



SIN: A BRIEF HISTORY

Posted on May 1, 2018 by S.N. Cairn



What is sin? Is it merely religious transgression, or is it the very foundation of human culture? If we understand culture to be the expression of humanity's search for meaning, then the idea of sin is the nub of all that makes us human: our need for morality, our need for private choice and private space, our erotic desires and pleasures, our fears, our notions of good and evil, right and wrong, and our religious hopes.

Because sin is an intensely human experience (the intriguing notion that other living things also sin disappeared very quickly in the course of civilization), it is found in all parts of the world, and from the very earliest recorded history.

The notion of sin is found in the earliest of human cultures; perhaps sin is the earliest expression of human desire, for it sets us apart from the instinctive drive of the animal world. Desire is very different from instinct because it is constructed by individual and social necessity.

The sinful individual is intensely human, because to sin is to be wrong, which implies the knowledge of rightness. The first stirrings, the pale residue of sin may be discerned in the most ancient of human expressions – animism. What does sin mean for an animistic culture?

This question brings into focus the interplay of the cosmological ramifications of personal choice and action – our deeds when right are constructive; when wrong are sinful and destructive. But for the shaman, sin is an imbalance between the community and forces that may bring harm. This imbalance may be remedied by ritual propitiation alone.

Thus was sin associated with personal and social obligations, wherein it became the duty of the community to restore the correct balance between the social group (the humans) and the more powerful forces inherent in the world at large.

When we begin to look civilization, we become more deeply involved with sin, because sin becomes not only a communal problem but an individual one. Therefore, the earliest civilizations (Mesopotamia, Egypt, India and China) saw sin in legalistic terms, as a contractual breach, for it was a transgression against society – individual action destroys the community.

This gave birth to the various law-codes which were the very first to evaluate and quantify sin – in order to establish remedial redress. This led to the establishment of the idea of paying for one's sins; that is, the association of sin with personal responsibility.

Once this connection with the individual was established (as, for example, described in The Epic of Gilgamesh), then the idea of sin was translated into religious terms, in that the individual could sin against society and against the gods, both of which involved different methods of payment.

The Greeks saw sin as *harmatia* (literally, "to go amiss"). This view brought the notion of personal shortcoming into the equation, in that sin resulted when a person had personal defects (such as hubris).

This led to the development of ethics (duty, what ought to be done); that is, human beings should strive to be perfect. When they stop striving to be perfect, they sin.

Thus, with the Greeks, sin acquired philosophical shape; it was no longer misguided personal action, an upsetting of some sacred balance, or a willful act which could be compensated – rather, sin became a method whereby one could understand what was good for human beings and for society.

The Romans maintained this idea, adding only the concept of civic identity – sin (*peccatum*) became deviation from the norm, from what the larger population maintained and believed.

It is with the Jews that sin takes on questions of purity and defilement. The Hebrew term for sin, *avera*, is closely associated with another Hebrew term, *avon* ("lust").

Here, we see for the first time the association of defilement with desire and thus with sin – a sinful person lusts after more than what he or she has and thus becomes physically dirty, an outcast, since his desire leads him or her astray, and he or she becomes defiled (who should not be touched), and who needs not only ritual cleansing, but also spiritual cleansing. Here lies the link of sin with evil.

For the Hebrews, sin became an offence against God, because a lustful person sought more than what God has allotted him or her. Further, it is with the Jews that sin becomes associated with atonement, through prayer. Here, an intriguing link with sin and language is established, in that it is possible to erase defilement by verbal redress. The importance of the word for the Jews (akin to the Greek concept of language) becomes part of the process of overcoming sin. Thus, we see for the first time, the link with repentance, which will be fully validated by Christianity.

The association of sin with evil stems neither from the Greeks nor the Jews; this legacy is found further east – in ancient Iran. The idea of good and evil (the Devil) is the contribution of Zoroaster, the semi-legendary sage of Persia of long ago, who taught that falsehood is the greatest sin, which can be overcome by truth, and that sin the emanation of the evil forces of the universe, who seek to subvert the inherent goodness within humankind.

The torch of the Roman empire passed to the Christian West, and the Greco-Roman and Judeo-Christian concepts of sin (falsehood, deviation and defilement) were incorporated into Christian culture – but with a twist – in that humankind was now regarded as sinful not because of personal acts or deeds, but because of their state of being – that is, a person was born sinful, through no fault of his or her own. It was with Christianity that sin became solely associated with theology.

Since sin was innate, the need for atonement was therefore far greater, in that individual deeds were no longer enough – God Himself had to step in (through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ).

Further, the only way sin could be innate was to regard the soul itself as sinful. But because God was also now associated with sin, the notion of atonement was superseded by the concept of repentance (one had now only to trust God and recognize that one's soul was indeed sinful and therefore needed God's help).

Consequently, various human failings humans were seen not as being harmful to the body and the community, but to the soul itself. Sin no longer upset the balance, or defiled a person – it now robbed the soul of eternal life. Christianity gave sin a far larger role in human life than it previously had had, in that sin was now associated with redemption.

The Christian notion of innate sinfulness led to further refinement of sin: the association of sin with hell (the proverbial Seven Deadly Sins), fear, sexuality, pleasure, and desire.

However, in the Christian scheme of things, and in a paradoxical way, not every instance of sex, pleasure and desire were sinful – only the utter engrossment in their pursuit was sinful, which made the person forget the true purpose of life (faith in God).

Thus, sin became a measuring rod of how religious, how faithful, how honest, how true, how noble a person could be.

Is the concept of sin still relevant? In our age where religion and morality are no longer central to the way we live, does sin exist today? We have associated it with global morality (greenhouse gases, rampant consumerism, greed, genocide).

How will we continue look at sin in the burgeoning technological age? Despite our desire to be pluralistic, we are inheritors of a very clear understanding of sin (as traced in the previous chapters), to which we resolutely adhere. Sin is now firmly connected with guilt (the result of excessive pleasure, or hedonism). Perhaps this perception of sin fits our age of unbounded consumerism and materialism.

As for the future, it is interesting to note that we have projected sin into outer space – we seek new worlds because we innately fear that we have irreparably destroyed our own.

Are we unwittingly enacting the myth of the expulsion from the Garden of Eden? Is the exploration of outer space an act of redemption, atonement, for the way we have defiled the earth? Is the realization of our sin (the selfish way that we continue to live) make us hope and dream that we can begin again on some distant planet? And will we take sin along with us?

Sin is still firmly grounded in the need for salvation, even if we understand salvation in secular terms –

that is, the desire to redeem ourselves from our own willful and destructive acts.

To trace the history of sin is to trace the history of humanity itself. The idea of sin has been part of the human experience from the very beginning.

In fact, we may conclude from this history that each culture and civilization has understood sin in its own way; or rather created sin in its own image.

Perhaps human beings need sin in order to be human, since ultimately sin is the conceptualization of frailty and imperfection – and the strong desire to transcend both these shortcomings sometime in the future.

The photo shows, "The Remorse of Orestes," by William Adolphe Bouguereau, painted in 1862.

