

From Sin to Radical Evil

By
Ted Peters

The forgiveness of sins belongs inextricably to work of salvation accomplished by Jesus Christ. But, what does it mean to sin?

In this theological brief we will ask: Just what happens when we sin? If we look into a mirror and watch ourselves when we are engaged in sinning, what will we see?

Now, of course, we will be tempted to close our eyes. We don't really want to see ourselves as sinners. We want to see ourselves as good, as righteous, as likeable, as beautiful even. Curiously, this willingness to avert our eyes and avoid looking at ourselves is itself a part of sinning. Worse. We are even willing to tell ourselves lies to keep the truth of sin from penetrating. This will make the discussion that follows difficult, because we will need to penetrate our own self-deceit if we are to understand just what we are doing when we are sinning. So, get ready for a rough ride.

What will make the ride easier is the knowledge that in the apron of God's grace we have heard the message that we are forgiven. Baptized Christians are forgiven by God. This ought to provide some comfort and, even more, the security to face the truth about ourselves without fear of condemnation. In fact, we might even enjoy deepening our understanding of ourselves. Recall: ^{NRS} Romans 5:8 "God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us." Because we have been loved by God "while we still were sinners," we might even come to love ourselves a bit more.

In previous works, the author of this theological brief outlined seven steps from innocence down a ladder to the worst of the worst. These steps have been outlined in *Sin: Radical Evil in Soul and Society* (Eerdmans 1994) and chapter 5 of *GOD—The World's Future* (Fortress 2000) as well as the web series at Westminster John Knox Press for "The Thoughtful Christian" (www.TheThoughtfulChristian.com). Here's what's coming.

1. Anxiety
2. Unfaith
3. Pride
4. Concupiscence
5. Self-Justification and Scapegoating
6. Cruelty
7. Blasphemy

Do Sins Come in Sevens?

Christians have some favorite numbers. Twelve, for example, counts the tribes of Israel and the disciples of Jesus. Ten counts the commandments, and three the persons of the Trinity. In this collection appears the number seven as special too. Medieval theologians listed seven virtues: the four Cardinal Virtues of prudence, temperance, fortitude, and justice, plus the four Theological Virtues of faith, hope, and love.

So, we might ask, how many sins can we think of? Twelve? Ten? Three? Or Seven? Whichever number we choose does not really matter. The medieval theologians chose the number seven and ordered sins from worst to not-so-bad. On the list of *Seven Deadly Sins* we find pride, envy, anger, covetousness, sadness, gluttony, and lust. Note that none on this list of seven are actually activities. Rather, they are dispositions of spirit or character traits. They are orientations toward life. The theological idea of sin is a way of illuminating who we are and our disposition toward daily life.

The approach we Thoughtful Christians take here will employ the number seven but look at sin from a slightly different angle. We will look at what is going on with us when we engage in sinful activity, especially violent activity. Just what about our disposition toward daily life leads us to gossip, steal, go to war, murder, or crucify?

We will follow a sin tree from the soil up through the branches, from pre-sin up a ladder of violence toward radical evil, toward Satanic evil. Here are the steps: (1) anxiety; (2) unfaith; (3) pride; (4) concupiscence; (5) self-justification and scapegoating; (6) cruelty; and, finally, (7) blasphemy. These steps do not necessarily map onto a progression of activity. It is possible for us to take all of these steps in a flash, in a moment. The seven on this list simply help us to take apart and analyze our everyday experience.

1: Anxiety

Some of us take pills to relieve us of anxiety. When we do, we think of anxiety as a physical state that gives rise to a debilitating and constricting psychological state of mind. We don't think of such anxiety as sinful.

Here in our analysis of sin, the term *anxiety* is used a bit more broadly so that it includes every human being, not just those with a pathology. Each of us is anxious, regardless of how much we are aware of it. Here anxiety refers to our pre-conscious awareness of our impending death. At some level, we are aware that we live in a tension between life and death, between being and non-being.

