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Recent Thought on the Doctrine of Sin.

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There would be general agreement that no one had written on this subject in recent times with more acuteness and distinction than Dr. F. R. Tennant. His Hulsean Lectures of 1902 had dealt with *The Origin and Propagation of Sin*, whilst the larger book of 1903, *The Sources of the Doctrines of the Fall and Original Sin*, gave historical support and elucidation to his main contention—the separation of actual sin from 'original sin,' and the explanation of the former by evolutionary science. The chief criticism of this position was that any 'explanation' of the universality of sin by reference to man's animal origin seemed to make actual sin just as inevitable as did the doctrine of original sin—a result which is felt to contradict both Scripture and conscience, for sin is not sin if it is inevitable. In 1912, Dr. Tennant met this criticism by his book, *The Concept of Sin*, an exceedingly able and closely reasoned essay in definition, which avoided some of the less guarded statements in the earlier work, and clearly asserted man's full moral responsibility. Thus he writes (p. 78) that sin 'can never be a *necessity* for man at any stage of his developement,' whilst (p. 234) 'Characters are not made evil, in the strictly moral sense, by environment or by disposition.' The special value of this book is that it challenges all who work at this subject to clear thought and exact definition of what they really mean by 'sin.' Dr. Tennant's own definition is 'moral imperfection for which an agent is, in God's sight, accountable' (p. 245). This, of course, rules out the term 'original sin' as a misnomer, and sharply distinguishes the historical fact of moral imperfection in the race from the individual volition which essentially constitutes sin. The standard of judgment is relative to man's knowledge of God's requirements; the wrong act consists in the choice of a lower end when a higher is consciously present. The material or occasion for the sin is supplied by the natural impulses which in themselves are not sinful or morally evil. There is no sin in the fact of temptation, and there is no guilt where there is no moral accountability.

Mr. S. A. McDowall's *Evolution and the Need of Atonement* (1912, 1914) dealt with sin on similar lines of evolutionary science. It is maintained that 'in all life there is something of freedom, even in response to environment' (p. 50). Man's inturning of consciousness upon itself introduces a larger degree of indetermination, as compared with that at lower levels, so that man can choose whether he will identify himself with what Bergson called the *élan vital*, or whether he will sin by 'enlisting his will on the side of the downward forces that rule matter' (p. 68). Sin is conscious opposition to the Divine purpose as revealed in the vital impulse (pp. 122, 132). Sin is thus not merely negative as being failure to moralize the natural, but positive, as the conscious misuse of experience (p. 82). The consequences of sin, whilst continuing to be consequences for the race, become punishments for the individual (p. 137). There is no race-sin, because there is no race-indetermination (p. 143). 'We cannot say that the sin is hereditary—that it will reappear in the next generation,' and the work of Weismann forbids us to build anything on the inheritance of acquired characters, such as the tendency to misuse freedom (p. 146) . . . 'sin, or rather the tendency to sin, becomes hereditary in the race, not by the inheritance of acquired characters, but by the creation of an environment which acts, on a community of self-conscious beings, towards the cessation of selection of those with the higher instincts' (p. 150). Another way of putting this is to say that in human as distinct from animal society, individuals committing anti-social acts (and all sins are of this character) are not so rigorously eliminated, so that racial evil tends to increase.

This recognition of the social tradition of moral evil is a conspicuous feature of the modern doctrine of sin. 'Social heredity, as taught by Ritschl, is a wiser assertion than brutal or Adamic heredity, not simply because it lies within a truly moral region, but because it points to a combination of corporate wrongdoing with individual guilt' (R. Mackintosh, *Christianity and Sin*, 1913, p. 162). But this particular reference to 'corporate wrongdoing' may illustrate Dr. Tennant's criticism of the use of terms, as does the companion statement on the previous page, 'inheritance, if it does not exclude real guilt, at least seriously lessens responsibility.' The issue can hardly be left in that hesitating fashion, after Dr. Tennant's incisive discussion. The modern doctrine of sin must face the issues as boldly as did

the Augustinian, and not shrink from the consequences of its own logic. The natural is not to be confused with the moral. Canon Lacey, in his brief but illuminating study of the Augustinian position (*Nature, Miracle, and Sin*, 1916), refers to the persistent delusion by which 'we are led to discover evil in nature. . . . Because it would be an evil thing for me to lay waste fenced cities into ruinous heaps, therefore I infer that pestilence and earthquake are evil; because I know that it is wrong for me to be like horse or mule, whose mouths must be held with bit or bridle, therefore the qualities to the likeness of which I have sunk seem to me evil in themselves' (p. 142). This author argues that the Augustinian scheme is coherent in its assertion that the world is good, sin only excepted.

