

Jewish and Christian Understandings of Sin

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Such a topic as this raises problems. Both Judaism and Christianity consist of a spectrum of organisations loosely associated with each other within a broad tradition, rather than neat, consistent, homogeneous religions. There is also the problem of understanding the thinking of people living in past eras and other cultures, especially as religions tend to behave as if events and experiences from the distant past—complete with detailed laws—still apply with all the force of divine authority. It will be an achievement just to identify a credible method for handling a topic such as this.

To start at all we must have a working definition of sin, whatever the difficulties, so the working definition is: 'Sin is whatever is thought to ignore or defy God's revealed will'. Some of the consequent questions are: How is God's will revealed? What does it reveal? What constitutes defiance of it? Most of what follows looks at some of the answers given by Christians and Jews at various times. Finally, a conclusion is reached about common elements in what Jews and Christians understand by 'sin', and how to talk about it. Like all true mysteries, sin cannot be described comprehensively, but this does not mean that we have to retreat into silence. There is a way of talking theology which preserves integrity.

Both Jews and Christians share common ground in their belief that what Christians call the Old Testament contains the revealed will of God, even though Christians then modify their attitude towards the Old Testament in the light of what is contained in the New Testament. This revealed will of God is binding on believers, and to disobey it is, by definition, sinful. So we must begin with a brief look at the main revelations of God's will, and what kind of obligations arise from them.

From the very beginning, God's actions as creator establish responsibilities for his human creation, so the creation narratives are a source of information about human obligations. In particular, they establish human responsibilities towards the rest of creation, and express norms about marriage and more general relations between human beings. The most explicit statement of these obligations is found at the end of the story of Noah, with consequences admirably summarised by Rabbi Arye Forta:

In Jewish teaching, all humankind is put here for a purpose—to serve G-d. In its most basic form, this service consists of living a moral life, as enshrined in the seven principles of the Noahide Code. Within this scheme of things G-d set aside the Jewish people to bear further moral and religious responsibilities. By so doing, they become beacons of morality and spirituality to all

humankind ... This, then, is the Jewish model. This is what lies at the heart of a Jew's relationship with G-d and with people. (Forta, A: 'Dishonest Conversion of Jews', in *The Times*, Monday Jan 16 1989)

Not many Christians would turn to the Noah story as a source of moral obligations binding on all mankind; that role would be assigned to the Ten Commandments. The Ten Commandments—and the rest of the revealed law of God—derive their authority from the Exodus and the Exodus Covenant, the definitive culmination of all previous covenants and the essential basis for Hebrew law.

Whatever it was that actually happened when Israelites in Egypt escaped from forced labour during the 13th Century BC, it provided Jewish thought with the key to understanding God, God's will, and sin. Moreover, in the course of their history during biblical times, the Jews attributed the whole body of their laws in all their detail to the Exodus period, under a literary form in which God who led them from Egypt then dictated the laws to Moses. The logic behind this is stated in Exodus 19, where Yahweh calls to Moses from the holy mountain and orders him to tell the Israelites:

'You have seen for yourselves what I did to the Egyptians and how I carried you away on eagle's wings and brought you to me. So now, if you are really prepared to obey me and keep my covenant, you, out of all peoples, shall be my personal possession, for the whole world is mine. For me you shall be a kingdom of priests, a holy nation.' (Ex 19:4—5; NJB Version)

The laws spell out what it means 'to obey me and keep my covenant'. For Jews—and in varying degrees for Christians too—these laws are the revealed will of God, and sin is understood to be the breach of them.

In a further revelation, anticipated in the covenant with Abraham, God gave Palestine to the Israelites; when he made them a kingdom of priests, a holy nation, he also gave them a holy territory:

Yahweh showed him (Moses) the whole country: Gilead as far as Dan, the whole of Naphtali, the country of Ephraim and Manasseh, the whole country of Judah as far as the Western Sea, the Negeb, and the region of the Valley of Jericho, city of palm trees, as far as Zoar. Yahweh said to him, 'This is the country which I promised on oath to give to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, saying: I shall give it to your descendants.'

(Deut 34: 1—4)

Consequently, the then inhabitants of that territory, the Canaanites, lost all rights to it, and any nation which now threatened the security of the Holy Land and its Israelite inhabitants would be committing sacrilege.

Later, the covenant was further extended for King David:

'I promise to defeat all your enemies and to give you descendants ... I will make one of your sons king and will keep his kingdom strong ... and I will make sure that his dynasty continues for ever ... I will put him in charge of my people and my kingdom for ever. His dynasty will never end.'

