH the progress along scientific lines, the developing of philosophical thought and speculation, and the remolding of religious beliefs and theological dogma, many of the doctrines of the old ecclesiasticisms have undergone material change. Sometimes the alteration has been quite a radical one; for instance, in the view of deity as immanent in contradistinction to the belief in the transcendence of the Godhead. At other times the variation appears to be rather in the method of approach than in the change of the fundamental conception itself. This is apparent in the doctrine of the Incarnation. The fact of an incarnation remains the same, whether it is approached by the dogmatic method of the more conservative advocates or the philosophical method of the liberal theologians, although the latter view raises grave textual problems. As long as the modifications in dogma were confined to the more speculative issues, the immediate effect was not so great; but when these began to touch the ethical and practical problems, naturally there would be certain corresponding results. In the consideration of the question of sin, we touch a decidedly ethical and practical issue. If the conception of sin is so modified that it becomes a necessary concomitant of man's development,—in fact, if it is no more than good in the making,—then, necessarily, the gravity and heinousness of sin disappears; and man's responsibility and guilt for sin is thereby lessened, if not eradicated altogether. Thus, in a case like this, it is the part of wisdom to alter fundamental conceptions with caution, and to look well to the outcome of any change before the modification is made.

Before turning directly to the subject, however, it is necessary, since the question of sin is such a ramified one, to institute a process of elimination, that it may be clearly

understood just which phase of the issue is to be treated. Together with sin comes the query of origin, — both metaphysical and non-temporal and also temporal. Then also theodicy would become a part of a full discussion of the subject. Moreover, the relation of sin to human destiny would be a consideration to be taken into account. But these will be dismissed for the time being, and simply the nature and essence of sin will be discussed, together with some closely allied features which are sometimes confused with sin.

With this view of the subject in mind, we will consider some of the modern definitions and analyses of sin. First, we shall take up the scientific exposition of natural science, the evolutionary solution of the problem. From the point of view of pan-evolution there would be no discontinuity between man and the beast. Sin would be the inheritance received from the animal ancestry, and all that it would be necessary for man to do would be to

"Move upward, working out the beast,
And let the ape and tiger die."

In such a view sin is inevitable, and the responsibility entailed on man for its possession is reduced to the test as to whether he does move upward or not. If he fails to work out the beast that is in him, then he must needs be responsible. Another evolutionary view is that when man was in the transitionary stage from the non-moral to the moral, instead of fulfilling the ideal upon entering the realm of moral consciousness, he came short, he stumbled and fell. With this view comes a real responsibility for sin, and this also reveals to some extent the inherent nature; it is the falling short of the ideal of the type for man and the subservience to the lower instincts.

Besides the scientific explanation of the problem of sin, the philosophical thinkers have also contributed a solution. Kant maintains that there is in man a radical evil principle. Julius Müller sums up the view of Hegel as follows:—"As to the nature of evil, Hegel makes it consist in abstract subjectivity, or, more exactly, in arbitrariness,

— in making self the ruling principle, instead of universal good,— in the subject's recognition of his individuality as that which determines him, so far as it asserts some subjective interest in opposition to moral good." In contradistinction to these subjective views, Schopenhauer finds sin in the constitution of the world, and Rothe seeks the origin in matter.

With the statements of these two great philosophers, we turn to the statements of modern theologians. First to be considered here is Schleiermacher, the father of the modern theological movement. In his conception of the human will, he was a determinist, and attributed all causality to God. The Divine Being, although not considered to be the author of sin in the same way that he was the author of redemption, yet was in some sense its author. This reasoning involves the difficulty of making God the author of that which was in direct contradistinction to his will. The solution offered was this:—

"There are two elements combined in every act of sin, namely, the outgo of a sensuous impulse, and the consciousness of God. We derive both without hesitation from the eternal causality of God; but both taken together do not in themselves constitute sin. Sin only ensues when the determining power of the God-consciousness is inadequate, when compared with the strength of the natural impulse. But we must regard this weakness of the God-consciousness at any given stage of our life, as rising from the gradualness of our spiritual development, and from the conditions of our present state of existence; and the original or ideal perfection of man is not thus done away. But sin, as such, thus resolves itself into a mere negation, and no mention can be made of a productive or generating will of God in connection with it."¹

