

Foundations of Christian Faith

AN INTRODUCTION
TO THE IDEA
OF CHRISTIANITY

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*Start with ch. 1 -
Key chapter
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The fact that as subjects of a freedom still coming to be we do not know whether or not God has so established all freedom that it will reach a good decision, at least finally and ultimately, is something to be accepted in obedience as a fact we know from experience, just as we have to accept our very existence in obedience.

We experience in our very experience of existence what is here the specific characteristic of freedom in its relationship to God: namely, we experience it as contingent by its very nature and at the same time as something necessary for us. We have neither the possibility nor the right to give back our admission ticket to existence, a ticket which is still used and not allowed to expire even when someone tries to annihilate himself in a suicide attempt. And this curious relationship between something contingent which is necessary for us really just has its prime example when there is established free differentiation from God. It is what is most properly our own and as such it is what God has established.

But if freedom is willed and established by God, and if in this way subjectivity exists without limiting the sovereignty of God, then this entails the possibility and the necessity of a free decision vis-à-vis God because this is what constitutes the essence of freedom. At this point we cannot go into the question whether and how this freedom can be accounted for in those peripheral cases where a person exists on a merely biological level, cases in which we do not recognize any concrete possibility of accounting for subjectivity, for example, the mentally handicapped who, at least by our normal standards, never seem to come to the use of reason. But we cannot understand something fundamental which is experienced at the center of existence in terms of such peripheral cases. Each one of us is endowed with his own freedom, and in this situation the Christian and theological assertion that man is a free subject takes on for us in the concrete an inescapable importance and a radical seriousness.

4. "Original Sin"

THE WORLD OF PERSONS AS THE REALM OF FREEDOM'S ACTUALIZATION

If the Christian doctrine about the possibility of radical guilt in human existence is really to be understood, then we must also consider that man precisely as free subject, and not merely in addition to this, is a being in the world, in history, and in a world of persons. But this means that he

always and inevitably exercises his personal, inalienable and unique acts of freedom in a situation which he finds prior to himself, which is imposed on him, and which is ultimately the presupposition of his freedom. It means that he actualizes himself as a free subject in a situation which itself is always determined by history and by other persons.

This situation is not only an exterior situation which basically does not enter into the decision of freedom as such. It is not the external material in which an intention, an attitude or a decision is merely actualized in such a way that the material of this free decision then drops off this decision, as it were. Rather freedom inevitably appropriates the material in which it actualizes itself as an intrinsic and constitutive element which is originally co-determined by freedom itself, and incorporates it into the finality of the existence which possesses itself in its freedom.

The eternal validity of the free subject in and through his freedom is the final and definitive validity of his earthly history itself, and therefore it is also intrinsically co-determined by the elements imposed on it which have constituted the situation of the free subject in time. It is co-determined by the free history of all the others who constitute his own unique world of persons. However much it defends radically against making our own historical decision in freedom innocuous, the Christian interpretation of this situation of the free subject says that this situation, determined by his personal world, inevitably bears the stamp of the history of the freedom of all other men, and this precisely for the individual in his free subjectivity and in his most personal and individual history. Consequently, the guilt of others is a permanent factor in the situation and realm of the individual's freedom, for the latter are determined by his personal world.

The corporeality and objectification of each individual's original decision of freedom participates in the essence of this original free decision, and this is true whether the decision was good or bad. But they are not simply the original goodness or evil of this subjective, original free decision. They only participate in it, and therefore they are inevitably characterized by ambiguity. For while history is still going on, it always remains obscure whether they really are the historical, corporeal objectification of a definite good or evil free decision, or whether it only looks this way because this objectification has arisen only out of pre-personal necessities.

Moreover, this objectification of a free decision is always open to and capable of further determination. For the objectification of one person's free decision which has had an effect on the objectivity of a shared situation of freedom can become an intrinsic moment in the free decision of another.

In this latter decision this objectification can acquire a completely different character without ceasing for this reason to be the result of the first free action.

