Currents FOCUS

On the Inadequacy of Personal Sin: A Socio-Political Alternative

Stephen D. Morrison

Doctoral candidate
University of Aberdeen, Scotland, UK

I do not find the idea of personal sin all that useful anymore, either theologically or spiritually. Of course, I am a sinner justified before God, perpetually falling short of who I should be, *simul justus et peccator.* A strictly personal definition of sin, however, is not as central to me now as it once was, nor do I think it is helpful for our present situation.

Maybe it is because of the baggage associated with such a narrow view. The doctrine of sin that I was taught produced a traumatic pattern of shame and self-abuse. I recall a particularly extreme example from when I was a teenager, walking home while beating myself up physically and mentally, aggressively stomping my feet, hitting my legs and chest, and repeating a mantra of negative self-talk—all in an effort to shame my way out of personal sin. The gospel was about overcoming personal sins and little else. It was not good news of liberation but, rather, left me with the impression that self-hatred is a virtue. I must "decrease" so that Christ can "increase" (John 3:30). It was not until later that the revelation of divine grace liberated me from these self-abusive tendencies, but the memory remains.

The Christian life was defined as a perpetual treadmill of not doing enough and left me with low self-esteem that has followed me into adulthood like a scar. Self-hatred comes naturally. It is easy to succumb to negative self-talk, even today. Gradually, I learned to accept myself in spite of being unacceptable (Tillich): to receive the healing balm of divine grace. Better said, grace found me in this pit and gently lifted me out of my self-hatred. The process of self-acceptance and self-love has been a long but necessary journey. For me, the danger is not that I will forget my sinfulness but that I will forget my worth—forget that I am a beloved child of God worthy of love and acceptance.

My hesitation to find value in a personal doctrine of sin may also reflect a deeper theological anthropology. I do not think human beings need to be reminded of their unworthiness. What is more urgent today is to proclaim their inherent value, contradicting the messaging of a perpetually dehumanizing world. Capitalist society works very hard to keep people trapped in a pit of despair by defining a person's worth ruthlessly according to what they can produce. Human beings, dearly loved by God, have become objects, mere fodder in the capital accumulation process, dehumanized and alienated from a life that is real. The task of Christians today is not to pile one more piece of bad news onto the heap of misery that is our modern situation, but rather to declare *good news to the poor,* humanity to the dehumanized, and acceptance to the unacceptable.

The process of self-acceptance and self-love has been a long but necessary journey. For me, the danger is not that I will forget my sinfulness but that I will forget my worth—forget that I am a beloved child of God worthy of love and acceptance.

This is why I find the concept of personal sin unhelpful. What *does* convict me today, however, is a socio-political definition of sin. I deeply resonate with what Dorothee Soelle said in this regard:

> The confession I am a sinner does not make too much sense to me in terms of my sexual life or my disobedience towards my mother. It makes more sense to look on a world hunger map. I don't want to exclude the personal, but the depth of the personal is only reached if it becomes related to the political.[1]

If I reflect on myself as a sinner today, I must recognize that I am privileged—socially, economically, politically, and geographically. While reading *Intersectional Theology*[2] by Kim and Shaw, it dawned on me that I can locate myself on the side of the

1. Dorothee Soelle, *Beyond Mere Dialogue: On Being Christian and Socialist* (Detroit: American Christians Toward Socialism, 1978), 10.

2. Grace Ji-Sun Kim and Susan M. Shaw, *Intersectional Theology: An Introductory Guide* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2018).

privileged in nearly every category. In terms of sexuality, gender, economic status, ability, race, etc., I am privileged. In addition to these categories, we might add geography, as Soelle intimates. This has become the most poignant category for me, though in a different way than for Soelle. In the West, we often talk about the "imminent threat" of ecological destruction. However, that rhetoric obscures the fact that ecological destruction is already *here.* It is not on the horizon. For millions in the Global South, pollution, natural disasters, deforestation, water scarcity, and food shortages are an ever-present reality. The threat of climate change is not about having no future but about having no present. Thus, geographical location can be a sign of privilege—and collective sin.

I contribute to the suffering of those in the Global South. That is the brutal reality I must confront, even if it is also true that the primary causes behind their suffering are structural and thus outside my immediate control. I contribute by virtue of my position geographically in a country with such enormous wealth and power, not to mention its brutal imperial domination. I benefit from these injustices personally, even if I did not choose these sinful structures. I did not choose to be born in the United States. It was forced upon me, a system I inherited—quite like the old concept of original sin. Therefore, I should not strive to claim innocence from the sins of my nation.