In 1917 there appeared two important books of opposite tendencies which indirectly concern us, and may remind us that the doctrine of sin can never be adequately studied apart from the doctrines of grace and of God. These two books were Principal Oman's *Grace and Personality*, and Professor Otto's *Das Heilige* (Eng. tr. by Harvey in 1923, as *The Idea of the Holy*). The moral emphasis of the former leaves no room for anything but the moral relation of the individual, as actual sinner, to God. The consequences of sin remain after penitence, but their meaning is transformed. 'To be justified, then, is not to have the consequences of sin condoned or even obliterated, but so to be reconciled to God in spite of sin that we can face all evil with confident assurance of final victory over it, and by God's succour transform all its consequences, whether the evil be natural or moral, the outcome of our own sin, or from our necessary fellowship with others in His family' (p. 221, 2nd ed.). On the other hand, Otto's well-known and widely influential book urges that we cannot reduce either our idea of God or our reaction to that idea to a purely moral or rational content. The conception of the wrath of God—say in the ninetieth psalm—illustrates this overplus in the idea of the holy. There is a hidden depth in God—'the numinous'—which cannot be rationalized or moralized by us. This provokes in man such confessions as those of Isaiah and Peter ('Woe is me! for I am undone. . . Depart from me; for I am a sinful man, O Lord'): 'these outbursts of feeling are not simply, and probably at first not at all, *moral* depreciations, but belong to a quite special category of valuation and appraisement . . . the feeling of absolute profaneness' (Eng. tr., p. 53). In God there is 'the positive *numinous* value or worth, and to it corresponds, on the side of the creature, a numinous *disvalue* or "unworth"' (*ib.* p. 53). It is this aspect or element that gives the peculiar religious quality to sin. 'Mere "unlawfulness" only becomes "sin," "impiety," "sacrilege," when the character of *numinous unworthiness* or *disvalue* goes on to be transferred to and centred in *moral* delinquency' (p. 54 f.). The guilt of a bad action is to be clearly distinguished from its moral pollution. This religious element can be neither moralized nor conceptualized, a fact which condemns all quasi-mathematical theories of atonement. The whole chapter (viii.) on 'Sin and Atonement' should not be overlooked by the student of the doctrine of sin. It offers a sort of religious parallel to Dr. Tennant's moral differentiation of sin and 'original sin.' Dr. Tennant argues that sin is not sin unless and until it is moralized; Dr. Otto, that sin is not sin unless and until it is *numinous*. The fuller recognition of the *numinous* in the doctrine of God might have important consequences for the doctrines of sin and atonement. It would leave room for both the lower sub-ethical and the higher 'mystical' element, as well as for the central content of morality, and would thus remind us of the mystery of personality, human and Divine, the invisible rays beyond the visible spectrum. Negatively, it would exclude both the rationalization of the Atonement and the attempted 'explanation' of that abuse of freedom we call sin. Moreover, the weakening of the sense of God's majesty, and of the reality of the 'wrath' of God has proceeded side by side with the decay in the consciousness of sin; a recovery along one line would assuredly encourage a recovery along the other.

