

“Whatever Happened to Sin in American Culture?”

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The New York Times

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MICHAEL CROMARTIE: Neal’s book *Not the Way It’s Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin* [Eerdmans] was named the Book of the Year by *Christianity Today* some years ago. He’s currently Senior Research Fellow at the Calvin Institute for Christian Worship at Calvin College. He was formerly Professor of Systematic Theology and the President of Calvin Theological Seminary.

He did his PhD at Princeton Theological Seminary, and on this subject, I can’t think of a better person to have than Neal Plantinga.

CORNELIUS PLANTINGA, JR.: My own definition of sin is that it is culpable disturbance of shalom, which I’ll unpack for just a second. There are all these visions, in Isaiah, particularly, of a coming day when everything is going to be put right. God, humanity, and all creation are going to live together in harmony, justice, and delight. Children will not be harmed by snakes, wolves will lose all their carnivorousness, and everything will be the way God intends it to be. And my suggestion is that evil is disturbance of shalom and sin is culpable disturbance of shalom.

Whatever Became of Sin? is the title of a book by a psychiatrist, Karl Menninger, in 1973. In his book, Menninger lamented the loss of awareness in American society of human wrongdoing. He had in mind, “behavior that violates the moral code or the individual conscience or both; behavior which pains or harms or disturbs (sic) my neighbor — or me, myself.” He insisted that there are very many forms of wrongdoing that “cannot be subsumed under verbal artifacts such as disease, crime, delinquency, deviancy.” He wrote

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that there is immorality, there is unethical behavior, there is wrongdoing, and he wrote, “I hope to show that there is usefulness in retaining the concept and even the word ‘sin.’”

Now, Menninger’s angle on the topic was psychiatric. He was a practicing psychiatrist at The Menninger Clinic. He believed that a good deal of mental health is moral health; that people engaged in significant and unacknowledged wrongdoing tended to become edgy depressives. Accordingly, he believed that people who frankly acknowledged their wrongdoing and amended their lives tended to become much more buoyant.

For Menninger, the confession of sin and the amendment of life were two of the most psychologically healthy things a person could do, and he wrote that sinfulness was therefore one of the most hopeful diagnoses a psychiatrist could make. This is a malady that the patient can do something about, and without pills.

Well, Menninger wrote in 1973 — that’s 40 years ago. I think that, with several exceptions to be mentioned later, the situation has stayed about the same with respect to a lack of frank acknowledgement of wrongdoing in ordinary human life in the U.S. Now, there are some significant exceptions, and we will talk about them.

But midway between Menninger and now, I wrote on sin and said that slippage in our consciousness of sin may be pleasant, but it is also devastating. The reason is that self-deception about our wrongdoing is a narcotic that suppresses our conscience. A lively conscience is an early warning system: something we are contemplating may not be good to do. But a suppressed conscience is disorienting. When we lack an ear for wrong notes in our lives, we don’t then readily play right ones or even recognize them. We miss the little bursts of moral beauty in the lives of others; we become bored by the suffering induced by wrongdoing across the world. The idea that the human race is in a predicament because of human wrongdoing, that idea starts to sound quaint.

Well, in my book, I observed that at the outset of the New Testament, four gospels describe the pains God has taken to defeat sin and its wages. The very shape of those four documents tells us how much the pains matter. The gospels — as everybody has noticed — the gospels are shaped as passion narratives with long introductions. Accordingly, Christians have often measured sin, in part, by the passion needed to atone for it.

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The ripping and writhing of death on a cross, the bizarre metaphysical maneuver of addressing the malady death by another death, the extraordinary centering of the Christian religion on the degradation and death of its God, these things tell us that human brokenness is desperately difficult to fix, even for God; that it is the longest running of all human emergencies; and that while annoyances, regrets, and miseries trouble us in all the old, familiar ways, none of them matters as much as sin. And why would that be?

Well, like other evils, human sin breaks the peace, and for this reason, at least if you’re a theist, you believe that this grieves God, but unlike other evils, sin perverts what is specially and highly human about us. Sin distorts our character, a central feature of our very humanity. It corrupts powerful human capacities — thought, emotion, speech, act — so that they become centers of attack on God or others or else centers of defection or neglect.

