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Sin as the Disruptor of Relationships: A Critical Expedition with Annelies Van Heijst

Jijo James Indiparambil

¹Sanjo College (SCMAS), Rajakkad

ABSTRACT

Though the general perception conceives humans as to be naturally good, a 'sin nature' is also identified in him. Broadly viewed as a transgression against divine law, at its core, sin is about relationship, or the break in relationship. Sin is not just a personal thing between man and God, it also has interpersonal dimensions, for it affects those around us and interferes with the relationships we have with one another. In the article "Sin as the Disruptor of Relationships" Annelies van Heijst illustrates sin as breaches of relationships between people, between people and themselves, between people and the world of which we are part. This study critically reviews van Heijst's nuanced way of understanding of the concept of sin, basing in and moving from the traditional one, which could be more comprehensible to the people of different social and cultural contexts and situations

KEYWORDS: Moral conscience, original sin, disruption in relationship, sin nature, sin and guilt, structural sin, institutional evil.

I. INTRODUCTION

An open look at life around us shows many tragic conflicts between people who should be close to one another. In this respect, sin is not just a personal thing between man and God, it also has interpersonal dimensions, for it affects those around us and interferes with the relationships we have with one another. The article "Sin as the Disruptor of Relationships" (1996) written by Annelies van Heijst, tries to convey a nuanced way of understanding of the concept of sin, basing in and moving from the traditional one, which could be more comprehensible to the people of different social and cultural contexts and situations. It can also be read along with or as a continuation of the article of Bernhard Häring titled "Sin in Post Vatican Theology," because both of these articles speak post Vatican understanding of sin. This paper compiles first the arguments of the article under discussion and then moves with critical comments towards a personal synthesis of different perspectives and appraisals.

II. SUMMARY OF ARGUMENTS

Author and Wider Context

Annelies van Heijst, professor of Ethics of care and Caritas, teaches ethics at the Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies at the University of Tilburg. Her publications were mainly on care and theology and include: *Humane care: An ethical perspective on professionalism* (2005), "*Seen standing person: Care ethics of recognition* (2008), and *Models of Charitable Care: Catholic Nuns and Children in Their Care in Amsterdam since 1852* (2008). She explains the core of care ethics as 'relation' and this acquaintance influenced her to see even sin as the disruptor of relationships. This article under study is a part of greater work edited by Frans Vosman and Karl-Wilhelm Merks (1996) called "*Aiming at Happiness: The Moral Teaching in the Catechism of the Catholic Church.*" The purpose of this book is to give a new analysis and a commentary on the basic concepts of the Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC), such as the dignity of human person, freedom, sin, grace and conscience etc.

In this book, the comments revolve around the question that: Does the catechism render account for the adequacy of its concepts in view of both the richness of faith and the modernity of today's moral questioning? In this respect,

the article on sin by Heijst is also geared around this question. She illustrates the problem to which the use of the term sin gives rise and how the catechism tries to deal with this concept of faith in order to deal with various contemporary theological re-orientations. Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC) no. 1849 speaks, “Sin is an offense against reason, truth, and right conscience; it is failure in genuine love for God and neighbour caused by a perverse attachment to certain goods. It wounds the nature of man and injures human solidarity.” The different kinds of sins are explained in nos. 1852 and 1853. The gravity of sin with its mortal and venial explanation is also given in nos. 1854 to 1864. Basing on this, Heijst analyses the concept of sin in a multifaceted contexts.

The Concept of Sin: Problem Analysed

This article begins with a frightening note alluded to our time that we lose a sense or a concept of sin. The problem perceived here is the fading moral conscience of the people and the deficient knowledge of what sin is. Moreover, for some, the awareness of sin is only a psychological category – a kind of unhealthy guilt feeling (van Heijst 1996). Here, we can either criticise and accuse the other for deficient understanding of sin (deterioration of moral consciousness), or we can have a self-criticism that we have failed to explain it in a comprehensive way to the people or perhaps the wrong way of explaining sin by the church etc. (theological, ecclesial, and pastoral self-criticism). Heijst also brings Frederic Nietzsche, who uses a hermeneutics of suspicion to explain this scenario, in this discussion.

