

# Lay Christian Understanding of Sin; A Qualitative Study and Appraisal of the ‘Ordinary Theology’ of an Anglican Congregation.

Peter Wright

Reader, St. Laurence Church Meriden, Diocese of Coventry

## Abstract

This article concerns the lay Christian understanding or ‘ordinary theology’ of sin. It describes a qualitative research study undertaken to explore and appraise the extent to which the lay Christian ‘ordinary theology’ of sin corresponds to the theology and doctrine of original sin shaped by St. Augustine of Hippo. I suggest that in contemporary culture the notion and language of sin are largely devalued. Following introductory observations and a discussion of the theology of sin, this article explores ‘ordinary theology’ by way of introducing the nub of the study in which 15 lay members of an Anglican congregation were interviewed to establish their understanding of sin. The majority of the interviewees were found to offer undeveloped, deficient or problematical understandings. However, there were a few exceptions and these revealed a significant connection between personal spiritual practices and disciplines and a correspondingly well-developed understanding of sin. The implications of these findings for ministry are explored and suggestions for practice offered.

**Keywords:** sin; ordinary theology; St Augustine; spiritual practice and disciplines; ministry.

## Introduction

It matters profoundly that lay Christians should have a proper, robust understanding of the theology and traditional doctrine of sin; this is key to grasping fully the revelation of salvation through the death and resurrection of Jesus, without which the true significance and fullness of God’s love and grace for them may be unrealized. However, the subject of sin is both slippery and complex. In everyday conversation it may be difficult to know what people actually mean by the word ‘sin.’ In contemporary culture the word is often trivialized, used as a synonym for life’s little luxuries or trivial peccadilloes or employed facetiously.<sup>1</sup> It may even be considered anachronistic or even dangerous. What was once a strong, ominous and serious word that described a central point in every civilized person’s life plan and lifestyle has become marginalized or has disappeared.

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<sup>1</sup> Connolly, Hugh, *Sin*, (London: Continuum, 2002) p. vi; McFadyen, Alister, *Bound to Sin*, (Cambridge: CUP, 2000).

Nonetheless sin is still an inalienable and ubiquitous matter even if the traditional language and cultural concept of sin is lost or relegated. Menninger detects a vague but strong impression that many believe sin still permeates our lives as a kind of persistent reality: corrupting persons, communities and whole cultures.<sup>2</sup> We are aware that things are not right in the world and that human beings are somehow implicated in what has gone wrong.<sup>3</sup> While ambiguities and euphemisms prevail in contemporary culture and discourse, sin nonetheless persists stubbornly in its experienced centrality, universality, ubiquity, destructiveness, contagiousness and potency. These are characteristics of the traditional Augustinian concept and theology of original sin to which it is argued a lay Christian understanding should clearly and soundly correspond. My study suggests that in fact this was not reliably the case.

### Theology of Sin

Augustine's understanding of sin based on his reading of Genesis 3 recognized the 'fall' when Adam's desire became not *for* God but to *be* God, enacted in his disobedience described there. Without an alternative Augustine presumed the historicity of Adam and Eve, but - as Wiley points out - his powerful and enduring insights that sin originates in the human refusal to acknowledge dependence on God can be detached from the Genesis story without diminution.<sup>4</sup>

In opposition to Pelagius' overconfident view that virtue was a straightforward matter of exercising free autonomous human will to be and to do good, Augustine recognized that human beings are far more complicated, driven by mixed and unacknowledged motives: our human nature inherently compromised. Augustine recognized that human beings are fundamentally broken and need to be fixed. He recognized that this fixing is so profound that only God is capable of doing it.<sup>5</sup>

For Augustine the important questions were soteriological and Christological. His primary interest was in Christ not Adam, his focus the meaning and significance of Christ's death and resurrection.<sup>6</sup> He understood that the need of human beings for Christ as Saviour could only be comprehensible, and consistently maintained, on the basis of human captivity to the power of sin.

There is in this no Pelagian competition between God's will and human will. As Williams emphasizes, God's divine purpose is to maximize for his creatures all possible fulfillment since the good, the joy, the flourishing of all could never be in

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<sup>2</sup> Menninger, *Whatever Became of Sin?* (New York: Hawthorn Books, 1975) p.15; Plantinga, *Not the Way It's Supposed to Be*, (Grand Rapids: Wm. Eerdmans, 1995) p.p.54 - 55, 173 - 197.

<sup>3</sup> McFarland, *In Adam's Fall*, (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010) p. 3.

<sup>4</sup> Wiley, *Tatha, Original Sin*, (New York: Paulist Press, 2002) p. 74.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 56 - 75.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 56 - 75; Harrison, Carol, *Augustine: Christian Truth and Fractured Humanity* (Oxford: OUP, 2000) pp. 106 - 114.

any way a threat to the divine bliss.<sup>7</sup> Neither does Augustinian original sin imply some misanthropic belittling of human beings. It is a corollary of the good news of the gospel.

Attempts to revise this theology of original sin have recurred down the ages. In one recent attempt, Suchocki rejects the traditional doctrine, arguing that sin is essentially unnecessary violation against the wellbeing of any aspect of creation, not God. Sin is only indirectly or derivatively against God. Violence is the cause and effect of sin. While helpfully profiling violence as a major source of concern and experience of sin in society, this reconstruction fails to centre sin clearly within the whole Christian story as recognised by Augustine. Suchocki's concept of God in her model of original sin is one who is essentially 'the moral law giver who establishes the boundaries of acceptable human conduct' and who is 'probably remote from the experience of most people.'<sup>8</sup> God in Suchocki's model is apparently not one to be encountered through grace, forgiveness or transformation as recognized by the traditional doctrine nor is sin primarily seen as the opposite of God's grace. Suchocki argues that by maturity we can transcend violence (i.e. sin) but neither explains why and how this does not seem to happen, nor how we can reliably internalize the good. Suchocki's revision places an inestimable onus on human intellect and will, one that veers close to Pelagian overconfidence.

