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THE IDEA OF SIN

In this month's magazine Mr. Eugene Halliday writes on, "The Idea of Sin."

The unfamiliarity of some of the ideas in the article means it cannot be taken in on a single reading. It needs to be read a number of times and I hope many of you will find this exercise interesting and worthwhile.

THE IDEA OF SIN

by EUGENE HALLIDAY

At the Church of St. Michael and All Angels on January 3rd a play was presented in which God's creation of the world was treated as "the Greatest Sin". The shock value of this idea was intended to provoke, and did provoke, some strong discussion. But the mind that believes in the unshakableness of God's Truth is not afraid to re-examine itself, its accepted ideas and beliefs.

In the discussion following the play there was evidence of differences of usage of the word "sin". In theological thought this word is often used to translate a Greek word meaning "missing the mark". Whilst this usage of the word is quite acceptable in certain contexts, there is another possible significance for it, a significance embodied in the thought of the play.

The English word "sin" is derived from the old English "synn", which was generally used to signify "wrong doing, injury, or hostility". But many etymologists connect the word with "sooth", meaning "true", and take it from a particular form of the base "es", meaning "to be". In this sense "sin" is "that which is really true, that which is revealed in confession".

In confession one is supposed to tell the truth, to disclose one's real aim, one's real motivation. To reveal one's true motive for a given act, in this sense, is to reveal one's "sin". "Sin" here simply means "real motive for an act". When so used, the words "secret sin" would mean "hidden motive" or "concealed aim".

Here we have two different meanings for the word "sin". One the most general, in which it means "wrong doing"; and the other, less often used, in which it means "real motivation for an act". How are we to reconcile these two opposed uses of the word? And are there other uses which might be legitimate?

Before we proceed with our examination of this problem, we must warn ourselves of a dangerous thing, a tendency of human thought which often leads the mind astray. The tendency we call "mental inertia".

By "mental inertia" we mean the mind's tendency to run along old established lines of thought, its tendency to resist change, to continue along lines of least resistance already established, to cling to familiar patterns of ideas, and old, comfortable ways of looking at things.

History repeatedly shows us that new truths are resisted as productive of mental discomfort. New truths may require new mental attitudes, changes of mind and heart, and perhaps even of

behaviour. And all changes cost energy expenditure. As the German proverb says "Denken is schwer"—Thinking is difficult.

Christ's new truths, brought to the peoples of his day, demanded from them a change of mind, heart and action. And this change required the expenditure of more energy, and the possession of more insight than most of the people of his day possessed.

Even the people's leaders could not assimilate Christ's new truths. Nor could they accept the implications of his demonstration of his New Way. Christ died on the cross because his new truths were too demanding, too disturbing for the governments and religious authorities of his day.

But not only governments and authorities have inertias. Individuals also tend to have fixed attitudes of mind, emotional response patterns that spring too quickly into action, established physical behaviour patterns too hard to change.

But at last man's mental inertias must give in to Truth, for "The Truth is great, and shall prevail". And those of us who have the energy and the desire to find the Truth will find it earlier than those who do not.

Those who, out of inertia or fear, defend their old attitudes, will merely delay for a time Truth's approach to their own minds; they will not postpone its arrival for ever, nor for others.

In discussing anything whatever it is most important for us to remember the following rule: **The meaning or significance of words is always to persons.** This means that words have no significance except to persons **intending** by those words to refer to something. If a man uses the word "cat" it is his **intention** which determines whether the word refers to a certain kind of animal or to a certain kind of whip.

Human language was invented by human beings for human purposes. Language arose because of the will of human beings to communicate with each other. Human beings perceive things, see, hear, feel, taste and smell things, and having done so, make sounds to symbolise them and their actions and inter-relations. By means of these sounds, which we call words, and their correspondent written symbols, human beings communicate with each other. "Communication" was originally a getting together for purposes of self-defence or for mutual aid.

Let us now return to our discussion of the idea of "sin".

As we have seen the word is used in theological thinking as meaning "missing the mark". The assumption here is there is a mark or target to be hit, and that it is missed. The mark or target is taken to be God's will for men. The missing of this

mark is generally taken to be the substitution of man's target for God's.

Now, the actions of men are of two kinds: those in which there is deliberate conscious intent to hit some target, or fulfil some aim, and those in which there is no such intent.

