

SIN IN THE UPANISHADS

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IT may seem somewhat surprising to the student of Hindu religion and philosophy to see such a term as "sin" used in connection with a system wherein to our Occidental minds the problems are not moral but metaphysical. The aim of the writer, however, is scientific and not religious in the narrow sense in which this latter word is often used, and thus he does not read into the word "sin" elements which belong to systems foreign to that one with which he is dealing. Rather would he for general purposes understand by the word the element or elements which *sunder* a human being from his subjective or objective ideals, which he by manifold crude or intelligent means seeks to abolish.

From the most primitive days to the present sin has possessed a varying content. In one age the content is purely a physical taint, in another it is found to be largely composed of demonic elements, yet again it can be formal and ritualistic and lastly it can possess an ethical significance as in the present state of the higher religions.

The reader will misunderstand the study if he here seeks primarily a better understanding of the Upanishads. In so far as the paper may contribute to that it must be reckoned quite secondary. The primary motive is to understand the content of the conception of sin as found in these writings and thus add a contribution to a study in which the writer is very interested, namely the science of sin, viewed from the standpoint of comparative religions.

The first thing to be noticed is that the Upanishads, like the sacred books of many other nations, do not possess a systematized statement on this matter any more than on other subjects. They are not the product of one mind or of one age and consequently we must not look for a harmonized statement. For instance, the sinful nature of the body is again and again dwelt upon, but there is an earlier view which describes the body as "the city of Brahman,

heavenly and desirable, the highest dwelling of Brahman." (Brih. 2. 5. 18., Khand. 8. 1. 1.)

Difficulty is also met in the fact that varied interpretations are given by varied commentators; add to this Max Müller's statement that "there will always remain in the Upanishads a vast amount of what we can only call meaningless jargon," and it will be seen that our task is not so easy as it is in lands where the mode of thought approximates our own.

Christian critics who narrowly desire to make all non-Christian nations conform to their own moral standard must here be reminded that the ethical standard of the Upanishads if not the same is by no means inferior to their own. Generally speaking, organized Christianity looks more to the objective worth of a good action than to its subjective worth. As Professor Deussen remarks, "the widow's mite is never anything more than a mite." To the Hindu, says this same philosopher in his recently translated *Philosophy of the Upanishads*, "the subjective worth of an action consists in the greatness of the personal sacrifice which is involved, or more strictly speaking in the actor's consciousness of the greatness of the sacrifice which he believes himself to be making, . . . whether in other respects it be of great or little or absolutely no value for others. . . (p. 364). A further contrast to the Christian conceptions is the lack of emphasis placed upon sin by the Upanishads. It is significant of much in both systems that the Christian revivalist yet covers sea and land in bringing about "cases" of "conviction of sin," while a perusal of the subject index of the last great work on the Upanishads discovers the absence of the words "sin" and "evil." The Upanishads seek not to convict men of the negative unrealities of life, but are constantly drawing them to the contemplation of the great reality—Brahman. This counter-emphasis has a great deal to do with the lack of the sense of sin which Christian missionaries so often have lamented in the Hindus. There are few generalizations of wicked acts; particular sins and individual instances of wickedness are the most prominent of what we call the fruit of sin. Professor Deussen does not hesitate to attribute this actually to their every-day conduct. "This lack of generalization," he says, "as well as the rarity of such warning in the Upanishad literature proves that offences of this character [i. e., theft, drunkenness, murder, adultery] were not common, and that many an Indian chieftain might make in substance his own the honorable testimony which Aśvapati Kaikeya bears to his subjects:

‘In my kingdom there is no thief,
 No churl, no drunkard,
 None who neglects the sacrifice or the sacred lore,
 No adulterer, no courtesan.’” (Khand. 5.11. 5.)—Deussen, p.366.

