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Sin: Radical Evil in Soul and Society

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theology in the institution's behalf: those who articulate public policy, Church and Society committee and board members, bishops, members of National and synodical church councils.

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Sin: Radical Evil in Soul and Society

Ted Peters

Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 1994
327 pp. \$21.25 softcover

Ted Peters is a systematic theologian who writes of sin as a movement towards radical evil. His book leans heavily upon social psychologists, largely Freudian; the early church fathers, primarily Augustine of Hippo; and "the earlier generation of neo-orthodox theologians", primarily Paul Tillich, Reinhold Niebuhr, and "secondarily" Karl Barth and Emil Brunner (p. 6). Sin, Peters writes, is unable to give good reason for what it is or does and is therefore not "subject to rational explanation" (p. 10). Yet, attempt to explain it he does by seven steps, calling these "parsing the phenomenon of sin" (p. 10). As he discusses these we are shown how it is that humans move towards radical sin through anxiety, the first step, which predisposes humankind to act out of a fear of loss, "*the sting of death within*" rooted in original sin, *peccatum originale*. This, Peters defines as "corporate sin as well as the propensity to commit sins that arise from the condition of human anxiety" (p. 26). As discussed elsewhere, within this work corporate sin is not so alien from the idea of hereditary sin, which Peters seems to reject but which is raised elsewhere in the text as a question of sociobiology "Genes and Sin" (ch. 10).

Anxiety as rooted in our psyche is both a call of God and the breeding ground for sin (p. 62, 63). Our anxious selves must from our beginnings meet with love and nurturing if we are to learn trust and to grow in faith and believing. Peters writes that those who image God for us will influence us for good and God and away from being controlled by anxiety. Love at our beginning, and a pattern of faithfulness in our lives, predispose us to grace, and make it possible to live our own lives with faith (p. 80).

Anxiety as a thesis for the roots of sin is well argued using both theological and psychological constructs. Anxiety is explained as the fear of non-being and the crisis point for individuals and nations. It lurks in the "preconscious fear of death" and can drive us to a state of despair from which we may rise up in rage (p. 38) to move through the stages of unfaith, pride, concupiscence, self-justification, cruelty and blasphemy. This last is redefined as the "misuse of divine symbols so as to prevent the communication of God's grace" (p. 16) and takes two forms: covert and overt

blasphemy. This last is “radical evil”, the final stage in the journey from anxiety to the “destruction of the inner soul” (p. 217). It is at this stage, when all of God is negated, that one is open to the powers of evil as these are focused on Satan and satanic cults.

Throughout this work the reader is made conscious of the melding of the social sciences and theology. If one is not adept at these some of the arguments may be lost. There are aspects of this book which are troubling for me, among these the writer’s venture into including women’s experience, which is not helpful and comes across as paternalistic, the argument against homophobia, and a number of recreated terminologies which are challenging, to say the least. Even so, the book is well worth reading as it challenges our own understandings of sin, faith and grace and nudges us towards new insights and new growth.

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I Am A Palestinian Christian

Mitri Raheb

Translated by Ruth C.L. Gritsch
Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995
xii + 164 pp. \$14.95

Most books—unless they are dictionaries, catalogues, encyclopedias, or holy scripture—are intended to be read from first page to last. Traditional literary structure and intention demand that reader and author, temporarily at least, share the same continuum of experience.

But there are compelling exceptions to every rule. For anyone concerned about the Middle East in general, and the plight of Palestinians in particular, the sheer volume and subjective diversity of current writings on the subject can seem overwhelming. No wonder so many Western-world observers tend to recoil in confusion and despair, hoping that the ongoing “peace process” between the Israeli government and Palestinian Liberation Organization will sort things out, someday.

Instead of waiting for that hypothetical “someday” when the whole situation will become crystal clear or puzzling briefly over the apparent oxymoron of Raheb’s title (aren’t all Palestinians Muslims?), try going straight to page 47, to a chapter called Daher’s Vineyard. The parallels with an Old Testament man called Naboth (I Kings 21) are striking, but there’s more.

Suddenly, “someday” is right now. What looks at first to be a modern parable is the true-life story of what it’s like to be threatened with homelessness and dispossession; what it’s like to be the underdog in a world that associates Palestinians only with violent extremism; what it’s like to be