There was a time before we were born, before we existed. At the present moment, we exist. At some point in the future we will cease to exist. We will eventually be forgotten. We will drop from being into non-being, into oblivion. The pre-conscious awareness of the possibility that we will cease to be influences nearly everything we do in our daily life. Among other things, it leads to safety habits that protect us from accidents and disease. If uncontrolled, our anxious

state may also lead to lust, gluttony, envy, covetousness, theft, anger, murder, war, and genocide.



We are anxious over space and time. We need space and time, otherwise we are nothing. If someone takes away our time, we are dead. If someone denies us space, we cease to have existence. When someone cuts in front of us while in line for the check out counter at the supermarket or cuts us off while driving on the freeway, we can feel the anger beginning in our toes and racing throughout our entire body. Why? Because that person has denied us our space, and, if we hastily look at our watch, we are feeling cheated out of some of our time. That line cutter has refused to acknowledge our presence, refused to acknowledge our identity. He or she has stolen our space and our time. To lose that acknowledgement of our identity elicits a fear that we have ceased to be, that we are closer to non-being. A part of us wants to kill the interloper in order to demonstrate that we are present, that we have the power of being within ourselves.

When in the 1920s Adolph Hitler was trying to rally the German people to support his Nazi program, he capitalized on their anxiety over space and time. He trumpeted that the German people needed *Lebensraum*, living room. To conquer the lands of others and bring them under German control would be the way to increase space. He also trumpeted *das tausendjährige Reich*, the Third Reich or third kingdom, a concept that connoted rule for a thousand years. The Nazis would provide the German civilization with a thousand year reign. The world spun out of control, and when the Second World War came to a close Europe, Russia, northern Africa, and the Far East lay in devastation with so many millions of bodies they could not be counted. We falsely believe that we can conquer our anxiety through gaining the power to insure our space and time. The result is that we steal space and time from others in order to prop up what will eventually be revealed as a tragic delusion.

Today, the economy of Western Europe, North America, and increasingly East Asia is energized by petroleum. Without oil, this economy could not exist as it does. This places oil producing regions of the world in a dangerous situation. The momentum of the spinning world economy will not tolerate impediments for further expansion, let alone threats of reduced oil supply. For nations whose existence seems to be tied to the prosperity that petroleum energy delivers, their

inhabitants are willing to go to war to preserve their economies. Although the rhetoric that justifies war is drawn from high-minded images of democracy and freedom, underneath it is driven by anxiety over self-preservation. The result is massive mechanized bloodshed.

In itself, anxiety is not sin. Perhaps it is better to describe anxiety as the soil within which sin grows. Anxiety that is unrelieved or uncontrolled leads to violence, violence justified by lies and delusions. Why we lie and delude ourselves is part of the phenomenon of sin, and we'll explain how this works later on.

2: Unfaith

Faith is what relieves our anxiety. Of course, faith has many dimensions. The particular aspect of faith that squares with anxiety is trust. If we trust God, our anxiety will not get a grip on us. If we trust God, we can live without space or time; we can live in God's eternity. With God, we will have no need to steal space and time from others, or oil or anything else for that matter.

Jesus tells us to trust God and escape the grip of anxiety. Recall ^{NRS} Matthew 6:25. "Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? ²⁶ Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?" Jesus says, "don't be anxious." Or, perhaps more precisely, "don't let your anxiety get the best of you. Have faith in God."

Jesus himself lived with such trust in God. He could face loneliness, danger, and death with equanimity. This does not mean he did not experience anxiety. When in the Garden of Gethsemane, anticipating his betrayal and crucifixion, he prayed while sweating drops of blood. The threat of falling via death into nonbeing elicited anxiety, worry, fear. Nevertheless, he was able in faith to rise up and affirm his destiny. ^{NRS} Matthew 26:39 "And going a little farther, he threw himself on the ground and prayed, 'My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want'." Faith as trust in God does not cause anxiety to disappear. Rather, it provides us with the courage to be ourselves regardless of the threat.