Christianity is accused of “slave morality” by Nietzsche, and he criticizes the so called weak Christianity. He prefers to speak in relation to the will to power. For him everything that increases the feeling of power is good and everything that weakens it is bad. Thus, for him, sin and guilt were nothing other than the discoveries by a priestly caste that wishes to continue exercising their power, and when believers are put into the feeling of sin and guilt, their freedom and autonomy are also denied (van Heijst 1996).

Guilt is also spoken in terms of jurisprudence and juridical sanctions. In juridical sense guilt has to be proven legally, which, in fact, is not possible in all the cases. Heijst also explains the discrepancy that exists between the juridical understanding of ‘doing justice’ and the biblical concept of justice. In Biblical it is a kind of restoration of proper relation with oneself, other and God. She further evaluates that the sin and guilt in the personal as well as the collective sense are hardly relevant categories any more for the understanding of reality. Therefore, even though the sin is viewed as an offence against God and the divine law, nowhere is it indicated what experiential reality corresponds to that (van Heijst 1996).

New Theological Orientations

Heijst explains further the concept of sin basing herself in CCC and gives new theological orientations to it. Sin is explained ecclesiastically, which is more traditional, as a “disruption of the good relations between God and people and as an attack on ‘the eternal law’ which rational human beings are able to know” (van Heijst 1996, 134). For her, the theological concept of sin and guilt on the contrary should be explored in view of the experiential categories of contemporary humans living in various situations. It is more contextualizing the concept of sin and guilt. It demands for a reinterpretation which is more comprehensible to the Christians at the threshold of new millennium. In this respect she also suggests that “Theologians from various continents speaking from their own contexts should come together and give form to a catechism, which when combined, could speak to people of all over the world” (van Heijst 1996, 137). And that is the new orientation of the theological view that contextualizes the concept of sin making it of current interest.

Heijst also brings forth the idea of Piet Schoonenberg who made an explicit connection between ‘sin’ and ‘original sin’ in his theological reflection. To show the connection between individual sin and human solidarity in sin he referred John 1: 29 that ‘the sin of the world’. Thus, for him, ‘sin is a revolt against God in God’s salvific actions and creation, and is therefore implicitly a corruption of people and the world (van Heijst 1996). And this movement or shift from the individual to the structural component of sin is very much seen in political theology, liberation theology, and women’s studies theology.

The political theologians like Johann Baptist Metz and Dorothee Sölle articulate the ancient theological themes of sin and guilt in the context of contemporary social relationships in the modern period. These relationships are characterised as relationships of injustice. The sinful situation affects the large group of people who are denied of their chance to become what they potentially are to become because of social and political repression. It is termed as ‘downwards transcendence’ by Metz (Metz 1980; van Heijst 1996). Liberation theologians, such as Gustavo

Gutierrez and Leonardo Boff, had a still different interpretation of sin from a 'third world' context. And they placed poor at the centre of theological interest. Poverty, underdevelopment, marginality and oppression and so on interpreted theologically as institutionalized injustice and a sinful situation. This situation needs along with social praxis, categorically, ecclesiastical praxis (van Heijst 1996). In women's studies theology 'sin' is thematized in a gender-specific manner.

The domination of the female sex by the male sex is characterized as sinful. We see 'sexism' both in social structures and in private domain, which is more sinful as it projected to be. Seeing the genesis story of fall, even the church and theology itself are referred to as institutional joint causes of the evil of sexism. In a sexist society it is often women and nature that become the victims of that violence (van Heijst 1996). So as in political theology, in liberation theology and in women's studies theology, sin is not primarily conceptualized as a personal act but as a reality that manifests itself in society and historical reality. As Heijst also thinks, this type of contextual and situational explanation of sin, which is more experiential in their day to day life and related affairs, will be more comprehensible to the people of each time and place.