A study of the Upanishads will reveal the fact that the sins are internal rather than external. I have made the following list which will help to illustrate this: Theft, drinking of spirits, killing of a Brahman (Khand. 5. 10. 9); miserliness, adultery, ignorance (*ibid.* 5. 10. 7); lying, disrespect for parents and friends (Taitr. 1. 11. 2); bewilderment, fear, grief, sleep, sloth, carelessness, decay, sorrow, hunger, thirst, niggardliness, wrath, infidelity, envy, cruelty, folly, shamelessness, meanness, pride, changeability (Maitr. 3. 5). Here it will be seen that many of these evils were only found within, in harmony with the proverb of the Bhagavad Gita, “In thyself know thy enemy” (6. 5). The relation of sin to the body is not peculiar to the Upanishads, it but forms one more chapter to the already large history of man’s identification of his evils with his physical nature. “Mortifying the body” is mentioned as necessary (Khand. 11. 23. 2); all evils are left behind in the body (Taitr. 11. 5); and in another place the body is called “this offensive, pithless body...which is assailed by lust, hatred, greed, delusion, fear, anguish, jealousy, separation from what is loved, hunger, thirst, old age, death, illness, grief and other evils” (Maitr. 1. 3). There does not seem to be any notion of sin as a demonic entity in the physical nature, like we find in the popular animistic notions of the inhabitants of Asia Minor in Paul’s day. In one passage (Ait. 1. 2. 5) it is indeed said that hunger and thirst make their home in men as demonic powers, but the explanation of this (cf. Khand. 6. 8) gives no reason for assuming the existence of such animism.

Their view of the body naturally led to a certain amount of asceticism in regard to it. To the Hindu the body is a sunderer and thus to us a sin, deliverance from it is to be delivered from all evils (Brih. 4. 3. 8). There seems however no justification for the excesses of bodily torture so common to some Christian fanatics, and also found with some of the Hindus of modern days. It doubtless received its share of discipline in the asceticism (*tapas*) prescribed as necessary; but the attitude of the authors and the defenders of the Upanishads was not very encouraging to the ascetic ideal. For instance, we read (Brih. 3. 8. 10), “of a truth...he who does not know this imperishable one and in this world sacrifices and distributes alms and does penance (*tapas tapyate*) for many thousands of years, wins thereby *only finite* (reward).”

A characteristic Oriental sunderer is desire. It is found in Lao-tse's Tao-teh-king and as *ἐκθυμία* is often found in the New Testament. The Upanishads supply a number of interesting elements to this strange conception of sin. The emphasis it receives in these writings is doubtless due to the tendency above mentioned of concentration upon inward sin rather than outward. The *kâmayamâna* ("consumed by desire") is contrasted with the person who knows himself as the *âtman*. Our true home is Brahman. In Brahman we live, move and have our being. We are blinded and hindered however from the enjoyment of this rest by desire.

"When every passion vanishes
That finds a home in the human heart,
Then he who is mortal becomes immortal,
Here already he has attained to Brahman" (Brih. 4.4. 6-7).

"Free from desire is freedom from evil," and in one passage in the Bhihadaranyaka-upanishad desirelessness is united with sinlessness (4. 3. 33). In one passage desires for wife and children and family life are placed among the evils from which a man is to flee, but it would be unfair to infer fanatical asceticism from this as from the words of Jesus, "He who does not hate his father and mother is not worthy of me." We have to place alongside of the passage another where offence to father, mother, brother or sister calls forth a cry of shame. All is Brahman and thus while desire can be evil the "self is free from evil."

It is well to note, before we pass on to speak of emancipation from sin, that the Upanishads seek a sinless ideal like the other religious systems. It is not our purpose here to compare the relative values but simply to note the fact. "The Self is free from sin, old age, death, grief, hunger and thirst" (Khand. 8. 1. 5). "The Self within all things is never contaminated with the misery of the world" (Kath. 11. 5. 11). Thus he who knows the unity of the *âtman* and Brahman becomes sinless. "He therefore that knows it, after having become quiet, subdued, satisfied, patient and collected sees self in Self, sees all as Self. Evil does not overcome him, he overcomes all evil. Evil does not burn him, he burns all evil. Free from evil, free from spots, free from doubt, he becomes a (true) Brahmana" (Brih. 4. 4. 23).

