

Christology takes up, transforms, and answers from the of the Triune God, who loves each person as if this one and fulfills him or her in a communion both human

he basis of the above reflections, the structure of the part of this study should become intelligible. First we see the state of sin as multiple alienation (chapter I); then by the process by which God accepts full solidarity with and condition and raises human nature in Jesus to himself. As a preparation in the Old Testament, reaches its decisive incarnation and is consummated through the cross and of Jesus (chapter II). After dealing with various aspects of the Son (chapter III), we will describe the reconstituted of the Triune God: the role of the Father, the Son and Spirit. Then the final goal of redemption, including the of the material world, will be outlined (chapter IV). Theistic part ends with examining the relationship of Christian religions (chapter V) and to possible intelligent other planets of the universe (chapter VI).

CHAPTER I

Sin as a Threefold Alienation

1. Sin

In order to understand the way of redemption we need to examine the state of sin from which we have been redeemed. According to Christian faith, man and woman committed sin at the very beginning of human history.³

In this first sin man and woman chose to realize their human existence (an option made possible by their nature as a finite created freedom) in conscious independence from and opposition to God. As a result of this first sin, all human beings are born without God's grace and with the inclination to ratify the same option for themselves. The propensity in humankind for a false autonomy from God has been reinforced by the accumulation of personal sins that has created a universal sinful environment. Nevertheless, in virtue of the redemption accomplished by Jesus Christ, and even before the historical realization of that redemption, all human beings have always been offered the grace of Christ, so that they may resist the "gravitational pull" of sin or at least repent of their sins and yearn for communion with God.⁴

However, in this first chapter, the omnipresent influence of God's grace in human history will not be treated but only the state

³ In a christological work it would be superfluous to enter into the contemporary discussion of a monogenistic or polygenistic explanation of the first sin. On this, see especially the encyclical *Humani Generis* (DS, 3897), which does not exclude outright the possibility of a polygenistic interpretation of human origins.

⁴ Regarding the concrete forms this offer of grace may take to pagans or atheists before Christ and after Christ, see pp. 452-454.

of universal sinfulness from which God wants to save us.⁵

Every time I consciously and freely oppose an imperative of my conscience, I go against my "better self." I knew before the act what was the "right thing to do," yet I overruled my own judgment and set my own sinful will above the awareness of my duty to do what I recognized as right. Thus, through the act of sinning, a split or estrangement is introduced into the very core of my subjectivity, into my judgment and will. My sinful will — seeking the support of a rationalizing judgment — is set against my right judgment and will to do what is right. If I persevere in my sin, then my sinful judgment and will are going to overpower and, to a greater or lesser extent, "silence" my "moral self," the self who appreciates and obeys moral values. My sinful self affirms himself as absolute, higher than the recognized moral order I had previously acknowledged through my conscience. The result is self-estrangement: I find myself in conflict with my own "truth," with my own real self whom I chose to ignore. I act as if I were an "Absolute Being" who can simply decree what is right and wrong for myself. Yet, while in my acts this false "absolute" self dominates the true "moral self," at the core of my being I know that my self-affirmation as an Absolute is false since, at least at the beginning of this process, I acted consciously against my own better judgment.

When I overrule the judgment of my conscience, I always do so for the sake of some limited good I decide for myself to be superior to the values my conscience proposes. For instance, a married man may decide that for him here and now an extramarital affair is more important than his obligations to his family; the satisfaction and pleasure he finds in the relationship with "the other woman" becomes more important for him than his family. In fact, for the

⁵ Note that a new-born child in the state of original sin is in some sense truly innocent, since original sin simply means the fact of being born without God's grace. It is not the result of a personal sinful act in the child. Yet the child's state of being without grace is opposed to God's call to communion with himself; moreover, without the grace coming from Christ's redemption, each child would realize its human existence in a false autonomy from God.

sake of this affair he may be ready to risk everything that he had cherished before. In other cases the limited good the sinner idolizes may be wealth, power, or fame.