Other contemporary theologians argue for a rehabilitation of an understanding of sin that draws on the Augustinian conception. McFadyen contends that this still has the power to describe and explain sin accurately, comprehensively and meaningfully over and against the inadequacy of models and language that depend on purely secular moral and ethical frameworks.<sup>9</sup> Retrieving significance of the will and human willing - which Augustine saw as crucially in bondage to innately disordered desire in the human condition - McFadyen demonstrates through case studies of the sexual abuse of children and the Holocaust how all human willing is inevitably subject to distortion, sequestration and perversion, causing us all to be bound to sin. He elucidates how the inherent corruption of the dynamics of willing that Augustine originally discerned means that we are incapable in our own power of discerning and pursuing the good unequivocally, i.e. we inherently lack the ability not to sin. Thus, our potential and tragic implication in the pathologies of sin - whether as victims or perpetrators - is inalienable.

McFarland similarly draws on Augustine in underlining our human solidarity in sin. In this respect he argues that Adam's representativeness for Augustine is properly interpreted to signify the fundamental unity of all humankind from creation to

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<sup>7</sup> Rowan Williams, 'Insubstantial Evil' in Dodaro, Robert and Lawless, George (eds.) *Augustine and His Critics* (London: Routledge, 2000), Ch. 7.

<sup>8</sup> Suchocki, Marjorie, Hewitt, *The Fall to Violence: Original Sin in Relational Theology* (New York: Continuum Publishing Company, 2004) pp. 17 and 18.

<sup>9</sup> McFadyen, *Bound to Sin*, pp.14 - 42.

eschaton and that we experience sin *together*. We are all inalienably implicated and accountable although, as in a family breakdown, not all in the same way.<sup>10</sup> Jenson also retrieves the thrust and significance of ‘original sin’ in his positing of a relational model and understanding of sin.<sup>11</sup> Augustine coined the phrase and developed the concept of ‘*Incurvatus In Se.*’ Taking sin as a metaphor for humanity thus ‘curved in’ on itself and driven by a radical, insidious, gravitational self-centeredness, Jenson shows how ‘sin’ means to be without meaningful relations with God, self or others. Jenson draws entirely on the image of Augustinian original sin that sets up the features of this relational understanding.

Evident in these readings of original sin are clear Augustinian emphases on sin as the opposite of God’s grace, God’s ceaselessly flowing, suffering love to all. That is, sin can only be properly understood against the backdrop of God’s unfolding story of love.<sup>12</sup> Our solidarity as humankind is to be under God together. We are one because we are created, addressed, loved and forgiven by God as one.<sup>13</sup> McFadyen points out that Augustinian original sin points us to the reality of sin, but only in the context of the superabundance of a God of joy and grace.<sup>14</sup> Jenson similarly points out that to live a life ‘curved in’ without relationship with self, others, or God is to try to live as though reality, i.e. life under God’s grace, is other than it is.<sup>15</sup> Alison argues comprehensively that a proper understanding of sin is inaccessible other than through the lens of the Easter story.<sup>16</sup>

Sin is clearly complex both historically and contemporaneously. However, the foregoing overview confirms that a proper understanding is only possible from within the perspective of the Christian story. Accurate understanding is inseparable from the perspective of salvation in Christ. This emphasis on its theological and religious character means that any understanding of the pathology of the human condition that depends exclusively on secular moral or ethical frameworks is inadequate. Sin is a state of alienation from God, a separation or turning away from God. Sin is therefore a condition, and not *acts*. Sin is not to be understood as what one has done or not done but as the *orientation* of *all* one’s action or inaction in ways that demonstrate that our desires are disordered, oriented elsewhere other than to God.<sup>17</sup> Sin indicates the inherent disorientation of individuals from original goodness and desire for God.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> McFarland, *In Adam’s Fall, a meditation on the Christian doctrine of original sin* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), pp. 157 - 161, 170

<sup>11</sup> Jenson, Matt, *The Gravity of Sin* (London: T. & T. Clark, 2006)

<sup>12</sup> Connolly, *Sin*, pp. 21 - 39

<sup>13</sup> Mc Farland, *In Adam’s Fall*, pp. 157 - 161

<sup>14</sup> McFadyen, *Bound to Sin*, p. 249

<sup>15</sup> Jenson, *The Gravity of Sin*, p. 191

<sup>16</sup> Alison, James; *The Joy of Being Wrong: Original Sin Through Easter Eyes*, (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1998)

<sup>17</sup> Volpe, *Rethinking Christian Identity*, (Chichester: Wiley Blackwell, 2013) , p 233

<sup>18</sup> Marshall, I. H., Millard, A. R., Packer, J.J., & Wiseman, D. J., (*Consulting Eds.*) *New Bible Dictionary*, (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 2000), pp. 1105 - 1109.

