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# Sinful Individualism and Sinful Structures

Linda Nguyen

In the vast history and study of sin, theologians focus on the sinner, the repercussions of the sin on the sinner, and the strains of the relationship between sinner and God. Less material and discussion in mainstream thought, however, exists on the ramifications of sin on others or sin in a social context. Furthermore, there is also a lack of discussion on the problem with structural sin, or sin that stems from corporations, organizations, or governmental entities, that do not involve a single sinner whose sin has a direct impact in a relationship with God. Rather, when a collective group of persons forms a large group, the grouped entity itself does not have a collective conscience in which it must address God, yet each individual is still responsible towards the betterment of the structure. The question I attempt to answer, then, is this: has the cult of the individual become sinful and does it make structural sin more difficult for us to recognize or transform? The following presentation is an abridged version and a work in progress of my final thesis. I will discuss a Protestant post-Reformation understanding of sin according to Martin Luther and Friedrich Schleiermacher. Then a Catholic modern understanding of sin will be explored through Karl Rahner and Piet Schoonenberg. Albeit very brief, this history of sin will provide the ground work for assessing individualism as considered by Jerome Theisen and Thomas Schindler. The final sections will then focus on Catholic Social Teaching and its call for Christians to live with and for others. Once it is illustrated that the cult of the individual is, in fact, sinful, it will be evident that individualism shields structural sin from recognition and exposure and therefore, transformation.

## **Post-Reformation Protestant Understanding of Sin**

I begin with Martin Luther; however, it is important to note that Luther is heavily influenced by Augustine, who I will consider in my final thesis. In Martin Luther's *Freedom of a Christian*, Luther famously emphasizes the prominence and importance of faith over works. He begins his argument by first posing two propositions: "A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all."<sup>1</sup> Luther continues this juxtaposition with the twofold nature of humans, that being, the spiritual and bodily natures. Luther argues that the spirit, the soul, the inner human, is constantly in contradiction with the flesh, the carnal, the outer human.<sup>2</sup> Because the two natures of humans are perpetually in

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Luther, *Martin Luther: Selections from His Writings*, trans. John Dillenberger (New York: Anchor Books Doubleday, 1961), 53.

<sup>2</sup> Luther, *Martin Luther*, 53.

contradictory states of desire, no external entity or external work will be enough to place the spirit and flesh in harmony. The desires of the two beings are in constant flux. Luther argues, then, that faith alone saves. A distressed and hopeless humanity can only depend on faith, the unwavering belief in Christ, to save.

If the ultimate power of faith is the foundation of salvation and saves from all evil, it can be concluded that the lack of faith, then, must be the basis of sin.<sup>3</sup> If an individual lacks faith, they essentially do not trust God and therefore, defy God and God’s power. Luther’s notion of sin, here, addresses the inner human but says little for the outer human. The inner human, the soul, must obtain faith in order to achieve salvation yet there is no solution for the outer human that grapples with the faith. If the inner human and the outer human are one and the same individual, and if Luther states that the Christian is both a free person and a dutiful servant at the same time, should there be a solution for both the inner and the outer human, the free Christian and the servant Christian? This understanding of sin addresses the Christian individual as an independent and free being, but says very little for the Christian individual who is servant and subject to all. Luther turns to the inner human to ultimately turn towards God. The faith that Luther emphasizes is a personal relationship with God, referring to the Christian individual that is free to either choose faith or choose not faith. If faith strictly deals with the individual and God, what is the Christian who is subject to all to do, then? Moving from Luther, this presentation will now turn to Friedrich Schleiermacher, in which similarities between Luther’s notion of sin and Schleiermacher’s notion of sin will be evident.

In *Christian Faith*, the nineteenth century modern Protestant thinker, Friedrich Schleiermacher’s understanding of sin stems from the fact that all individuals are incapable of the complete capacity of good, that is, the capacity to come to know and completely love God. To sin is to interrupt the process of knowing and loving God.<sup>4</sup> All of humanity is susceptible to sin which Schleiermacher argues is the victory of flesh over spirit. The resulting consequence of sin is the diminishment of the God-consciousness, that is, an individual’s understanding of who or what God is and God’s role in regard to an individual’s existence<sup>5</sup>, that each individual possesses. Although fleshly desires may be strong, the possibility to interrupt sin always exists. A steady God-consciousness “that is planted in them personally and spontaneously” and a connection with redemption may interrupt the action of sin.<sup>6</sup> Schleiermacher emphasizes the contrasting relationship between sin and redemption. The God-consciousness of the spirit seeks redemption but the fleshly desire of sin tears the spirit from redemption.