When the arresting soldiers entered the garden, Jesus did not respond with counter-violence. In fact, he healed a soldier's ear after Saint Peter cut it off with a sword. In the face of imminent danger, the disposition of trust enabled Jesus to have compassion for someone else. Faith does not eliminate anxiety; rather, it frees us from its chains and relieves us of the compulsion to act violently.

Our own underlying belief in God's promise to care for us surfaces as a trusting life. If we live trusting, we need not sin. This is why the Protestant Reformers, Martin Luther and John Calvin, both said that the root and source of sin is unbelief. By this they meant unfaith, the failure to trust God. Anxiety is inescapable; but sinful activity can be reduced through faithful living.

3: Pride

Notice that pride appeared first on the medieval list of *Seven Deadly Sins*. Whereas Luther and Calvin in the 16th century said unfaith is the root of sin, a millennium earlier Saint Augustine had put pride in this first place. Here, we will describe anxiety as the soil, unfaith as the root, and suggest pride as the first sprout, or even the trunk of the sin tree.

By *pride* we mean the self-exaltation that results from centering our attention upon ourselves. Pride suggests a self curved in upon itself. When we act out of pride, we treat our self as ultimate, as a god or *deva* to which all other things are placed in service. When we treat ourselves as a god to be served, then the true God gets pushed to the side. The ancient Greeks used the word *hubris* to describe a person who plays God. A proud person idolizes himself or herself.

Actually, we all do this. In fact, all by ourselves, we can serve only ourselves. We hardly have any choice. Pride is the natural human state for all of us, even though some persons appear more obnoxiously proud than others. Such self-idolatry takes a masculine form in bragging and a feminine form in narcissism, although persons of either gender are capable of both. We feel uncomfortable next to an outrageously proud person, because intuitively we know that person has no feelings of empathy toward us, no concern for our welfare.

Saint Augustine, just mentioned above, said that the self cannot help but be curved in on itself. The only way for a human person to be liberated from this relentless self-absorption and self-orientation is to be invaded by the Holy Spirit. Only when the Holy Spirit enters a person in faith and replaces the selfish self with the loving Self of Christ can we actually turn outward. Only when we turn outward can we love others and devote ourselves to the welfare of others. When we have faith, the Holy Spirit places within us the loving disposition of Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit is necessary to free us from slavery to ourselves.