We come now to understand the salvation from sin. At first we will notice that although it is not the orthodox Brahmanic means of salvation, there is evidence in some passages of a survival of the primitive ideas of the transference of sin. These passages are im-

portant in so far as they give us reason for thinking the early Aryans shared with the early Semites ideas that were anything but metaphysical. In one passage (Kaush. 1. 4) a man on his way to the world of Brahman, "the path of the gods," shakes off his good and evil deeds, his beloved relatives obtain the good he has done, and his unbeloved his evil deeds. In another passage (Brih. 1. 3. 10) the deity sends death and sin to "the end of the quarters of the earth," adding, "therefore let no one go there that he may not meet with such." As there is no need to emphasize this element in the Upanishads let me merely refer my readers to a similar method of transferring sin to an indefinite place or distant people in Herodotus (2. 39) and in the Bible (Lev. 17). Salvation from sin by "works" holds a place in the Upanishads very similar to the place it holds in Protestantism. From the ideal standpoint they are of no value, they even hinder the progress of the soul and for this reason are accounted evil. He who sees his self as the Highest Self "kills all actions, good and bad" (Maitr. 6. 20). Yet for all this, "works" seem to be as the first rung of the ladder to the path of the gods, and we are told that the man who has works alone "goes to the world of the Asuras, which are covered with blind darkness, yet those who give themselves up to knowledge despising the previous discipline of works enter into still greater darkness" (Vaga. 12). That some account is taken of works may be seen from the following passage: "Now as a man is like this or like that, according as he acts, and according as he behaves, so will he be: a man of good acts will become good and a man of bad acts, bad. He becomes pure by pure deeds, bad by bad deeds" (Brih. 4. 4. 5).

The great emancipation from sin however is knowledge. It is on this that emphasis is continually placed in the Upanishads, "as water does not cling to the lotus leaf so no evil deed clings to one who knows Brahman." Ignorance of the true Self, or as the Christian would say, being "without God in the world" is the great sin. To know Brahman, this is life eternal. It is significant that one of the arbitrary meanings given to the word "Upanishads" by Sankara (cf. Deussen 10) is that they were so named because they "destroy" inborn ignorance. Certain it is that the aim of the Upanishads is to give the knowledge of Brahman. This knowledge however has to be defined. It is possible to be learned in all branches of ordinary knowledge, and draw much wisdom from experience and yet be "a sinner" in the Upanishad sense. It is rather the knowledge of Brahman that recognizes all other than Brahman as *maya* (illusion). Professor Deussen compares it to the step which Kant took when

he showed that the entire reality of experience is only apparition and not reality (*Ding an sich*). We must not however make the mistake of conceiving of a knowing subject and a known object for the *âtman* is an absolute unity and cannot tolerate such a dualism. A man only is saved from sin when he *rests* in this "unfathomable" All. This salvation is the death of all strife and dualism. "He has not first turned away from his wickedness who is not tranquil and subdued or whose mind is not at rest," "only he who meditates on Brahman destroys sin" (Kath. 1. 2. 24; Khand. 4. 11. 2). Mere knowledge is nought compared to this rest based on the profoundest intuition. The Upanishads fight against both ignorance and mere knowledge alike, as the following verse shows:

"In dense darkness they move
Who bow the knee to ignorance;
Yet denser they
Who are satisfied with knowledge" (Brih. 4. 4. 10).

Here our study ends and as we close it is for us to note that although the content of the idea of sin which we have studied in the Upanishads differs widely from the Christian it is not without its value. It will need to be recognized by the religion which is based on the science of religions and is not the partisan of any one development, that in the conception we form of sin we shall have to allow as large a place for the Brahmanic root of "ignorance" as for the Christian root of "wilful selfishness." The method of salvation from sin is not one whit behind that of the higher religions, its great contrasts are mostly superficial. All men are in God's forest seeking Him, and Christian and Hindu both discover that it is only when we cease seeking that we find Him, both declaring

"The one remains, the many change and pass,
Heaven's light forever shines, earth's shadows fly;
Life like a dome of many-colored glass
Stains the white radiance of Eternity."