Thus we see that Schleiermacher closely associates sin with the sensuous nature; it is the outgo of a sensuous impulse which is stronger than the God-consciousness. He also, while rejecting the orthodox doctrine of original sin, substitutes an explanation for the phenomena. He calls it "the collective guilt of the race," and maintains that not

¹ Müller, *The Christian Doctrine of Sin*.

only does sin come from within man, as in the case of the impulse of the sensuous nature, but it also comes from without in this sense of collective guilt; and thereby arises our absolute need of redemption.

While Schleiermacher thus associates sin with the sensuous nature of man, or, rather, explains it on the basis of "the relative weakness of the spirit compared with the sense," Müller finds the principle of sin in selfishness: "The I, that gloomy despot, rules supreme; man stands alone in the world, shut up within himself, and in a chaos of selfish endeavours, preferences and antipathies." Man desires to be his own master. But this principle does not remain negative altogether; there is an outgo in it; there is an attachment to some worldly affection. Then direct acts of sin result by the working of this desire in the heart of man. At first the better self in man, the understanding and the will, is antagonistic to this dominance of the lower impulses, but finally even these surrender to the control of the lower self. All through the various manifestations of sin, this selfish tendency is evident. It is apparent in covetousness, falsehood, pride, love of power, injustice, hatred, and the other forms.

While Müller finds sin in selfishness, Ritschl specifies that its source is ignorance. According to his conception, man begins as a purely natural being with self-seeking propensities, and with a moral will only partially developed; this moral will is a growing entity. Since sin thus has its root in ignorance, the sense of guilt is lessened, for man cannot be held responsible for that which he does not know about. Moreover, it would also seem that sin is unavoidable, for it arises through the natural tendency of man undergoing development. Altogether this theory does not seem to give a very thoroughgoing estimate of the gravity of sin. As for original sin, Ritschl rejects the existence of this form of evil, but instead maintains the presence of social heredity, that is, there is an "inheritance of evil not merely by individual imitation of bad example," as Pelagius would teach, "but by the inbreath-

ing of a tainted life. Our finite fleshly nature surrounds us with temptation while we are unformed; and social pressure proves irresistible."¹

In contradistinction to the foregoing, Tennant finds the secret of sin in the volitional powers. He defines thus: "Sin will be imperfect compliance (in single volitional activity or in character resulting from such activities) with the moral ideal in so far as this is, in the sight of God, capable of apprehension by an agent at the moment of the activity in question, both as to its content and its claim upon him; this imperfect compliance being consequent upon choice of ends of lower ethical worth when the adoption of ends of higher worth is possible, and being regarded in its religious aspect (which may in some cases be wanting)." In this way he feels that sin is differentiated from infirmity, temptation, and any element that is closely connected with sin. Moreover, this gives a sound basis for culpability; for "volition, and volition alone, . . . is sinful."

Turning from British and German theologians to American thought, we find in Finney's account of sin, as given by Wright,² an explanation based principally upon the thought of human depravity. This depravity he differentiates into physical and moral. By physical depravity is meant, when the application is to the mind, that the mental powers are so impaired by nature that "the healthy action of these powers is not sustained." Then moral depravity constitutes a "choice at variance with moral right, and is synonymous with sin." Moreover, besides this state of individual depravity, there is also a condition of universal depravity. This, however, as in the case of the individual, is not due to any inherited evil tendency, but arises as soon as man comes to the age of responsibility or "moral agency," because of the weakness of human nature through physical depravity. Although sin lies essentially in "an act of the will," yet, owing to a "physically

¹ Mackintosh, *Christianity and Sin*.