Central Features

Reflecting some of the central features aroused from the multiplicity of new theological orientation, Heijst reminds us that there is a search for an experiential access to the topic of sin and guilt with the purpose of transcending the gap between the spheres of faith and life. Moreover, in the discussion on sin, more than individual transgressions in human history, theologians, now, begin with the universal experience of the contemporary people. Therefore, a bare minimum of Individual guilt against God is discussed, and more attention is given for evil in human history and on what we now call as institutionalized evil. More theological concept of sin linked with the freedom of the creature is gained upper hand than legally based moral concept. In addition to that the problem of moral evil is placed within the framework of the issue of evil in general. However, the way in which the new theological outlines on salvation are discussed, tries not to separate sin and redemption. Now the reality of redemption is more linked with the objective social structures which look for a new just social structures and relations.

1) CRITICAL COMMENTS AND GENERAL OBSERVATIONS

2) *Van Heist in relation to Häring and Chryssavgis*

3) *The common factor between Bernard Häring and Heijst is that both of them give a post Vatican understanding of the concept of sin. Heijst is more optimistic than Bernhard Häring in seeing and approaching the traditional concept of sin and explaining it in today's context. Häring strongly shows the dissatisfaction in the traditional moral theology and we see a vigorous quest from his part for a renewed moral theology. He criticises that too much emphasis is given on grave sin, obedience to law and authority, dogmas, etc. For him, sin as alienation is more appropriate because it captures the nature of sin in the present day understanding (Häring 1988). But, Heist is very moderate in understanding and analysing the concept of sin in CCC. Basing herself in CCC, she goes further and explains it in a comprehensive manner in line with the contextual and experiential situations of the people.*

4) *John Chryssavgis, who explains sin and grace in an Orthodox perspective, reflects in same line with Heijst. He also speaks sin as break up of relationships and grace as restoration of these relationships. According to him, sin and evil stand for the distortion and division – that is the literal sense of the work 'dia-bolical'- of life (Chryssavgis 1994). He further explains that sin is division and alienation but grace is the force of reconciliation and reintegration. For him, both sin and grace are now institutionalized. They have not only individual but a social dimension also. He also urges us to have a metanoia of the heart, means redirecting our lives towards good (Chryssavgis 1994). Heijst also tries to explain the movement of individual concept of sin to social, institutional and structural forms.*

5) *Relational view leads to minimalization*

This article seems to give more relational understanding of the concept of sin basing on CCC, and asks for more experiential and contextual explanation and risks to reduce its multi dimensional intensity. Heijst explains that "only if the theological concept of sin and guilt is explored once again from the point of view of the experiential categories of contemporary human living in various situations and contexts can it once again acquire theological relevance" (van Heijst 1996, 136). Then, what is our responsibility, as a creature who receives abundant and unmerited graces, towards the creator? A process of minimalization also happens in this respect. Moreover, there

is a transition in the understanding of sin from an individual dimension to a structural perceptible. In this process of transition also the personal dimension of the act of sin is very much minimized. We cannot avoid the reference to the sinful and vulnerable nature that every creature possesses due to our limitedness and imperfections as a creature.

6) *As we read in the article, Piet Schoonenberg sees that the biblical thought of sin is dominated by the theme of the Sin of the world, or otherwise sinfulness of the world. But the present thought about sin is dominated by the idea of the 'human act' in which, the 'sin happens' through human acts. The responsibility is in human hands. In the former case, this sin of the world has to be seen as a 'personified force' of the evil that surrounds all, and there is no way to escape from its strong and endangering clutches. Thus, for me both the individual act and the sinful nature of the society that happens through the collective activity of the individual have to be evaluated and taken care of. At the same time I am well aware of the fact that as Kevin F. O'Shea would say that "the sin that is in the world now is not primarily the small matter of 'saying no to God' in a bad act, but the great matter of the historical power that has already struggled to crucify Christ and that struggles now as a beaten but still violent force, to claim men for the Evil One. It is legitimate to suggest that the historical realism of this meaning of Sin is not sufficiently brought out in current formulas" (O'Shea 1968, 245).*

