

# The Changing Paradigms of Sin

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## *I: My own experience of living with sin*

Since my experience is probably typical of many Catholics, it might be a useful exercise to begin this paper by sharing with you my own personal journey through various understandings or paradigms of sin. I believe it has been a journey of healing, because my earlier understanding of sin was very crippling and has probably left me scarred for life.

DISOBEDIENCE is the word which captures my initial paradigm of sin. While this model presumed an internal dimension to disobedience, the *external* dimension loomed far more important. Psychologically 'disobedience to authority' was the dominant notion. This was emphasized by the fact that the gravity of the sin was often determined by the commanding or prohibiting authority. Certain actions were commanded or forbidden under pain of mortal sin. Other actions, admittedly, were regarded as mortal sins because the 'matter' was grave in itself. Yet even here the determination of grave matter was sometimes a matter of decision by authority—no light matter in the area of sexual sin, for instance! In my teens I once had to write out 100 times: 'Tintinabulum vox Dei est'. That says it all! The 'disobedience' paradigm, in the form I absorbed it, was *individualistic, act-centred* and *voluntarist*. It offered no help in developing a capacity for moral decision-making or conscience-formation.

SIN AS PERSON-INJURING might summarize the next phase of my understanding of sin. I began to have a deeper appreciation that actions were sinful, not because they were forbidden (whether by God, Church, or State) but because they were *person-injuring*. Moreover, person was not just an individualist term. There was an essential social dimension to the human person and this began to introduce the social aspect of sin. The phrase which summed up this paradigm most aptly for me is found in Aquinas's *Summa contra Gentiles*, III cap. 133, and can be loosely paraphrased: 'God is not offended by us except insofar as we harm ourselves and others.' This development in my understanding was healthy and healing, even though at the time my appreciation of it was rather *essentialist, unhistorical* and still too *act-centred*.

HEART CONDITION describes the next paradigm that affected my thinking. I was greatly influenced by the notion of the *fundamental option* with its focus on the centrality of the human person as *agent* in sin. It reflected a whole understanding of the relationship between the person we are and what we do. It recognized the deeper level of 'self' within each of us—what Biblical writers call the 'heart'. This 'self' or heart could only come to be, grow, develop and change through the raw material of life

lived interactively in the world and in relationship with other selves. At the same time this paradigm recognised the ambiguity of human actions. They could 'reveal' the heart; they could even 'form' or 'deform' it; and yet they could also 'conceal' the heart and be inconsistent with it. The 'heart condition' paradigm insisted that the prime meaning of sin was to be found in terms of our personal relationship with God. And it stressed that the working out of this relationship operated through the stuff of human living. This was a far cry from the voluntarism of the 'disobedience' paradigm. This paradigm offered a way through conscience dilemmas at the time of *Humanae Vitae*. It helped people believe that their hearts could be in the right place even though they were going against a strong and clear authoritative statement of the Church. Admittedly, in some cases this was unsatisfactory since it was reduced to a kind of 'good intention' ethic. Nevertheless, in many cases the 'heart disease' paradigm offered something for people to hold on to when they felt convinced that what they were doing was not sinful, while the Church (and perhaps their own *superego* too) seemed to be insisting that it was sinful and that they lacked the necessary theological understanding to realise that dissent might be a legitimate option for them.

SIN AS DISEASE gets some of the flavour of the next paradigm that influenced me. Its main focus is not on sinful actions but on the roots of those actions deep within us. It is concerned about where sin comes from within us. It recognises an important aspect of the truth in the assertion that it is not our sinful actions which make us 'sinners'; rather we act sinfully because we are 'sinners'. This links in with a consideration of what is meant by 'original sin' and the various attempts to re-think this notion. I was particularly influenced by two aspects of the disease paradigm at this time. One was the basic Christian truth of our acceptance by God and how we find this very hard to accept through a radical incapacity to accept ourselves as people of worth. Sin in its origin is this alienation from ourselves, an alienation which poisons our relationships with each other. The only way out of this alienation is through the experience of being loved and valued just as we are. This experience can be available to us through our positive human relationships. It is also the core of what we mean by faith in God. Jesus came to convince us that God has faith in us. For this faith to be real, we need to be in touch with the unfaith deep within us. This links in with the second influence that affected me—the spirituality of Ignatius of Loyola, which I encountered especially through the privileged experience of a 30-day retreat. At first I was put off by the opening week with its emphasis on one's radical sinfulness. However, gradually it began to take on meaning for me. Put in rather traditional terms, 'salvation' is not 'good news' if we do not believe we are in need of being saved. I found the 'sin as disease' paradigm helpful in moving away from a too act-centred and morality-based view of sin. It also enabled people to eradicate certain guilt feelings that had no connection with real life and which had been induced in them by an unhealthy Catholic