OBJECTIFICATIONS OF ANOTHER'S GUILT

According to Christian teaching objectifications of guilt are a part of these already existing elements in the situation of an individual's freedom. This seems to sound at first like something perfectly obvious. For every person has the impression that he has to decide about himself and to find himself and God in a world which is co-determined by guilt and by the guilty refusals of others. He knows from his own transcendental experience that there is freedom, and that this freedom objectifies itself in the world, in history, in time and space. He knows that such freedom includes the possibility of a radically evil decision, and he presumes that in this undoubtedly very inadequate and sorrowful world there are to be found objectifications of really subjectively evil decisions which have actually taken place.

This opinion is very natural. But if we think about it carefully and correctly, outside of the possibility of an absolute experience of one's own subjective evil objectifying itself in the world, it can really only claim to be probable at most. We could assume, first of all, that there has indeed always been the pressing and threatening possibility of really subjective evil in the world, but that this possibility has not become reality. We could assume that unfortunate situations which are detrimental to freedom and which always have to be worked through in the development of the human race never arise out of a really subjectively evil decision, but that they are the early stages of a development which begins from far below and moves upwards, and is not yet finished. We could assume that perhaps there have necessarily been evil decisions of freedom objectifying themselves in the world, but that they are then improved and transformed by a subsequent change in this same subjective freedom, so that they no longer have any adverse significance for others which would constitute an essential obstacle to a good decision in freedom by these others.

All of these possibilities might appear very improbable. To a person who in a subjectively honest judgment faces himself not only as a possible sinner, but as a real sinner, it might appear absurd to assume that in the whole history of the human race he alone is such a sinner merely because he only has the possibility of judging about himself, while this possibility is not assured with regard to others, or at least not with the same clarity and certainty. It might strike such a person who has really experienced his own

subjective guilt as absurd to believe that he and he alone has brought something evil into this world by his actions in freedom, something which he can no longer intercept completely and undo.

All of man's experience points in the direction that there are in fact objectifications of personal guilt in the world which, as the material for the free decisions of other persons, threaten these decisions, have a seductive effect upon them, and make free decisions painful. And since the material of a free decision always becomes an intrinsic element of the free act itself, insofar as even a good free act which is finite does not succeed in transforming this material absolutely and changing it completely, this good act itself always remains ambiguous because of the co-determination of this situation by guilt. It always remains burdened with consequences which could not really be intended because they lead to tragic impasses, and which disguise the good that was intended by one's own freedom.

ORIGINAL AND PERMANENT CO-DETERMINATION BY OTHERS' GUILT

But this human experience, which is really quite obvious, is prevented from becoming innocuous by the message of Christianity and its assertion that this co-determination of the situation of every person by the guilt of others is something universal, permanent, and therefore also original. There are no islands for the individual person whose nature does not already bear the stamp of the guilt of others, directly or indirectly, from close or from afar. And although this is an asymptotic ideal, there is for the human race in its concrete history no real possibility of ever overcoming once and for all this determination of the situation of freedom by guilt. Throughout its history the human race can indeed, and always will strive anew to alter this situation of guilt, and even do this with very real successes and as an obligation, so that to neglect this obligation would itself be radical guilt before God. But according to the teaching of Christianity this striving will always remain co-determined by guilt, and even a person's most ideal, most moral act of freedom enters tragically into the concrete in an appearance which, because co-determined by guilt, is also the appearance of its opposite.

By rejecting an idealistic as well as a communistic optimism about the future, Christianity believes not only that it is giving witness to the truth, but also that it is performing the best service for a "better world" here and now. It believes that it has offered the world adequate moral imperatives and obligations extending all the way to responsibility before God and to the risk of eternal guilt. It believes that its historical pessimism is also the

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best service towards improving the world here and now, because the Utopian idea that a world functioning in perfect harmony can be created by man himself only leads inevitably to still greater violence and greater cruelty than those which man wants to eradicate from the world. Such a pessimism, of course, can become the excuse for not doing anything, for offering people the consolation of eternal life, and really for offering a religious attitude not only as the opiate of the people, but also as an opiate for the people. But this does not alter the fact that the radical realism which comes to expression in the pessimism of Christianity as we have formulated it with respect to the situation of our freedom is true, and that therefore it may not be disguised.