Bad enough if we sin against others involuntarily, by boorish insensitivity to their feelings, for example, or by an alienating form of complacency. We may not want these character flaws. Indeed, we may not know we have them. But if our victim knows we have hurt him or her deliberately, their attitude toward us is not merely rueful, as it would normally be if we had harmed them by accident. Their attitude is not merely sorrowful, as it normally is when the great machinery of nature catches us in it. Instead, our victims now face us indignantly. They know we have violated them with something deeply and peculiarly personal. We have willingly hurt them. We have done it on purpose.

Sin outstrips other human troubles by perverting special human excellences. When a smart investment banker dreams up a Ponzi scheme, when a writer enjoys a spasm of sweet satisfaction over the sour review of another writer’s book, when a drug dealer fishes for a fresh customer, when a teenager curses his confused grandmother, when we put other people on a tight moral budget but make plenty of allowances for ourselves, when we do these things, we human beings exhibit a corruption of thought, of emotion, of intention, of speech, or of disposition, which are some of the greatest of our human powers. By such abuse of our powers, we creatures of dignity and responsibility evoke not only consternation, but also blame. Other evils do not make us blameworthy. Sin does.

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Sin, moreover, lies at the root of such big miseries as loneliness, restlessness, estrangement, shame, and meaninglessness. That’s the second reason why sin is the main human trouble. In fact, sin typically both causes and results from misery.

Think of this: A father who abuses his daughter corrupts her. He breaks all the little bones of self-respect that hold her character together. Now she’s filled with shame, fear of intimacy, anger at her treacherous father and conniving mother, grieving for her lost and innocent self. The corrupted child is extremely likely, social scientists will tell us, extremely likely to grow up to abuse her children or to assault her central nervous system with lots of booze, or to make and break one rickety marriage after another.

Moreover, the pattern gets even worse. The veins of sin interlace through most of the rest of what’s wrong in human life through birth disorder, disease, accident, nuisance. Across the world, thousands of children die daily from largely preventable disease. Out of laziness or complacency, certain grownups fail to prevent them.

Thousands of children are born drug addicts; their mothers have hooked them in the womb. People with sexually transmitted diseases knowingly put partners at risk. It happens every day. Even many accidents are, in retrospect, both accidental and predictable. Somebody who needed to concentrate on his job in order to protect others — a driver, for example, or a ship’s captain, or a lifeguard — got drunk instead, or got careless, or got wholly preoccupied. Often, a number of such factors combine in some lethal and intricate way to bring havoc to human well-being.

I believe that sin often plays a role paradoxically, even in some so-called Acts of God or natural disasters. Human beings may not cause hurricanes or mountain storms, but they do sometimes contribute to the devastating effects of these things. Shoddy bridge and building construction, bribery of inspectors, greedy condominium development in known hurricane alleys, macho disdain for the sudden power of mountain storms at 12,000 feet. These and other human failures sometimes cause or at least exacerbate the actual suffering, the actual disaster that accrues to people from a great natural force. Sin usually plays at least some role in the kind and amount of evil we absorb from what we are used to thinking of as non-moral events.

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Now, obviously the Bible has good deal to say about sin, and where its treatment is concerned, it shows us an array of images in both testaments. Sin is the missing of a target, a wandering from the path, a straying from the fold. Sin is a hard heart or a stiff neck. It's both the overstepping of a line and the failure to reach one. And so, in that respect, it's both transgression and shortcoming.

Sin is a beast crouching at the door. In sin, people attack or evade or neglect their divine calling. These and other images in the Bible suggest deviance so that one of the most centrally biblical things you can say about sin is that even when it is familiar, it is never normal. Sin is disruption of created harmony and then resistance to restoration of it. And that's the end of the catechism session and, no doubt, not a moment too soon.

Now, where are we today? Forty years ago was one touch point, 20 years ago another, but where are we today? Well, one of the first things I do when I want to find out how a concept and its most central word are used is to Google it, and one of the things that I've long suspected, I think is now quite readily confirmable, namely, that the word “sin” has decayed in North American culture to such an extent that if you Google it, you will get an enormous number of hits. I got — the day I did it, six days ago, I got 3,000,780,000 hits, an enormous usage, but I had time to look at the first 300, and none of them was the word used seriously. So what you get is *Sin City: A Dame to Kill For*. A whole lot of the hits are for bars and restaurants: the Sin Bin, Sin and Redemption, the Eighth Deadly Sin.

