Part I

Drawing into Conversation

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The loss of God: pragmatic atheism and the language of sin

This book on sin – why bother?

'Why?!'

That cry – simultaneously one of exasperated disbelief, plain bemusement and gently derisory humour[1] – has been the most frequent response to the news that I am currently working on the doctrine of sin. It expresses good-humoured doubt that sin is worth taking seriously as a means for speaking about reality. In part, the humour reflects a now-conventional association (especially in sensationalist reporting) between the language of sin and what are seen to be trivial (though often as titillating) peccadilloes and temptations. But such trivialisation itself reflects the fact that the language of 'sin' has fallen largely into disuse in general public (but also in much Christian and theological) discourse as a language for talking about the pathological in human affairs. In part, that reflects the general secularisation of our culture (discussed in this chapter); in part, the suspicion that Christian understanding of sin might be counter-moral and/or counter-scientific (discussed in the following chapter); in part, the suspicion that sin is a language of blame and condemnation (encouraged by its flourishing in religious enclaves where it is used to whip up artificial and disproportionate senses of personal guilt and shame – addressed implicitly throughout Part III). For all these reasons, sin-talk may be thought anachronistic or dangerous, and it is easy to see how the idea that it yet holds descriptive, explanatory and interpretive power in relation to the discernment and understanding of pathologies in human affairs might appear bemusing, exasperating or just plain laughable.

1. I have lost count of the times I have been asked whether I need help with the practical research, and admit to not being above such silly jokes myself.

Given all that, should not the disappearance of sin from serious public discourse be passed over in silence, for fear of resurrecting a source of considerable potential embarrassment for Christian faith in the modern world?[2] Is the marginalisation of sin-talk to the privatised sphere of (trivialised and titillating) personal morality, not to be greeted by Christians as relief and liberation from public anachronism and irrelevance? Such a response to the implicit challenge issued by the cry of exasperated bemusement with which I began is tempting, given the existential situation of Christians in a highly secularised culture (discussed below), but would quite misjudge both its force and its scope.

For that challenge pertains, not only to specific, substantive issues related to the doctrine of sin, but to more general difficulties concerning the possibilities of speaking of God in relation to the world. The cry of exasperation, then, cuts to the very heart of the difficulties faced by Christian faith and theology in the modern world. For that reason alone, the general absence of sin-talk from serious public discussion of human pathologies is not something that may either be passed over in silence or enthusiastically embraced by Christians without colluding with the more general retreat of God-talk from public life and discourse. Losing our ability to speak of the world's pathologies in relation to God represents a serious, concrete form of the loss of God that is a general characteristic of contemporary, Western culture. The doctrine of sin is not so much an isolated case of Christian embarrassment concerning anachronistic aspects of Christian faith, as a crucial test of our ability to speak of God in relation to the world at all.

Appreciating the range of this challenge and its potency beyond the doctrine of sin helps towards an understanding of its force and significance in relation to sin-talk itself. For, since the challenge reflects suspicions concerning the possibilities of speaking of God and the world together, it threatens to incapacitate sin-talk in its essential, functional core. Speaking of God and world (in its pathological aspects) together is the core function of the language of sin. For sin is an essentially relational language, speaking of pathology with an inbuilt and at least implicit reference to our relation to God. To speak of what damages human beings as

2. I have no wish to become embroiled in debates about whether our contemporary situation is best characterised as post-modern rather than modern, or whether the post-modern is really only a form of late modernity. By 'modern', I merely wish to designate a cultural stream which runs back to the agenda and consequences of the Enlightenment, and which continues to shape our cultural situation, albeit through a complex history of modification.

sin is to claim that the essential character and defining characteristic of such pathology, however else it may be described and identified in non-theological languages, is theological: disruption of our proper relation to God. It is of the essence of sin-talk, therefore, that it should function as a *theological* language, and this is the source of its distinctiveness from and irreducibility to other languages through which the pathological may be discerned and described.

Therefore, anything less than facing head-on the implicit challenge of both the specific and the more general suspicions raised concerning sin-talk in our culture is heading for trouble in at least one of two ways (outlined in more detail in the following section). One potential response effectively colludes with the public meaninglessness of sin-talk by restricting either its use (to a religious enclave) or its referential range (to the private and personal). Hence, talk of God is carried on, but without any meaningful connection being made between sin as a functioning theological language and the world of public meaning and living. Alternatively, its public meaning and reference might be secured by evaporating it of any distinctively theological referent and function. Yet, eclipsing any functioning reference to God shears sin-talk of its essential, functional characteristic and mark of distinctiveness, eliding the difference between speaking of sin in theological and in any other terms. Why use the empty terminology of sin if, stripped of its essential and distinctive theological frame of reference, it conforms itself precisely and without remainder to the contours offered by, say, secular psychology, psychiatry, sociology or ethics?