While it is true that about 70% of industrial global emissions are caused by just one hundred companies[3] and that the largest polluter in the world today is the U.S. military,[4] I still drive a car, I use disposable plastics, I buy cheap products made in sweatshop factories, and I eat fruit (and other foodstuffs) harvested by poverty-stricken laborers. I may disapprove of imperialism but it benefits me, nonetheless. Both collective and personal sin coincide; they cannot and should not be separated. That is why an emphasis strictly on personal sins strikes me as moralistic water-treading. It is unhelpful in the face of our present crisis.

Of course, it is vital to retain both a personal and collective notion of sin. Their relationship is a bit like the classic "chicken or egg" dilemma. What came first? The answer is that both coexist and feed into each other. The personal adds to the collective, while the collective grounds and reinforces the personal. There is also a psychological parallel here. Are human beings what we are by birth or are we conditioned by our environment? The most likely answer is once again both. But the point is that Christian teaching has over emphasized the personal and individual so much that the collective and socio-political have dropped from view. A robust doctrine of sin demands retaining both aspects. Or, as Soelle put it above, "…the depth of the personal is only reached if it becomes related to the political."

A socio-political understanding of sin has become more common today due to the influence of liberation theologies. But

I still drive a car, I use disposable plastics… I may disapprove of imperialism but it benefits me, nonetheless. Both collective and personal sin coincide; they cannot and should not be separated. That is why an emphasis strictly on personal sins strikes me as moralistic water-treading. It is unhelpful in the face of our present crisis.

the idea can be traced back to Friedrich Schleiermacher in the nineteenth century, who made the essentially communal nature of humanity central to his definition of religion. Human beings cannot be neatly itemized. In fact, Schleiermacher goes further and suggests that individualism threatens to destroy the very nature of Christian faith.[5] The gospel is antithetical to individualism.

This was such an important insight for Schleiermacher that it led him to argue for the eventual salvation of all. Human community is so tightly interwoven that separation would mean introducing a destructive division to the whole, which would ultimately threaten the blessedness of the redeemed. Schleiermacher raised a valid question for infernalists: How could the bliss of heaven not be spoiled by the reality of hell? Are the redeemed meant to give up on others, to be *less* compassionate toward their neighbors in their state of perfect blessedness? Is that really what we imagine to be the perfection of humanity—or is it not a diminution?[6]

A more holistic concept of sin necessarily reflects on the interconnected nature of human beings and defines sin as personal, collective, and political. We are too interconnected to be so neatly separated, contrary to what a personal definition alone seems to imply. I am not *me* apart from those I love and who love me. If even a single soul is damned to hell, then humanity is fractured and not finally healed. I have always been compelled by Moltmann's version of universalism. He argued that we know for certain of only one person who has gone to hell: Jesus Christ.[7] And because Christ has descended to the deepest depths of our God-forsakenness, even hell is not without hope. Sin and salvation are always related. Maybe a collective definition of sin necessarily leads to *apokatastasis.*

3. https://www.theguardian.com/sustainable-business/2017/jul/10/100-fossil-fuel-companies-investors-responsible-71-global-emissions-cdp-study-climate-change. Accessed July 18, 2023.

4. https://www.ecowatch.com/military-largest-polluter-2408760609.html. Accessed July 18, 2023.

5. Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Christian Faith* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2016), 547 (§88.3).

6. I elaborate further on Schleiermacher's argument in a video essay: https://youtu.be/1FveOtAB86s.

7. Jürgen Moltmann, *Jesus Christ for Today's World* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994), 143.

There is also a political parallel here. Neoliberal politics typically emphasize personal responsibility for systemic injustices to the point that people are left feeling powerless, isolated, and hopeless in the face of immovable systemic evils. Consider climate change, for example. Oil companies have worked hard to place the responsibility for ecological devastation upon individuals, shifting the blame from their profit-driven pathology to individual consumers who have little to no alternative.[8] This is parallel to how spiritual, individualistic doctrines of sin places the responsibility back onto the individual. Both the political and spiritual categories of sin are liberated from this individualistic fallacy by contextualizing these tendencies within the structural forms of sin, that is, capitalism, climate change, and other systemic injustices on the one hand and inherited, collective sinfulness on the other. No one is free until we are all free. Overcoming collective evils will require more than the isolated actions of isolated individuals, like reciting a sinners' prayer in the hope of purely individual salvation. Neoliberalism and individualism both have limited the possibilities of systemic change, thus narrowing the scope of hope. Today, it is necessary to work for collective solutions to collective problems. In politics, that means *revolution*. In theology, it means *resurrection*.