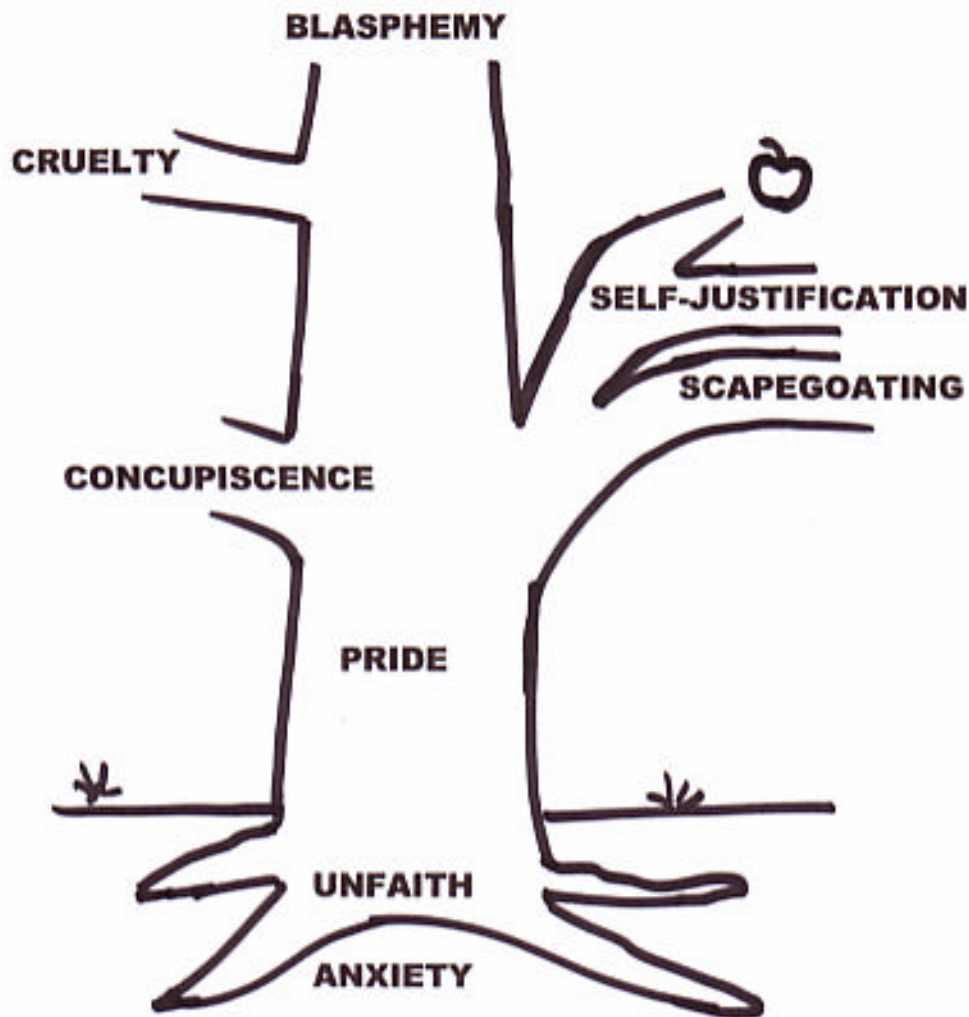
Now, does this observation help us to understand what is happening when we are sinning? Yes, it does. Pride has a structure. Like a vortex or bathtub drain whirlpool, everything swirls and swirls until finally it gets swallowed up by the prideful person or team or race or economic class or political party or nation.

Pride and the enhancement of identity appear together. We believe, rightly or wrongly, that our identity is our being. To avoid falling into non-being and to enhance our self, we absorb as much power as we can to expand our identity.

Pride requires that we divide the peoples of the world into two groups, an in-group and an out-group. The fundamental divide is between our family and everyone else. Beyond that, we divide between those on our team and our opponents, relying on group pride to maintain cooperation and enhancement of power. Racial pride or ethnic pride or religious pride inspires a sense of group omnipotence and re-locates all apparent competitors to the margin of our consciousness. If outsiders appear to threaten our group identity, we marshal the weapons necessary to put them down. In many cases, the victory over a

competing racial or ethnic group becomes the event that defines the identity of our in-group, so further violence against outsiders becomes the fuel for firing up the pride of the in-group. This is sometimes called “tribalism,” but the phenomenon of tribalism can crop up among high school cliques, neighborhood gangs, sports fans, political parties, terrorist organizations, and military units.

The net result is a world always teetering on the edge of the next outbreak of violence and war. ^{NRS} Matthew 24:6 “And you will hear of wars and rumors of wars,” Jesus told us, so that we would not be alarmed. Once we understand how sin works, an unceasing sequence of wars should not surprise us.



Sin Tree

4: Concupiscence

Concupiscence is a Latin word we've inherited from Saint Augustine in the 4th century that covers such things as sensual desire, lust, envy, greed, avarice, and covetousness. We pronounce it this way: *con* as in 'concrete'; *cu* as in 'cute' with the emphasis on this syllable; *pis* as in 'pistol'; and *scence* as in 'cents'. Like a vacuum cleaner, a proud person sucks everything in reality toward his or her self; and concupiscence is what this sucking looks like.