It is against the backdrop of these considerations that this book is written. In it, I seek to test whether sin holds, not just public meaning, but explanatory and descriptive power in relation to concrete pathologies. Beginning with this challenge is not only a device for making clear the nature of the contemporary problematisation of sin-talk, against which it must be tested. Since the challenge to sin-talk is to its very essence, it helps clarify its nature in the very act of objecting to it and finding it so problematic. That, in turn, helps clarify a significant aspect of what it is that is being tested: the meaningfulness and explanatory power of a functioning, *theological* language. Sin-talk cannot survive testing unless it continues to function as a distinctive theological language, speaking of concrete pathologies in relation to God. The challenge implied by the exasperated bemusement with which it is frequently greeted cannot be met by turning sin into a form of non-theological

discourse, collapsing it into the categories and frame of reference offered by, say, secular ethics, philosophy, psychology or sociology. If sin-talk attempts to meet the challenge by evacuating itself of all functioning reference to God, conforming itself to the standards or reference afforded by non-theological discourses, then it defeats itself in the process.

That is why it is right – even, perhaps, necessary – for a discussion of sin to begin with the exasperated bemusement with which sin-talk is frequently greeted and to take it seriously by meeting it head-on. That is why it is necessary, as a means for appreciating the essence of sin-talk, to be clear about the nature and sources of the difficulties it faces in our cultural situation. For that will help clarify what sin-talk must be if it is to hold explanatory and descriptive power in relation to concrete pathologies, and what must be tested in the course of the book.

In the following chapter, I shall turn to consider two substantive reasons for resistance to the language of sin (especially in the form of the doctrine of original sin). But first, I want to characterise the more generalised difficulty we face in speaking about God in relation to the world, the better to understand what might be involved in deploying a theological language, such as 'sin'.

Pragmatic atheism

We live in a culture which is basically secular, which affirms the world's integrity and independence from any external, non-worldly reality so that it may be understood in its own terms, without immediate or explicit reference to God.[3] Such secularity is neither necessarily nor intrinsically atheist, but it does issue a special challenge to faith and theology: if the world may be understood and lived in without transcendent reference, what place is there for God, and what point is there in speaking of God? If speaking of the world (e.g., its pathologies) in theological terms (as sin) makes no difference to secular ways of speaking, which are entirely adequate on their own, then why bother to speak of God at all? Would it not be better, less confusing and more honest, openly to abandon talk of God in these respects, if not to give up on God altogether?

Perhaps the most common religious response to secularity is for God

3. For two markedly different studies of the impact of secularisation on sin, see Richard K. Fenn, *The Secularization of Sin: An Investigation of the Daedalus Complex* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1991) and Marsha Witten, *All is Forgiven: The Secular Message in American Protestantism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).

to be withdrawn to the margins of the public world, but allowed free reign in the world of personal values, morality and spirituality. (This strategy also effectively withdraws theology from interaction with secular discourses, the spiritual/religious from the material and the private from the public). Thus, God is admitted into the 'gaps' left where the explanatory power of secular discourses gives out.[4] Hence, for example, the doctrine of creation ceases to function as a means for affirming the presence and activity of God in and through the very integrity of the world's *natural* order and processes as these may be described by the natural sciences. Instead, creation is evaporated to the point of God's initial responsibility for the natural world. After which, ceasing to have any 'natural' function, God is irrelevant to the task of understanding the natural order and processes of the world. For 'natural' is here understood as that which has its own integrity in *separation* from God, which functions without God's involvement, and so may now be understood through disciplines which exclude God from their frames of reference.

Whether creaturely integrity (of the world, human beings or non-theological discourses) separates from and excludes God is a question that constantly resurfaces throughout this book. For reasons that should become clear in what follows, I consider it to be the main challenge posed in our culture to theology and faith. Is God-talk only possible by distancing God from the world, by making God utterly transcendent and 'other' to it,[5] whilst permitting a compensatory proximity in the subjective dimension of moral and spiritual values? If so, then God-talk is redundant to the task of understanding and living in the world. For, if it is no longer possible to think of God as related to, present and active in the world, to speak of God and world together, then God has ceased to hold any explanatory power for understanding the world in its own integrity. The world, at least in its public and material aspects, does not need God in order to understand itself in its own terms. So, why bother to speak of God at all in these contexts?