7) *But because of the presence of sin in the world, if we are not able to make any dialogical relationship with one another and with God ultimately, is it not to say indirectly that a true community life is impossible in today's situation? Then what about the redemption brought about by Christ himself for the whole humanity? What is the role of the grace, then, freely imparted to people by the benevolence of God?*

8)

De-centralization of the concept

While recognizing and highlighting the horizontal nature of sin which is more person to person in a broader way, its vertical aspect which is an offence against God is weakened in this discussion. In other words the horizontal dimension takes over the vertical dimension of the sin. Anyone who wishes to understand the seriousness of sin and to help oneself and others think about and fight sin the way s/he ought to, s/he must also have this God-centred view of sin. CCC clearly presents the idea of a merciful God, who is never seen as a judge and punisher. Hence, the question of bridging the traditional ecclesiastical understanding of sin and the modern way of viewing sin in different modern theological trends remains a grave matter for our further discussion.

Even though Heijst urges us to reinterpret and rediscover the expressions, images, symbols and rituals in the area of sin and guilt in a way that are comprehensible to Christians on the threshold of the third millennium (van Heijst 1996), she does not make it clear the kind of expected rediscovery and reinterpretation that whether it is about a personal commitment which is essential for a sincere and open relationship with God or it calls for an interpersonal relationship among the people themselves. My major concern here is that, can it be possible in any way to rediscover the meaning of sin devoid of connecting it to the personal commitment to God and to fellow being?

9) *Pastoral complement to CCC*

10) *When this article is considered as a whole, many would read it as a criticism to CCC on the concept of sin. But, it is a movement to see the missing element of CCC by which an unintelligible becomes intelligible to the people of our time. When we deal with the concepts such as sin, we have to be both conscientious and critical on the one side and nurturing and empathetic on the other. We should not be over conscientious and over burdened by feelings of guilt and shame, and at the same time things should be explained in more contextual and experiential level so that people grasp it according to their capacity. That is what prominent in this article. Therefore, this article is a pastoral complement to the 'Catechism of the Catholic Church'.*

11) *Problem still not solved*

12) *The title "Sin as disruptor of relationships" needs more clarity. In our present day society, some relationships are broken so that, invariably, new relationships are brought up. Agreeing to the fact that all forms of disruption are not considerably sinful, how do we explain the concept of sin as the disruptor of relationships? No hermeneutical key is provided to approach this problem categorically. Because, some acts that are not sinful in and of themselves, in practice, will be sinful in a context. Thus, even the idea of looking for a new catechism, which speaks to the whole world, practically, seems to be very utopian.*

13) *Even though Heijst discusses about the need for conversion at community level and a joint responsibility for common good, in a society where each individual follows different pattern of customs and traditions apart from the limited community prescriptions, and where each person fall into the category of either victim or an offender of a sinful structure, it is not possible to speak about a conversion at community level. Finally, it is observed that*

the author has realistically raised the conflict between the Catechism and mentioned theological perspectives discussing about the sin and guilt. However, the author did not give any solution to it, but as exactly what she had said sadly, "there is more going on than a crisis in the understanding of sin and guilt" (van Heijst 1996, 146). Though it does not propose any hermeneutical key to align with the experiential approach to the problem of sin, this article gives a positive vibe because it speaks about a contextual reading of the concepts of our faith.

III. PERSONAL QUESTION ON SIN

The most crucial question with regard to sin and original sin is that, "Is Original Sin a sin in proper sense or a privation of holiness?" That means, whether Original Sin is a privation of holiness, reflecting over the individual sin and sin of the world?

Objection 1: Original sin is a physical corruption that every person bears through the birth. Hence, it is a sin in actual sense. The human condition is also characterised by split due to sinfulness. We are plagued by weakness and sin (Rom 7, 13-25). We experience ourselves as limited creatures, and this generates a sense of anxiety.

