

THE CHANGING CONTENT OF SIN.

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AS this paper does not design to be a contribution specially to Christian ethics it will be necessary for us at the very outset to say what we mean by the word sin. The definition given by Christian theology is hardly broad enough if, as we intend, consideration is given not only to pre-Christian days, but to times and lands far removed from the divine revelation essential to that theology. True to this theology, Ullman in his *Sinlessness of Jesus*, says that "the idea of sin can only exist where a divine rule of life, and a highest aim of human existence resulting therefrom are recognized."

The primitive consciousness akin to our modern sense of sin very seldom if ever possessed an ethical content, therefore the simple yet broad definition, much in vogue of late, that "sin is selfishness," is excluded. This primitive consciousness is constantly found in connection with animistic notions, particularly tabu; therefore when we speak of sin we must not exclude from our definition these non-ethical elements. The following suggests itself as broad enough for the needs of our subject, Sin is that which is conceived of as tending to sunder man from his ideals. From our modern standpoint many of these ideals may seem unworthy of the name, in some cases they mean nothing more than positive existence, but as to the possessor they form something to be realized, we shall do well to recognize them as such.

A fixed standard whereby to judge the acts of man, however, will prove a barrier to a just appreciation of the primitive sense of sin, and its changing content down the ages. He who maintains that sin is a violation of God's law as given in the Bible must be reminded that there are a few books which reveal the changing content more. The hopelessness of making the Bible our standard of morality often leads us to reduce the sphere of the revelation of

such a standard to Jesus. We are told as Dr. Fairbairn tells us that "the supreme act of revelation is the Incarnation." It is becoming however more and more obvious to us that the portrait of the Gospels partakes of the ideals of ardent admirers and that while Jesus may have been a grand test for morality in A. D. 30, and even to-day becomes in his idealized form a test that yet allows some of us to say, "We test our lives by Thine," we do not see reason for thinking that his life shall always decide whether we are sinners or not in certain acts and dispositions. "The man has never lived who can feed us ever."

The failure of the so-called standards of morality to give us the key to the consciousness of sin imposes on us the task of showing some justification for thinking that the sense or consciousness of sin does not arise from objective standards but from subjective notions of right and wrong. We shall find that because of this subjective estimation sin has had a varying content in different periods, different lands and different individuals. In the estimation of character we shall see that sin must be judged as such, more from the consciousness of the sinner in regard to it, than by its appearance to society. Writing of this distinction between the subjective and objective value of life, we are reminded that Professor Deussen in his recently translated *Philosophy of the Upanishads* has hinted that this distinction is not only ethical but geographical. In contrast with the Hindus, he tells us that "Europeans, practical and shrewd as they are, are wont to estimate the merits of an action above all by its objective worth. . . . He who has obtained the greatest results by this standard passes for the greatest man of his time, and the widow's mite is never anything more than a mite." Judging otherwise, we hold that a man is a sinner not because *we* think he sins, but because *he* knows that his life is sinful.

As we have already hinted, the primitive consciousness of sin was devoid of all morality in our modern use of this term. Most writers on early religions and primitive culture recognize this fact. Professor Smith in his *Religion of the Semites*, says that "while it is not easy to fix the exact idea of holiness in ancient Semitic religion, it is quite certain that it had nothing to do with morality or purity of life." In another place he adds, that there was no "abiding sense of sin or unworthiness, or acts of worship expressing the struggle after an unattained righteousness, the longing for uncertain forgiveness. . . . Men were satisfied with the gods and they felt the gods were satisfied with them."

The mistake must not be made, which is yet sometimes made

by those unacquainted with primitive religious ideas, that the awful sacrifices and asceticism of primitive devotees form a witness to the existence of our modern sense of sin. These horrors were seldom conceived of as appeasing the god but most often were used as a means of establishing the blood-bond of communion with the god; even fasting was only a physical preparation for eating the sacred flesh. De la Saussaye in his *Manual of the Science of Religion*, has said that not only in "Israelitic and Christian but in Indian, Persian and Assyrian prayers the consciousness of sin is expressed." These early prayers like the sacrifices have often been appealed to as providing evidence of the sense of sin. It is true it is there, but the content is something very different from what we understand by it to-day. For instance in the Vedic hymns we have the following:

"Through want of strength, Thou Strong, Bright God have I gone astray."

and

"Agni, drive away from us, sin, which leads us astray."