The Eleventh Volume of the ENCYCLOPÆDIA OF RELIGION AND ETHICS contained a representative and judicial article on 'Sin (Christian)' by Professor H. R. Mackintosh, comparable in quality with the excellent article by Kirn in the *Realencyklopädie für protestantische Theologie*, which was on an ampler scale (xix. 132–148). The criticism of Dr. Tennant's position made by Dr. Mackintosh may be quoted: 'penetrating and illuminative as Tennant's work is, it may be doubted whether his "logically perfect" concept of sin will be approved by those who hold with St. Paul and Augustine, not to speak of numerous modern students of society, that men are ethically as well as physically involved in the unity of the race, and that we desert experience if we ignore

either aspect of sin, the voluntary or the constitutional.' In the same article the irrationality of sin is clearly stated: 'to refer moral evil to the free activity of will is less an explanation in the proper sense (all true explanation being teleological) than an implicit admission that sin is radically unintelligible—the one thing in the universe rightly to be called "irrational," as not merely an irreducible fact, but the negation of all rationality.'

The best recent attempt to rehabilitate the ecclesiastical doctrine of sin is that of Mr. E. J. Bicknell (*The Christian Idea of Sin and Original Sin*, 1922), though it must be admitted that the doctrine suffers a 'sea change' in the process. He fully recognizes that the present position of biology allows of no dogmatism on the inheritance of acquired characteristics, but says, 'We are content to maintain that whatever be the issue of the debate, the inheritance of evil tendencies can be maintained independently of physical transmission' (p. 40). He argues that 'original sin may be inherited through our social environment' (*ib.*), in the sense of 'the movement of the race away from God's purpose' (p. 42). That this movement is a fact would be admitted by most Christians; the point is whether, especially in view of Dr. Tennant's cogent criticism of the use of theological terms, this racial evil ought to be called by a name which denotes something very different from social heredity. Nor can it be held that the social environment replaces heredity as an explanation of the universality of sin, such as the doctrine of original sin did supply. The moral evil of my social environment is no doubt the *occasion* of my temptation, but it cannot be made the *cause* of my sinful volition without being open to the same criticism as the doctrine of original sin itself—that it demoralizes sin. 'Original sin' ought to denote at least sin that springs from origin rather than from social environment, and the term did denote this in the Augustinian theory, which is the classical form of the doctrine. It is perilous to use the term in a sense so different from that for which it was framed, and the peril is illustrated by a footnote on p. 118 of Mr. Bicknell's book, where he says, 'This is not the place to discuss how such freedom from original sin was possible in one who was truly man,' with apparent reference to the Virgin Birth, rather than to the social setting of the Incarnation. A not less perilous tendency to confuse the natural with the moral is seen on p. 111, where the statement is quoted with approval that 'it is the malignity of the struggle that has produced the venom of so many reptiles.' Surely such a statement projects a moral meaning into the term 'malignity' which is quite out of place in the evolutionary struggle for existence; it would be as reasonable to say that it is 'selfishness' that makes an infant suck. As a matter of fact, Mr. Bicknell elsewhere agrees with Dr. Tennant that 'this material, the instincts and impulses that we inherit, is non-moral' (p. 100). We may, however, sympathize with Mr. Bicknell's insistence on the moral disorder of human society as a problem to be faced on its own account, and with his protest against the easy-going optimism as to the progress of the race—a protest made not less by Dr. Tennant (*The Concept of Sin*, p. 278). But the way to deal with this further problem of racial evil is not to entangle it with that of individual sin, but to view it from without as a fact of history. However responsible I am for my individual contribution to the moral disorder of the world, and to whatever degree that disorder is the occasion of my temptation, the world's wrongdoing cannot be represented as an individual volition, as it could when Adam was conceived either as the historic head or the corporate representative of the race.

In the same year (1922), there appeared a more ambitious book on *The Doctrine of Sin*, by Mr. R. S. Moxon, which usefully traces the history of the doctrine from the New Testament times onwards down to and including modern theories. The final chapter, professedly constructive, and entitled 'The Psychological View of Sin,' is unsatisfactory. It seems not simply dangerous, but also untrue to say, 'We must think, then, of sin as something inseparably connected with personality' (p. 246), or that 'The sense of sin takes the same place in the spiritual development of man as is taken by the vital impulse in the physical' (p. 228). Much is said about the sublimation of instincts, in terms of psycho-analysis, but little that contributes to the real problems of the doctrine. 'Original sin' is defined (p. 246) as 'the universal tendency in man, inherited by him from his animal ancestry, to gratify the natural instincts and passions and to use them for selfish ends'—a definition which raises more questions than it answers.