This is, indeed, very much the situation in which we find ourselves, in a secular culture that operates an effective exclusion of God-talk from the

4. Thus, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, enlarged edn (London: SCM, 1971), pp. 325f., 360f. (letters to Bethge, 8 June and 16 July, 1944), whose recognition of the chief issue as our understanding of God's transcendence and immanence cries out for development in a more explicitly trinitarian direction than he was able to achieve himself.
5. Here Paul Ricoeur's rhetorical question, 'Does not sin make God the Wholly Other?' (*The Symbolism of Evil* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), p. 58), achieves an added significance and poignancy.

discourses and practices through which we understand, live and work in the public and material world. Reference to God is effectively absent from every discipline of interpretation, analysis, explanation and action, from the natural and social sciences to public, political discourse, community development work, management, administration and social action. God is operationally excluded from those social and cultural processes which structure and shape our basic intentionality in desire, thought, action; reference to God is taken in practice to make no difference to the interpretation, explanation and understanding of the world; no difference to acting and living in it.

And so it is not easy to see how (or, indeed, why one might wish) to draw a specifically theological world-view and language (such as sin) into relation to ways of speaking about the world (in its pathological aspects) in its own terms (sociology, criminology, psychology, psychiatry, etc.). Reference to God is functionally redundant where we have developed effective and powerful disciplines for understanding and living in the world which, assuming God's irrelevance to analysis and interpretation, bracket God out of the picture. The prevailing assumption is that God is a private decision concerning personal values and motives, which would make no difference to the frameworks through which we understand the world by disciplined attentiveness to it in its phenomenal integrity. Therefore, the exclusion of God from the frames of reference through which we interpret reality is supposedly neutral in relation to beliefs. Habitual use of and reliance on the exclusion of God as the means for discerning objective truth about reality is reckoned to have as little impact on beliefs about God as they may allowedly have on our understanding and interpretation of the world.

Yet, as we utilise frameworks of understanding which exclude and assume the irrelevance of God, is this not a performance of atheism? It is not a straightforward atheism, to be sure, since it does not necessarily involve specific or conscious beliefs or disbeliefs. But it is an operational or pragmatic mode of atheism, in that it assumes the *practical* irrelevance of God's existence to the disciplines of reflection and practice we all use as we interpret and act in the world.[6] This is, indeed, the character of our culture's mode of secularity: an atheism mediated, not so much by argued or reasoned conviction, as by basic and habitual *practice*. Atheism is something that we all *live out and enact* in the public world, even if we refuse to

6. This anticipates the understanding of idolatry which emerges through the course of the book and is discussed explicitly in chapters 9 and 10.

give it consent in the form of explicit beliefs. For what characterises the basic secularity of our society is not so much that there are publicly accepted arguments against the existence of God, positive reasons for disbelieving in God, but that there is a *de facto* exclusion of God from public rationality, reference and discussion. Arguments against God are not needed where mentioning or invoking God makes no perceptible difference to the way in which we understand and explain the world. For then talk of God becomes meaningless. Our common and collective habits of mind, spirit and agency exclude God from consciousness. We live in our world *as if there were no God* – or at least a God who makes some actual difference to the way in which the world is to be interpreted, spoken about, acted in and upon – no matter what personal beliefs or faith we may have.

Hence, we live in a culture that shapes us all, in our most basic ways of making sense of and intending ourselves and our world, as practical atheists. That goes equally for those who live from a strong sense of faith in God as for those who do not. For faith in God makes no practical difference to the way in which we understand and live in the world; the ways in which we think, speak, act and make judgments – except possibly at the level of internal, personal motivation. We manage our lives, understand and interpret reality in the public domain, for all intents and purposes, as if we were atheists, as if there were no God actively and dynamically present in and related to the world. Because our secular culture is a form of *practical* atheism, rather than one of explicitly argued or acknowledged conviction, then, we may all be performatively incorporated into its atheism without any apparent contradiction with or loss of theistic conviction.[7] It does not lead Christians into open and conscious conflict with the ideas and beliefs we explicitly assent to and affirm concerning God, since we have colluded with the removal of such beliefs from the public sphere of ordinary life. For the atheism of which I speak concerns our *operational* beliefs; those which we hold *in practice*.