Concupiscence is perverted love. "I just love to go shopping," we say. This means that shopping is an enjoyable pastime. Why? We fondle the merchandise, imagining what it would be like to own it. We build images of ourselves as rich and influential and enviable. We want a relationship with what we desire to buy. We try to convince ourselves that ownership would make us happy. Yet, this is a superficial way of loving. It is an ephemeral form of loving because nothing we can buy will endure. No product in a shopping mall is eternal. All will fade away. To establish a relationship with a piece of merchandise is to sail in a boat with leaks in the bottom.

Now, the matter becomes more subtle. Much of what we desire to own is already owned by somebody else. It appears to us that these other people desire what they own, and that they are happy because of it. Commercials and advertisements present new products as very desired. They picture happy people desiring what they own. What then happens is that we begin to desire what we see others desire. We call this *mimetic desire* because our own desire is a mimesis or copy of what someone else desires. What is happening, to use traditional Christian words, is that we are giving in to envy, jealousy, lust, covetousness, greed, and avarice.

The second most coveted commodity is money. Money in itself is nothing more than a cipher, a medium of exchange. Yet, because others desire it, so do we. Down deep at a level in our psyche we hardly know is there, we believe that if we can get what others want then we can preserve our being, establish our identity, and remove the threat of death. This is foolishness, of course; yet all of us are prone to foolishness.

If money is the second most coveted prize, then what is the first? Power. More than anything else, we desire power. We hunger and thirst after power. To have power, we surmise at a level below logic, is to defend ourselves against diminishment, loneliness, death, and oblivion.

Power comes in many forms: possessing a toy that other children in the neighborhood covet; being attractive to the other sex; becoming marketable for one's professional skills; paying off the mortgage and becoming a debtor to no one; persuading others to vote for you and winning an election; identifying with a winning team or a race that considers itself superior; rape, torture, and murder of a weaker person, such as a child; marching to war with the confidence that victory is nigh; or, finally, genocide and the replacement of another people with one's own people.

Power is inherently spiritual. At a certain level we are aware that we cannot possess power. Power is more than we are. It's bigger than us. So, rather

than possess power, we seek to channel it. We desire that power pass through us, so to speak. We borrow our own sense of power from that which is greater than us. To simply be on the side of power is enough to satisfy us, to permit us to feel secure in the face of anxiety.

“Power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely,” Lord Acton is said to have said. ‘Tis true. ‘Tis true. Yet, we lie to ourselves that it will not be true in our case. We will employ power justly, we think to ourselves. This is how we delude ourselves. This is how sin works. Sin includes the coveting of power combined with the lie to cover it up. Exactly why we lie to cover ourselves is the topic we will address in the step on self-justification and scapegoating



Painting by H. Bosch

Adam and Eve

The story of Adam and Eve provides a mirror. When we look at this story, we see ourselves. We may not like what we see, but there we are. If we allow the story to penetrate, we will gain an understanding of just how it is that we are disposed toward sin.

Rather than take the space to retell the entire story, let's give attention to some selected elements within it. First, the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil is attractive to Eve. It looks good to eat. ^{NRS} Genesis 3:6 “So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate.” Eve acted on her desire to eat what she perceived to be good. She did not set out to pursue evil. One point to be learned is this: we human beings have something within us that draws us toward what is good. We delight in what is good.

Second, what happens later in the story may be more important than the eating of the fruit. God enters the garden. Adam and Eve hide. When God finds he cannot see them, he calls out to them. They answer from their hiding. God becomes curious. Why do these people hide themselves? Could they be feeling guilty? God interrogates them and learns, yes, they have eaten the forbidden fruit. Now what happens is decisive for understanding the mechanism we know as sin. ^{NRS} Genesis 3:12 “The man said, ‘The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit from the tree, and I ate’.” ¹³ Then the LORD God said to the woman, ‘What is this that you have done?’ The woman said, ‘The serpent tricked

me, and I ate'." In effect, Adam blames Eve, and blames God for putting Eve in his life. Eve blames the serpent. And the book of Genesis tacitly blames God for having created the serpent and placing it in the garden to do this dirty work.