A convenient and competent approach to the doctrine of sin from the standpoint of modern psychology and the comparative study of religion may be found in the chapter devoted to 'Sin and

Repentance' in Principal Selbie's book, *The Psychology of Religion* (1924). The consciousness of sin has developed from that of a breach of custom and taboo into a genuine moral and spiritual attitude, and (in this broad sense) 'the history of religion justifies us in regarding it as universal' (p. 228). On psychological grounds we may say that 'at the root of every sinful act or disposition lies an ultimate choice of the lower and an inhibition of the higher springs of action' (p. 242). Psychologically, this volition is 'largely a question of attention' (p. 235), which we can at least previously control, affected by the content of the sub-consciousness, for which we are ultimately responsible (p. 236). It does not seem possible to explain volition without resort to a self or personality (p. 231), whilst conscience is itself, as moral consciousness, the expression of that personality as a whole (p. 234). In regard to original sin, our rejection or modification of the theory must not blind us to the existence of facts which it professed to explain; but original sin cannot mean original guilt, and we should speak of inheriting, not sins, but only a tendency to sin (p. 241). Attention is called to the fact that psychotherapy distinguishes moral disease from sin as that condition in which morbid complexes give rise to uncontrollable impulses (p. 229). Dr Selbie, of course, recognizes that there are definite limits to the contribution of psychology to the doctrine of sin, *e.g.* the question of freedom can never be adequately dealt with on psychological grounds alone' (p. 232).

Finally, we may open Dr. Garvie's recent book, *The Christian Doctrine of the Godhead* (1925), in order to learn how the problem of sin presents itself to a modern theologian within his general constructive statement. Whilst he criticises Dr. Tennant's use of a human (subjective) standard of judgment for the definition of sin, he agrees that 'sin is a conscious, voluntary act, even although a man's own conscience is not the final measure of it' (p. 299). 'We may dismiss from consideration the possibility of the transmission of moral depravity or corruption by physical heredity' (p. 307), but there is a social inheritance of moral evil, which justifies us in speaking of mankind as a sinful race (p. 311) and in saying that each child enters the world under a handicap (p. 309). Actual sin is an intrusion into God's world (p. 312), but though there is risk for the individual there is none for the universe (p. 313); God's final victory is certain, though it must be won by moral and spiritual means in order to be worthy of Him (p. 314).

As we review the course of thought on the doctrine of sin for the last dozen years, we may feel some disappointment that no contribution has been made of equal calibre with that of Dr. Tennant. The relatively small attention given to the doctrine, as compared with that given, say, to immortality, may be partly traced to the admitted decline in the general consciousness of sin, from which theologians themselves may not be exempt. There seems to be the same lack in German theology; at least, I have found no constructive works (other than monographs on special points) which call for notice here. Thus there is real need and opportunity for a book that would face the problem of 'racial sin' in all its implications, with the same firm grasp and keen insight that marked Dr. Tennant's study of individual sin. The present review appears to warrant certain conclusions:

1. The sciences of biology, psychology, and sociology have made, and may yet make, important contributions to the natural history of sin. They help us to disprove some theories of it which are erroneous or inadequate. But these sciences cannot of themselves give an adequate basis for the doctrine. The raw material with which they deal is taken up into human personality, where the issues become philosophical and theological. We must not be misled, for example, by the important contributions of psycho-analysis to psychotherapy into thinking that these are vital contributions to a *doctrine* of sin. In particular, we must beware of offering an 'explanation' of the 'universality' of sin from the mere existence of this raw material in the individual or the race. This is clearly said by Dr. Tennant: 'The "material of sin" by no means suffices in itself wholly to "explain" or account for sin, and indeed is to be sharply distinguished from sin' (p. 140); yet in another place (p. 259) he writes of these propensities, 'their presence in every human being, making the inducement to sin common to all men, is the sufficient explanation of the fact that few, if any, of mankind, who possess a moral code embracing the many departments and complex relations of human life, go through this world without contracting some stain of sin.' The apparent inconsistency may be no more than verbal, but most students of theology will feel that the practical universality of sin does raise questions of its own that call for a more complete answer—if only the conclusion that the freedom of personality by its very nature excludes the deterministic cate-

gory of causation, and that a scientific explanation of sin is as impossible as a scientific declaration of the ultimate destiny of the individual. Here a remark from Mr. C. C. J. Webb's *God and Personality* seems worth quoting: 'The *possibility* of Sin is after all involved in freedom to choose the good; and it would seem meaningless to find a new problem in the *reality* of what is already understood to be in a true sense *possible*' (p. 190).