(1 Chron 17: 9—14)

This established the belief in the divine rights of the Davidic kings, and—by extension—the claim to God-given rights made by Christian monarchs for most of the Christian era. Together with the Noahite and Exodus covenants, it conveniently rounds-off the Old Testament basis for moral obligation.

This series of revelations by God forms the basis for the practical recognition of sin—whether or not the sinner recognises it. What this means in practice is best seen in the Psalms, which condemn a wide range of actions and attitudes as sinful:

Breaking the covenant laws is sin against God, as is rejecting, ignoring or mocking God, and testing God by asking for proof by miracles. Both the heathen and the Israelites sin when they worship other gods.

Because Israel is God's chosen people, any violence or threat against it is sinful, and this includes the people, the Holy Land given to the people by God, and Jerusalem and its Temple. Disloyalty to friends and betrayal of brothers is particularly sinful.

The king is God's chosen guardian of the covenant, so to oppose him is sinful; the king can sin by betraying the trust God has placed in him.

Violence, murder, robbery, theft, adultery and fraud are all sins, particularly when they are against 'the poor', which includes foreigners, orphans and widows. Anything which hinders justice is sinful: bribery, accusations against the innocent, slander and lying.

Finally, any assertion of self-sufficiency is sinful because it implies independence of God and of the sacred community: pride, boasting, arrogant commands, contempt, mockery of age or infirmity, trusting in military might, and failing to pray.

This range of condemnation is also found throughout the prophets, but a new dimension to sin is identified by Jeremiah and extended by Ezekiel. It probably stems from Jeremiah's disillusionment with Josiah's great reform, which he had so enthusiastically supported. When the reform failed, Jeremiah concluded that 'the human heart' itself—the sovereign centre of personality—was defective, and the people could not respond to God:

'Who can understand the human heart?

There is nothing else so deceitful;
it is too sick to be healed.'

(Jer 17:9)

In the 'New Covenant' passages, Jeremiah expresses his belief that God himself will imprint the pattern of his law on his people's hearts so that they are able to fulfil their covenant promises:

'The new covenant that I will make with the people of Israel will be this: I will put my law within them and write it on their hearts.

I will be their God and they will be my people ... I will forgive their sins and I will no longer remember their wrongs. I, the Lord, have spoken.'

(Jer 31:33f)

Which is as good a point as any to turn to the New Testament.

Jesus upholds the Jewish tradition of the Torah—the response to God supported by the law—by going beyond the letter of the law to the principles behind it. His approach is well illustrated in the Sermon on the Mount,

where his teaching about anger, adultery, divorce, vows, revenge and love of enemies emphasises that duty to neighbour is unconditional and beyond any legal limits, so sin is therefore any departure from perfection: 'You must be perfect—just as your Father in heaven is perfect' (Matt 5:21–48).

Because Jesus himself is the perfect expression both of God's will and of the human response to it, such teaching is practicable. For he is also the new covenant, the means by which his own response to God becomes possible for all: 'This is my blood, which seals God's covenant, my blood poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins' (Matt 26:28), where 'blood' is the symbol of life, and sacrificial blood is the means by which the worshipper shares in God's life. So Jesus—who is both human and divine, both dead and risen in glory—is the way to God and to obedience to God's will.

Consequently, as Paul saw, sin is failure in a personal relationship—the Christian's union with the risen Jesus—rather than failure to conform to a code of law. Paul reached this understanding in the midst of the pastoral responsibilities and stresses of his *Third Missionary Journey*, which are reflected in the sequence of letters he wrote at that time: 1 Corinthians, Galatians, 2 Corinthians and Romans.

In these letters Paul condemns a wide range of sins among Christians, and destroys a complex of analogies to describe the Christian community. It is a plant sown by God and tended by the apostles; a temple of the Holy Spirit with Jesus as the foundation and the Christian as the stones; a body composed of many parts, all of them essential to its well-being; a new Israel or holy nation; a bride whose husband is Christ. In each analogy, the community is defined by the Christians' union with Christ, and sin is anything incompatible with this union.

Jesus himself used analogies when he taught, and the parables of the kingdom show how he controlled the conclusions he wanted his listeners to draw. His use of the 'kingdom' analogy differs significantly from the secular model familiar to his listeners: it comes into existence by a different process—more like a plant growing from a seed; membership is by invitation of the king, not by inheritance; Jesus himself is the king, but his kingdom is not of this world, so this kingdom is not a visible, theocratic state; yet his kingdom is intended to come on earth, as in heaven; there are members of the kingdom who are obviously harmful to it—like weeds growing in wheat, yet the citizens are not to try to weed them out; it permeates the world like yeast working in bread until everything is transformed by it. This central question of how a network of analogies operates and is controlled will be returned to at the end.