approach to sin. Nevertheless, it failed to draw attention to the reality which should provoke real guilt in the human family, namely, the horrific suffering inflicted on our fellow human beings by all the dehumanizing factors at play in our world today.

**SIN AS SYSTEMATIC DEHUMANIZATION.** This is a more radical version of the 'person-injuring' paradigm. The dehumanization of our brothers and sisters which is taking place in so many ways today is the reality of Christ's crucifixion in our contemporary world. In one sense, it reveals the horror of sin by high-lighting the powerlessness of God in the face of humanity's sin. In another sense, it reveals God at work in the myriad ways in which those who are victims of sin and oppression are empowered to bring about the redemption so much needed by them, by their oppressors and by our world today. In the 'systematic dehumanization' paradigm, purely theoretical discussion of sin is useless and almost blasphemous. Yet it is not an anti-intellectual paradigm. Theology is crucial, but a theology of sin must start from the reality of sin as it is experienced today and not from the way people have thought about sin in past ages. That is why it is concerned to 'name' the dehumanizing presence wherever it is found in our contemporary society.

**HISTORICAL-CULTURAL REALISM.** This is how I would describe the next paradigm to influence my understanding of sin. As the name suggests, there are two dimensions involved in this paradigm. The first is the link between sin and historically existing reality. In a sense, historically existing reality has an autonomous existence. Certain institutions, structures, ways of acting etc. are *de facto* humanizing or dehumanizing. This is not a matter of good will. It is simply how things are. Conversion of heart is no substitute for an accurate understanding of how things are and how they operate. Morality cannot by-pass reality. Nevertheless, reality as we experience and come to understand it is always culturally and historically conditioned. That is why I have called this paradigm 'historical-cultural realism'. This allows for the possibility that there is a variety of ways in which basic human values can be realized in human life. Hence, it recognizes the possibility of ethical pluralism. Consequently, sin, seen as *person-injuring* and/or *systematic dehumanization*, needs to be recognized as being to some extent contextual and relative to culture and history. In a sense, the 'historical-cultural realism' paradigm goes hand in hand with the previous one and complements it. The previous paradigm focussed on the reality of sin revealed through the presence of suffering. It called for redemption i.e. the removal of whatever is causing this suffering. Hence, in South Africa it calls for the abolition of the system of apartheid. However, it does not immediately make clear the way forward. The 'historical-cultural realism' paradigm brings out the fact that the way forward demands *both* 'good will' (i.e. not just vague good intention but real commitment to the basic human values involved) *and* reality-based discernment of the means appropriate to achieve these values in this particular historical and cultural situation.

## *II: Personal story and theological reflection*

I found it very encouraging to note the convergence between what I have experienced in my own personal story and Patrick McCormick's theological reflection in his recent analysis of models of human sinfulness (cf. McCormick 1988). Referring to my 'disobedience' paradigm of sin as the 'juridical and individualistic' model of sin, McCormick writes:

The analogy which dominated Catholic morality was that of sin as an act committed by a free and competent individual which violated some law of God, Church or State. Sin was a crime. And the sinner was the relatively isolated and therefore free individual who had committed a crime. Employing such juridical and individualistic models ..., moral theology initiated its task with an analysis of 'objective' human acts, abstracted somewhat artificially from the context and story of persons performing them, moved on to an evaluation of the culpability of the identified individual sinner and brought the process to a conclusion with assignment of an appropriate penance. (p. 69)

He notes that this model of sin works as a powerful force for conservatism. Sin is an act of rebellion against God's law, mediated through Church or State. This privatized notion of sin 'renders any criticism of civil authority an immoral act and any criticism of ecclesial power a crime...' (p. 66)