We tend to hold a man responsible for the actions he performs with conscious deliberate intent. We tend not to hold him responsible for the results of his actions which he does not intend. Where harm is deliberately done we talk of malicious damage. Where malicious damage is done we tend to think that the person doing it is an "evil" person.

Where a man accidentally does harm, we tend not to hold him responsible for it, and we may even feel sorry for him and express sympathy for him. We know that the world is so constituted that not all the effects of our actions can be foreseen. "The road to hell is paved with good intentions" says the proverb, and Christ says "Sorrow must come, and woe to him by whom." That "sorrow must come" is a statement about the nature of the material temporal world.

In view of this, God, who created man, and knows man's deficiencies, does not fail to make allowances for man's unavoidable errors. "He who judges us is He who made us."

The unconscious, non-deliberate act, the unwilled act is not a sin. Only when a man has a conscious aim or target, and acts deliberately to attain it, can we talk of sin. **The idea of sin contains the idea of conscious, deliberate aim.** But it contains also something else.

Remembering the dangers of mental inertia, and being unafraid of the attacks of untruth upon God's eternal Truth, which is indestructible, let us now consider every deliberate, conscious act as a sin, and especially so **if that act is performed without prior consultation with, and permission from, every being that act may affect.**

Let us repeat this definition: A sin is any act deliberately and consciously performed without prior consultation with, and permission from, every being that act may affect.

Now, before creation God was wholly in Himself, non-manifest, not expressing His creative power. Thus there were as yet no creatures in existence. Therefore God could not consult with the creatures. He could not gain their permission to create them.

True, we may say that God in His omniscience, His all-knowingness, could see the effect of His creative action upon His creatures, could foresee the kind of discussion He might have had

with them, could foresee their reactions to his creative intent and to the joys and sorrows that would result from it. Yet His foreseeing these things could not be the same thing as actual discussion with the creatures, as **they would have experienced it from their own viewpoint.**

God, then, in His first creative act, acted consciously and deliberately without prior consultation with, and permission from, His creatures. Under our definition of "sin" as given above, if we are prepared to accept it, God here sinned. If we are not prepared to accept the definition, the fact will remain. And if we cannot understand the meaning of this fact, we will not be able to attain the kind of relation with God that comes when we see the unavoidability of the problem presented to Him by the fact of His own eternity and infinite creative power.

Prior to creation, in His all-knowing mind, God foresaw the effect upon His creatures of His creative act. He saw the joys and sorrows that would result from creation, the happiness and misery, the pleasures of healthy life, the pains and agonies of disease, that would afflict His creatures. Yet He willed to create; for His own purpose, His own reason, His own definition of Good, He willed it

Now, if a man consciously and deliberately does an act for his own defined purpose, and his action produces various effects, pleasant and painful, on other beings, the beings that receive pain from his acts tend to think that his action should be modified so that it brings pleasure.

If a scientist said to us, "I have examined the possibilities of the life process and found that life cannot be lived without undergoing a certain amount of pain, and I have nevertheless decided to create some living creatures," we would probably tend to view him with suspicion. If he persisted in his purpose we would tend to try to protect ourselves against his future actions, in case he should decide to interfere with our lives and purposes. If he continued in his purposes and extended his actions so that they began to impinge on our lives, we would probably tend to define him as a "sinner."

By "sinner" would here be meant any being who consciously and deliberately performs an act of which we do not approve.

It is some such thought-process that in certain minds has led either to the belief that God is an arbitrary being with no respect for persons, or to atheism.

What we human beings approve of depends on two factors: our natural response, and our education or training. These two factors, though in principle, simple, are of tremendous importance.

The New Testament refers to these two factors, one as the

“natural man”, the “man of flesh”, the other as the “spiritual man”, the man of Truth or principle.

We must now remind ourselves of the kind of response our “natural self” tends to give to any experience. If the experience is pleasant the natural self tends to accept it, and, if possible, to repeat it. If the experience is unpleasant or painful, the natural self tends to reject it, and, if possible, to avoid its repetition. In our natural self we tend to react just as animals do, we tend to pursue pleasures and to avoid pains.

But in our “spiritual self”, which comes to birth in us from the truths of God revealed to us by great religious and ethical teachers, we find a power that enables us under certain conditions to forego pleasures, and to accept unpleasant or even painful experiences. Our natural self may resent the interference of the spiritual self, but our spiritual self is enabled to persist in its interference whenever its ethical or religious sensitivity requires it.