² Wright, *Charles Grandison Finney*.

depraved" constitution, the presence of external solicitations will, unless inhibited by supernatural agency, result universally in yielding to acts of sin. Thus, in some respects there is an agreement between Finney and Tennant, in that, in both, emphasis is laid upon the will in defining sin; but Finney lays more stress upon human depravity, which is not recognized by Tennant.

Although many other authorities might be cited, yet these give at least some idea of the various interpretations given to sin. In summing up, we have the designation brute inheritance, a radical evil principle in man, arbitrariness, in the constitution of the world, in matter, the feebleness of the God-consciousness, and the consequent assertion of the sensuous impulses, selfishness, ignorance, and in volition. These various theories may be classed first as subjective and objective, or may be defined as those which find sin in the inner life of man and those which find sin in matter. The definitions to be included under the latter head would be the location of sin in the constitution of the world and in matter. These theories, however, do not play a large part in the theological conceptions, so may be set aside as samples of the solution offered by a small number to this problem. In taking up the rest, the question arises whether the nature of sin is not found in the fusion of these various thoughts rather than in the single idea contained in any one of them. Yet there must be some central thought around which the others may cluster. Accordingly we need to search for the underlying principle of sin.

In whatever way we define the nature of sin, there is one fact very evident — that sin is a tragic element in the lives of individuals, states, and nations. This truth comes home with more than usual emphasis now that we are face to face with the greatest war that the world has ever known. Moreover, it is also evident that sin is so deep-rooted in the heart of man that culture alone does not necessarily abate its manifestations and maliciousness. This is witnessed to by the fact that Germany, the land

where *Kultur* has been nourished and fostered, has shown herself capable of committing barbarities equal to those of the uncivilized nations of early days. The day has passed when the shallow optimism of Rousseau could find much acceptance. If man is to be perfected, there must be something deeper than education and changed social and political conditions. In fact, the majority of the theories stated indicate the thought that sin is deep-seated in the heart of man.

With these conclusions it seems that Kant has given the most comprehensive and incisive interpretation of the nature of sin in its inbeing in the heart of man. He says that it is a 'radical evil.' Along with the good in human nature dwells also this evil principle.

In connection with the Kantian account of the sinful nature of man, it is interesting to examine the Pauline hamartiology. In the seventh chapter of Romans Paul gives a very realistic description of his own personal experience under the dominance of this evil principle. It is noticeable all through this chapter that the apostle uses the term *hamartia*; never is there a transfer to the term *hamartemas*. If the two terms were synonymous, it would seem that, since the word is repeated frequently, the latter term would be substituted occasionally; but this is not so. In regard to the word *hamartia*, Thayer states that in the singular it is used to indicate the principle of sin, while the plural denotes acts of sin. This being so, we see, then, that Paul is speaking of an evil principle in his nature. Further we note some facts about this evil principle. In the first place, it did not become a moral factor in the life until it was uncovered and revealed by the law; secondly, it brought in bondage the will of man, so that he was unable to do the things he would; and, thirdly, it had as the place of its activity the flesh, which is used synonymously with the term "members," used in reference to the body, and the ego. From this last statement it has been inferred that Paul was teaching a metaphysical dualism, and consequently the evil nature of the flesh; but we feel that the

dualism is empirical rather than metaphysical. The flesh was "the *locus* of sin's manifestation," but was not inherently evil.

With this last thought of the Pauline delineation in mind, we have suggestions to help us to understand what Tennant terms "the material of sin." Under this designation he places "organic craving, appetite, instinct, impulse, and desire." Then he goes on to say, "These are non-moral, as is also voluntary attitude towards them previously to acquisition of conscience; yet without them there could not be sin. In that pleasure is associated with their satisfaction, they supply the basic incentives to sin; and in that they are called into play in independence of moral considerations, their presence imposes on every moral being a lifelong moral conflict, failure in which, at any point, is sin. This is the ultimate 'explanation' of sin. These propensities are also neutral in respect of the moral value of what the will may construct out of them, and necessary, i.e. biologically essential and normal, and psycho-physically inevitable." This description also exerts a reflex influence and throws light upon the Pauline passage. The term "flesh," then, is in a state of transition from a physical designation to an ethico-theological sense. The apostle is indicating certain tendencies of our physical nature which serve as the base of activity for sin; they are the weaker elements in our organism. In and through these elements the radical evil in man becomes manifest. Then it is that the 'sacredness of the personality' of man is violated, the high ideal for which man was constituted is blighted, and the lower nature assumes a dominance.