More is going on here than merely the acquiring of knowledge or wisdom. We covet the good; and with this forbidden knowledge we can distinguish the good from the not-good. We want to draw a line between good and evil; and we want to place ourselves on the good side of the line. Something within us drives us to place ourselves on the good side of the line. If we are pressed, we'll locate someone else on the bad side of the line just to make ourselves look good. If pressed to an extreme, we'll even place God on the evil side of the line.

The difficult to understand message of the New Testament gospel is that God places the divine self on the evil side of the line. A reversal is happening. Through the incarnation and crucifixion, the divine enters our world and identifies with sinners, not with the righteous. If God is to be found on the evil side of the line, then those who are frantically identifying themselves with the good end up out in the cold, so to speak.

5: Self-Justification & Scapegoating

Why do we covet the good? Because we think the good is eternal. For whatever reason, our human intuition believes that what is good is not ephemeral, but everlasting. So, if we can identify with the good, we can live forever. We may not be aware of it every moment, but we react defensively when confronted with a threat to our being. This is natural. In the moral sphere, self-defense consists of reaching for what is good. Grab the good! Defy nonbeing and make yourself immortal!

So intent are we at pursuing the good, that we would rather lie to ourselves than admit we are less than good. This lie takes the form of self-justification.

Self-justification is our term for drawing the line between good and evil so that we can place ourselves on the good side. We have a strong, perhaps irresistible, desire to justify ourselves. It begins with the classic, "I didn't steal the cookie. My brother did it." The child thief wants to appear just and good in the eyes of his or her mother.

Blaming one's brother for putting a hand in the cookie jar continues in disguised form when we become grown-ups. It takes the form of an ideology of high-minded political values such as freedom or democracy or prosperity or even God's blessing to justify going to war and reigning death and destruction on villages in foreign lands. In between cookies and bombs, we engage daily in gossip, wherein the victim of our gossip is placed on the evil side of the line and we, obviously, demonstrate the wisdom of knowing the difference between good and evil. No matter what the level of damage, we draw a line between good and evil and place ourselves on the good side. This is how sin has worked from the time of Adam and Eve to the present; and this is how we can expect it to work for the foreseeable future.

Self-justification describes the relationship of the sinner to himself or herself. Another term, *scapegoating*, indicates that someone else becomes the victim. The paradigm example is the Sanhedrin's decision to execute Jesus. ^{NRS} John 11:47 "So the chief priests and the Pharisees called a meeting of the council, and said, 'What are we to do? This man is performing many signs. ⁴⁸ If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and destroy both our holy place and our nation.' ⁴⁹ But one of them, Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, said to them, 'You know nothing at all! ⁵⁰ You do not understand that it is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed.'" In this discussion that led to the crucifixion of Jesus, note the anxiety. The council felt threatened by Jesus' followers and by the Roman army. The preservation of Israel's peace was the good they invoked. They determined that the sacrifice of Jesus would preserve their security against a threat. In order to carry out this maneuver, they needed to draw a line between good and evil, place themselves on the good side, and accuse Jesus of profaning their religion and violating Roman law. Jesus became the scapegoat, the sacrificial lamb.

This is human nature. The same story only with different characters is acted out every day around the office water cooler when employees gossip about the boss. The boss gets crucified in effigy. Senators and presidents and vested interest advocates hourly draw lines between their own dedication to national prosperity while denouncing political rivals for dastardly incompetence and malfeasance. Racists tell us that members of other races stink. The rich tell us that the poor have too many children and are dregs on the economy. The poor tell us that the rich are immoral and greedy. All draw the line between good and evil, place their enemies on the evil side, and justify their own identity. It's all a delusion of course; but the temptation to believe the delusion is irresistible. This is what is going on when sin happens.