Yet in every choice against one's own conscience it is ultimately not an external object that becomes the idol; rather, through choosing any created good as an absolute, the sinner idolizes himself or herself. In setting up arbitrarily one's own values, for instance, the pleasures of an extramarital relationship, against the order of reality itself as it has become known to us through our conscience, the sinner acted as a "god" by deciding arbitrarily what was right or wrong. That in every "idol" the sinner actually idolizes himself or herself, becomes very clear when the idol is no longer satisfying. A man's ecstatic love will immediately turn into hatred if the idolized woman no longer fulfills the role he assigned to her. If the people a dictator idolizes turns against him, he will try ruthlessly to suppress or destroy them.

Thus, if I understand myself as in some sense the "Absolute," the highest and the only true value, I will get into a conflict not only with my own true self, but also with my fellow human beings. I cannot accept my neighbors as my equals, since that would require me to dethrone myself. As long as I hold myself to be the center of the universe, others cannot be accepted for their own sake, but only as a means to further my own interests or else as potential rivals to be overcome. Depending on the kind of society I live in, my methods will be covert or overt, crass or subtle, but my goal will always remain the same: I will attempt to suppress, manipulate, and exploit the freedom of others.

I will also use the material world to enhance my own interests, without regard to the interest of others, and in the process I may contribute to destroying the environment for future generations.

The conflict with one's conscience and one's neighbor necessarily implies a conflict with God. Through the awareness of the absolute obligation to do what is right, believer, agnostic and atheist alike encounter the true Absolute, God himself. Moreover, we know from God's revelation that the voice of conscience calls one

not only to respect the order of reality established by the Creator, but, ultimately, to accept the love of God the Father who wants to transform us into his children.⁶

Thus the one who sins mortally not only opposes the will of God the Creator, but also God's will to be our Father. Hence sin — to varying degrees and in various ways — is always a personal offense against God the Father.

In committing a sin, I also necessarily distort my understanding of God. If I was an unbeliever (even innocently) before sinning, the sin will confirm me in the received notion that "God" is an arbitrary and tyrannical power from which I must be set free. If I was a believer before my sin, in rationalizing my sin I may gradually come to believe that it is not God who actually forbids this or that sinful act, but only a Church teaching or other human tradition. In another scenario, I may continue to think what I did was sinful, but begin to resent God as the cause of my guilt, a tyrant and vindictive judge. I might even repress my instinctive knowledge of God and come to the conclusion that God does not exist. My resentment or cynicism will then be directed against "life" or "reality" in general. In any case, by sinning, we distort or repress our knowledge of God and no longer know the holy and loving One who has created us out of love and whose will is our life and fulfillment.

While sin is always committed by the will, a spiritual faculty, it expresses itself, and influences others, through the body. Through the body sin becomes "contagious"; it creates a milieu that affects everyone to varying degrees, and increases its power by enticing or pressuring other freedoms to commit the same sin or to oppose it with other sins. Thus violence begets counter-violence, promiscuity provokes self-righteous indignation, arrogance begets hatred, and infidelity in one spouse tempts the other to become unfaithful.

⁶ Of the many hidden but real ways in which this offer of God's love takes place in daily life, the short stories of Flannery O'Connor provide powerful examples. See especially, "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," *The Complete Stories* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1985), pp. 117-133.

Moreover, by replacing the true Absolute with an idol, with some limited created good made into a false absolute, I oppose my own spiritual nature, which is naturally drawn towards the infinite spiritual Absolute. By embracing a creature as my ultimate value, I lose my ability to know and love spiritual realities. All that interests me now is the goods of this world, pleasure, possessions, power, and self-aggrandizement. Scripture and patristic tradition are describing this change when they say (speaking existentially rather than metaphysically) that every sinner becomes flesh: in conflict with their spiritual nature, they are captivated by the things of this passing world rather than by the things of God.