THE CHRISTIAN TEACHING ABOUT "ORIGINAL SIN"

Such a universal, permanent and ineradicable co-determination of the situation of every individual's freedom by guilt, and then of course of every society's too, is conceivable only if this ineradicable co-determination of the situation of freedom by guilt is also *original*, that is, is already imbedded in the origin of this history to the extent that this origin of the single history of the human race is to be understood as established by man. The universality and the ineradicable nature of the co-determination of the situation of freedom by guilt in the single history of the human race implies an original determination of this human situation by guilt already present at the beginning. It implies an "original sin."

"Original sin" does not mean of course that the original, personal act of freedom at the very origin of history has been transmitted to subsequent generations in its moral quality. The notion that the personal deed of "Adam" or of the first group of people is imputed to us in such a way that it has been transmitted on to us biologically, as it were, has absolutely nothing to do with the Christian dogma of original sin.

We arrive at the knowledge, the experience and the meaning of what original sin is, in the first place, from a religious-existential interpretation of our own situation, from ourselves. We say first of all: we are people who must inevitably exercise our own freedom subjectively in a situation which is co-determined by objectifications of guilt, and indeed in such a way that this co-determination belongs to our situation permanently and inescapably. This can be clarified by a very banal example: when someone buys a banana, he does not reflect upon the fact that its price is tied to many presuppositions. To them belongs, under certain circumstances, the pitiful lot of banana pickers, which in turn is co-determined by social injustice,

exploitation, or a centuries-old commercial policy. This person himself now participates in this situation of guilt to his own advantage. Where does this person's personal responsibility in taking advantage of such a situation co-determined by guilt end, and where does it begin? These are difficult and obscure questions.

In order to arrive at a real understanding of original sin, we begin with the fact that the situation of our own freedom bears the stamp of the guilt of others in a way which cannot be eradicated. But this means that the universality and the inescapability of this co-determination by guilt is inconceivable if it were not present at the very beginning of mankind's history of freedom. For if it were not present, hence if this determination of our situation by guilt were only a particular event, then the radical nature of this recognition of a universal and ineradicable co-determination of the situation of our freedom by guilt could not be maintained. We have to understand this co-determination of the situation of human freedom by guilt as imbedded in the origin of history itself. The universality and ineradicable nature of the co-determination of the situation of freedom by guilt in the single history of the human race implies in this sense an "original sin" as it is called by its traditional name.

"ORIGINAL SIN" AND PERSONAL GUILT

"Original sin" in the Christian sense in no way implies that the original, personal act of freedom of the first person or persons is transmitted to us as our moral quality. In "original sin" the sin of Adam is not imputed to us. Personal guilt from an original act of freedom cannot be transmitted, for it is the existentiell "no" of personal transcendence towards God or against him. And by its very nature this cannot be transmitted, just as the formal freedom of a subject cannot be transmitted. This freedom is precisely the point where a person is unique and no one can take his place, where he cannot be analyzed away, as it were, either forwards or backwards or into his environment, and in this way escape responsibility for himself. For Catholic theology, therefore, "original sin" in no way means that the moral quality of the actions of the first person or persons is transmitted to us, whether this be through a juridical imputation by God or through some kind of biological heredity, however conceived.