Objection 2: The nature of Original sin always refers back to the disobedience and subsequent fall of the first man Adam, which still tarnishes the whole humanity. Therefore original sin is a sin in proper sense.

Objection 3: If original sin has to be seen and evaluated only as a bad example, not sin as such, then it does not corrupt the physical nature of the individual person. Since, it is real and does havoc with us, it is not merely a privation of holiness alone.

On the contrary, there is a tendency in human hearts towards sin. But, original sin is the privation of sanctifying grace in consequence of the sin of Adam. It is said that as death is the privation of principle of life, the death of the soul is the privation of sanctifying grace which according to all theologians is the principle of supernatural life. Therefore, if original sin is the death of the soul, it is the privation of sanctifying grace.

I answer that, original sin is a privation of holiness. Original sin does not destroy the image of God in human but tarnishes it. It does not incapacitate human intellect nor destroys human freedom. But it leaves human nature wounded and weakened in its natural powers. Evil exists as a powerful force around us. Sin of the world is more than a condition; it is a complex reality that entails a powerful force or evil surrounding us and influencing us. We should not underestimate the power of sin over humans and its extent in the world. It is real and does havoc with us. It is formidable. But it should not make us despondent or pessimistic. The grace of Christ super abounds. Recognition of the hold of sin on humankind and human proclivity towards sin will guard us and help us in our battle against it at all levels: personal, social and structural.

Reply to objection 1: Original sin cannot be seen as a physical corruption of the individual who are born into the world, but could be taken as moral or spiritual, that stains the whole person with its mark in heart, mind, soul, will, thoughts, desires, etc. According to Bernhard Häring, in the light of post Vatican II theology, the division of sin is no more emphasised, rather, the new emphasise is centred on the holistic nature of man (Häring 1988). The value of human consciousness and respect for human dignity and sanctity of human life is stressed further.

Reply to objection 2: We cannot negate the fact that this traditional understanding of sin should create and lead to a new concept of liberation and salvation, which emphasises also social justice and the right of the oppressed. Here, indeed, arises another problem that "how do we explain the transcendental dimension of sin?" In this respect, Wilhelm Guggenberger also writes that "original sin could be understood as the situation in which man is in Satan's hand. The satanic reality is nothing else than the vicious cycle brought about by the social group itself" (Guggenberger 2014).

Reply to objection 3: As McFadyen would see, sin is coterminous for Augustine with neither act nor will. So far as he is concerned, sin is a category applicable equally to situations, states and conditions as to acts – as, indeed, his employment of the term 'original sin' itself imply" (McFadyen 2000). In this manner we can say and regard the external actions such as stealing, lying, harming, adultery, murder, or even disrespecting the other in any form of words and deeds, etc. are sin in which the actual sin or the cause lies deep within a person. Original sin does not come to this state of art.

IV. CONCLUSION

It is a common experience that, today, the knowledge about what is sin becomes increasingly deficient, and people lose a moral consciousness in this age of increased secularised ideologies. Moreover, the idea about what is right and wrong varies place to place and culture to culture even as time passes by, so that something I call as virtuous may be vice in the perspective of another who is in different context and situation. If we are to understand the concept of sin rightly and to help ourselves and others, think about and fight sin the way we ought to, we must have both God-centered and man-oriented views of sin. The first sin is disobedience, a revolt against God, and it is traditionally explained as the refusal of good relationship with God, others and with nature. Sin has acquired social and structural dimensions today. Therefore, sin has to be seen and explained in view of the experiential categories of various human situations and contexts. Though the author has sensibly raised the confliction between the Catechism and described recent theological perspectives discussing about sin and guilt, no hermeneutical key is anticipated to evaluate it. Van Heijst's attempt, in this respect, to explain sin with a purpose of transcending the gap between the spheres of faith and life is very encouraging and is well appreciated.

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