It is often claimed that people today have lost their sense of sin. McCormick believes that in the discarding of a voluntaristic disobedience approach to sin 'a sense of sin is not so much being lost as being born' (p. 63). It is, in fact, the 'disobedience' model which has inculcated a very weak sense of sin. It has played a 'disassociative' role, providing the self-proclaimed 'just' with a false sense of innocence. Innocence is achieved by declaring other people guilty. This is the blindness and self-justification of the Pharisees so strongly condemned by Jesus. This same sentiment is echoed in McCormick's assertion that 'it may well be that traditional models served the function of relieving large segments of the human community of any real sense of responsibility for the presence of sin in the world.' (p. 71)

McCormick names as 'violence' the attitude that the voluntarist disobedience model inculcated in us when we were conditioned as a Christian community to believe that missing Mass, or an act of masturbation, or omitting to put a drop of water into the chalice, were mortal sins and merited eternal damnation. Such a model of sin was strong on fostering guilt-feelings and a judgemental attitude. Any sense of sin it produced had little to do with real life.

In searching for models of sin which are in tune with how we experience and see life today, McCormick looks at two models in particular—sin as 'disease'; and 'social' or 'cooperative' sin.

As well as noting its strong biblical roots, he sees the starting point of the 'sin as disease' model as 'the universal experience of being alienated

from and in need of the loving mercy of God' (p. 73). To see sin as 'disease' immediately shifts attention from judgement or juridical absolution to healing and forgiveness. This links the disease paradigm to the 'person-injuring' paradigm. What is required is not external, juridical absolution but healing of real injury—inner healing, inter-personal healing and even healing of dehumanizing structures or systems. This latter kind of healing brings in two other paradigms in my personal story, sin as 'systematic dehumanization' and 'historical-cultural realism'. Jon Sobrino, writing about the need for this kind of healing, lays great stress on what he calls 'forgiveness of sinful reality' (Sobrino 1986, p. 46). By this he means the eradication of the structures of oppression and violence and the building of new structures of justice (*op. cit.*, p. 48). He even puts this forgiveness of reality before forgiveness of the sinner, though he should not be accused of thinking that a change of structures alone can 'forgive reality'. As he puts it: 'the forgiveness of reality is also a matter of spirituality ... Forgiving reality means loving, loving very much' (pp. 48—49).

The same basic approach to sin is found in Albert Nolan. His definition of sin is very similar to that of Aquinas in *Contra Gentiles*, quoted above. Nolan writes: 'Sin is an offence against God precisely because it is an offence against people ... There is no such thing as a sin that does not do any harm to anyone ... In the last analysis sin is not a transgression of law but a transgression of love.' (p. 348)

This approach to sin leads Nolan to make a statement which is at the heart of his whole presentation: 'Sin becomes visible in suffering.' (pp. 38) After repeating this statement a few pages further on, he writes: 'If one were to try to discern the new starting point for modern theology and spirituality in most of the Christian world today, one would have to say that it is suffering. The sufferings of so many millions of people on this planet are one of the most fundamental signs of our times.' (p. 49) In other words, Nolan is saying if we want to know where to find sin in today's world, we need to look at where suffering is to be found. Of course, he is speaking of suffering brought about by human agency, even though the causality of that human agency may be operating *a distans* through a whole interlocking web of structures and institutions.

His ultimate purpose is to discover where God is to be met in today's world. His conclusion is that the voice of God can be heard in the suffering of the oppressed. Their suffering reveals where salvation is to be found in today's world, since the roots of their suffering demonstrate where conversion is called for, bringing with it salvation through a changing of the oppressive relationships causing these sufferings. Radical conversion alone suffices and that entails a disowning of the oppressive system and appropriate participation in the processes needed to dismantle the system. Applying this more specifically to South Africa Nolan writes: '... unless we, both white and black, face the monstrous reality of evil and suffering in South Africa, we shall not find God and we shall not hear his good news

of salvation from sin.' (p. 57)

Forgiveness of reality can also be needed in personal and family relationships. Person-injuring and anti-social behaviour can have their roots in family dysfunctioning at an earlier stage in a person's development. The 'crime' model of sin would seek to determine how guilt should be apportioned for this dysfunctioning. The 'disease' model is not interested in assigning guilt. It seeks healing. In some cases such healing can only be found by *owning* one's personal part in the dysfunctioning process as well as recognizing the parts of the other participants. The past cannot be eradicated by some juridical act of absolution but its consequences can be named and owned. McCormick writes:

