

Sense of Sin

Regret is an essentially human emotion. We make mistakes. If the mistake is without serious consequence we may just feel foolish; if it shows us as less than ideal we might feel shame; if it causes others to suffer we feel guilty; if it contradicts the law of god we feel a sense of sin. This is an overly simplistic taxonomy of what might be called the negative social sensations, in contrast to such positive sensations as friendship, compassion and love.

Social sensations provide the basis for religion. In the Eastern religions, our fate (*karma*) in this life and in later reincarnations is determined by how well we have followed the way of justice (*dharma*). In the monotheistic religions that come from Abraham, however, justice has a personal edge. Wrongdoing becomes a sin against God's law and incurs his wrath.

Sin and punishment come together. The Hebrew language uses several words for sin. In the story of Cain's murder of Abel, *hata* describes the sin waiting to be enacted, and *avon* the sin once committed. Each word denotes the punishment as well as the offence. Thus Cain's response to his banishment can be translated as either "My punishment is too great to bear" or "My sin is too great to be forgiven" in the sense that the sin might be "borne away" (Anderson, 2009). William Blake's tempera painting of 1826 shows Cain interrupted by his parents as he was trying to bury his murdered brother (an episode not in the biblical retelling of the legend). The setting sun and dark clouds highlight the agony of sin, as Cain burns with his guilt.



Punishment occurs both now and in the afterlife. However, sinners often prosper in this life and the innocent often suffer. The human sense of justice requires that this be corrected in the afterlife. All religions therefore have some concept of judgment. The righteous will be received into heaven whereas the evil will be consigned to eternal damnation where “their worm shall not die, neither shall their fire be quenched” (Isaiah 66:24).

The Bible uses several metaphors for sin (Anderson, 2009). Sin can be conceived of as a “stain” to be washed away by sincere repentance. This process is often represented by cleansing rituals such as baths and baptism. A sin against another person might be considered as a “debt,” and restitution or compensation might be offered to erase the debt. Most often, sin is a “burden” that “weighs” us down. Exactly how this metaphor works is not clear. Perhaps the burden represents the load we must carry when we are indentured to work off our debt. We can be relieved of this burden if it is transferred to someone or something else.

Perhaps the weight represents the sin that will be placed in

the scales of judgment. The writing on the wall at Belshazzar's feast stated "Thou art weighed in the balances, and art found wanting." (Daniel 5:27). In Ancient Egyptian representations of the judgment, such as the following illustration from a Book of the Dead of 1275 BCE (British Museum), our heart (in the urn on the left) is weighed against a feather (on the right). The illustration shows the newly deceased (in white) being brought by the jackal-headed Anubis to the scales of justice (Maat) which are read by the ibis-headed Thoth. Osiris will then determines whether the soul is are accepted into paradise or consigned to oblivion (being devoured by the crocodile-headed Ammit who waits beside the scales).



Humanity has evolved many different means to deal with sin and punishment. God might be appeased by offerings and sacrifices. Rituals of sacrifice seem universal to all human religions (Burkert, 1996; Hubert & Mauss, 1899). Why is unclear. Perhaps sacrifice was initially a way for human beings to share the benefits of the hunt or the harvest with the forces that had allowed their success. Perhaps it was a way to get the attention of the gods. Yet how these purposes evolved into a means to atone for wrongdoing is unknown.

Early Judaism used both sacrifice and scapegoat to attenuate the effects of sin. The high-priest would cast lots over two

goats. One would be sacrificed. The goat that escaped this fate would become the “scapegoat:”

And Aaron shall lay both his hands upon the head of the live goat, and confess over him all the iniquities of the children of Israel, and all their transgressions in all their sins, putting them upon the head of the goat, and shall send him away by the hand of a fit man into the wilderness:

And the goat shall bear upon him all their iniquities unto a land not inhabited: and he shall let go the goat in the wilderness. (Leviticus 16: 21-22)

The word translated as wilderness is Azazel, Custom considers this a mountain in the Judean desert (*Jabel Muntar* in Arabic), where the goat was pushed off a cliff. The ritual of the scapegoat bespeaks a finite God. Our sins are consigned to a place hidden from the sight of God. Modern Judaism uses neither sacrifice nor scapegoat. Yom Kippur – the day of atonement – involves prayer, repentance, and charity.