The contaminating influence of sin spreads not only through the body but is also further extended and reinforced through the structures of society; the economic, political, and cultural institutions are — to varying degrees and in various ways — all deformed by sin. While a sinful environment does not eliminate all individual freedom to be good and to do good, it curtails its range of action and makes some semi-conscious or unconscious appropriation and imitation of the sins of others inevitable. Thus hypocritical parents may produce hypocritical attitudes in their children, even before the children are able to recognize hypocrisy as evil. Promiscuous parents may produce promiscuous offspring. Parents alienated from their true selves (through their own or through others' fault) may influence their children to develop a "persona," a mask, which covers up their true selves even before the children are able to recognize that such an attitude is wrong. Institutionalized economic exploitation and political oppression create a climate in which individuals become unconscious or half-conscious instruments of injustice.⁷

⁷ The fact that the individual is born into a sinful world that affects him through his genetic heritage and environment is not only a burden; it also limits or eliminates the individual's subjective sinfulness insofar as his moral awareness and freedom is diminished or sometimes non-existent.

2. The punishment of sin

The punishment I receive for my sin is not something extrinsic to sin itself. It is not like the application of a penal code whose penalties have only a legal connection with the sin committed. God respects our human dignity to shape freely our own being. If by sinning I freely distort my own reality and thereby my relationship to my neighbor and to God, God allows this freely chosen distortion to take effect. **The punishment of sin, then, is its necessary, "natural" consequence.** Thus, while sin is the freely chosen opposition to one's true self, to God and to one's neighbor, the punishment is the suffering that results from this threefold estrangement. Yet, as long as the sinful choice is not finalized in death, the suffering that comes from the estrangement remains a powerful incentive for sinners to seek a reversal of their state. We need to investigate this in more detail. For simplicity's sake we examine only that kind of alienation for which the person himself or herself is responsible. In real life, however, responsibilities always intertwine, and we carry in our own alienation — prior to our own decisions — the alienation caused by everybody else's sins.

In refusing to obey my conscience, I negate my own true being and live in a state of falsehood and self-deception. Hence the experience of self-alienation. It manifests itself in diminished self-worth and in a diminution of my own sense of identity. Often, I will try to compensate for it by inflating my ego and by exaggerating my self-importance. I need to convince myself more than anyone else of my own worth against the nagging suspicion of worthlessness.⁸

In refusing to accept myself as a gift from God and to accept God's own self offered to me in love, I am trying to be independent from God, and attempting to become what I am not, an absolute

⁸ Obviously, as explained above, not every feeling of diminished self-worth is the result of personal sin. If a child does not receive unconditional love from those around him, especially in the first years of his life, he will develop a feeling of worthlessness or at least some serious doubts about whether he is lovable. Thus the child becomes the victim of others' sin.

in myself. By cutting myself off from Being Itself, I necessarily experience the fragility of my own being, which borders on nothingness and is threatened by nothingness. The result is a heightened sense of anxiety, a dread before the inevitability of my own death. Heidegger's "Angst" is the anxiety of sinful humankind. There is a connection between living as if "I were my own god" and experiencing my existence as a sliding towards death, a "Sein zum Tod."

In refusing to accept my neighbor with equal rights and a claim for personal relationships, I isolate myself from everyone. I end up with nothing but alliances and enmities based on self-interest; I become incapable of personal relationships, which demand mutual respect and acceptance of the other for the other's own sake. In either case, using everyone around me as a means for my ends or looking on him or her as a rival to be overpowered, I will be treated by others in exactly the same way.