Sin is relational, to do essentially with the dynamic interrelationships between the Triune God and humans. Sin is therefore a violation of this relationship rather than a breach of some kind of static created order presided over by some kind of fixedly law-giving sovereign God. An understanding based primarily around the law, laws or list of prohibitions, or degrees or grades of sin with tariffs and punishments is inadequate. The evil that sin manifests is not so much a kind of invasive external object as a *process* located in the malfunctioning of relations between subjects in which good is lost.<sup>19</sup> Understood relationally, sin depends on the prime reality to which it is opposed, i.e. God's abundant and ever-flowing, freely offered grace and forgiveness.

The dynamic relational understanding of sin places traditional views of pride, and a human compulsion for individual freedom, self-determination and autonomy, (supposedly opposed to God's own freedom, self-determination and autonomy) into proper perspective. Pride indicates disordered desire. It is the core of perverted desire, but it is not a paradigm for understanding sin.<sup>20</sup> God's grace is essentially relational, directed to and for the integrity and fulfillment of individuals and humanity. Thus, neither utter human self-negation nor conversely assertion, as if in a 'zero-sum' competition with God is appropriate to a proper, fluid understanding.<sup>21</sup> This appreciation can be a counter weight to modern struggles with the idea of sin as pride, including important feminist critiques.<sup>22</sup>

This further underpins the significance of will or human willing to an accurate understanding. By sin human willing is not incapacitated but in sin can be sequestered, redirected and distorted. The Augustinian understanding of sin takes seriously how people may be as much victims of sin and yet as victims exercise free will and can be tragically and powerlessly incorporated in the collective solidarity of sin.

The collective solidarity of sin is significant to its proper understanding. Sin is not only personal but also interpersonal and even suprapersonal. It is more than the sum of what individual sinners do.<sup>23</sup> Sin is not one's own business but by definition is a reality that concerns the other.<sup>24</sup> McFarland, for example, underlines how we are all inalienably implicated and accountable<sup>25</sup> and this accountability reminds that sin is against God who cannot be indifferent to it.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Williams, Rowan, 'Insubstantial Evil' in Dodaro, Robert and Lawless, George (eds.) *Augustine and His Critics* (London: Routledge, 2000) Chapter 7.

<sup>20</sup> Pannenburg, *Systematic Theology II*, (Edinburgh: T.&T. Clark, 1994) p. 243

<sup>21</sup> *The Oxford Companion to Christian Thought*, Hastings, Adrian; Mason, Alistair; Pyper, Hugh; Lawrie, Ingrid; Bennett, Cecily, (eds), (Oxford: OUP, 2000), Entry on 'Sin' by McFadyen, Alistair; pp. 665 – 66; Connolly, Hugh, *Sin*, pp. 96 – 101.

<sup>22</sup> Plaskow, Judith, *Sin, Sex & Grace* (Washington: University Press of America, 1980)

<sup>23</sup> Plantinga, *Not the Way It's Supposed to Be*, p.75

<sup>24</sup> Connolly, Hugh, *Sin*, p.69

<sup>25</sup> McFarland, *In Adam's Fall*, p. 157 - 161, 170

<sup>26</sup> Marshall, I. H., Millard, A. R., Packer, J.J., & Wiseman, D. J., (*Consulting Eds.*) *New Bible Dictionary*, (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 2000), p. 1108.

Properly perceived in the light of God's grace, sin is not, therefore, despite its sombre theme, a reason for pessimism, as the New Testament often assures, e.g. John 1:29; 1 Corinthians 15: 3; Ephesians 1: 3 – 14, 2: 1 – 10.<sup>27</sup>

### Ordinary Theology

The theology of original sin discussed above is largely of an academic, systematic, scholarly kind. Indeed theology is often characterized as an academic scholarly subject.<sup>28</sup> In contrast, ordinary theology can be described as 'the theology and theologizing of Christians who have received little or no theological education of a scholarly, academic or systematic kind.'<sup>29</sup> It is not simply identical to Christian believing or faith. Ordinary theology comprises the lay Christian's (or indeed a congregation's) understanding, expression, reflection, judgment and interpretation of their faith, including its key terms and concepts.<sup>30</sup> This suggests how important it is to recognize and appreciate how and why it is valid, significant and worth the church listening to and taking seriously.

As 'faith seeking understanding', theology's search involves learning.<sup>31</sup> Learning the faith is a matter of process and context not simply of content. It is in *knowing* God not just knowledge *about* God. It is to move from believing *that* to believing *in*.<sup>32</sup> How we learn and what we learn is inextricably linked. Thus the 'ordinary' theology of lay Christians with no formal theological education or training is what each one *does*. It is what we do ourselves for ourselves so that the second-hand views of others need to become *our* first hand views.

Ordinary theology which informs lay Christians' faith and beliefs thus derives its validity, meaning and significance from the fact that it involves - as should faith itself - the whole person with his or her idiosyncratic, authentic personal life experiences, feelings, and attitudes. Ordinary theology is personal. It is tried and tested. It is what feels workable and right. It is an embraced, owned theology. Thus does Astley credibly describe Christianity as a 'method' or 'way'.<sup>33</sup> All theology is ultimately contextual.<sup>34</sup> The primary context for the 'ordinary theologian' is real life with all its experiences, challenges and crises rather than an academic context. Ordinary believers are particularly open to the influences of the world, society and

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<sup>27</sup> Mc Farland, *In Adam's Fall*, p. 212

<sup>28</sup> Astley, Jeff, *Ordinary Theology*, (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 2002) p. 53

<sup>29</sup> Astley, *Ordinary Theology*, p.56

<sup>30</sup> Astley, Jeff, and Christie, Ann, *Taking Ordinary Theology Seriously* (Cambridge: Grove Books Ltd., 2007) p. 7

<sup>31</sup> Anselm quoted in McGrath, Alister, E., *Historical Theology: An Introduction to the History of Christian Thought*. (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 1998) p. 118

<sup>32</sup> Astley, *Ordinary Theology* p. 29; Williams, Rowan, *Tokens of Trust* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2007), Chapter 1

<sup>33</sup> Astley, *Ordinary Theology*, p. 5

<sup>34</sup> Pratt, Richard, *Ordinary Theology* 'Theology' Journal; Issue of March/April 2009; Volume CXII No. 866 p. 113

culture around them. This is especially relevant in thinking about the influences and discourses in contemporary culture on lay Christians' ordinary theologies of sin.