Now, because all individuals are inherently inclined to sin due to the incapacity of complete good, the entire world constantly exists in a state of evil, which the God-consciousness of the spirit must continuously and persistently work against.<sup>7</sup> The direct derivative of sin is social evil, as it results from direct action of sin and “grounded in human activity”. Evil does not exist on its own.<sup>8</sup> Schleiermacher calls this social evil human evil or human wickedness. Sin of

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

<sup>4</sup> Derek Nelson, “Schleiermacher and Ritschl on Individual and Social Sin,” *Zeitschrift Für Neuere Theologiegeschichte* 16, no. 2 (2009): 134.

<sup>5</sup> Nelson, “Schleiermacher and Ritschl on Individual and Social Sin,” 134.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, §74.3.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, §75.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, §76.1.

one individual directly becomes evil for another individual. Schleiermacher comes to the conclusion, then, that because humankind is the “locus” of sin and collective sin encompasses the world, so the world is the locus of evil. Therefore, the world and all of humankind is effected by the evil that each individual puts forth through individual sin.<sup>9</sup>

Schleiermacher’s notion of sin works as a continuation of the discrepant desires of what Luther would call the inner human and outer human and what Schleiermacher would call spirit and flesh. Schleiermacher, however, goes beyond Luther, and addresses the issue of the impact and effects of sin on others. Perhaps in Luther’s context, Schleiermacher begins the thought on the effects of the sinning Christian individual who serves and is subject to all, rather than the sinning Christian individual who is free to choose faith or not faith. In engaging this “other” individual, Schleiermacher introduces the effects of sin as evil and even goes so far as to call this social evil, perhaps suggesting that sin is not only an issue between sinner and God. Yet, introducing this idea is the extent of Schleiermacher’s engagement of the Christian individual with others. While some evidence exists for the discussion of social effects, a systematically developed doctrine does not exist surely in the two Protestant theologians discussed here. Next, Catholic theology and a modern and contemporary doctrine of sin will be discussed.

### **Catholic Modern and Contemporary Understanding of Sin**

Karl Rahner discusses the genuine ability to choose yes or no in his book titled *Grace in Freedom*, and specifically in §8, titled “True Freedom”. Rahner begins his discussion of freedom by defining it in three ways. Freedom is being free from any compulsion from social, economic, or political body. On the individual level, being free means an individual may do what they want. The most striking of Rahner’s notes considers not only being free from external factors and pressures, but also free from the innate freedom, or as Rahner mentions, more of a personal demand than freedom. In this regard, this freedom is most evident in Christianity where an individual is “eternally valid” and realizes the responsibility that comes in freedom.<sup>10</sup> Although it is not “explicitly grasped” by humanity, freedom is only possible through God. And because this freedom comes from God, it is not only dependent on God, but the free choice comes before God as well. In other words, an individual may consider freedom as a choice between two realities without external compulsion; however, because this free choice comes before God, the free decision now ultimately concerns God. There is a yes or no in every possibility and whether or not it is acknowledged or recognized, this concerns a yes or no with God, directly or indirectly. Because of this, Rahner argues that the individual’s encounter with God is endless as freedom continues to be questioned. These choices are effected by the world, but as Scripture denotes, it also affects our neighbor.<sup>11</sup>

Because of this *yes* or *no* and the question of freedom which considers God in every free choice, humanity finds itself in a paradoxical relationship with God. Even if an individual were

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<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, §75.2-76.1

<sup>10</sup> Karl Rahner, *Grace in Freedom* (London: Burn and Oates, 1969), 204.

<sup>11</sup> Rahner, *Grace in Freedom*, 205-208.

to definitively say *no* to a choice that ultimately denies God, the choice simultaneously affirms God because that choice came from freedom and freedom comes from God. Each *yes* and *no*, both denies and chooses God at the same time. Should God have humanity choose rightly every time, then the essence of freedom would be removed.<sup>12</sup> Because God offers freedom and the choice to choose *yes* or *no* to God with every instance, God offers himself as a possession of humanity. This grace God gives to us is God’s communication and transcendence to humanity.<sup>13</sup>

If every equally free *yes* or *no* comes from God, considers God, and involves God, then the free choice of *no* to God is sin. When an individual consciously and freely chooses an object that is opposite of God directly or indirectly, recognizing it or not, that choice is sin. The action interrupts God’s communication and transcendence to the individual. Yet God allows for this interruption or error in choice because the choice would not be made freely otherwise. An individual has a choice to choose the highest good, a *yes* to God, or to choose not God, but the choice is never a demand from God. Freedom is a dialogue between the individual and God whether or not it is acknowledged by the individual.