Repentance involves acknowledging the sin (confession), professing regret for its occurrence (contrition), and resolving not to do so again (renunciation). Acts of penance might be performed to demonstrate the sincerity of the repentance, and to reduce the required punishment (expiation). Such acts may reduce worldly pleasure and increase spiritual insight (fasting, flagellation, pilgrimage), improve the life of others (almsgiving, voluntary work, forgiving others), or appease the anger of God (offerings, sacrifice).

The Christian religion has evolved a complex philosophy of sin and punishment. This derives mainly from the writings of the Apostle Paul some twenty or thirty years after the death of Jesus and Saint Augustine in the early 5th century (Fredriksen, 2012). Augustine argued against Pelagius, who proposed that we were born innocent and sinned only when we freely choose evil

over good; and against Origen, who suggested that an all-merciful God could forgive everyone. Augustine considered humanity as inherently sinful. We inherit this from Adams's initial act of disobedience – the original sin – in eating from the Tree of Knowledge. Even though we might try to be good we cannot help ourselves and are subject to death and damnation. A merciful God, however, sent his son as a sacrifice to atone for our sins. Believing in Christ thus allows us to escape our just punishment.

Therefore as by the offence of one judgment came upon all men to condemnation; even so by the righteousness of one the free gift came upon all men unto justification of life.

For as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so by the obedience of one shall many be made righteous (Romans 5:18-19)

The idea of original sin was not part of Jesus' teachings. God's sacrifice of his son to redeem the sinful provided Paul with a way to reconcile himself to the ignominious death of Christ on the Cross.

The concept of Christ's death as an atonement for humanity's sin was the subject of Saint Anselm's book *Cur deus homo* (*Why God became man*), completed in 1098 CE (Anderson, 2009). The doctrine of atonement is believed by many of the Protestant Churches. The Roman Catholic Church proposes that Christ redeems man through his example rather than by his sacrifice. To believe in Christ is to follow his teachings.

Despite the fact that Christ died to save sinners from damnation, the fires of hell have remained alight for those who neither repent of their sins nor follow Christ. Even true believers still need to be cleansed of their sins before being admitted to paradise. In the 12th century, the Roman Catholic Church proposed Purgatory as a place for this purification. Eastern Orthodox churches also believe in an intermediate state between death and salvation, but call this Hades. Roman Catholics find some justification for their belief in 2 Maccabees 12:45, which urges prayers that the dead might be delivered of their sins. Protestant churches consider this book apocryphal and reject purgatory as without scriptural justification.



Belief in purgatory is no exception to the general rule that untested doctrines become more ornate with time. The duration and severity of the purification process can be attenuated by the prayers of the living, and the intercession of the saints. The illustrated painting by Luca Giordano in the Venetian church of San Pietro di Castello (around 1650) shows the Virgin Mary selecting souls to be released from the refining fires of Purgatory. Time in purgatory could also be shortened by purchasing an “indulgence.” This would allot to the sinner some portion of the accumulated merit of the saints and martyrs in return for a donation to the church. Charging for indulgences was one of the main triggers for the Reformation.

The ancient idea of the scapegoat persists in various forms.

Recently, the poet Thomas Lynch (2011) has based the character of Argyle, the “sin-eater,” on funeral customs present until not long ago in Christian parishes. Through a distorted Eucharistic ritual involving the drinking of beer and the eating of bread, Argyle would take upon himself the sins of the deceased. Though a social outcast, Argyle provided necessary insurance against the fires of purgatory.

But still they sent for him and sat him down
amid their whispering contempts to make
his table near the dead man’s middle,
and brought him soda bread and bowls of beer
and candles which he lit against the reek
that rose off that impertinent cadaver
though bound in skins and soaked in rosewater.
Argyle eased the warm loaf right and left
and downed swift gulps of beer and venial sin
then lit into the bread now leavened with
the corpse’s cardinal mischiefs, then he said
“Six pence, I’m sorry.” And the widow paid him.