Judaism and Christianity share the Old Testament, but they then part company. Christians travel via the New Testament into the Church Fathers. Judaism moves into the debate of the rabbis, which produced a vast literature of law, ethics, homily and legend, later codified in such works as the Mishna and the Babylonian and Jerusalem Talmuds. These two routes differ fundamentally in the way they interpret the biblical history, and result

in radically different attitudes:

The Talmudic literature is not so much a book or collection of books, as the edited record of centuries of sustained argument over every issue which touched the life of the Jew. Argument is of its essence, and decisions were reached only when absolutely necessary to establish a *community of practice*. For this reason Judaism evolved very few authoritative stances on matters of dogma, attitude, or value-structure. On value-judgements, therefore, the tradition will range from a broad consensus to radical divergence. On specific rulings, however, where the issue was often a *conflict* of values, the tradition is more definitive. How did one translate values into practical policies—that is, into law—in a world of limited resources and conflicting claims? This is where rabbinic thought has its cutting edge. (Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *Wealth and Poverty: a Jewish Analysis*, p. 4.)

Rabbi Sacks, the Principal of Jews College, London, shows this method at work in his conclusions about poverty: poverty is evil, and therefore no one should impoverish himself to relieve the poverty of others. Charity should aim at helping the poor to rise out of a state of 'welfare dependency' to one of independence and work. Hence, principles of economy and efficiency enter into the equation, and it is more important to preserve the freedom of workers to choose for whom to work and under what conditions to work, rather than to protect them from exploitation.

Another kind of insight into Jewish thought is provided by the synagogue liturgy. The evening service for the Day of Atonement contains a confession of sin, during which the people corporately assert that they have been faithless, have robbed, spoken basely, done violence, forged lies, counselled evil, spoken falsely, scoffed, revolted, blasphemed, persecuted, been stiff-necked, gone astray and led astray. The people ask for forgiveness:

For the sin committed under compulsion, or of our own will; in hardening of the heart; unknowingly; with utterance of the lips; by unchastity; openly and secretly; knowingly and deceitfully; in speech; by wronging our neighbour; by sinful meditation of the heart; by association with impurity; by despising parents and teachers; by violence; by the profanation of the divine Name; by unclean lips; by folly of the mouth; by the evil inclination; by denying and lying; by the taking of bribes; by scoffing; by slander; in business; in eating and drinking; by usury and interest; with wanton looks; with haughty eyes; by breaking off the yoke of thy commandments; by contentiousness; by ensnaring our neighbour; by envy; by levity; by tale-bearing; by vain oaths; by causeless hatred; by breach of trust; and for the sin which we have committed before thee with confusion of mind.

(*The Authorised Daily Prayer Book*, pp 353ff.)

The prayer goes on to list the various biblical sacrifices for sin, the penalties inflicted by God (such as childlessness), and such legal penalties as stoning, beheading, burning and strangling. It asks forgiveness for any sins

which would require these sacrifices or attract these penalties.

Underlying such liturgical lists and the rabbinic evolution of practical laws, there is a fundamental Jewish understanding of sin which is radically different from Christian tradition. This difference can be seen in the way the rabbis have tackled the problem of the existence of sin if God is sole creator of all things and is omnipotent and good.

Christianity has tackled this dilemma through the doctrine of the Fall of Man, an original rebellion by mankind against its creator which fatally flawed mankind's original righteousness. The rabbis, on the other hand, tackled it by holding that man is impelled by two conflicting forces: the *yetzer tov*, the 'good inclination', and the *yetzer ha-ra*, the 'evil inclination'. In spite of its name, the 'evil inclination' serves a good purpose and is not intrinsically evil:

'If it were not for the evil inclination, a man would not build a house, marry, beget children, or engage in business' (Genesis Rabbah 9:7). Evidently, *yetzer ha-ra* is a generic term for those basic human drives—for property, pleasure, power and survival—which are readily seen to be biologically necessary. It is called 'evil' only because these drives, being so powerful, are always liable, if not controlled, to lead a man into actions that harm others. But they can and should be harnessed to good ends. Hence the Rabbis could enunciate the paradox, that a man should serve God with *both* his good inclination and his evil inclination. (Goldberg and Rayner, *The Jewish People* p. 263)

