

A Brief History of Sin

Unity Church

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When did sin begin? Arthur C. Clark's short story, The Sentinel, the story which inspired Stanley Kubrick's pioneering film, "2001: a Space Odyssey" tells one version of the story. It begins in a time before time, in a time before tools, a time when ape-like, plant-eating Australopithecines, roamed the earth in little bands, grazing quietly while doing their best to keep out of the way of predators. One day, the ape-man Clark calls Moonwatcher happens upon a large black monolith, one of hundreds such sent years before from outer space and intended to transmit the teachings that would transform the apes into beings of a higher order. Drawn to the monolith's hum Moonwatcher reaches out to touch it with just the index finger of his right paw just as Adam reaches out to God in Michelangelo's Creation.

The next day Moonwatcher finds the bleached-out skeleton of what appears to have been a pre-historic antelope. He picks up a long bone and tentatively strikes it down against the skeleton, which falls apart. Seeing the affect of his actions, Moonwatcher, beats the bones down into powder. Another night, another day and using bones as weapons he and his band take control of a watering hole. In the flush of victory Moonwatcher throws the bone into the air. End over end it soars, spinning the fabric of consciousness; dreams come, all the arts are born, science, engineering, architecture, all the languages of love and light, poetry and promises and yes, of course sin. And at

the apogee, at the point it should begin to fall, as Strauss's "Thus Spake Zarathustra" builds to full crescendo, the bone turns over once more and dissolves into an orbiting nuclear platform.

When does sin begin? It begins at the very dawn of consciousness. It begins when we become self-conscious. Sin is existential. It is an essential part of being human. Sin is a state of being born of the fact that somewhere deep inside us we remember being one with God. Our longing for reunion, for that sense of merger, for the relinquishment of consciousness is the ultimate source of our sin. We experience our loneliness and isolation as punishment and wonder what we did to deserve it. And in our isolation we often do act out our rage doing damage to ourselves and other.

Another version of the story of the beginning of sin is familiar even to post-Biblical Unitarian Universalists. "It is best not to begin with Adam and Eve," writes poet David Shumate. Original sin is baffling, even for the most sophisticated minds. Besides, children are frightened of naked people and apples. Instead, start with the talking snake. Children like to hear what animals have to say. Let him hiss for a while and tell his own tale. They'll figure him out in the end. Describe sin simply as those acts that cause suffering and leave it at that. Steer clear of musty confessionals. Children associate them with outhouses. Leave hell out of the discussion. They'll be able to describe it on their own soon enough. If they feel the need to apologize for some transgression, tell them that one of the offices of the moon is to forgive. As for the priest, let him slumber for a while more."

As for the priest, ah yes, the priest. We can't really talk about sin without noting the fact that Christendom has highjacked the sense of existential sin and used it to further its own purposes. "I am poor and needy and I am better only when in sorrow of heart I detest myself and seek your mercy..." I

have great respect for Christianity, respect enough to condemn the aspects of its doctrine, which betray the example set for us by the ministry of Jesus. The existential state we experience as sinful, that in us, which makes us capable of objectifying others or worse yet of falling into complicity with evil is hard-wired into us. It makes sense to call that original sin.

The trouble is that most people have been taught that original sin is essentially about sexual desire. Sexual longing and spiritual longing feel so much the same that they are easily confused. The equating of sin with sexuality has caused no end of suffering. It has been the cudgel of the ruling classes. It is at the heart of the oppression of woman. It serves as the primary justification for racism and homophobia as church fathers in both the Catholic and Protestant traditions have allowed their sexual confusion to undermine the gospel they proclaim. That's why we reject the common concept of original sin and join the renegade Roman Catholic theologian, Matthew Fox in affirming what he calls, "an original blessing."

I won't claim that Unitarian Universalists are any less confused. We fall into the same destructive patterns as our brothers on the other side. But we can take pride that our theology and at our best, our congregations have encouraged self-acceptance, responsible, life-affirming sexuality education and a deep appreciation of the natural world. Zen beat poet, Gary Snyder, writes in Earth House Hold, a book of essays published first in 1969, "...A ruling class, to survive, must propose a Law: a law to work must have a hook into the social psyche-and the most effective way to achieve this is to make people doubt their own worth and instincts, especially sexual. To make "human nature" suspect is also to make Nature-the wilderness-the adversary. Hence the ecological crisis of today."

Augustine and the long line of theologians and philosophers who follow in his wake have made sin personal. They have attributed what is essentially existential in nature, the feeling that one has sinned, exclusively to personal transgression against what they would describe as God's law. There is no doubt we human beings sometimes do terrible things. "I alone bargained the proper coins and slipped away," Judas confesses in James Wright's poem.

Already strangling on the guilt, already on his way to suicide he saw

a pack of hoodlums beating up a man...

Dropping my rope aside, I ran, ignored the uniforms:

Then I remembered bread my flesh had eaten,

The kiss that ate my flesh. Flayed beyond hope

I held the man for nothing in my arms.

Judas, the sinner, becomes Judas the Saint, not by priestly absolution but by the miraculous intervention of his own compassion. Love was in his nature after all.

When we believe that sins are purely personal we tend to get caught-up in our guilt. We human beings have a hollow place inside us that only God can fill. That empty hollow is the inside source of all our longing. Sin is the attempt to fill that empty place inside with anything other than God. When we do that our longing can become insatiable. And when it does, it overcomes compassion and often leads us to do serious harm. The belief that sins are purely personal in nature tends to mire us in our guilt. For guilt is purely personal and it is also highly addictive.

I want to suggest we broaden our understanding of sin so that it encompasses the social realities of what we might call systemic sinfulness. Sins that have "some size and bloom and dignity," sins that call us up out of the mud and mire of all that precious guilt into a stinging sense of shame that

wakes us up and makes of us a force for good. Racism, now there's a sin well worth confronting. Sexism, that one goes back a long way. Homophobia, we know it's wrong. And we also know that oppression is the social manifestation of the dynamic of repression and projection, which causes us to see in others those aspects of ourselves with which we are the least comfortable.

We now know what sin is. It is a word, deed or desire contrary to God's eternal law. And what is that law? What is God's eternal law? Some say every word of the Bible is true. They learn the book by rote in order to discern its subtleties and defend their fundamental understandings. But the wisest ones among us know and have known for a very long time that the essence of God's law is very simple. It's living it that's hard. God's eternal laws is this: "that you shall love the Lord your God with all your mind and all your heart and with all your soul and that you shall love your neighbor as yourself. "

Compassion then is God's eternal law. If you would be saved from sin repent, rise up from the paralysis of your self-absorption, break free from the sticky mud of your self-centered guilt and take up the banner of shame. Though you and I may be among the privileged ones, though you and I, by virtue of our place in life, may fall into complicity with systemic sin; we know as surely as we know our own hearts that those who benefit most by the oppression of others are those most obliged to help end it.

May it be so and amen.