The doctrine of original sin can give Christianity a very bleak outlook. Karl Barth considered religious persons as those who accept that they are composed of both spirit and flesh, that the spirit may seek to be good but that the desires of the flesh will inevitably lead to sin.

Conflict and distress, sin and death, the devil and hell, make up the reality of religion. So far from releasing men from guilt and destiny, it brings man under their sway... Religion is neither a thing to be enjoyed nor a thing to be celebrated: it must be borne as a yoke which cannot be removed. Religion is not a thing to be desired or extolled: it is a misfortune which takes fatal hold upon some men, and is by them passed on to others; it is the misfortune which assailed John the Baptist in the desert, and drove him out to preach repentance and judgement. (Barth, 1918, p. 258).

This is the religion of original sin. It is not easy to accept. Where in this misfortune is found the joy of God? Where in the misery is “the peace of God which passeth all understanding” (Philippians 4:7). This should come from the salvation available through the sacrifice of Christ. The darkness makes the light more obvious, but the darkness remains.

Philosophy has considered sin in different terms from religion. Descartes' *Fourth Meditation: Of the True and the False* (1642) considered man as “intermediate between God and nought.” Our understanding exceeds our ability. This leads to error: we choose “the evil for the good, or the false for the true.” This evaluation of humankind was extended by Pascal in the 72nd of his *Pensées*:

For in fact what is man in nature? A Nothing in comparison with the Infinite, an All in comparison with the Nothing, a mean between nothing and everything. Since he is infinitely removed from comprehending the extremes, the end of things and their beginning are hopelessly hidden from him in an impenetrable secret, he is equally incapable of seeing the Nothing from which he was made, and the Infinite in which he is swallowed up.

More recent discussions consider human “finitude.” We are limited in our thought and action. The good escapes us even as we try to attain it. Paul Ricoeur considers us as *Fallible Man* (1965). We have only a single point of view, even though we can acknowledge the possibility of a more encompassing perspective. Intriguingly, Ricoeur uses the word “transgress” in a double sense: on the one hand, to break of a moral law; on the other hand, to transcend our limitations. Sin is thus a narrative whereby we can consider our limitations. Salvation and damnation are metaphors whereby we can urge ourselves to exceed these limitations.

Sin might be better considered in a social rather than a

religious context. We should think more about a just society than about divine obedience, more about the present state of affairs than about an imagined afterlife. We should evaluate wrongdoing in courts of justice rather than in churches. We should no longer tolerate the fulminations of the celibate about sexual matters in which they have no experience. Mutual respect and tolerance should be the goals of a pluralistic society. Greed and exploitation are far greater enemies to social welfare than blasphemy and apostasy.

Anderson, G. A. (2009). *Sin: a history*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Barth, K. (1918, revised 1932, translated Hoskyns, E. C. 1933). *The Epistle to the Romans*. London: Oxford University Press.

Burkert, W. (1996). *Creation of the sacred: Tracks of biology in early religions*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Descartes, R. (1642, translated by Elizabeth S. Haldane, E.S. & Ross, G. R. T., 1911). *The Philosophical Works of Descartes. Volume I Meditations on First Philosophy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Fredriksen, P. (2012). *Sin: the early history of an idea*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Lynch, T. (2011) *The sin-eater: a breviary*. Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press.

Hubert, H., & Mauss, M. (1899) Essai sur la nature et la fonction du sacrifice. *Année Sociologique*, 2: 29-138. Translated by Halls, W.D. (1964, reprinted 1981). *Sacrifice: its nature and function*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Pascal, B. (1669, translated by Trotter, W. F., and introduced by Eliot, T. S., 1958). *Pense'es*. New York: E.P. Dutton.

Ricoeur, P. (1965, translated Kelbley, C. A., 1986). *Fallible man*. New York: Fordham University Press.