

SIN AND REDEMPTION - Michael Bennett (www.michaelbennett.org.uk)

How do we come to an understanding, from the anamnestic point of view, of those who have caused the pain, suffering and death of the innocent? From the perspective of some religions these perpetrators can be subject to eternal damnation. Damned for breaking the fellowship of the Kingdom of God. From the perspective of the secular sacred we do not have the divine privilege of judging these people to be damned. If all humans are part of the universal fellowship the immanent transcendental nature of this fellowship precludes anyone from exclusion. Membership is neither an elective or a soteriological process, it is an inherent feature of being human. This, of course, does not preclude the possibility that membership of the fellowship can be subjected to penalties and restrictions against those who damage it. Nevertheless, for the perpetrators of violence, domination and oppression who are still alive then redemption from their 'sin' of transgressing the secular sacred is possible. The first step towards this would be for the perpetrator to be psychologically open enough to feel guilt and shame. This is primarily a therapeutic process of sensitising the perpetrator to the horror of his or her actions. Once the perpetrator feels guilt it becomes possible to atone for the sin that has been committed through sacrifice or compensating actions. Positive acts to undo the negative causality set in motion by the perpetrator's crimes would be an appropriate form of expiation. Redemption ensues when the perpetrator's actions are rewarded by the forgiveness offered by other people thereby enabling re-entry into 'full' membership of the fellowship. The process of guilt formation, punishment, sacrifice, compensating action and expiation by the perpetrator is matched by the process of understanding, compassion, acceptance, love and forgiveness by the rest of society. Redemption is not a matter of divine grace but is a process of psychological transformation.

What if we transgress? We have so far considered the otherness of the religious sacred and its spellbinding power. If a religious interpretation of transgressing that which is sacred involves the concept of acts that are sinful and aspects of being that are evil, how might we accommodate such ideas within a secular frame? There are obvious parallels between the divine and secular sense of retribution and punishment, and it is also the case that the secular concept of guilt may act as a psychological replacement for an existential dread of the sacred, but these concepts do not sufficiently capture the nature of sin. Let us look at Ricoeur's (1969) understanding of this issue. Mankind's first connection with the sacred through early

myths and religion was concrete rather than symbolic. A person would feel that their soul was in peril if they found themselves in the presence of something that was forbidden to them. This was not simply a state of mind, but was felt as a material danger that could be unleashed should they break a taboo that forbade proximity with forbidden things or people. Improper contact would imperil the soul like a contagion or a physical stain. This dread of the impure which is concretely echoed in rites of purification is, Ricouer suggests, subtly acting as a background shadow to all our other feelings relating to fault, including their secular transition into psychological states like guilt and shame. We can no longer identify with this unmediated sense of defilement that used to accompany the committing of a sin or the breaking of a taboo. Our reflexive attunement to symbolic structures denies access to this rather 'fundamentalist' concreteness or magic. Yet the potential in this symbolisation provides the possibility of retaining something of a feeling of this dread of impurity in psychological approaches to the experience of acting in fault or committing a sin. Thus, Ricouer argues, right from the start, inherent in the experience of defilement is the possibility for a conceptualisation of sin that operates at the symbolic level. Rather than being a transgression that is material with physical consequences, a sin operates symbolically as something that violates a relation in terms of deviation, rebellion or contradiction. In this new way of experiencing evil there is a change in the basic images: 'for relations of contacts in space, relations of orientation are substituted.'(74) The revolt or rebellion against the sacred does not operate like the committing of a crime by breaking a law, it is more an act of treachery and betrayal. This denial of the relationship to the sacred takes a form that is very similar to an act of infidelity or adultery. With the committing of a sin, or with an evil act, we are operating within the ambit of the validity claim of *authenticity* as opposed to *criminal* acts which are transgressions of a legal code that sits within the validity claim of *justice*.

There is no question, of course, of denying the incompatibility of the two representations of the same murderer - the more *juridical* one which places him in the category of the "involuntary" and already belongs to the realm of guilt in the precise sense that we shall give to that word, and the more *religious* one which places him under the sign of the "impure"...' (Ricouer: 40)

This dread of the impure is not just a psychological transformation of the fear of defilement, it has also kept a link with the sacred through the sense of breaking a relation, a betrayal of that which was pure. Shame replaces guilt as the predominant feeling. It is not so much a case

of being *inauthentic* towards one's true self, but that one's true self is utterly intersubjectively connected to all others in the human fellowship. When we transgress the validity claims inherent in communicative rationality we don't just break rules, we betray the bonds of human fellowship. In so doing we let our individual selves down through our inauthentic action and we fail to honour and respect the secular sacred bond that immanently keeps us in a relationship with all humans in the past, present and future. The rational fear that is appropriate in such secular sacrilegious acts is one which recognizes that the dread of the inauthentic and of the impure relates to a threat 'which, beyond the threat of suffering and death, aims at a diminution of existence, a loss of the personal core of one's being.' (Ricouer: 41)

I believe that three things follow from this. In the first place we have, in broad outline, the possibility of successfully translating the concepts of sin and evil into a world of rational secularism. A 'sin' becomes a *transgression against the human fellowship* that does not operate in the same way as a (punishable) crime, but brings upon itself the condemnation of others who have been betrayed, and a sense of shame that is felt by the self when the 'impure' act is recognised. Evil would be the conscious intention of bringing-about such a state by breaching the covenant of the fellowship. It is important that we overcome our fear of using terms like sin and evil. As Neiman (2009: 379) suggests we must hone and refine our usage of these terms because we cannot do without them. To prevent the continued erosion of shame we must find a way to create a secular way of talking about evil.