The reversal of expectations in the New Testament gospel message is that we cannot by our own reason or strength justify ourselves. Only God can justify us. And God offers this justification free of charge. Christians call this *grace*. What we need in order to enjoy this grace is a little honesty, the opposite of what Jesus called "hypocrisy." Nowhere does Jesus make this more clear than in his parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector. Here the Pharisee brags with pride about his religious devotion. ^{NRS} Luke 18:13 "But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!' ¹⁴ I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted."

Self-justification is a delusion, a form of self-deceit, and so utterly useless. We don't need it, because our justification comes to us as a free gift of God's grace. We can save a great deal of wasted psychic energy if we simply trust God and accept in faith the fact that God justifies us.

6: Cruelty

The flip side of self-justification is scapegoating. We treat our scapegoats cruelly. We will define *cruelty* as the inflicting of physical or emotional pain on another person in order to cause anguish or suffering or death. All the fear we have over preserving our own survival becomes translated into acts of cruelty, which stimulate in our victims the anxiety that we ourselves are gripped by.

Cruelty comes in passive and active forms. Passive cruelty is the result of a lack of care. A narcissistic parent, for example, may seal himself or herself off into a private emotional world, leaving the child to wander alone in the chaos of uncontrolled feelings and fears. Or, to look at another example, one of the products of the world economic order is the passive cruelty experienced by impoverished peasants who are removed from their land to make way for mechanized farms growing export crops. They wander to the outskirts of large cities, settle in barrios, and suffer the humiliation of scavenging for food they could have grown for themselves. We can only shrug our shoulders and say that economic inequality is a product of a system that is bigger than we are. Poverty may be unjust, but there's nothing we can do about it. Oh, well.

Active cruelty is the deliberate infliction of pain—that is, torture. What seems to be happening when individuals deliberately cause pain for the enjoyment of watching others suffer is this. They believe at some level to be siphoning off the power—the life force—of the victim. The feeling of power gained when placing another person in a position of humiliating powerlessness evokes in the torturer a delusion of empowerment. The twisted logic is that by causing death one beats death.

National governments authorize torture. Allegedly inflicted for the purposes of gaining military intelligence, institutionalized cruelty indirectly expresses the anxiety of the nation whose soldiers are the inflictors. The blood and gore and suffering are painted over by a coat of political rhetoric defending retributive justice and national security.

Why would people who are motivated to pursue the good act with cruelty? The lie makes it possible. We deceive ourselves into believing we stand on the good side of the line and those on the evil side deserve evil. We delude ourselves into thinking that if we exact justice—if we exact punishment on evil persons—that we are embodying the good. From the point of view of the Christian understanding of sin, however, the exacting of justice becomes the gravest form of sin. It is grave because in the name of justice we inflict violence while making impenetrable the lie that the inflictor of violence is justified. This is why in Christian theology it is our virtues, not just our vices, that before God are counted as sins.

7: Blasphemy

At the top of the sin tree we find blasphemy. Recall the commandment:
NRS Exodus 20:7 You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the LORD your God.”

Blasphemy comes in two forms, subtle and overt. Subtle blasphemy is what we have been describing all along. When we engage in self-justification in the name of God and then proceed to scapegoat, we are blaspheming the name of God. Garden variety everyday sin consists of inflicting verbal or physical violence in the name of one or another good thing—usually justice. Religious sin consists of inflicting rhetorical violence while actually invoking the name of God, who is the ultimate source of all goodness. Nations readying for war like to say they are especially chosen by God, so that the nation's enemies become allegedly God's enemies. To justify violence in the name of God is to blaspheme God in a subtle fashion.

