

Recovering the concept of sin for the labyrinth walk of antiracism

By the Rev. Stephen H. Phelps

What is the root of sin? It is a crucial question to be exploring as part of this *Sacred Ground Dialogue Series*. For centuries, Christians have been taught that sin *is* the root of evil, a bedrock concept beneath which no inquiry can penetrate. Reasoning minds do not accept this refusal to probe for the *source* of sin. Moreover, it is not hard to see how the refusal to explore sin's causes has enhanced the power of the powerful.

If sin's root is thought "original" with Adam, then evil cannot be rooted out, especially systemic evil. Guardians of evil systems need just this teaching to help maintain the status quo: evil is the bedrock of human nature and *cannot* be changed. Until the early 1800s, virtually all Christian theologians taught as much. American slavery was everywhere defended on these terms, even by religious leaders in the North who claimed to hate the institution.

In the 1820s, a "new school" of moral and social theology formed around the teachings of Nathaniel Taylor at Yale Divinity School. Taylor read in the Gospels that the Lord Jesus actually commanded his followers to improve social conditions – on Earth as it is in Heaven. The movement to abolish slavery found its home in this new school.

Writing about 1840, Søren Kierkegaard was the first theologian to probe the sources of sin in both psychological and spiritual terms. In *The Concept of Dread* (also known as *The Concept of Anxiety*), he writes that on hearing God's command "Do not!" the figure of Adam becomes suddenly dizzy with the realization that he can say yes or no – that he can try to have anything he desires. An abyss of hungers and possibilities yawns beneath him, producing fear and anxiety as he confronts the necessity to choose what he will try to have. Thus does he fall. In this reading of Adam as every human, the root of sin is coiled in temptation and fear.

Now, fear has two kinds. The fear wired in the nervous system is necessary to survival and is not directly implicated in sin. The other fear, however, belongs only to the human imagination of what might be. This fear manifests itself in painful, edgeless hungers tempting us to satisfy our desires by any means. Moral philosophers once called this frame of mind *concupiscence*, but when the word became synonymous with sexual lust, it lost its power to help people perceive their own unlimited yearning. Let another word serve: *greed*, meaning craving – not alone for money but for anything I can lay hold of – craving so anxious and unregulated that whenever my need runs up against yours, I choose mine, not yours. The fear at the root of sin is of that kind.

Greed has cultural manifestations peculiar to each society, but none differ from Adam's, the fear-driven urge to take whatever we can. Sin is always a type of mis-take, wherein the word "take" needs to be heard aloud. Consider: to live, every animal must take things, but only the human animal can mis-take things. Whenever we take what is not rightly offered, we mis-take. Sin is this mis-taking – of land; of labor; of the bodies of men and women, boys and girls, and their lives and honor and trust; of the possessions and the hopes of the poor and vulnerable. And on and on. Mis-taking is driven by greed, but greed has a cause as well.

When I am afraid that *in myself I am nothing, then I am tempted to get something to measure myself by – to mis-take whatever I can to make myself something.* Greed gets its virulent power from the fear that I myself am worthless – or would be in my own eyes and others’ – if I could not take what I need to cover my nakedness. Racism, white supremacy, control of the weak by the dominant, with all its systematically rendered privileges – these are manifestations of greed that hide the naked self from its own fear and loathing. Perhaps self-loathing should be thought the first sin. “Then the man said to God, ‘I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself.’” (Genesis 3:10) Afraid because I hated myself and I hid.

What is the way up from self-loathing, from greed and sin? The great spiritual traditions set this question as their first concern. The Jewish and Christian faiths tell that by the eye of the Eternal One, we are seen as we are and loved. And if we trust that we are so seen, then we trust that all are so seen by the eye of the Eternal. In this awareness of abundant divine grace, we can abandon material measures of ourselves and others. In a glimmer of trust, we can see as the Eternal One sees – in sin and sorrow and in eternal hope.

For God alone my soul waits in silence; from God comes my salvation. God alone: my rock and my salvation, my fortress; I shall never be shaken. (Psalm 62:1-2)

Those called to help dismantle white dominance and racism must learn its stories, from the 1452 edict of Pope Nicholas V, which blessed explorers to sail the seas and enslave and despoil in the name of Jesus every people they met, right down to “Hands up! Don’t shoot!” and voter suppression laws. The enormity of white dominance will try every heart open to read its history.

Tragically, the Christian churches of the West have mostly failed to develop in the people the fortitude to face this history. The good news that God makes no distinctions – a realization that catapulted Peter from fear to faith – is not heard in many Christian communities. The apostle Paul found the rhythm of it, declaring that there is no longer Jew nor Greek, neither male nor female, neither slave nor free, but all are one in Christ. Yet when it comes time to translate the apostle’s word to the present – “neither black nor white nor brown, neither documented nor undocumented” – many churches cannot find their tongue.

Instead, we Americans are thrilled by our freedom to monetize everything. In 1836, Alexis de Tocqueville commented on our national tendency to measure every thing and person for a price. A nation like this could hardly have failed to become the wealthiest of all. How is it that the same materialistic people also proudly proclaim Christianity?

The moral culture of Western, white dominance can be understood as the result of a kind of evolution. Just as various species develop peculiar appendages to exploit unique features of their environment, the American culture has prospered in an ecological niche that values humans primarily in material terms. Whichever culture doubled down on this interpretation of human purposes was bound to learn domination best.

Jared Diamond’s research suggests the “accident of geography,” which gave Europeans the material advantage. Developing in the globe’s temperate zones lying along a great east/west

axis, they had perfect conditions for domesticating key animals, adapting to their germs, and discovering steel, then guns. Haunted by their existential fears, Europeans took these geographical advantages and built empires through violence, terror, and manipulation of the peoples they encountered. In short, greed drove out the biblical promptings of grace and peace once inscribed in ancestral memory.

And yet ... it is never too late. We can turn to the Bible, aware of the tragic ways our dominant culture has misused it, but also aware that its green shoots bring life in the Spirit. Like a loving grandmother who nudges her wayward children without judgment, the Bible's innumerable stories and sayings direct our attention away from material anxiety and struggle for advantage toward the other and beloved community. Those who commit to dismantling racism need God's grace, and the communion and fellowship of all God's people, to prepare to receive and to give the gift of transforming love.

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