What does redemption look like in a world plagued by systemic injustice? Traditional theologies have defined sin personally and redemption strictly as the salvation of one's soul. But that is no longer helpful, at least on its own. Nor is it faithful to the preaching of Jesus, particularly his consistent emphasis on the immanent kingdom. But if sin is not *purely* individual or spiritual, and if there needs to be a collective concept of sin that includes the political and social elements of structural sin, how does the salvation narrative central to the gospel and the church answer these challenges? Where is the deliverance of the Lord from capitalism or structural oppression? What good is a gospel that saves souls, if it leaves bodies in bondage? How does the life and death of a man 2000 years ago save the world from structural sin?

One common answer to these difficulties is *eschatological escapism*. This approach claims that God really does not care about the material world and will burn up society and its systems one day, while the elect will escape into an immaterial heaven. But this does not solve the problem and only leads to more dangerous conclusions that perpetuate (if not validate) structural sinfulness. Consider, for example, how eschatological escapism can quickly lead to ecological indifference. But there is another manifestation of escapism that holds onto materialism but is still a kind of escapism by way of resignation, one that cannot or will not accept any hope for overcoming systems of injustice. This kind of escapism defers hope to another day. Again, there is a political parallel here in what Mark Fisher calls "capitalist realism," the notion that there are no other possibilities left for the organization of human society. In Margaret Thatcher's words, "There is no alternative."

No one is free until we are all free. Overcoming collective evils will require more than the isolated actions of isolated individuals, like reciting a sinners' prayer in the hope of purely individual salvation. Today, it is necessary to work for collective solutions to collective problems. In politics, that means *revolution*. In theology, it means *resurrection*.

Both forms of escapism lead to the same apathetic indifference to structural sin and are unhelpful for a faithful Christian witness today.

Another response is *idealistic hope*, the notion that the world is getting better, and things are gradually improving, that is, the naïve liberal optimism that all things will simply sort themselves out over time. This strikes me, however, as a response rooted in privilege, a privilege that overlooks the brutality of the status quo. Hope, even utopian hope, is not necessarily fantasy. A creative imagination of new possibilities is always necessary in the struggle toward justice. In that regard, a renewed utopian vision is necessary today. This is distinct from a kind of *cheap hope* that excuses us from acting responsibly—hope without action. Cheap hope belongs on a Pinterest board, not at the center of Christian faith. It is not "hope against hope" but the hope we make for ourselves.

Setting these two options aside, *resurrection hope* is all that remains—hope at the end of all human hoping. Calvin wrote: "Eternal life is promised to us, but it is promised to the dead."[9] Christian hope finds the cheap hope that circumvents human impotence unacceptable. It is only beyond the limits of human hope that Christian hope has any meaning.

The first Christians seemed to find more redemptive content in the resurrection than in the cross alone, though without ever separating the two. A return to a resurrection-centric doctrine of atonement is necessary to address the question of how God heals systems of oppression today. Protestantism has long emphasized the cross but, for the "crucified people of history" (Ellacuría), resurrection hope is a radical necessity.

One poignant political sign of the resurrection in history is poverty alleviation. While the spiritual health of a person matters tremendously, I am not convinced a person with an empty stomach benefits from a gospel of pure spiritual liberty. They first need a meal. Structurally, we need to acknowledge the necessity of revo-

8. The phrase "carbon footprint" was coined by BP for this very purpose. See: https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/aug/23/big-oil-coined-carbon-footprints-to-blame-us-for-their-greed-keep-them-on-the-hook. Accessed July 26, 2023.

9. John Calvin, *Calvin's New Testament Commentaries* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 12:157.

lutionary politics, of arranging society in such a way that all things are held in common, and with no one in need among us (Acts 2 and 4). Reforms are not enough when the system itself is unjust. Changing seats on a bus speeding toward a cliff accomplishes nothing. A revolution is not the same as a resurrection, of course, but they share a similar radicality that should be acknowledged. A revolution acknowledges the limitations of the present system and the dire need for transforming that system. A revolution can be a sign of resurrection hope, though it is always precarious to identify this "sign" with the kingdom itself.

Consider the remarkable, nearly miraculous, accomplishment of lifting 800 million people out of poverty in China—an act unheard of in human history. If not for the Chinese Revolution of 1949, the world would be far poorer today. Seventy-five percent of poverty reduction in the twentieth century was accomplished in China—meaning that without this accomplishment, more people would be in poverty today than ever before.[10] If there ever was a modern sign of the inbreaking kingdom, it is perhaps, paradoxically, in this "godless" communist state that helped so many poor and hungry people.[11]

I once heard a story about an Amish man who was asked by a stranger, "Are you a Christian?" The Amish man thought for a moment, then answered: "I don't know. You'll have to ask my neighbor." I like this actualist definition of what it is to be a Christian. The proof of the pudding is in the eating, to use another phrase. Perhaps the test of a political system is not in its claims to "freedom" or "Christian values" but in how well it cares for the least of these. I do not care if the Bible is taught in schools if those same children learning about Jesus go to bed with an empty stomach.