In this connection it is obvious that when the word "sin" is used for the personal, evil decision of a subject, and when on the other hand it is applied to a sinful situation which derives from the decision of another, it is being used only in an analogous sense, and not in a univocal sense. Now we could

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ask in a critical way why the church's theology and preaching use a word which can be so easily misunderstood. We would have to answer, first of all, that what is permanent and valid about the dogma of original sin, and its existentiell meaning could certainly be expressed without this word. On the other hand, however, we have to take account of the fact that there is and has to be a certain amount of standardization in the terminology of theology and preaching, that the history of the formulation of this experience of faith did in fact take this course, and that this word is there and cannot be abolished privately and arbitrarily by some individual.

In preaching and in catechesis, therefore, we should not begin immediately with this word, which then has to be modified with a great deal of effort afterwards. We should rather acquire enough theology so that, starting with experience and with a description of the existentiell human situation, we can talk about the *matter itself* without using this word. Only at the end would we have to indicate that this very actual reality of one's own life and one's own situation is called "original sin" in ecclesiastical language.

Then it would be clear from the beginning that with regard to freedom, responsibility, the possibility of expiation and the modes of expiation, and the conceivability of the consequences of guilt which we call punishment, in all of these respects in any case "original sin" is essentially different from what we mean when we speak of personal guilt and sin, and understand them as possible or as actual from the perspective of the transcendental experience of freedom in ourselves.

"ORIGINAL SIN" IN THE LIGHT OF GOD'S SELF-COMMUNICATION

The nature of original sin must be understood correctly and only from an understanding of the effect which the guilt of a particular person or particular persons has on the situation of other persons' freedom. For given the unity of the human race, the fact that man is in the world and in history, and finally the necessity that every original situation of freedom be mediated in the world, there is necessarily such an effect.

Presupposing this basic structure of an act of freedom as being in the world and as co-determining the situation of others' freedom, what is specific about the Christian doctrine of original sin consists in two things:

1. The determination of *our own* situation by guilt is an element within the history of the freedom of the human race, an element which is imbedded in its beginning, because otherwise the universality of this determination of the situation of freedom and of the history of the freedom of all men by guilt is not explained.

2. The *depths* of this determination by guilt, which determines the *realm* of freedom and not freedom as such immediately, must be measured by the theological essence of the sin in which this co-determination of the human situation by guilt has its origins.

If this personal guilt at the beginning of the history of the human race is a rejection of God's absolute offer of himself in an absolute self-communication of his divine life, and we shall be treating this in detail later, then the consequences as a determination of our situation by guilt are different than they would be if it had merely been the free rejection of a divine law within the horizon of God himself. This divine self-communication, which is called the grace of justification, is what is most radical and most deep in the existential situation of human freedom. As divine grace it lies prior to freedom as the condition of possibility for freedom's *concrete* action. Self-communication of the absolutely *holy* God designates a quality sanctifying man prior to his free and good decision. Therefore the *loss* of such a sanctifying self-communication assumes the character of something which *should not be*, and is not merely a diminishing of the possibilities of freedom as can otherwise be the case in the instance of a "hereditary defect."

Since there is such a loss for the human race as the "descendants of Adam" in the situation of its freedom, we can and must speak of an original *sin*, although merely in an analogous sense of course, even though we are dealing with an element in the *situation* of freedom and not in the freedom of an individual as such. How this individual responds to this situation co-determined by a guilty act at the beginning of the history of the human race is a matter for his freedom to decide, however threatening and pernicious this situation is, and especially that freedom which is exercised vis-à-vis God's offer of himself. In spite of the guilt at the beginning of the human race, God's offer of himself always remains valid because of Christ and in view of him, although it is no longer present because of "Adam" and from "Adam," and hence no longer from a guiltless beginning of the human race. Even in this situation co-determined by guilt, it remains just as radical an existential in the situation of human freedom as what we call "original sin."

An understanding of what "original sin" means, then, is based on two factors. First of all, it is based on the universality of the determination by guilt of *every* person's situation, and this factor includes the original nature of this determination by guilt in the history of the human race, for this is implied in the universality. Secondly, it is based on the reflexive insight,

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deepening with the history of revelation and salvation, into the nature of the relationship between God and man. This factor includes the specific nature of the conditions of possibility for this relationship which are implied in the relationship, and also the special depths of guilt if and when there is guilt, and, if there is guilt, what kind of guilt is implied by a rejection of the sanctifying offer of himself which God makes to man.