It is important that ordinary theology be acknowledged as a valid and valuable resource, not just worth listening to but essential for the church to hear. Astley and Christie point out that, as with all theology, the church needs to take ordinary theology seriously. It is the ordinary theologians' expression, reflection, judgment and interpretation of their faith that is above all a practiced faith.<sup>35</sup> The church needs to listen to, and understand it properly before it may be sensibly met with appropriate ministerial responses.<sup>36</sup>

It was through the perspective of 'ordinary theology' that the lay Christian understanding was explored in interviews, against the traditional concept and theology of sin affirmed in this article.

### Interview Outcomes

A number of common interrelated themes emerged concerning what participants thought and believed.

#### (i) Sin understood as *sins*

A first theme to become clear was that many understood sin essentially as *sins*. They understood sin in terms of acts, as human behavior, often cited as '*disobeying the rules*', '*wrong doing*', '*going down the wrong path*' or '*doing things you shouldn't*'. Roughly 80 per cent did not refer to sin as an innate condition or state of being at all. Largely, sin as *sins* was to do with acts of commission not omission and only occasionally to do with thinking wrong things rather than doing wrong things. Considering sin like this led participants to consider what acts they therefore counted as *sin*. Many went on to convey their perception that there were '*degrees*' or '*gradations*' or a '*range*' or a '*spectrum*' of sins. This then invariably led those on this track of understanding to try to distinguish major from minor sins. Most revealed confusion or ambivalence about this particularly at the '*lower*' end of their range. For example:

*'I have to lie in my business, I suppose it's not really right but to balance something worse and get fairness....don't know if that would always be approved by God...'*

*'If you mean it, it's sin but if it's a mistake or an error of judgment, say, it's not...'*

*'If you think or want something wrong but don't act on it, like adultery, that's not really sin, is it?'*

Further probing revealed some significant and interrelated influences. Participants were guided in their assessments by what most referred to as '*conscience*' by which it transpired they clearly meant moral conscience derived, significantly, in a secular moral framework. Conscience was often greatly influenced initially in childhood by

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<sup>35</sup> Astley, and Christie, *Taking Ordinary Theology Seriously*, p. 7

<sup>36</sup> Astley, and Christie, *Taking Ordinary Theology Seriously*, p. 23

their upbringing in family and/or school. Many described specific vivid learning experiences when young when they had done something wrong and were found out, publicly shamed and had to face consequences. Though not generally serious, these childhood experiences had had an emotional force that taught and reinforced their moral sense of right and wrong well into adulthood. Typical comments were:

*'Conscience tells us when we've really done something sinful'*

*'Conscience, it's that voice inside you... tells you this doesn't feel right, what's not fair...'*

Neither the Bible nor the liturgies of the church were considered particularly helpful in informing their understandings. The words of prayers and hymns were not central in forming their understanding of sin providing mainly a confirmatory and often re-assuring linguistic gloss on what they already 'knew.' It is important to note that this aspect of their understanding, in these terms, did not *require* for them a theological framework of reference or language for this to make sense to them.

These lay concepts of sin would seem to have developed along a-theological lines. Sin was not seen primarily, or in some cases at all, as rebellion or violation against God but often as violation against other people, e.g.

*'...it's what hurts other people...'*

*'Sin to my mind is anything that damages another person whether its gossip or abuse or whatever'*

*'...it's when you trample on other people's property or their bodies or you spoil their quality of life in some way...'*

Again, this aspect of their understanding did not *require* a theological framework or language to be true for them. Suchocki's attempt to revise the traditional doctrine of original sin to define sin as essentially violation against creatures, i.e. each other and only indirectly or derivatively against God, is echoed here but that is an interpretation that has been refuted in this study.<sup>37</sup>

An understanding of sin shaped by the context of the moral and ethical framework of contemporary culture as these interviews suggested was the case, locates sin, as McFadyen has pointed out, in a secular, rational and moral order in which responsibility for sin (or acts of sin) is restricted and contained by that order. This serves to ensure the fiction that as free and autonomous individuals we are at fault and accountable only for actions that can be traced and proven to have been caused by our individual free choices and personal performances.<sup>38</sup> This aspect of participants' understanding did not *require* a theological framework or language. It suggested a severe erosion of a proper understanding of sin when placed against the traditional doctrine, which rightly recognizes the pervasiveness and collective solidarity of sin or, in other words, the 'total and universal moral collapse which

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<sup>37</sup> Suchocki, *The Fall to Violence: Original Sin in Relational Theology*; c.f. Patterson, Barbara P., *Review of The Fall to Violence: Original Sin in Relational Theology* (Journal of the American Academy of Religion, Vol. 66, No. 3 (Autumn, 1998), pp. 710-71.