So Judaism holds that mankind inclines towards righteousness, but may become obsessive, aggressive and ruthless towards others as it seeks pleasure, power, wealth and so on, for good reasons. Mankind is able to control these self-regarding drives:

To begin with, he is born untainted by sin. ... Furthermore, he has a conscience: that is, an inborn capacity to discern between right and wrong, a tendency to favour the right, and an altruistic impulse. That is what *yetzer tov*, the good inclination, means. And although, if left uncultivated, it may be too weak to overcome the forces of passion arrayed against it, it can be trained. That is precisely the purpose of the Torah. 'The Holy One, blessed be He, spoke to Israel: My children, I have created the Evil Inclination, but I have also created the Torah as an antidote to it; if you occupy yourself with the Torah, you will be delivered into its power' (Kiddushin 30b).

(Goldberg and Rayner pp. 263f.)

In our own times, Jewish attitudes have been deeply affected by the 'Holocaust'—the attempt to exterminate all European Jews. This has become a focus for all past examples of antisemitism throughout history, and for the ever-present danger of its recurrence. It has also provided justification for claims to Palestine as the Jewish Holy Land and for the modern State of Israel. It thus superseded earlier Zionist propaganda that Palestine was 'a land without a people for a people without a land'. Jews

who accept this argument see Israel's present struggle for survival as a war against God's enemies, hence failure to wage such war would be a sinful betrayal of the covenant.

Returning to Christianity, Christianity has adopted the Old Testament belief that the anointed king derived his authority from God, with the consequence that breaches of the king's law are sinful. A particularly clear statement of this belief was made in Spain as the 'Reconquest' of the country from Moslem rule neared its completion. Responding to criticism of his mode of government in 1439, John II of Castile left his people in no doubt:

'The cognizance, judgment, and final decision in this matter, especially since it is of my own making and appertains principally to me, does not belong to anybody else after God, except myself. All my vassals, subjects and people, whatever their estate, condition, pre-eminence and dignity, are according to all divine, human, canon, civil, and even natural law, subject, compelled and bound with all humility, reverence and subjection to my word and deed ... For so great is the king's right of power that all the laws and all rights are beneath him, and he holds this position not from men but from God, whose place he holds in temporal matters.'

(Quoted in MacKay, A, *Spain in the Middle Ages*, p. 137)

John II's parliament tactfully abdicated all its responsibilities:

'... it would be abominable, sacrilegious, ... contrary to God, divine law and human law ... if the king, whose heart is in the hands of God who guides him and inclines to his wish, ... should be made subject to his vassals and people ... especially since he recognises no superior in temporal matters save God alone.'

(MacKay, p. 139)

Whatever ignores or defies God's revealed will is sinful; the king's laws are God's will; therefore to ignore or defy the king's laws is sinful. A modern Spanish historian explains that this is the key to the policies of Philip II (1556—98), the Armada king, a hundred years later:

It is futile to argue whether he harnessed politics to religion or the other way round, because that sort of distinction did not occur to the men of an age in which heresy was a crime punishable by the civil law and resistance to the legitimate ruler a sin that merited hell fire.

(Ortiz, A.D. *The Golden Age of Spain 1516—1659*, p. 20)

Such beliefs help to explain the savage policies of the 'Catholic Monarchs' of Spain against Jews and Moslems, and against Jewish and Moslem converts to Christianity.

The British, however, had their own version of the theory, particularly when the Scottish Stuart dynasty took over in London. Thus, the indictment against a witch brought to trial in May 1671 reads (in modern spelling):

'... it is of verity that you, Elspeth Thomson, having shaken off all fear of God and reverence and regard of the divine ordinance, laws and acts of parliament of this kingdom ...'

(Larmer, C, *Enemies of God*, pp.129f.)

In Great Britain the extreme form of royal divine right ended with the execution of Charles I, and is now no more than a coronation ritual, but such beliefs still thrive among Roman Catholics in the authority ascribed to popes. Ironically, absolute monarchy and divine rights meet in the modern papacy, at a time when these have lost credibility everywhere else.

The 'covenant' analogy surfaced again in Britain when the divine rights claimed by the Stuart kings of Britain were overturned by the Civil War. In 1643, a year after Charles I had fled from London, the English and Scots parliaments entered into 'The Solemn League and Covenant', a form of social contract which defined the nature of authority, not only between the people of Britain and the government, but also between the people and God. As such, it had the same objectives as the Hebrew covenant at Mount Sinai nearly two millenia earlier.