When we read, however, the following:

"From the sins which knowingly and *unknowingly* we have committed,
Do ye, all Gods, of one accord, release us."

we suspect at once that we are dealing with a non-ethical stage in the evolution of the idea of sin.

Tabu seems to have been intimately connected with the primitive sense of sin. It was so non-ethical that from our modern point of view it could be both holy and unclean. That which to us now forms a strong contrast then existed in a mysterious unity. The Greek *αγ* and the Latin *sacer* provide us with words meaning holiness and also pollution. The dictionaries of such languages as that of New Zealand or Polynesia define *tabu* or *tapu* quite in harmony with the equivocal nature of the Greek and Latin roots. The words are defined as meaning "spiritual, sacred, consecrated, wonderful, incomprehensible, mysterious, uncanny, weird." They are applied by the savage equally to a woman in child-birth and to the missionary and his Bible. The primitive sinner may be either the murderer, his victim, the man who buries the victim or even those who mourn for him, they are all "tabu." It is as Dr. Fraser has expressed it in his *Golden Bough*, "The odor of sanctity and the stench of corruption alike provide the savage with sin."

Another instance is seen in the Hebrew root¹ of the words

¹ קִדְּשׁ (cf. *kadesh* and *kadosh*) W. R. Smith *Prophets of Israel*, p. 225, also *Enc. Biblica*, vol. i, col. 836. See also an instructive article on "Chastity and Phallic Worship," which touches on this subject—*Open Court*, Vol. XVII, p. 614.

signifying "holy" and "harlot." This root according to Robertson Smith stood for "every distinctive character of Godhead." He adds in another place that "if the Arabic commentaries on the Koran are to be believed, the etymological idea is that of distance or separation." In other words, it is but another instance of *tabu*.

It may be felt by some that the penalties for such imaginary transgressions not appearing, the consciousness in regard to them would soon pass away. The evidence however is overwhelming to show to the savage that the penalties do appear. The fear and horror of having contracted the mysterious indignation of spirits and being tabued, works so powerfully on the imagination of the victims that as one New Zealand writer expresses it, "the victims die under it as though their strength ran out like water."

While it is true that the sundering element between man and his ideal in the past was *tabu*, its non-ethical mysterious content invested it with those powers necessary for atonement. Blood, which above all else was tabued, could bring defilement and also cleanse. Instances are too numerous to quote, survivals of the idea yet exist in the terminology of systems that have long discarded the original significance.

It will not be out of place to notice at this point the nature of Paul's consciousness of the content of sin. It is impossible to ignore it because it seems to possess elements of the animistic period we have just noticed. The writer is indebted to Pfeleiderer's *Primitive Christianity*, for the pointing out of this fact. Paul conceives of sin as having its home in the flesh; the flesh is "the seat of an active God-opposing principle." This is the source of sinful acts. At times this principle seems to receive personification, it is thought of as an independent entity, "an active subject to which all manner of predicates can be attached." It came into the world, it is a tyrant to whom man is sold, it gives its slaves the wages of death; it is a demon spirit. The deadly miasma of this demon within Paul gives him his justification for such phrases as "the body of death," "the flesh lusteth against the spirit," "walking after the flesh." Like Seneca and Epictetus, Paul inherits the popular animistic notions of his age and thus it is natural for him like others to reckon "the contempt of the body" to be "the soul's true freedom."

As a logical consequence of these notions sin became something we could transfer to another. Having very little to do with the will it could fulfil its own pleasure or do the bidding of another. To these beliefs belong the scapegoat custom and the "catching" of sin by physical contact. Sin was contagious. In the Zendavesta, touch-

ing a corpse is called sin. Among the Narringeri of South Australia, the sorcerer lays his charm in the bosom of a dead body in order that it may derive a deadly potency by contact with corruption. To this stage also belong accidental sins, the sins which the book of Leviticus says are done "unwittingly"; and doubtless, the origin of that early Christian dogma of the perpetuation of sin through physical connection with Adam, could be traced to ideas that we have already mentioned.