In Piet Schoonenberg’s *Man and Sin: A Theological View*, Schoonenberg, a modern Jesuit theologian, argues that sin is simply turning away from God, and that this idea is founded in Scripture. Schoonenberg goes on to list multiple accounts of Scripture which roots sin in a direct denial of God and ultimately concludes that sin “is gradually placed more in the core of the person.”<sup>14</sup> Similarly to Rahner, Schoonenberg states that sin is a voluntary *no* to God. This *no* is an active opposition to grace and its theological virtues of faith, hope, and love.<sup>15</sup> Two outcomes always exist from the action of sin: “usurpation and refusal” which is a “disordinate” turn away from God and towards a creature.<sup>16</sup> Here, Schoonenberg engages a subject in addition to the sinner and God: a creature. Creature is not specified except that it is the new object which replaces God, or an idol.

Unique to Schoonenberg is his consideration of the sin of the world where the sinner is a coexistence of individuals rather than a single individual.<sup>17</sup> For the foundation of understanding his thought, Schoonenberg explains that “nobody can simply cause another person to sin.” A foreign influence may have an effect on a choice or decision, but by no means does it force an individual’s choice for the good or bad. One free action leads to another free action. If an individual chooses, another choice will be made in reaction to the former. It is not the force, but the response or reaction that is required that Schoonenberg calls the “situation.” The situation is “all influences which pass from one free person to another free person.” In this way, the history of the world, and more specifically, the sin of the world, is a culmination of all the choices made throughout the history of the world.<sup>18</sup> In the simplest terms, Schoonenberg’s situation can also be likened to peer pressure. An individual makes a choice and does not directly force another individual to act in any given direction for freedom allows all individuals to choose *yes* or *no* to God. If an individual were forced by their situation to respond in a specific way, then the

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 208-209.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 209-210.

<sup>14</sup> Schoonenberg, *Man and Sin*, 9.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 98.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 104.

individual would no longer be free. Hence this situation is an influence or an external pressure that moves an individual to respond or react.

In considering the sin of the world, Schoonenberg’s work encompasses the details of the sin already existing in the world, where it comes from, and where it is headed. What is lacking still, then, is developed thought regarding sins of a collective group of people, recognizing that this group is not a person itself, has no individual relationship with God, and perhaps suffers no direct effects of sinning.

Sin has three dimensions, one of which is seldom included in the study of sin. For so long the study of sin has focused on the relationship between individual and God, such that its own effects on the surrounding environment and social context were not considered. Turning away from sin calls for a conversion towards God in developing and strengthening the personal relationship. A sole dedication of developing self is necessary. Following this emphasis on personal development, the *other* and the community fade away. The failure to recognize, identify, and address the third dimension of sin, in both Protestant and Catholic thought, has over emphasized the pretentious importance of turning inward, and of the individual, having paid little attention to anything else. The following section shifts the attention of sin, then, from turning inward and the individual relationship with God to individual relationship with the social context. We will now discover what individualism is and the associated sinful effects it possesses beyond itself.

## The Rise of Individualism

In determining whether or not individualism is sinful, individualism will be described and illustrated in the context of sin. Jerome P. Theisen, OSB addresses the question of moral evil in *Community and Disunity: Symbols of Grace and Sin*. In particular, Theisen develops an understanding of why humans deliberately and willfully choose evil. Theisen uses Paul Tilich and Paul Riceour’s concept of symbolism, that is, a sign that is a representative, more than symbol, which partakes and represents two realities – the reality of itself and the reality of the thing it represents.<sup>19</sup> Through this concept of symbols, Theisen believes that disunity is a symbol of sin and that this disunity assumes a freedom of choice and will. Because the outer human (Luther), the flesh (Schleiermacher), or the will (Theisen) seeks what is finite (Rahner) or turns away from God (Schoonenberg), the result of a free choice is self-centered. Inner disunity results from an inner human (Luther), or a soul (Schleiermacher) that is not in control of its house. It is weak in its ability to say *yes* to God and is susceptible to diminishing the God-consciousness (Schoonenberg). For Theisen, this means that the individual views itself as the center of the universe with all things readily available to him/herself but is responsible for sharing all the resources with others. Because of this, individuals are incapable of serving or building up their community. Communities diminish and fall apart due to the narcissism of the individual.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Jerome Theisen, *Community and Disunity: Symbols of Grace and Sin* (Collegeville: St. John’s University Press, 1985), 53-55.

<sup>20</sup> Theisen, *Community and Disunity*, 66-67.