Overt blasphemy, in sharp contrast, is the pursuit of evil in the name of evil. This is where Satanism enters our picture. Those who covet power in their inept attempt to overcome anxiety may be tempted to turn to Satan, who reinforces our self-deceit with additional lies about empowerment and immortality. Practicing Satanists include torture in their rituals, feeding on the suffering of others to nourish their own delusional sense of omnipotence. Key here is the rhetoric that denies the grace and goodness of God. Worship rituals include the reading of pseudo-scriptures that slander God and praise the devil. The Lord's Prayer may be read backwards and a black mass is celebrated. Profaning Christian symbols is deliberate.

Animals such as dogs, cats, chickens, squirrels, and goats are tortured and sacrificed during worship. The extremities of these animals are amputated so that the blood flows and fills up waiting drinking cups. When an animal is not cut up, young children or grown women may be stretched on the altar, murdered, and inner organs such as the heart eaten by the worshippers. All of this constitutes the attempt to imbibe the power of the sacrificial victim.

Overt blasphemy is here called *radical evil*. Garden variety evil is characterized by self-justification, by subtle blasphemy. All human beings engage in subtle blasphemy. It constitutes everyday sin. Open or overt blasphemy, however, bypasses self-justification in the raw pursuit of immortal power through ritual. It is rare. But radical evil stands in continuity, not discontinuity, with garden variety sin.

Conclusion

Where have we been. We have asked: what is happening when we are sinning? We have described the phenomenon of sin in analogy to a tree. In the soil we find anxiety, the pre-conscious awareness of our own death, which we take to be a threat to our existence. In order to secure ourselves against the threat of nonbeing, we orient all things in our daily reality toward ourselves as the center. We treat ourselves as a god which everything else must serve. By curving all things into our self, we steal what we perceive to be the life-giving power of others in the vain hope that we can thereby beat death.

We intuitively believe that what is good is eternal. So, we draw a line between good and evil; then we place ourselves on the good side of the line.

This takes the form of self-justification, and we will lie to ourselves and to others in order to make the self-justification seem real. This may include scapegoating others, perpetrating violence either verbally or literally against those we have defined as on the evil side of the line. By treating the evil ones justly, we believe we are justifying ourselves. The New Testament reveals this to be the structure of sin, violence perpetrated in the name of what is good. So desperate are we to think of ourselves as good that we will scapegoat and crucify even God or the Son of God to prop up the self-deception.

According to this understanding, the way to combat sin is not to provide lists of do's and don'ts to frighten children or keep the populace in line. Lists of do's and don'ts are important for structuring our lives, to be sure; but they should not be confused with the specifically Christian insight into human nature. In fact, to pretend that lists of do's and don'ts establish the criteria for determining sin can in some instances become a form of sin, a form of self-justification and scapegoating for those who enforce compulsory codes of behavior. Jesus labeled this 'hypocrisy'.

The good news of the Christian gospel is that in Jesus Christ God places the divine on the evil side of the line between good and evil. God in Christ takes refuge among sinners and scapegoats, not among the self-justifiers and the scapegoaters. God in Jesus Christ becomes the paradigm scapegoat. God is willing to absorb the slings and arrows of human sin in order to redeem and reconcile.

God forgives us our sins. This forgiveness is what justifies us, not our identification with what we think is good. And this forgiveness is offered by God freely. It is grace in our lives. If we trust in the God of grace, we need not justify ourselves nor need we scapegoat others in order to siphon their power in our fruitless attempt to preserve ourselves in being. Eternal life with the God of grace is worth more than the ephemeral space and time we currently inhabit.

About the Writer

Ted Peters is Professor of Systematic Theology at Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary and the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, California. He is editor of *Dialog, A Journal of Theology* and co-editor of *Theology and Science*. He is author of *God as Trinity* (Westminster John Knox Press 1993); *For the Love of Children* (Westminster John Knox Press 1996); *Sin: Radical Evil in Soul and Society* (Eerdmans 1994); and *GOD—The World's Future* (Fortress Press 2000). Homepage: <http://www.plts.edu/people/tpeters/index.html>.

Additional Resources

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