Secondly, there is a strong connection between these secular concepts of sin and evil and my core argument that the features of communicative rationality can reflexively act like a secular sacred. Finally, there is a dialectical connection between sin and inauthenticity on the one hand, and purification and redemption on the other. 'Sincerity' says Ricouer 'can be a symbolic purification.'(46) The symbolism of sin cannot be separated from the symbolism of redemption. To sin is to break an ontological bond; redemption is to re-enter into that bond after a 'therapeutic' cleansing.

Redemption, as far as my experience goes, is a term that does not have much current currency. In the public sphere, we hear a great deal about punishment, protection and incarceration, but redemption has been inadequately replaced, as a concept and a practice, by various therapeutic interventions. To a degree this state of affairs stems from both the limited

provision of therapeutic help and the increasingly behaviouristic form that it takes. It is also connected to the confusion between the validity claims of justice and authenticity. Because of the unwillingness of secular interests to listen to what religion, suitably translated, has to offer, society has concentrated on a judicial response to sin with its consequent connection to punishment as a source of deterrence and suffering, as opposed to a redemptive response to sin where punishment is still appropriate but its function has more to do with pain as a process of removing the stain of impurity.

Ricouer reminds us that the function of guilt changed from being something that was a direct consequence of the punishment engendered by the vengeful wrath of a transcendent god, into being the psychological loss of self-worth that became the source of an internal punishment. The need for justice in this process is augmented by the need for authenticity, and the latter can only be met through personal healing and amendment. The maintenance of external social order through just punishment can only be achieved if punishment operates not only at the social level but also has an internal psychological purpose. Punishment must provide the sinner with the opportunity to redeem himself by a personal self-transformation that expiates the inauthenticity and impurity that was a direct consequence of committing a sin.

‘Punishment would then no longer be the death of a man in the presence of the sacred, but penance with a view to order and pain with a view to happiness.’ (Ricouer: 44). Redemption, gained by the pardoning of a sin, offers the possibility of restoration into the universal fellowship. Punishment as penance is not merely a penalty but also acts as the vehicle for the return to authenticity. In this way, I suggest that the religious conception of redemption can be successfully translated into secular language and, in so doing, enables us to *restore the validity claim of authenticity into a better balance with the validity claim of justice*.

Such a view, for example, would help us to gain a more balanced perspective on the treatment of perpetrators of domestic violence. Although services are changing, they have long suffered from an overwhelming concern with justice at the expense of authenticity. Whilst public protection is clearly important, the psychological interventions available on many perpetrator programmes have been predominantly geared to changing behaviour through mechanistic and behaviouristic techniques which offer little of redemptive value. The inner need to seek release from the destructive power of guilt is ‘sacrificed’ in an attempt to increase public safety by trying to engineer psychological change in the perpetrator. This not only fails to offer people the possibility of rejoining of the human fellowship, it also ignores

the greater public safety to be gained by people who perceive the possibility of their own redemption.

Redemption was also an important feature of our earlier discussion of anamnesis. Be it on a personal or a world-historical plane, through our understanding, empathy and forgiveness we can redeem the failures of our ancestors just as we can hope that our successors might offer the same to us. To do this we need to remember that when we are talking about evil we are talking about evil acts and not evil people. To describe a person as evil is to presume that we know their 'essence'. But this is a mistake because we can never know how the perpetrator of evil acts might redeem themselves in the future. There is also a practical side to this. By our actions we can literally unpick the causal consequences of ancestral failures, and, by our current actions to live as authentically as possible we send a signal to our successors that we may be worthy of the redemption their forgiveness confers. If we lived in greater fear of our failure to act in such a way we might act with greater alacrity in trying to reduce the legacy of environmental destruction that we bequeath to our children.

In my attempt to argue for the possibility of a successful translation of religious concepts into secular language I feel that I have been emphasising the need for rationalists and secularists to be more open to this opportunity. But, in the final analysis, I believe it is the responsibility of religious people and organised religions to find a way to de-transcendentalise their core world-view. We are on the road to a moral vacuum in relation to which it is inappropriate for the state to attempt to fill. At the same time official religions no longer generate sufficient respect and legitimacy to empower them to act as moral leaders. This is a troubling state of affairs, particularly amidst the global environmental crisis. Only the reflexive generation of a secular sacred has any chance of offering some relief.

References

- Ricoeur, P. (1969) *The Symbolism of Evil*, Boston: Beacon Press.
Neiman, S. (2009) *Moral Clarity. A Guide for Grown-Up Idealists*, London: Bodley Head.

See *The Secular Sacred* – M. Bennett (2014) Kindle Edition.