At this point it might be objected that, inasmuch as these appetencies of our nature are non-moral, and in man there are principles of good as well as of evil, then the power of volition might be asserted, to prevent these elements becoming the avenues for the activity of sin. But the fact is that the will is more or less enslaved under this dominance of the radical evil. This is evidenced by the

Pauline statements that it was not possible to do the things that the moral reason approved. Moreover, Schleiermacher indicates a similar thought when he speaks of the weakness of "the determining power of the God-consciousness as compared with the strength of the natural impulse." Furthermore, Müller states that finally the will, and even the understanding, come under the dominance of the lower nature. In addition to these authorities, we cite the evidence which history and experience afford, that, apart from the surrender of the will in obedience to the higher Divine Will, there does not seem to be the power in man to resist the dominance of the lower nature. Man only becomes free in the truest sense when he yields in submission to Him who can make him "free indeed." When this assertion is made, however, it is not intended that the thought should be conveyed that in the dominance of the lower nature man shows himself forth in the entirety of evil of which his nature may be capable; but that, along with the virtues that may exist, there is also a certain enslavement, more evident in some natures than in others,—at times it is quite veiled, and again it is quite apparent.

Having now analyzed the nature of sin in its essence, its place of activity, and its resultant effect on the will, another point is to be noted—the differentiation between sin in its essence and in its manifestation. The evil may be in the nature; but when it breaks forth into an overt act, it is sin manifested. These overt acts are collectively designated sins. With the repetition of acts, habits are formed, and then the habits constitute a character, and thus we have a man whom we designate as a sinner. The outward manifestation of this character is manifold. At one time animal passions and impulses are the dominant traits, at another arbitrariness, and again selfishness or pride; but all have their root in the evil in man's nature. Thus we feel that the various analyses of sin are fused in the more comprehensive term, unless it be the Ritschlian finding concerning sin, that it is due to ignorance, which is so distinctive that it requires to be treated by itself.

Before passing on, however, to the discrimination between sin and certain closely allied elements, it will be well to note the relation between the view that sin is a radical evil in the heart of man to the teaching of Jesus. The teaching of Paul is more dialectic; but, quoting Goguel, "la prédiction de Jésus est extrêmement simple, complètement étrangère à toutes les subtilités de la théologie."¹ Accordingly the question might arise whether this designation of a radical evil in man is simply a dialectic subtlety or whether it is also found in the more simple accounts of sin given by Jesus. First there comes to mind that passage which says, "If ye then being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children," etc. Here it would seem that man is described as tainted by sin with evil inherent in his nature. Moreover, there is also the account of the source of sinful deeds. It is said that they come from within, out of the heart of man. If there were not a fountain of corruption within, there would not surely issue forth such turgid streams as the text goes on to describe (Matt. xv. 19). These references will suffice to show that at least the teaching of Jesus is in harmony with the Pauline hamartiology on this point, and consequently also in harmony with the Kantian postulate.

Now that the relation of the teaching of Jesus to that of Paul and Kant has been established, there remains to be considered the differentiation between sin and infirmity, also sin and ignorance, sin and temptation, and sin and guilt. There are certain infirmities which are concomitant with man's present state of existence. There are defects in understanding, so that he cannot always fully grasp the content of the highest ideal for his life; there are defects in judgment in that he mistakes the means to attain this ideal; there are defects in the imaginative powers and moral discrimination in that he constructs that to be a good which is not a good. Besides these, exist many other defects which more or less hinder the individual in the realization of that which is highest and best; but these

¹ Goguel, *L'Apôtre Paul et Jésus Christ*.

are not sins. They cause mistakes and involuntary violations of the supreme ideal for human personality, but there is no volitional moral element in them. The purpose and motive of the heart may be sincere and upright, that is, the errors may arise from a pure source; there is not necessarily an evil in the background of their production.