<sup>38</sup> McFadyen, *Bound to Sin*, pp.19 – 22.

makes avoidance of sin impossible'.<sup>39</sup> Suchocki also recognizes the social dimension of sin, which the traditional doctrine gives, but her process-like concept of sin as primarily political and horizontal erroneously misses the truth of this.<sup>40</sup>

Locating sin in a secular, rational and moral order also brings prominently into play the concept and language of moral judgment and blame. In illustrating their understanding of sin as *sins*, several participants variously expressed judgment and blame of others either personally or publicly known. As noted, understanding of sin was often a question of knowing right and wrong on the basis of (moral) conscience. Along with this, and still within this theme prompted by participants' understanding of sin as *sins*, emerged a further significant trend apparent in the interviews though not one that was always explicitly enunciated. This was the tendency for participants to distance themselves from sin. One way or another all acknowledged they were theoretically 'sinners'. The majority who saw sin as *sins* referred to this in formal or 'proper' religious language.

However, in further discussion, they showed they were not entirely or personally convinced of this. Comments would for example begin with:

*'I know we're all sinners but...'*

*'Of course no-one is perfect we never will be...but...'*

One participant went on to express this dilemma most illustratively: *'I have a major problem, a real difficulty in accepting we're all sinners, in my view there are degrees of sin and I still find it difficult to equate myself with Hitler when I think about it all.....I know I'm making judgments about other people...but...'*

Their Christian faith notwithstanding, the evidence of this common theme suggested that participants' sense and understanding of sin in the world owed more to the influence of contemporary secular culture. McFadyen notes this tendency to rely on contemporary culture for a concept of sin.<sup>41</sup> Reflecting on this theme, it was not clear what practical difference faith in God would make to participants' understanding of sin.

Thus they seemed to be far from aligning themselves with the traditional and robust doctrine of original sin.

## **(ii) Concepts of God in relation to an understanding of sin.**

In considering the implications of the first theme to emerge, that sin is understood as *sins*, it was notable that the majority of participants who had this understanding spoke at length of the primary need to engage their human effort and resources to resist sin. They spoke of the need to constantly work at this, e.g.:

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<sup>39</sup> McFadyen, *Bound to Sin*, pp. 21 – 22.

<sup>40</sup> Suchocki, *The Fall to Violence: Original Sin in Relational Theology*, especially Part 2, pp.82 – 127.

<sup>41</sup> McFadyen, *Bound to Sin*, pp. 3 – 13.

*'You have to put yourself right in here [pointing to head] and try not to do it again'  
 'You've always got keep on trying to do better, never let up...'  
 'It's something I and lots of people would like more control over... we really ought to....'*

This led to thinking about God in relation to their sin. God was always spoken of positively, mostly as a loving parent, frequently and sadly disappointed but the constant burden of trying to avoid sinning was for many something over which God always watched and judged them in their treadmill-like human efforts to do better. For about 50 per cent of participants God was nonetheless a somewhat remote figure whose patience and forgiveness was not forever guaranteed. Indeed this was potentially conditional, e.g.:

*'God won't forgive you if you don't try'  
 'We can't know how God sees sin or sins, it's up to us to consider our state in the world...not sure how God views sin these days but we have our moral views and have to work on these'  
 'It's almost like God is testing us through sin...all through life'  
 'I'm honestly confused between a vengeful God and one who forgives easily...'*

Although God was generally seen as a constant good, benevolent and faithful, when it came to sin for most there was not a real, central or vivid sense of God's overflowing loving kindness in the depth of their sin, or his *unconditional* love, grace and forgiveness in its immensity and power. It was not ultimately clear that God for them had 'entered' and defeated sin or whether indeed sin or God had the last word.

### **(iii) Sin and forgiveness**

Most participants spoke of forgiveness at least in the terms described above. However four remarked especially on this area, and very personally. Each in various ways spoke of their feelings that, although they believed and knew on one level the 'forgiveness of sins' they each carried a burden of guilt in their lives they felt that God's forgiveness had not reached nor were they convinced it could or ever would, e.g.:

*'I do carry guilt... things I have done over the years...one or two things I carry phenomenal guilt for and I know we're meant to let that go but things I've done I'm not proud of... as much as I know God will forgive me, there's part of me that says I can't be forgiven for that because that was not the right way to behave....'  
 'I don't always allow that clean slate, I hope God has a shorter memory than me...'  
 'I don't forget the things I've done wrong, I can't forgive myself... you don't get better do you?... no... I never think to myself I'm less sinful than I was 10 years ago...'*

These participants did not necessarily have an undeveloped intellectual understanding of sin but on one level it seemed that the lack of a fuller grasp of the meaning, significance, depth and power of the traditional and robust doctrine of original sin prevented the fullness of God's love, grace and forgiveness being unlocked thoroughly for them. On another level, enabling them and others similarly

burdened to grasp the meaning and truth of the full doctrine for themselves, is a clear task for ministry.

#### **(iv) Jesus' death and resurrection**

Participants were invited to talk about how thinking about Jesus' death and resurrection helped their understanding of sin. Most phrased their initial responses in the standard 'religious' language of liturgy and hymns but probing in further discussion revealed varying degrees and expressions of uncertainty and disparity in what they actually thought and believed.

Many departed conspicuously from a full grasp of doctrine or an adequate, developed understanding of sin through Easter eyes.<sup>42</sup> About 80 per cent of participants expressed understandings that were variously vague, equivocal, undeveloped, unconvinced, eccentric or simply inaccurate.