The natural self cannot understand God or God’s problem with creation and with His creatures. The natural self wants only to experience pleasure and to avoid pain. **It is not a function of the natural self to understand**, either its own processes or God’s. Spiritual understanding does not belong to the natural self.

But the spiritual self **can** understand. It can understand both itself and God, for “the spirit searches even the deep things of God”. St. Paul said that he had a doctrine of “strong meat” or “solid food” for full-grown men, not fit for babes. The spiritual self can understand this doctrine, the natural self cannot.

The natural self tends to interpret as “sin” any act which reduces its pleasures or increases its pain. The natural self’s “ideal” life, if it could define it, would be a life consisting entirely of pleasure, absolutely void of pain. If too many pleasures are taken away from the natural self, or too many pains imposed upon it, the natural self is ready to deny God’s justice, or His existence.

The spiritual self knows that the natural self seeks pleasure and avoids pain. It knows also that man himself, at this stage of his evolution, is still deeply enmeshed in the physical body which is the natural self’s vehicle.

The spiritual self knows, therefore, that it has a very hard battle to fight in that vehicle, a battle in which no quarter or mercy will be given from the side of the natural, physical self.

But the spiritual self is not afraid, for it knows that “perfect love casts out fear.” The spiritual self lives in perfect love for all God’s works. The spiritual self is not afraid to examine the ideas presented to it by new experiences. The spiritual self is not afraid to re-examine its terms, to analyse and refine its existing interpretations of a word.

The spiritual self knows that when God created the world He did so necessarily without prior consultation with, or permission from, His creatures. The spiritual self knows that when a man acts without prior consultation with, and permission from other beings, he "sins." The spiritual self is not afraid to apply the same concept to God, for the spiritual self knows that God will understand the application.

God comprehended before creation, that when, as a result of His creative activity, human beings came into existence and began to experience not only joy and pleasure, but also pain and displeasure, some of them would tend to doubt His wisdom, His compassion, or even His very existence. He comprehended these things and accepted them. He still comprehends them, still accepts them. They are part of the logical implications of His Eternal Being.

Man's freedom derives from the divine spirit breathed into him from God. God is the source of man's freedom of choice. Only a being of free choice can sin, for sin is conscious deliberate aim defined and pursued without prior consultation with the beings on whom the action arising from this aim may have affect.

Because man, as a limited creature, cannot possibly foresee all the effects of his actions on all beings, therefore all his actions are sin, and his sins have degrees of seriousness.

Because God, prior to creation, could not consult with His creatures and gain their agreement with His purpose, therefore, when He created, He sinned. The justification of this sin will ultimately be seen in the perfected humanity that He will produce, a humanity mature enough to be able to live on St. Paul's "solid food," the proper diet for "full-grown men," for men of full personal response-ability.

In this discussion, necessarily short from lack of space, we have considered some aspects of the idea of Sin. If we are prepared to meditate a little on Hamlet's problem "To be, or not to be" we may see an application to our discussion. For God the problem was not "To be, or not to be," but "To create, or not to create". God is eternal Absolute Power, All-Intelligence, All Compassion. He cannot get rid of Himself, cannot cease to be what He eternally is. If He had not created He would have inhibited His own creativity.

If we do not forgive Him for His creative activity, for His bringing **us** into being, our Sin is greater than His.

And the spiritual self in man knows that God has forgiven man.

God's "Sin", that is, His real motive for His Creation of the world, of creatures, and of humanity, was, and is, the bringing into being of images of Himself, that is, the reproduction of Himself in human beings made divine by the action of His grace. Humanity perfected will be God incarnated.

The perfecting process through which humanity must evolve **cannot be experienced without some pain and suffering.**

In the beginning God warned man not to presume to distinguish between "good" and "evil". "Of the tree of knowledge of good and evil thou shalt not eat." But man disobeyed, and since that day he has presumed, in spite of his finity and limited knowledge, to define "good" and "evil" in his own terms, and for his own purposes.

Today, in this era of the "New Morality" and the "Permissive Society" it becomes necessary for us to re-think all our old ideas. Let us not be afraid to do so. We shall survive our re-assessment.