Moreover, sin is to be differentiated from ignorance. Here we would revert again to the Pauline delineation in Rom. vii. The first thing that we noted was that the evil in the heart of the apostle did not become a moral factor until it was revealed by the law, that is, knowledge had to enter before sin was made known, and figured as a moral entity. In keeping with this are statements made by Tennant. He says: "Mere objective incongruence of an act with a standard does not constitute that act immoral; the act may rather be simply non-moral, like the behavior of animals or of lifeless things. The human infant is non-moral relatively to all moral ideals, and the untaught heathen relatively to all but the crudest. . . . Sin, then, is not 'transgression of the law,' but transgression of a moral law by an agent who, at the time, is in a position to know the content of the law and that it is binding on himself. This time-reference is important." On the other hand, while there is this ignorance that is innocent, there may be an ignorance which is guilty; so that it would not necessarily follow that all ignorance is sinless. The difference lies in the fact whether the individual or individuals have had the opportunity of knowing the moral and religious standard of life. Accordingly we see that when Ritschl grounds sin in ignorance, he reaches no serious view of evil, and confuses moral distinctions.

Again, in the discriminations of moral and non-moral entities, a distinction should be made between sin and temptation. Solicitation to evil carries no moral turpitude with it. There is a vast difference between solicitation to evil and yielding to evil. Temptations constitute part of the common lot of mankind. Experience testifies to this. So also does the Scripture: "There hath no temp-

tation taken you, but such as is common to man" (1 Cor. x. 13). Moreover, an outstanding proof that solicitation to evil is not sinful lies in the fact that Jesus was tempted; and the sinlessness of Jesus is admitted even by those who would hesitate to avow his divinity.

Finally, a line needs to be drawn between sin and guilt. Guilt entails accountability; so the question resolves itself into this, When is sin accountable? Overt acts of sin which have had the consent of the individual would always be accountable. But when we come to the fact of the radical evil principle in man, the question is a more subtle one. It would hardly be considered that man is responsible for that which he has had no part in infusing into his nature; but, on the other hand, he might be responsible for allowing its dominance when he sees the possibility of a higher life through the mystical union with Christ. Thus while sin and guilt are very closely allied, they are not identical, nor does one necessarily follow from the other, although very frequently they are coexistent.

The nature of sin in its essence having been discussed, and its element set off from closely allied features, one more question might be considered; and that is the turpitude of sin. Since in these days there is more or less indifference to the heinousness of sin, it is well to consider whether there are not certain facts which reveal the exceeding sinfulness of sin as well as certain tendencies that would obscure its true nature. The emphasis in theology on the fatherhood of God ought to arouse in man the sense of his ingratitude and utter selfishness when he separates himself from the supreme love of the Divine Being, who thus would receive him as a son. The transgression against the love of a father ought to set sin in a bolder relief than the transgression of law for which one must give an account to the Righteous Judge, which was the dominating conception in the older theologies. Moreover, the emphasis in recent philosophy on personality ought again to awaken the sense of the turpitude of sin. This evaluation of personality is in keeping with the teaching of Jesus. Fletcher

states: "We have seen how the Gospels record that Jesus treated human personality, even in the smallest child or the most abandoned outcast, as of inestimable worth. He discerned within each human being the potentialities of personality. Beneath the most forbidding exterior there were lying latent powers of goodness and of service, only waiting for the regenerative influence of the Spirit to bring them to life."¹ With a reawakening in modern times to the reality of personality, there should also be the desire to develop this personality to its highest, and the corresponding sense of failure and loss when this personality is violated in its possibilities of being renewed in the image of God. Thus we see that sin, rightly estimated, is still a tragic evil, written deep in the heart and life of man.

¹Fletcher, *New Testament Psychology*.