2. On the other hand, the fact and nature of racial evil ought to be studied without prejudice from the historical theories known as 'original sin' and 'the Fall.' We cannot put new wine into these old wine-skins without the inevitable result. Our social solidarity for evil is a fact of experience—but so is our social solidarity for good. We can comprehend that one evil will operating freely in a human society propagates itself by example and multiplies incentives to evil conduct beyond all human power to reckon. The sin of one will affect all; though there are many grades of sinning, which the mouth-filling word 'universality' tends to obscure. But, on the other hand, the believer in the Incarnation must maintain that the influence of a sinless will is also at work in the race, and that the victory will be with the good. Environment can save as well as destroy—so far as environment ought to be said to do either. Individual experience is endlessly repeating the story of Gn 3, and we may speak with a certain truth of an individual 'fall,' though even this use of the term can easily be misleading. But the race, *with Christ in it*, is moving upwards—not automatically, and not catastrophically, but by the immanent operation of God through Christ. We should speak not of the fall of the race from some level previously possessed, but only of the failure of the race (through the actual sin of its individual members) to attain to the level of God's purpose.

3. The theologian of to-day finds it impossible to draw the boundaries of doctrines as sharply as his predecessors, or to draw them over the old lines. In his endeavour to construct a dynamic rather than a dogmatic theology, he discovers the close inter-relation and ultimate unity of 'doctrines' that are often handled in isolation. His central concern is with the relation of human personality to the Divine, in all its aspects, and any doctrine of sin divorced from a doctrine of grace or of God is an abstraction. Now one of the most important aspects or attributes of personality is its power of transformation. At each level we can see something becoming something else within the realm of personality, something that gains new attributes without loss of the old by being taken up to the new level. Thus neural activity is transformed into sensation, and sensation into perception, and perception into conception, within the realm of psychology. So within the ethical realm, there is the lifting up of the whole closed circle of the volitional consciousness—will, motive, attention, interest—into an experience of freedom; again there is something more in the complex result than the sum or mechanical composition of the constituents. It is the same, also, on the still higher level of religious experience, where we first encounter sin in the strict sense, though its material content has met us as 'crime' or 'vice' at other levels. The new fact of sin raises two problems, or sets of problems, which ought to be distinguished. There is the need for personal forgiveness, opening into the whole of the new relation of the individual to God, and including the taking up of the sinner's sin into the Divine holiness, where it is transformed into suffering—the eternal Cross of God. (The *spiritual* suffering of the saint through the sin of others is the human analogy to this.) The suffering is voluntary, but not arbitrary; holiness cannot include sin within itself save as transformed into suffering. The temporal consequences of moral evil remain, but whether they remain as penalties, or as discipline, or as opportunities, will depend on the attitude of human personality towards them; they themselves are transformed. All this concerns the individual in relation to God; the other set of problems arises from man's racial history, that history which is not a fiction and foregone conclusion, but a reality. This must mean that racial evil is a new fact for God to face. Apart from the guilt of actual individual sin, there is the fact of the objective failure of the race, measured by the Divine standard, a failure that cannot be ignored by God. He must not only, for His honour's sake, win a final victory within the race, but He must make that racial history as a whole into a new glory of God. This is the supreme transformation being wrought by personality—that where sin abounded, grace shall yet more abound. 'In fact, a sinful world redeemed by the agony of Love's complete self-sacrifice is a better world, by the only standards of excellence we have, than a world that had never sinned' (W. Temple, *Mens Creatrix*, p. 286).