... forgiveness is an integrative and reconciling process in which the sinner moves towards a new 'whole-ness' which includes and transcends the experience of sin. Confession becomes the self-acceptance of the totality of one's story, the embracing of all parts, virtuous and sinful, in act of faith in the forgiving love of God that there can be a new generation of life... Genuine forgiveness is not about a simple pardoning or forgetting of sins but about empowering the sinner to an experience of conversion through which there can be an integration of the whole of human experience. (p. 76)

Some consequences may be able to be gradually diminished or even eliminated altogether; others may have to be accepted as permanent limitations to one's personal freedom. The horrendous trauma of marriage breakdown for both partners—and for any children involved—is not helped by assigning guilt or by passing judgement. Yet it needs more than pity and good-natured compassion. The 'forgiveness of reality' in this case will work in a variety of ways. While a second marriage is not an automatic, and certainly not an instant, cure, experience would seem to indicate that in some instances it can be a major factor in the healing process. For the Church to rule it out in principle suggests that the 'disobedience' paradigm is operating rather than the 'disease' paradigm.

The 'disease' model fits in much better with our contemporary understanding of human freedom as 'contextualized'. Our personal freedom is not unlimited—internally or externally. Our personal freedom (and our understanding—and these tend to go hand in hand) is limited by a whole variety of influences (genetic, psychological, relational, social, cultural etc) and go to make up our personal story as it stands at this particular point in our life. To the extent that these influences have affected us negatively, they are part of sin-as-disease in us. That is the personal reality we have to live with, alleviating the negative influences as far as we can, but for the rest accepting this condition as part of the human limitation within which we have to live our lives. As McCormick puts it: 'A diabetic is not culpable for his disease, but he clearly experiences responsibility in dealing with its presence and maintaining a balanced and healthy life in the face of it.' (p. 81) And he goes on to add the perceptive

comment: ‘... such a contextualization of personal freedom serves the function of empowering the weakened person to take more responsibility for his actual freedom.’ (p. 82)

An objection raised against the ‘disease’ paradigm is that it abandons any notion of personal responsibility. We are no longer ‘sinners’. We are just sick, victims of a disease which is outside our control. This objection misses the point. No one is claiming that sin should be listed as a medical disease—perhaps under the heading of infectious or inherited diseases! It is just that ‘disease’ offers a helpful model for thinking about sin. This is even true at the level of personal freedom and responsibility. After all, we are recognizing more and more these days that most sickness does not happen out of the blue. An insufficient diet, unhygienically handled food, toxic substances in the environment, polluted drinking water, unhealthy working conditions, failure to do sufficient exercise etc. are all health-injuring factors which are related to human agency, our own and that of other people acting either individually or cooperatively. And the list gets longer every day. We are becoming more aware that a great deal of human sickness can be traced back to human agency in one way or another.

The second model McCormick advocates is the model of ‘cooperative’ or ‘social’ sin. This ties in with the ‘systematic dehumanization’ view of sin in my own personal journey. McCormick argues that we need to develop ‘an anthropology which transcends the limits of individualism and incorporates the insights of a growing body of evidence about the social character of the human person.’ (p. 92) He goes on to suggest what this anthropology might look like:

Such an anthropology needs to recognize that experience and reality are transpersonal, reaching beyond both individualism and a localized interpersonal. There must also be a recognition of the essential intersubjectivity or communitarian character of human personhood, a character neither extrinsic nor secondary to the experience of being a person. This means that human freedom is radically interpersonal in its experience and expression. Personal freedom is contextualized and actualized within the organism of the interpersonal human community. (pp. 92—93)