Examples that could be considered vague, equivocal or undeveloped were:

*'Jesus? ..erm...I'm not sure... that was such a hurtful and painful experience, I do find it hard how he could forgive people like that but I suppose it's all part of God's plan.....'*

*'I just accept it [Jesus' death and resurrection] without question or analysis, .....I haven't peeled back the layers to see how it works.... blind faith... brought up to it...conditioned since childhood.'*

*'I'm really not sure at the end of the day...his death and resurrection make him different from us...he was saying this principle of behaving with love for others....that's the ultimate law of the Universe... highest principle...so important that he was prepared to die...such a horrible death... I don't honestly know whether Jesus knew what was going to happen, where it would lead...'*

Some seemed unconvinced, e.g.:

*'I can't help thinking how bad I am compared with the perfection he [Jesus ] was... in life Jesus is there to support us....the Cross reminds us of our sinfulness.... can't comprehend this great gift made so that one day... not in this life.... I'll know heaven...but not in this life...'*

*'I find it difficult to relate his resurrection with this innate sense of sin and conscience'*

Others offered eccentric understandings, e.g.:

*'Our sin killed Jesus, it was a shame that he died, we're guilty for that but good that he rose again to help us do better but that doesn't put it right.'*

*'I think it [the whole Easter story] was to shake us up, to say to us come on, shape up, stop it, don't be greedy, we're all selfish and greedy, it's horrendous, I feel so ashamed sometimes...'*

Some were simply inaccurate, e.g.:

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<sup>42</sup> Alison, James; *The Joy of Being Wrong: Original Sin Through Easter Eyes* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1998).

*'We [Christians] magnify this [Jesus' death and resurrection] too much. Jesus points to the nature of God and that God is love but to link the resurrection with Jesus is quite dangerous because it leads to the idea that we can offload our personal evil and the cross relieves us... this expiation thing probably comes from medieval history...it doesn't ring true for me.'*

These quotes, extracted from quite lengthy conversations in which participants tried hard to formulate and talk through their understanding, sometimes working through self-contradictions and ambiguity, illustrate a worrying picture of misunderstanding on the part of many on this theme. They suggest understandings that are far from a proper conception of original sin that takes its bearings from the crucified Christ or from a thorough understanding of the doctrine of sin as key to understanding the revelation of salvation in the death and resurrection of Jesus.<sup>43</sup>

Some of these findings are echoed in Christie's research into ordinary theologians' views about the person and work of Jesus Christ in which she found that 'many had great difficulty in understanding how the death of Jesus could be said to save us, and tended to circumvent atonement.'<sup>44</sup>

However it should also be noted that roughly 20 per cent spoke of personal understandings were much more confidently and accurately aligned with the traditional and robust doctrine of original sin in this respect. For them Jesus' death and resurrection was in the words of one '*absolutely pivotal*' to their understanding of sin. The whole Easter story was central and foundational. Their accurate understanding of sin was inseparable from the perspective of salvation in Christ.

Two participants' contributions were particularly interesting because they both had long experience of regular, developed and formative spiritual practices and disciplines that seemed to equip them with a well-developed 'ordinary theology' of sin, indicating a further theme:

#### **(v) Spiritual practices and the development of understanding.**

Two participants articulated this very clearly. They importantly showed that there is an inherent connection between doctrinal understanding and spiritual practice. For them sin was a broken human condition, fully met by God's grace through Christ, e.g.:

*'Yes, sin is a condition for me, it's very intimate, but it's not the end....I know God says to me whatever's inherent or whatever....'I love you' .....rescues me from the mires I get bogged down in... it's that unconditional acceptance, always.'*

<sup>43</sup> Alison, *The Joy of Being Wrong: Original Sin Through Easter Eyes*, especially Part 11, pp.115 – 265; c.f. Weaver, Darlene Fozard, *How Sin Works: Review Essay on The Joy of Being Wrong: Original Sin Through Easter Eyes*, (Journal of Religious Ethics, Vol. 29, No. 3, (fall 2001) pp. 492 – 500.

<sup>44</sup> Ann Christie, 'Jesus as Exemplar' in Astley, Jeff and Francis, Leslie, J., (eds.) *Exploring Ordinary Theology: Everyday Christian Believing and the Church* (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2013) Chapter 8, p.77.

*'You get to live with the tension... for me it all has to do with the flow of God's love and acceptance... Jesus ....absolutely pivotal.'*

And it was relational, e.g.:

*'Not letting God use me spontaneously....trying to do the right thing in my own resources and not accepting...or being part of the flow of God's love...neglecting denying it...'  
'Sin is me not letting God be God.'*

It was noticeable that these and many other germane observations were shared along with an account of these participants' long background of spiritual disciplines and practices that connected integrally with their understanding of sin.

It was not clear whether the key was mainly their exposure to reading or their prayer life; possibly a mix of both. However this was in notable contrast to some others whose understanding of sin was least sure or developed and whose personal spiritual practices, in so far as they linked, were also much less rigorous.

For most in this latter group, prayer and sin basically meant confessing in church on Sundays, e.g.:

*'By prayer I guess you mean saying sorry.... I do ....on Sunday....anything I've done in the past week... I ask God to help me in the week to come.'  
'Practices?...it's more of a blend, a mélange for me, I don't read the Bible regularly nor do I pray...don't disagree with it, just never get round to remembering...'*

This set of outcomes is very telling indeed. The contrast in spiritual practices and an understanding of 'the big picture' of salvation in Christ is instructive and pivotal. It suggests that the reason for some respondents' undeveloped understanding of sin is not to do with lack of formal academic theological training. Rather it reveals a significant connection between lay Christians' personal spiritual practices and disciplines and their understanding of sin.