It is our incorporation into this practical atheism which explains how it is that many will be bemused by the claim that the doctrine of sin holds, not just meaning, but explanatory power for us today. Our pragmatic atheism seems to me to offer the most viable explanation of the impotence and public irrelevance of the language of sin. Other ways of accounting for

7. I might also point out here the further implication that secularity which takes the form of a *pragmatic* atheism is unlikely successfully to be countered by theological (or philosophically theistic) arguments which show the existence of God to be a useful or even necessary metaphysical (and therefore purely ideational) assumption.

the public meaninglessness of Christian talk of sin fail, in the end, to take the *secularity* of our culture as a form of pragmatic atheism at all seriously as a source of resistance to it. Consequently, they fail also to give sufficient weight to the essentially *theological* nature of the language of sin.[8] Merely changing the categories through which it is presented so that it accords with the psychological or moral consciousness of the age cannot rehabilitate the doctrine of sin. The real problem is the loss of God's active and dynamic relation to the world as the necessary correlate without which any form of human experience or consciousness may become a form of sin-consciousness. The task facing theology is consequently more radical than correlating the traditional forms of doctrinal expression with culturally predominant ways in which the pathological is understood. The theological task cannot then be reduced to the changing of its language and pattern of basic conceptuality, in order to render it more meaningful to the supposed psychological and cultural forms of consciousness prevailing in contemporary, Western culture. The meaninglessness of the language of sin in our secular culture issues a challenge to Christian faith and theology: to show that reference to God holds explanatory and descriptive power; that it invokes and enables a more truthful relation to reality in both theory and practice. It is that claim which this book, in a small way, sets out to test.

Let me be clear what my own position is before proceeding, since I have now expressed the most basic premiss of this book: I take the language of sin to be fundamentally a theological language. It functions by building relation to God into its way of speaking of the pathological, by speaking of God and the pathological together. So, in a culture that has effected a pragmatic eclipse of God from its basic frames of public reference, which systematically explains reality, including the pathological, without such reference, the language of sin is rendered problematic. If it is deployed at all, it will prove difficult to retain its integrity as a function-

8. In two very dissimilar books, Karl Menninger (*Whatever Happened to Sin?* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1973)) and Henri Rondet (*The Theology of Sin* (Notre Dame: Fides, 1960), pp. 103ff.) effect a reductive analysis in moral (non-theological) terms, despite the latter's frequent avowal of the view that relation to God is a necessary constituent of the notion of sin. For both, the lack of sin-consciousness is related to the reduction of *moral* consciousness, and so recovery of sin-consciousness is achieved through the revivification of the moral, which then captivates their comprehension of sin in retrieval. Donald Capps, on the other hand, suggests, not that we have lost our ability to experience ourselves as 'in the wrong', but that there has been a cultural shift in the categories through which we so experience ourselves, from guilt to shame. See *The Depleted Self: Sin in a Narcissistic Age* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993). The resultant retrieval of sin, however, is conducted in overwhelmingly secularised, psychological terms.

ing *theological* language. And so we are likely to find the language of sin retained, if at all, without its intrinsic and active theological reference, as reduced to a rhetorical flourish added to secular discourses. Where the terminology of sin remains in public use, it tends either to be trivialised or deployed as an emotive device for passing judgment and attaching blame.

Beyond Post-It™ label theology[9]

In such a secular context as our own, it is perfectly understandable that people might initially be bemused by the prospect of drawing the doctrine of sin back into public discourse, in conversation with secular thought and practice. For, properly deployed, the language of sin carries an inbuilt reference to God, naming the pathological as the denial of and opposition to God. But if God has no explanatory power in relation to reality, including its pathological aspects, and if our secular ways of speaking of and addressing the pathological (criminology, medicine, sociology, social science, psychology, philosophy, etc.) appear to be sufficient, why stick God on to secular analyses, descriptions, therapies, and so on?

It must be admitted from the outset that, if God-talk merely appends itself to an analysis already in place, then renaming as sin that which secular thought identifies as pathological is no more than a rhetorical flourish. It adds precisely nothing at the level of explanation and understanding to baptise and bless conclusions arrived at by secular means for secular reasons. Only if Christian faith possesses a specifically theological understanding of what sin is and how it functions might it have something to offer secular diagnosis and therapy. Only then will it have its own basis for recognition and interpretation of the pathological and for engaging secular analyses in a mutually enriching and correcting conversation.

I hope it is clear by now why I consider the question of the meaningfulness and explanatory power of the doctrine of sin to be *in essence the same question* as that of God as an active and dynamic presence in the world. To

9. I have used the image of a Post-It™ label, since it neither makes any difference to that to which it is appended nor leaves any sign of its presence when removed. Significantly here, Paul Tillich construes sin as the separation of the holy and the secular, in which God becomes merely '"in addition to" all other things'. (*Systematic Theology*, I (London: SCM, 1978), p. 218.) Cf. here Friedrich Schleiermacher's characterisation of 'God-forgetfulness' as 'an absence of facility for introducing the God-consciousness into our actual lives and retaining it there' (*The Christian Faith* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1928), p. 55).