The structures in question can truly be called ‘sinful’ on two counts. First of all, they are *person-injuring*. They destroy relationships based on justice and freedom and replace them by ‘oppressive political and economic systems, developing pervasive social attitudes or voices of greed, hostility, indifference and narcissism.’ (p. 93) The result is what McCormick calls ‘anti-communities antithetical to the Kingdom of God’. Secondly, these structures do not exist outside of human persons willing to accept and maintain them and working cooperatively within them. It is the actual cooperative effort of the individual members of the group or society which makes up the structure itself. As McCormick writes: ‘Cooperation may take a number of forms and the degree of participation or

responsibility may differ widely from member to member. However, systematic injustice and oppression depend upon a broad base of diverse sorts of cooperative effort.’ (p. 93) Moreover, part of their *person-injuring* lies in the fact that they can even affect a person’s ‘core experiences of freedom and dignity’. Consequently, these sinful structures can be self-generating to the extent that people allow themselves to be conditioned into accepting them as either normal or at least inevitable and unavoidable. ‘That’s life’, as the fatalistic saying goes. McCormick puts this point well:

Members ... respond to their weakened and contextualized freedom with learned patterns of behaviour which support the ongoing relationships of injustice and/or contribute to the progressive disintegration of the group. Such cycles are ongoing, incorporating new members and generations in structures of oppressive and alienating injustice. (p. 94)

A weak presentation of this position would argue semi-apologetically that it is not inappropriate to describe this reality as sin. A strong presentation would argue that social sin is the prime analogue of sin. If this is true, then the communal celebration of reconciliation should be seen as the prime form of the sacrament because of this social nature of sin and our coresponsibility for it. The Ritual’s directive that the fully communal Rite 3 can only be used in an emergency when there is a shortage of confessors completely misses the point of communal celebration. Because sin is primarily communal, our owning or confession of sin should normally be communal, and likewise we should recognise that it needs cooperative effort to undo or heal the harmful consequences of our sin. Such communal commitment to the forgiveness of reality is a pre-requisite for our forgiveness. So our hope for and belief in forgiveness also needs to be signified and accepted communally rather than individually. Although the individual rite of the sacrament high-lights the personal dimension of sin, it does not do full justice to the cooperative model of sin.

McCormick would go even further and suggest that clinging on to the individualist model of sin itself constitutes a form of ‘social sinfulness’ and can be compared to the corporate blindness that Jesus challenged in the Pharisees (p. 88). Moreover, when the same objection is made against the ‘social’ model as was made against the ‘disease’ model (i.e. it abandons the notion of personal responsibility), McCormick argues that the very opposite is true. An individualist model of sin can be used by groups to ‘blind themselves from a sense of sin and responsibility for the structures of injustice which they support.’ (p. 96) Social sin, on the other hand, ‘instead of positing the origin of evil in anonymous and impersonal structures, reveals how groups of persons cooperate in projecting their responsibility for and participation in systems of injustice on to such invisible and anonymous structures of violence and oppression.’ (p. 96)



*Postscript: My personal story continues ...*

SIN AS ANTI-CREATIONAL. This new and very inadequately articulated paradigm in my story means far more than that we are now aware of a new kind of sin, ecological sin. Rather it acknowledges that there is an ecological dimension in all sin. This flows from our growing holistic appreciation of creation. Humanity is bound up in an intrinsic and essential relationship of inter-dependence with the rest of creation. There are not two separate and independent ethical criteria operating in ecological issues, what is good for humanity and what is good for creation as a whole. To consider creation as a whole is to consider it as including humanity. It is to recognize humanity as creation reaching a higher level of existence, the level of personal and social consciousness. This level of existence does not constitute a breaking away from the rest of creation. Creational health remains an integral element of the good of humanity, just as does bodily health. And vice-versa. In other words, the health of the rest of creation is now dependent on humanity conducting itself in a way which befits its place and responsibility within the whole of creation. Humanity can be a cancerous growth within creation—and some ‘deep ecologists’ believe it is such already. Or it can be creation reaching out to a yet higher level of life in which it can articulate its hymn of praise and thanksgiving to its creator and reflect in its very way of living the deeply personal and holistic life of its creator. For humanity to distance itself from the rest of creation and lord it over it would be a form of alienation from an integral part of ourselves. At the moment, I believe that we are struggling to find the right language in which to articulate this further paradigm of sin. It does not seem adequate to say that humanity is nothing more than one part among many within creation, even *primus inter pares*. Yet most of our ethical discourse tends to be anthropocentric in a way that fails to do justice to the oneness of the whole of creation which is being revealed to us through the most recent discoveries in a whole range of scientific disciplines.

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