#### **(vi) How the subject of sin featured or should feature in the church's public teaching and preaching.**

There was a general feeling that the subject of sin was probably not addressed often or boldly enough for them as regular church attendees.

However, this was often qualified, especially for several for whom sin-and-church still had a negative image for them from their personal past, e.g.:

*'No, I left the church as a teenager because the preacher kept telling us we were sinners, Sunday after Sunday, to be told there was no hope for you...I know I'm wrong but not all the time, I didn't want to know anymore, but the church has to say what's right and wrong...'*

For many, the negative image of 'sin-talk' in contemporary culture seemed to undermine their own understanding of sin. For the church to reach those outside the church, they felt that traditional doctrinal 'sin-talk' would be off-putting, e.g.:

*'The church has to say what's right and wrong but best to use words like 'unacceptable', 'wrong', 'inappropriate', give moral warnings...'*

*'We need to encourage people if they are to come in to church, don't threaten them or make them think they aren't going to get any better, or that it's all hopeless... the words we use would put them, off, I'm sure.'*

*'I'd be against focusing on talk about 'sin,' it has a lot of historical baggage, not sure about other words... 'love'...?' ....absence of love?...it's tricky.'*

*'I'm not sure, sin is such a personal thing, it would be like pointing a finger at you...but I think the church can pussyfoot around things sometime... should talk about it...but you've got to be very careful to get the balance right...sin has such a negative image in the church'.*

This suggested that an understanding of doctrine and dogmatism in the matter of sin was for some participants a negative, possibly even death-dealing matter rather than a positive, live-giving one, e.g.:

*'We've lost our way in the western world, morals have slipped, the church should make people aware of sin but, please, no dogmatics ....better to talk about how to get away from sin, face-to face discussions, gentle suggestions, guidance and so on, that's what we need.'*

However, interestingly, in exploring this theme further, participants did not want the church to dilute the language of sin *for themselves* but to keep the word 'sin', e.g.:

*'No, sin has such connotation...no other words would work for me, 'error' doesn't come into the same category.'*

Yet most said they would not use the language of 'sin' in everyday conversation with non-churchgoers. This seems to suggest these church-goers are on the one hand simply reflecting the eroded, marginalized non-theological assumptions and position of 'sin-talk' in contemporary culture. At the same time these church-goers seem to be part of a separate kind of world, a sub-culture in which the understanding and language of sin is in some ways 'privatized.' This implies a task for apologetics that bridges the two domains.

### **(vii) The benefits of ordinary theology.**

A final theme to emerge concerns the value of ordinary theology. The act of listening is vital to understand what an ordinary theologian is actually saying. Giving people the opportunity to articulate what they personally think and believe encourages them to clarify and critically assess those beliefs. Ordinary theology can do this. Many participants were clearly clarifying, forming or revising their understandings in the course of the research conversations. Several worked through

self-contradictions and ambivalences towards defining what they thought and believed. For all, these were indeed active and knowledge-constructing interviews.<sup>45</sup>

Typical comments included:

*'Your questions have really got my mind going on this, I didn't realize how deeply I thought about it...'*

*'Actually, I can see I'm just developing my thinking as we speak....'*

*'...as we're talking I think it's crucial, I hadn't thought so much about that before...'*

Listening is a mark of respect, it tells people they matter.<sup>46</sup> It can be a deeply affirming and pastoral act. Participants invariably confirmed this. Tellingly, many expressed their appreciation of the opportunity of being listened to *theologically*, e.g.:

*'Actually I feel empowered, it's important to know you can make sense of things at my time of life...'*

*'I'm a bit clearer in my mind now, I never thought deeply about it before, never thought I thought as I did.'*

There were also pastoral benefits. In two instances a 'quasi-confessional' element came in to the interview. In both cases the value of listening in the context of these interviews was clearly confirmed.

## Summary

It would be wrong to deduce from the evidence a dismissive picture of participants' understanding of sin. All participants regarded sin very seriously and felt it to be a tenacious and ubiquitous problem. However a significant number offered understandings that were undeveloped and deficient in the various ways illustrated. Such understandings were not perceptibly located or developed thoroughly within a grasp of the *whole ecology of Christian faith* including, crucially the grace of God and salvation by Christ. Such understandings were not discernibly or firmly rooted or integrally centered in *the whole Christian story*; they did not *require* a theological framework or language to be true for the participants who held them, e.g.:

*'At the end of the day it's not just about Christian faith....other faiths as well...crux is living the good life... how much is faith driven and how much culture driven I don't know...'*

*'...don't think you have to be a Christian to understand sin...do you? '*

## Implications and Suggestions for Ministry

Ministry should help lay Christians develop an understanding of the theology and doctrine of sin that will support them in their growth in faith. One key to addressing the need to ensure that lay Christians understand and hold to a robust, clear and

<sup>45</sup> Holstein and Gubrium, *The Active Interview*, (Thousand Oaks: CA, Sage, 1995) p. 4 et seq.

<sup>46</sup> Astley, *Ordinary Theology*, p.147.

firm understanding of the theology and doctrine of sin is to start with taking seriously what they already think, to take their ordinary theology seriously.