ON THE HERMENEUTICS OF SCRIPTURAL STATEMENTS

Both the fact and the nature of what we call "original sin," therefore, can be arrived at from man's experience of himself in the history of salvation insofar as this history has reached its culmination in Christ. From this perspective it is also clear that the biblical teaching about original sin in the Old and New Testaments indicates phases of development which are clearly different from each other. The universality of the consequences of sin could not develop into a knowledge of original sin until reflexive knowledge about immediacy to God was radicalized in the instance of a positive relationship to him. The biblical story about the sin of the first person or first persons in no way has to be understood as an historical, eyewitness report. The portrayal of the sin of the first man is rather an aetiological inference from the experience of man's existentiell situation in the history of salvation to what must have happened "at the beginning" if the present situation of freedom actually is the way it is experienced, and if it is accepted as it is. If this is the case, then it is also clear that with regard to the visual representation of these events in the primeval beginnings of the human race, everything which cannot be arrived at by this aetiological inference from the present situation to its origins belongs to the mode of representation and the mode of expression, but not to the content of the assertion. The assertion might be couched in the form of a myth, since this is a completely legitimate mode of representation for man's ultimate experiences, nor can it be replaced radically by some other mode of expression. Even the most abstract metaphysics and philosophy of religion must work with visual images which are nothing else but abbreviated and faded elements of mythology.

Original sin, therefore, expresses nothing else but the historical origin of the present, universal and ineradicable situation of our freedom as co-determined by guilt, and this insofar as this situation has a history in which, because of the universal determination of this history by guilt, God's self-communication in grace comes to man not from "Adam," not from the beginning of the human race, but from the goal of this history, from the God-Man Jesus Christ.

THE "CONSEQUENCES OF ORIGINAL SIN"

Insofar as the situation of our freedom is inescapably co-determined by guilt, and this guilt touches everything which exists as individual elements within this situation of freedom, it is also clear that man's whole encounter in freedom with the world of persons and things which determine him would be different if this situation were not co-determined by this guilt. To this extent, toil, ignorance, sickness, pain and death as we encounter them in the concrete are undoubtedly characteristics of our human existence which would not be present in an existence without guilt in the same way that we actually experience them.

In this sense we can and must say that these existentials are the consequence of original sin. But this does not say conversely that everything which confronts us in these characteristics of man's individual and collective history is absolutely nothing else but the consequence of sin, nor that we can form a concrete image of the opposite existentials as they would appear in a realm of existence free of guilt. It is to be taken for granted that man without guilt would also have lived out his life in and through freedom and into something final and definitive, and in this sense would have "died." It is obvious that we cannot imagine concretely this mode of existence moving towards its fulfillment without being touched by guilt. All of the scriptural statements about this are and remain asymptotic attempts to indicate what existence would be like without guilt, a situation which no one has experienced in the concrete, but which we have to postulate if we do not want to shift the blame for our sinfulness and for the co-determination of our situation by sin onto God.

If the essence of sin is an actualization of transcendental freedom in rejection of God, then it can be actualized by a person even when the theoretical and practical mediation of this transcendental freedom is very modest. Just as in the first act in which man appears as man, perhaps when he made fire or used tools and this achievement seemed to exhaust his limits as man, he was already a transcendent being or else he cannot be called man, so too even in the most primitive cultural conditions we must acknowledge in this being the possibility of a "yes" or "no" to God which Christian doctrine acknowledges in the "first man" (or men). Since such a rejection of God must be understood from the perspective of the origin of human freedom as an act of basic and original self-interpretation, and not as one act among many others, neither is there any need to think of man in his innocence as living in a historical paradise for a longer period of time, and to reject what is really meant in Genesis as a mere myth.

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Key summary
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