

It is understandable that for many years people have not taken the doctrine of original sin very seriously. Discussion of it seemed to be taken up with problems about the status of stories in Genesis, or the validity of collective guilt, or whether babies are born wicked—all topics somewhat marginal both to the doctrine itself and to most people's preoccupations.

To understand its importance you need to ask: If you believe in original sin, what are you committed to disbelieving in? One thing you cannot believe if you accept the traditional doctrine, is that all human or moral evil in the world is the product of the acts of individually wicked men; the doctrine is, amongst other things, a rejection of moral individualism. Nobody who accepts it can accept a conspiracy theory of evil—that all evil and inhuman behaviour is to be traced to this or that group of morally depraved men in the Pentagon, or Kevin Street, or even Downing Street. No traditionalist Christian can believe that a 'change of heart' on the part of this or that group is going to eliminate man's inhumanity to man. Those who teach this kind of thing in the name of Christ are just as heretical as those who say that Jesus did not rise from the dead or did not really pray to his Father.

The doctrine of original sin implies that we get closer to the roots of evil if we look not for some individual scapegoat but at the structures of human living. Instead of seeking out the 'actual sin' of some individual with a view to punishing him or changing his heart, we should be asking in what ways the structures of our world express our general incapacity to live without dominating and being dominated. It is not only profitless to inveigh against the moral character of mass-murderers like Hitler or Nixon, we are actually forbidden to do so. Naturally, we must recognize their crimes for what they are, as we do with such relatively minor offenders as ordinary gangsters, blackmailers and poisoners, but the commandment not to judge our neighbour means that we are not to divert our attention into righteous moralizing, we have more important things to do—we who by faith and baptism have been liberated from original sin. Not that we have been disentangled from the structures of evil, but we have been given the commission and the divine power to struggle against them and ultimately to take part in their overthrow.

That is why the Christian movement inevitably concerns itself with economic, social and political structures. The Church is not just for the forgiveness and conversion of the individual sinner; her compassion extends to the conversion of human institutions and societies as well.

It is thus entirely appropriate and a part of the preaching of the gospel that the Catholic Bishops' Conference should have produced

their excellent statement on the question of housing in Britain. What emerges quite clearly from their analysis is that the fact that twelve million people in our country live in slums is neither inevitable nor due to the ill-will or culpable indifference of any government minister or civil servant. Fundamentally we have this situation because our institutions are unable to solve the human problems they create. Capitalism in Britain cannot house the work-force it needs. 'To build accommodation for renting has long been an unprofitable business except in the case of luxury flats. The financial return does not bear comparison with the higher rewards which are taken for granted in other forms of investment.' The Bishops' proposals, as we might expect, do not go beyond the reformist and pragmatic: the infrastructure that capitalism needs, which cannot be maintained with profit to the investor, must be paid for by the working-class through taxation. 'Since the private sector can make economical profit only when rents are high, local authorities and housing associations working in co-operation with them should provide most of the increased accommodation needed.' Rented housing is to join with fuel, rail transport and the rest of the nationalized industries as one more government prop to the creaking structure of capitalism.

Nonetheless they are humane proposals as far as they go and are accompanied by sensible recommendations about co-operation between neighbouring regions and between housing authorities and other social services, as well as by demands for the abolition of such relics of feudalism as evictions and tied houses, and, as an imaginative gesture, the offer of surplus church land for housing. It is an honest Christian attempt to face the inhumanity of the society in which we live even though it remains, and for the moment must remain, a matter of plugging the leaks in the system. It must become a step on the way to an attempt at a more radical conversion.

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