In order for the church to exercise its various ministries it should know what those ministered to actually think and believe. Ordinary theology can provide this. To form dialogues between ministers and laity around their ordinary theology would invite the pragmatic, theological and pastoral benefits indicated by this study. A minister who knows his congregation well can be well placed to hear their ordinary theology of sin. The listening conversational stance suggested by this study can help people talk about what their theology means to them in their lives, their lived faith and their culture. This offers channels through which learning and teaching and preaching on sin would be on target. This study has shown how engaging people in this way can encourage them to really consider, assess and develop their own thinking and beliefs.

Ministers should not be deterred by the marginalized status of the language of sin in contemporary culture or regard sin as a 'barrier' word. More formal preaching and teaching ministry should address the theology and doctrine of sin with confidence, explicitly and not just occasionally. However, it is important that this be placed centrally within the framework and ecology of the whole Christian faith, of the whole Christian story, emphasizing that sin is never the end of the story. A full understanding of sin should begin from the perspective of God's love, grace and forgiveness, in other words the opposite of sin. Helping congregations grasp that original sin could never, as Alison indicates, have been understood without the fact of the resurrection will be to recast learning about sin in the primary context of the grace of God and salvation by Christ.<sup>47</sup> This should be to clarify and reinforce not that Christ has defeated the reality of sin but that He has triumphed over it. As McFarland puts it: '...original sin should be understood as in every respect secondary: a shadow cast by human beings that is known in its depravity and hopelessness...only as it is dispelled by the light of the gospel.'<sup>48</sup>

This may seem on the face of it self-evident but this study suggests clearly that where an undeveloped understanding of sin prevails so does an undeveloped understanding of its opposite. Helping congregants grasp a fuller understanding of sin can potentially open for them up a fuller understanding of its opposite and unlock for them the vast, overwhelming, unconditional love and grace of the Triune God for them. Potential opportunities for this do not lie only at major festivals such as Easter but in the regular liturgy, and hymns where the doctrine of sin may be publicly spoken but privately not reliably or fully understood.

A related pastoral implication concerns forgiveness. Some participants believed that God's forgiveness did not somehow reach them. On one level their undeveloped or mistaken understanding of original sin contributed to this. However, typically their block was not so much God's forgiveness but their own. In realizing that they were unable to forgive themselves they were perhaps more truly open to God's

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<sup>47</sup> Alison, *The Joy of Being Wrong: Original Sin Through Easter Eyes*, Part 11 pp. 115 – 265.

<sup>48</sup> McFarland, *In Adam's Fall*, p. 212.

forgiveness; and closer than they perhaps knew to the truth of the theology and doctrine of original sin for which a listening, pastoral and educative input through the lens of their ordinary theology would be relevant and beneficial.

This study also highlights that there is an important link between lay Christians' personal spiritual practices and disciplines and their understanding of sin. It suggests clearly that regular, developed habits of thought and practice in this respect can help contribute towards the formation of a Christian who, as Volpe, drawing on the prescriptions of Gregory of Nyssa states, can '...develop those habits that will strengthen their resistance to sin...' (and I would argue this necessarily implies a strengthened *understanding* of a robust, clear and firm understanding of the theology and doctrine of sin) '...and so enable their reception and reflection of the divine love which all were created to share.'<sup>49</sup>

The study further implies the need and scope for Christian apologetics on the theme of sin. It suggests that a significant gap exists between the concept and the language of sin in contemporary culture outside the church and the language and assumptions prevailing within the church at least as far as lay Christians are concerned. As Williams recognises, although all sorts of behaviour seem tolerated in contemporary culture, popular media reflects a deeply unforgiving and harsh attitude to wrongdoing.<sup>50</sup> It is precisely in trying to forgive ourselves that we find most difficulty. As participants showed in various ways, people know they have failed but everyone's understanding of sin needs the whole picture, especially of the prevenience of grace, in order that people can accept themselves. In talking to culture about sin apologetics does not therefore require accusation but can be a means of extending the grace of God. Apologetics needs to take seriously this cultural context, to listen to the complexity, the barriers, confusions and ambiguities involved and contribute to building bridges towards a developed understanding of sin for all.<sup>51</sup>

Finally, although acknowledging the relatively modest scale of the research for the study, I argue that the findings nonetheless compellingly suggest the potential and scope for further such research both in scale and depth. Such research could profitably extend to considerations not only of what ordinary theologians say but what they do in practice.<sup>52</sup> Not only is this indicated by the vindicated incentive and evidence of this study but also more generally in recognition of the purpose and value of this kind of qualitative research. As such research is integrated into the service of theological reflection and action it should not only help us to *understand*, as Swinton and Mowat recognize<sup>53</sup> but should enable us to love and relate more closely to God, ourselves and one another. Integral to this is the need for a full and proper

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<sup>49</sup> Volpe, *Rethinking Christian Identity*, p.221.

<sup>50</sup> Williams, *Tokens of Trust*, p.152.

<sup>51</sup> Wilkinson, D., 'The Art of Apologetics in the 21st Century'. *Anvil* vol. 19, no. 1, 5-17 (2002); McGrath, Alister, *Bridge-Building: Effective Christian Apologetics* (Nottingham, Inter-Varsity Press, 1992) pp. 176 - 187.

<sup>52</sup> Astley, *Ordinary Theology*, p. 121.

<sup>53</sup> Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*, (London: SCM, 2006) p. 259.

understanding of sin, but one that knows that sin is not the end of the story, the fulfillment of which is the good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

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