

Some Important and Pertinent Themes in Fundamental Moral Theology

Meaning of Sin

The most traditional definition of sin is the breaking of God's eternal law. There is no disputing that laws or rules are needed in society, or that when we sin, laws are often broken. What is disputable, however, is understanding "lawbreaking" as the central focus or most formal element in the definition of sin. A very significant percent of moral theologians today would assert that it is inadequate to hold that the essence of sin is the breaking of God's Law. Why? Because lawbreaking tends to measure what is on the surface of the human person, whereas sin would seem to come from a deeper level in the person. This argument can find support in the Scriptures as well as in the Christian tradition.

So, in place of the lawbreaking approach to sin, moral theologians assert that in Scripture and the Christian Tradition, the most central moral teaching is that all are called into a loving personal relationship with God. Moral questions usually focus around the question of a responsible relationship to God, others, and self. Now, once we commit ourselves to the centrality of the responsible relationship theme, it clearly becomes best to define the essence of sin as the breaking or rupturing of our loving personal relationship with God. Sin is estrangement from God. And when we estrange ourselves from God, we in the process estrange ourselves from neighbor and self as well. God must be kept at the center of our definition. If we reduce sin simply to the estrangement from other people and ourselves, we will too easily forget the seriousness of sin and understand it from a mere sociological or psychological maladjustment. The biggest question in this notion of sin, then, is how this estrangement takes place.

Traditionally, the answer was that we are able to estrange ourselves from God through single, isolated, external actions in such a way that one external action in and of itself was apt to alienate a person from God for all eternity, i.e., mortal sin. Thanks to theologians like Karl Rahner and Bernard Lonergan, the complexity of the human person makes this impossible. The human person is extremely complex, and there are many levels, strata or layers from which an action might emerge. No singular action can ever define the fullness or wholeness that determines why a person acted in such a manner and the levels in the human makeup ~ ~ (moods, emotions, drives, needs, etc.) makes it impossible to ever determine that the act reflects a picture of that human heart.

Therefore, we can conclude that identifying sin with wrong external actions was probably an incorrect tendency. In asserting the presence or absence of sin we need to look at the whole person, to see what the person is like at the core of their being. And in the end, we should be careful not to judge a person's status before God, because no one but the person and God know their relationship, we only know the pattern of one's behavior in life.

The term "Fundamental Option" toward God or away from God means the stable orientation or life direction that exists at the core level of the human person. Sin occurs when we separate ourselves from God at the core level and thus breaks our "fundamental option" for God. We say

an action is sinful if it has the potential, when repeated with other sinful acts, to break that relationship with God. A singular choice may be sinful and immoral, but that doesn't mean that the person is sinful or immoral. Only when the behavior of a person, over a long period of time, continually opts for the sinful acts or the immoral choice does a person's behavior define him or her self as immoral or sinful or even evil.

Moral Growth and Moral Development

It is important to note that the morality of the Church was based in the Classical World View and today moral decision making is made from a more Personal or Historical World View (see chart). Just as our morality has a history, so does each individual life. So, we must see morality as something in growth and development, especially when we look groups of people from the same society or culture. We can say that because a child is at a certain stage of moral development they are not responsible for certain acts as they would be if they were a normally developed adult. Each individual's awareness of various moral issues will develop as they grow in and through each stage of life. Lawrence Kohlberg is perhaps the best known author in articulating these stages of moral development in relationship to human development. The Church tended to be unaware of these realities, especially on issues of sexual morality.

So, let us make the following summary:

1. Moral norms should be formulated taking into account common human development patterns.
2. Those applying the moral norms should be aware of the unique factors of a person's history.
3. Moral norms should always strive for the moral ideal, delicately applying the above ideas development and growth. The danger of overemphasis on development theories is a tolerance that losses sight of truth and reason.

Therefore, morality and moral decision-making, is a delicate art. It is complex, and must take into account numerous factors.