The passing from the animistic to the ethical ideas of sin can seldom if ever be clearly traced. The higher concept only comes gradually, and often we find the old and the new existing side by side in the minds of men. Dr. Farnell in his Hibbert Lectures has drawn attention at one point to the fact that while Mazdaism is full of ritualism the spiritual concept of a pure heart has an important place. God says to the prophet, "Purity is for man, next to life, the highest good: that purity, O Zarathustra, that is in the religion of Mazda for him who cleanses himself with good thoughts, words and deeds." Darmesteter has thrown some doubt on the ethical content of these words, but, while not granting the truth of the doubt, it can be seen at least how they provide a natural transition from ritualism to spiritual life. An instance of the confusion of both notions may be the following from the Vasisltha-Darmasastra, "The body is purified by water, the internal organ by truth, the soul by sacred learning and austerities, the understanding by knowledge." Delitzsch tells of a Babylonian magus, who, having been called in to a patient, seeks to know what sins have thus thrown him on a sick-bed. He does not stop short at such sins as theft and murder, but asks, "Have you failed to clothe a naked person or to cause a prisoner to see the light?" Here side by side we perceive the old notion that sickness is the result of sin and the high ethical concepts of certain sins of omission.

Somewhat akin to the double consciousness of sin that we have just noticed as characteristic of the transitional periods, is the Oriental sense of sin so prominent in Hinduism. In this consciousness sin and evil are synonymous. This may be best illustrated by giving the following list of sins from the Upanishads: "Theft, drinking of spirits, adultery, killing a Brahmin" (Khand. 5. 10 9.); "miserliness, ignorance" (Kh. 10. 7); "lying, disrespect for parents and friends, bewilderment, fear, grief, sleep, sloth, carelessness, decay, sorrow, hunger, thirst, niggardliness, wrath, infidelity, envy, cruelty, folly, shamelessness, meanness, pride, changeability" (Tait. 1. 11. 2). Here it is evident that the evils of existence form the

content of the Hindu consciousness of sin. There the sense of sin is the sense of this life; necessarily therefore, salvation, which is the losing of sin and consciousness of it, with them means the negation of all sensuous experience. "Man," says Hegel, "so long as he persists in remaining in his own consciousness, is according to the Hindu idea, ungodly."

The content of the consciousness of sin often in the past changed for geographical reasons. Goodness and sinfulness were dependent on tribal boundaries. It was possible for a man to be a saint in one land but a sinner in another. Baudhâyana (I. 2. 1-8) speaks of certain customs which while legitimate in the South of India, make a person a sinner if practiced in the North. Robertson Smith has also pointed out that among the Semites, "a man is held answerable to his god for wrong done to a member of his own kindred or political community, but he may deceive, rob or kill an alien without offence to religion." It would seem that the present more cosmopolitan sense of sin is the result of the division which has taken place in the minds of men, between religion and the nation. As soon as the multitude of priests, which each nation kept to deal with its sins, were thrown into each other's company, by the breaking down of tribal and national barriers, they found their work confusing, so confusing that only the coming of prophets to take their place, gave any hope of understanding clearly again the meaning of right and wrong.

The sense of sin is, as Mr. A. C. Benson has hinted in one of his best essays, "in a certain degree an artificial sense." It changes as man changes, he was a sinner once who cared for the sick and dying, now he is a saint. Only a madman would have done Father Damien's work in the days of early man. It changes as custom changes, a prostitute was once a sacred person, with holy work, now one hesitates to write the word for the sad dark sin for which it stands.

That which we have observed to be true of the past will be true of the future. Much that we are conscious of as sin now, will then produce an opposite consciousness; much that we now do without reproach will then produce a condemning conscience. H. G. Wells in his essay on "The New Republic" promises us a scientific reconstruction of our ethics, and says that "the most loathsome of all conceivable sins" in the future will be the encouraging of the survival of the unfit. He anticipates that a certain portion of the population will exist only on sufferance on the understanding that they do not propagate themselves. He adds, "I do not foresee any reason to

suppose that they will hesitate to kill when that sufferance is abused." In those days the criminal who pleads insanity as a reason for mercy, will find it judged as only an added reason for death. This may provide some future writer on the changing content of sin with a good illustration that whereas in the twentieth century it was a sin to kill "a poor fellow" who was not responsible for the blood he had shed, now it is a sin to let him live.

This paper may well be closed with "the eternal years which are ours for growth." The seers of mankind have assured us that in those eternal years "there will be no more sin"; and every one of us who have the least conviction of the reality of the Unseen, agree that the former things will pass away, and with them what we *now* call sin. Growth however is inconceivable without a passing on to something as yet not realized and away from that which is realized. If a Heraclitus taught there is no Being without Becoming, the sinner then as now will be he who tries to evade this law, who, instead of passing on with the moving All to the perfection which is not Being but Becoming, lives for Being, for the present, for self.