Theisen calls this narcissism and self-centeredness “the core of sin,” and “the very origin of sin and the extreme of disunity.”<sup>21</sup> When an individual is so far removed from the reality of others and the pure interest of self and only self, there exists a true isolation from God. The self-centeredness increases loneliness, diminishes the God-consciousness, and seeks the finite, separating itself from the infinite. Narcissism is essentially self-idolatry.<sup>22</sup>

In Thomas Schindler’s *The Social Dimension: Individualism and the Catholic Tradition*, Schindler argues that individualism is a hindrance to social justice. Schindler states that individualism involves three different relationships: “the individual to society, to the physical environment, and to God.”<sup>23</sup> Schindler also argues that the “cornerstone” of individualism is freedom; however, this freedom is not the freedom that God intends or to which Rahner refers. Instead of being free to choose from multiple realities, the freedom that empowers individualism is what Schindler calls “freedom from.” The attempt to attain “freedom from” is an attempt of the individual gaining power of themselves, their own desires, and goals from an external entity. Rather than working with others and working collectively towards a common goal that is beneficial for all, individualism focuses on the one individual, self-centered goal. The individual shuts out the external world and the reality becomes the single individual world. This false and deceptive notion of freedom runs away from and pushes against something larger and more powerful beyond the individual them self.<sup>24</sup> Perhaps the idea of individualism is a form of self-protection and self-care rather than self-preservation; however, individualism does not attain this goal. The freedom that is sought after is not the freedom to choose realities and therefore is not the freedom attained. The self-centered individual finds himself alienated and isolated both from society and from God.<sup>25</sup>

Through Theisen and Schindler’s descriptions of individualism, it becomes clear that individualism is, indeed, sinful. It is a voluntary decision to say *no* to God, and to say *yes* to the bodily desires of what is finite. Individualism is excessively concerned with self-preservation and self-concern. The more excessive individualism is practiced, the more the scope of reality is diminished and narrowed. Individualism diminishes the God-consciousness, gives into bodily flesh, and feeds the outer human. Individualism is not self-empowerment, as it may seem. It is self-protection from, it is a fear-driven action, and it alienates and isolates. It is a false reassurance of safety that cannot be guaranteed. Does this individualism, then, make structural sin more difficult to recognize? And if structural sin is not always recognizable, how can it be transformed? The final considerations of my presentation involve Catholic social teaching.

### *Catholic Social Teaching*

According to the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, seven themes permeate throughout Catholic social teaching: life and dignity of the human person, call to family, community, and participation, rights and responsibilities, option for the poor and vulnerable, the

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<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 76.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 75.

<sup>23</sup> Thomas Schindler, *Ethics: The Social Dimension* (Wilmington, Michael Glazier, 1989), 46.

<sup>24</sup> Schindler, *Ethics*, 50-51.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

dignity of work and the rights of workers, solidarity, and care for God’s creation.<sup>26</sup> These themes of Catholic social teaching do not deny the importance of the individual. They do not deprecate or devalue who the individual is. Rather, what these seven themes call forward is the responsibility, work, and care of the individual beyond themselves. These themes are paramount in recognizing structural sin. While it is impossible to eradicate all individual sin and therefore, structural sin, it is possible to call the individual towards responsibility for structural sin, specifically when the individual is involved in the free choice. If I say yes to this decision, does this devalue life and the dignity of the human person? Am I avoiding rights and responsibilities? If I make this vote into this structure, does that further marginalize the poor or the vulnerable? Does my position in this company give more dignity to workers or remove their rights? In making this decision, am I contributing to the destruction of the environment or compromising my solidarity with the defenseless and helpless? And to further the thought, if the structure that I participate in makes a decision that is unjust, not righteous, and marginalizes the other, am I still responsible for the outcome that feeds the outer human, that gives in to bodily flesh, that says *no* to God, that diminishes the God-consciousness? Catholic social teaching provides the framework for individuals to recognize structural sin and therefore, make even the smallest steps and improvements towards transforming structures.

## Conclusion

As established throughout this presentation, sin is a direct No to God. Because God reveals God’s self in and through humanity, a no to humanity is also a No to God. A Yes to God requires a yes to those who embody God, that is, the neighbor. Therefore, a no to humanity or the neighbor is a direct No to God and a direct sin against God. Individualism denies both God and neighbor, both God and social context. The individual possesses no concern, is not compelled to, and feels no need to look outward or to look beyond the self. This misdirected focus does not motivate an individual to work for the oppressed, the marginalized, or the poor and needy. In these cases of structural sin, it is not enough for an individual to simply not engage in the structural sin. The individual must use Catholic social teaching to recognize and work against the structural sin. It should be noted, however, that I do not argue for an eradication of self-care or self-concern or that safeguarding for an individual is sinful. Nor do I argue that self-reflection or an inward turn is sinful. Rather, it is the genuine selfishness of individualism, the action of seeking personal gains at the expense of others, the decision to be ignorant towards the suffering of others, the narcissism, that is sinful. Structures possess the greatest opportunity and possibility to work towards the common good for all, but it is up to the individual to guide and steer these structures in such a direction that demands the individual and the structure to turn outward, to work in solidarity and in community with others, and for others.

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<sup>26</sup> United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, “Seven Themes of Catholic Social Teaching,” <http://www.usccb.org/beliefs-and-teachings/what-we-believe/catholic-social-teaching/seven-themes-of-catholic-social-teaching.cfm> (2005)



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