Has the Christian church missed something essential about the gospel by focusing so much on personal sin and salvation, while overlooking the plight of the least of these and the structural conditions that lead to their continued misery? Which message aligns more with Christ: feeding the poor or distributing gospel tracts? I was once convinced that only the latter mattered. Now I am far more interested in the former. I did not begin to realize this until I stood outside of my privilege and my situation and put effort into seeing the world with the eyes of the poor and disadvantaged.

Reforms are not enough when the system itself is unjust. Changing seats on a bus speeding toward a cliff accomplishes nothing.

"But blessed are your eyes, for they see" (Matt 13:16).

The confession that I am a sinner means I have fallen short of loving and following Christ every time I fail to help the least of these. *And* I am a sinner because I benefit from an economic system that exploits and abuses the least of these in the Global South. Yet somehow—*somehow*—I am justified, too. That is why divine grace is far more radical than any other cheap grace we can give to ourselves. And this is why redemption cannot merely be about personal sin.

What does atonement mean in a situation of structural injustice? It means radical hope that another world is possible. Human beings have made these socio-political structures, and human beings can unmake them. That requires both a bit of realism and a bit of radical hope. As Gramsci said, a pessimism of the mind and an optimism of the will. Act as if "all shall be well;" analyze as if it is all so horribly unwell. Perhaps that is another dimension to this duality. I am driven by a radical hope in resurrection life, yet I am bound to this sinful situation of injustice. I cannot betray either dimension. To be both a sinner and justified at the same time is to hope for life in the age to come, yet to live with open eyes and ears to the cries of injustice.

God's suffering love goes into the horrors of this world and meets us there. I find comfort in the meaning of Christ's descent into hell. It proclaims that the divine love sought and found humanity in the hells of our fallen existence—even the hell of my heart. I have been found, even in my privilege and sin, and lifted into the life of divine love. I have been and am comforted by the great hope that all shall be well. And this hope spurs me on to action. Yet every time I fail to act, grace comes and picks me back up from the pit of despair.

Samuel Beckett's play *Endgame* has this line: "You're on earth. There's no cure for that."[12] I think it resonates with me because there is a realism that the church has sometimes softened with its utopian vision of escape. The earth is our home, and God's concern is fixed on it. There is a strange hope in that realism. Because this earth, the one we are bound to, is the very earth where Christ's cross was raised, it is not a hopeless place. Every cross before and since has been taken up into the divine life. Christ himself found no "cure" for being on earth. That is the radical meaning of resurrection—not an abandonment of this world but the incomprehensible hope in its redemption.

Atonement theories try to systematize how we are redeemed.

10. https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2022/04/01/lifting-800-million-people-out-of-poverty-new-report-looks-at-lessons-from-china-s-experience. Accessed July 18, 2023. See also John Ross, *China's Great Road* (New York: 1804 Books, 2021). For a detailed study of China's misunderstood political economy, see Roland Boer, *Socialism with Chinese Characteristics: A Guide for Foreigners* (Singapore: Springer, 2021).

11. This is, of course, not to suggest that everything done since 1949 by the CPC is a sign of the kingdom. On the contrary, no human endeavor can be identified with the kingdom of God, and People's Republic of China is far from spotless. It is worth noting, however, that the new American cold war with China has led to a rise in Sinophobia, a sentiment that should be renounced by Christians today. That does not detract from valid critiques of China, such as the Cultural Revolution, which even the CPC denounces today. But let us also not make the past mistake of demonizing the East or engaging in McCarthyism, which Christians gladly participated in during the first Cold War.

12. Samuel Beckett, *The Selected Works of Samuel Beckett* (New York: Grove Press, 2010), 3:127.

Maybe, however, it is impossible to answer that question in words. T. F. Torrance once said that the atonement is "more to be adored than expressed."[13] I think that is right. I do not know how God will redeem this world. But I see remarkable traces every time poverty is relieved, hunger is satiated, sickness is healed, and misery is alleviated. I am the saint and sinner torn between cross and resurrection, between death and life, between privilege and solidarity, and between despair and hope. Yet God has sought and found me in this strange duality.

Perhaps the test of a political system is not in its claims to "freedom" or "Christian values" but in how well it cares for the least of these. I do not care if the Bible is taught in schools if those same children learning about Jesus go to bed with an empty stomach.

13. T. F. Torrance, *Atonement: The Person and Work of Christ* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity, 2014), 2.