In the same year, 1643, Parliament ordered the drafting of 'a Confession of Faith for the three Kingdoms, according to the Solemn League and Covenant'. The result was the Westminster Confession of Faith, which has influenced the religious belief and practice in the English-speaking world nearly as greatly as the Authorised Version of the Bible (1611) and the 1662 Book of Common Prayer.

Earlier this year (1989) the Westminster Confession received widespread publicity through the condemnation of the British Lord Chancellor—the head of the British legal system— by a branch of the Free Church of Scotland. By the lights of the Confession he had sinned gravely by attending Roman Catholic funerals, and he failed to show any adequate repentance. The most serious condemnations of the Roman Catholic Church are contained in the Confession's Chapter 25:

The purest Churches under heaven are subject both to mixture and error; and some have so degenerated as to become no Churches of Christ, but synagogues of Satan ... There is no other head of the Church, but the Lord Jesus Christ; nor can the Pope of Rome, in any sense be head thereof; but is that Antichrist, that man of sin, and son of perdition, that exalteth himself, in the Church, against Christ and all that is called God.

Four other chapters also contain explicit condemnations of particular points of Roman Catholic doctrine or practice: monastic vows of perpetual single life; undermining the authority of rulers over their people by papal claims of jurisdiction over their people 'to deprive them of their dominions or lives, if he shall judge them heretics, or upon any other pretence whatsoever.' The Catholic mass is condemned as 'most abominably injurious to Christ's one only sacrifice, the alone propitiation for all the sins of the elect', and specifically private masses, the denial of the cup to the people, worshipping the elements, the lifting them up, or carrying them about for adoration, and the reserving them for any pretended religious use. Transubstantiation 'is repugnant not to Scripture alone, but even to common sense and reason; overthroweth the nature of the sacrament; ... and is the cause of manifold superstitions, yea, of gross idolatries.'

In the light of recent declarations by groups of Catholic theologians, a note about Rome in one of the most influential commentaries on the Confession is interesting. Referring to Chapter 20: '... the requiring of an implicit faith, and an absolute and blind obedience, is to destroy liberty of conscience and reason also', the commentary warns:

By the Church of Rome the statements of our Confession are directly contradicted both in doctrine and practice. They teach that the Pope, and the bishops in their dioceses, may, by their own authority, enact laws which bind the conscience, ... and they require implicit faith in all their decrees, and a blind obedience to all their commands. Against the tyrannical usurpations and encroachments of that Church this section is principally levelled. (Shaw pp. 205f.)

The fact that the Westminster Confession is based on the analogy of a contractual covenant is essential for recognising why its adherents believe the Roman Catholic Church to be so sinful. For them, the arrogance of Rome has interrupted the continuity of the biblical covenants and has reversed their fundamental principles.

It has been argued above that the key to understanding Jewish and Christian attitudes to sin might be found in the kind of analogies they use and the conclusions they draw from them. Ultimately, religion is a mystery which cannot be expressed adequately in words. All religious language is analogical in that it takes concepts coined in secular experience and then uses them to point into the religious experience.

Beyond analogy there is paradox: 'I live, yet no longer I, but Christ lives in me'. Behind paradox there is only silence in the presence of the inexpressible. The corollary of this is that all theological analogies are inadequate, but their inadequacies can be limited by synthesising them in a network. Where some aspect of an analogy clashes with aspects of other analogies in the network, that aspect is probably misleading. This is a form of 'coherence theory' for religious truth.

But coherence is not the ultimate criterion for the control of religious expression. In the sphere of religion, the criterion of what constitutes 'truth' is to be found in worship, where silence rules supreme in the awesome realisation of a relationship with God. The ultimate validity of a synthesis of analogies lies in their ability to point the way into this region of silence. This applies even to the way Jesus uses analogies in the parables—and explains why some of his listeners failed to understand him. It applies to the apostles' analogies, particularly to the analogies they used about atonement (such as in Rom 3:21–26) and the analogies of community—*koinonia*—we have already glanced at. It applies, then, to the analogies used by Jews and Christian when they express what they understand by sin. Each of the analogies is inadequate, but each points into some aspect of inexpressible truth, and into the experience available in worship; and in turn, each is validated by the experience available in worship.

If religion uses analogies in isolation from each other, and without reference to the worship from which they gain their validity, they will be profoundly misleading. The resulting attitudes towards sin can lead to scandalous consequences, both in the past and in our own times.