While serving the true Absolute results in growing freedom and harmony, if I set myself up as an "absolute" by choosing limited goods like pleasure, wealth, glory, or power as ultimate values, I end up in slavery and must endure the disintegration of my freedom. I become "addicted" to my "idol," as the idol begins to exert more and more power over me, so that even when I want to shake free from it I can no longer do so. The object of my desire shapes and transforms my being to the likeness of the desired object. If I desire as my ultimate value things of this world, they will restrict my horizon and sensitivity to their level. Moreover, the instincts and drives these values give free rein to, the sex drive, the drive to possess things and dominate people, and the hunger for fame and greatness gradually weaken the freedom of my will, my personal, spiritual center that is the cause of my free acts. Now, even if I wanted to reverse the trend, I might not be able to assert myself against the internal forces that have taken control of my life. I am no longer free, because it is no longer my personal self that determines myself, one or several of these internal forces, of which each and all are less than my person, dictate my decisions. Yet I remain responsible for my actions, because I freely surrendered my freedom to these internal forces, and my will remains attached to them. Thus the

sinners who began by asserting themselves as "absolutes" end up as slaves to the goods of this world and to their passions.

All these forms of alienation, the self-estrangement, the estrangement from others, the slavery to the goods of this world, and the disintegration of the person as a free agent cause not only emotional and physical pain but also a feeling of numbness, of not really being alive.

Just as sin expresses itself and acquires power and influence through the body, so does the punishment for sin: the suffering, which results from my threefold alienation and from my conflict with the material universe, affects me through my body. It is in the death of the human body that the process of alienation and the suffering caused by alienation comes to a climax. This makes intelligible why physical death is viewed by Scripture as the natural punishment for sin and — but for Christ's death — also the image and anticipation of eternal death, that is, eternal damnation.

The human soul and human body constitute one being; one person. Thus, when I die, directly only my body dies, but since I am my body, I experience the disintegration of my body as something not external to myself; rather I experience *myself* dying (even though my soul, the very "core" of my person is immortal). This explains why the anticipation of the separation of our body and soul is so threatening and so painful for us: it is experienced as the disintegration and annihilation of the person who had originally been created for eternal life.

If the dying persons are believers but find themselves in the state of sin, they experience their dying as the foretaste of that final separation from the living God who is now perceived as absolutely distant from them. If unbelieving sinners are in the process of dying, their alienation from God will be felt as a cruel, impersonal fate indifferent to their personal concerns and aspirations. Either way, the sinners who attempted to be their own "absolute," their own god, must come to the realization that they are the exact opposite of an absolute; they are dependent, contingent beings whose annihilation is not only not impossible, but appears to be the most natural outcome of the process of dying.

In dying I also become more and more separated from my fellow men and women. If I considered them beforehand merely as means to further my interests, they are now slipping out of my control. I cannot force them to undergo the experience of dying in my place. Nevertheless, if some vestiges of humanity still remain in me, I will now long for the companionship and personal closeness of some human beings, whom I had not even noticed as persons before.

The conflict between the sinner and the material world also comes to a tragic climax at the moment of death. The material goods I used and abused in my lifetime refuse to serve me. They are no longer attractive but often become a source of pain. In general, the material universe appears as totally indifferent and even hurtful to the dying person.

3. The need for redemption

1. As long as sinners are alive, they have not entirely immobilized themselves in the state of this threefold alienation. Thus the misery that results from their state, especially when they are facing death, may serve as a powerful "therapy" to bring them back to reality. Yet, while we were free to distort ourselves and our relationships with God and with our fellow men and women, we are no longer free to reverse the process. Sin has affected our nature so deeply that only the author of nature, God, can create us anew.

2. If we consider sin as the free rejection of God's love, we find another reason why we cannot rescue ourselves from the state of sin on our own. We cannot earn back God's love. Even at the outset we could not have earned the absolutely free initiative by which God offers himself to us; much less can we gain it back now by our own resources. The analogy of human friendship may shed light on this truth of faith. Even a human friendship is a freely bestowed gift, and if, by an act of disloyalty, I become unworthy of my friend's trust, I lose all "rights" to his or her friendship. I may repent and may try to repair the broken relationship, but I cannot restore it on

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