One of the few Google entries that used the word seriously was one from the *Daily Mail* in the UK. In January, the paper reported on a new proposed liturgy for christenings in the Church of England. The old liturgy had asked parents and godparents two mighty questions. One was: “Do you reject the devil and all rebellion against God?” And the other was: “Do you repent of the sins that separate us from God and neighbor?” The *Daily Mail* quotes critics who observe the humanists reject evil and that the liturgy is being revised to accommodate people who are only in church only at Christmas and at Easter and for christenings and who don't have any truck with traditional Christian doctrine.

In any case — some of us were noticing this decades ago — the word “sin,” in ordinary parlance has lost a great deal of its clout, which was why I found it fascinating that, Paul, you were telling us that the Pope self-identifies as a sinner. Who knows what effect that may have, but I think that's rare enough to cause a little catch of the breath.

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Even 20 years ago, its main cultural usages were on dessert menus — chocolate peanut-butter binge is sinful or decadent — or in banter in which the locution “You have sinned” would be said with a facial expression, maybe a wink and a tone of voice that signaled an inside joke.

As for the classic concept behind the word “sin” — namely, that by our actions or inactions, we human beings often grieve God, offend our neighbors, and sully ourselves — I think that with each passing year, I read and hear less and less on the topic, and especially in church.

Now, I’ve got to specify what kinds of churches I’m talking about. That’s because, as a regular guest preacher on Sundays, I am in various forms of confessionally reformed — read: Calvinistic — or evangelical churches, mainly in the Midwest, which is not the most liberal part of the country, and in these churches, every year I see less and less by way of a service of confession of sin or of reconciliation.

Catholics, Lutherans, and Anglicans do maintain their rites of penitence. The celebration of the Eucharist in Catholic churches still begins, to this day, in most Catholic churches, virtually every Sunday, with a rite of penitence. Lutherans have a similar rite, using, again, straight, honest language of contrition. For Episcopalians, even in the contemporary book of prayer, the classic words of the general confession remain. But in very many evangelical and confessionally reformed churches these days, sin is a rare topic, and let me tell you exactly how I have formed this conviction. One is my own experience of being in a different church virtually every Sunday for the last 30 years. Another is the hundreds of my friends who do the same kind of thing that I do; books and articles on the topic, lamenting the loss of seriousness inside evangelical churches; and especially, the six books on this topic by David Wells, Professor Emeritus at the Gordon-Conwell Divinity School in Massachusetts.

And then one interesting and telling fact. There’s this outfit called Christian Copyright Licensing International, CCLI. It’s an organization that licenses songs and hymns to 158,000 churches in North America on a subscription basis so that they don’t have to apply for copyright every time they want to reproduce the words of a song or a hymn, but they can pay a fee on a subscription basis and then just show the songs and hymns.

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Many of these are contemporary songs and hymns for use in contemporary worship, and, as you may know, contemporary worship in Evangelical Protestant churches these days consists in largely two things: a number of praise songs followed by a number of quieter worship songs, so-called praise and worship; and then the so-called teaching or sermon. Unlike Catholic, Lutheran, and Episcopal liturgies, contemporary worship typically includes no penitence at all. And if you check out the content of the most popular songs used in churches with subscriptions to CCLI, you will find very, very few penitential songs.

So that whole biblical tradition of lament, which is all through the prophets and the psalms, is just gone, just not there. Now, we may speculate about the reasons for this amazing development in evangelical and confessionally reformed churches. One reason is surely that evangelical churches are set up to grow. This means they have to be seeker-friendly. Mindful that seekers come to church from an American, no-fault culture in which tolerance is a big virtue and intolerance a big vice, worship planners in evangelical churches often want nothing in the service that sounds judgmental. “Through my fault, through my fault, through my most grievous fault” will offend seekers. Those words will offend seekers who aren’t merely bewildered by them. And so lots of evangelical church services these days are unrelievedly cheerful.

In six books across the last 20 years, the theologian David Wells in Massachusetts has pondered this phenomenon. In too many churches today, Professor Wells says, the only theology around is one in which, “God is on easy terms with modernity,” and is interested chiefly in church growth and psychological wholeness. Professor Wells wants to know what St. Paul would make of some of our churches, of worship without lament, of praise teams whose dress and demeanor seem to owe less to the Christian choral tradition than to Vegas lounge acts; of beaming ministers on their barstools, swapping stories and jokes with an applauding audience and announcing top ten listings borrowed from Letterman?

Of course, what strikes me about evangelical worship, emptied of sorrow over sin, is that it brackets and sets aside a big biblical emphasis on sin and grace, a creedal emphasis on the forgiveness of sins, and the historical profile of evangelical and reformed churches in America. They used to be champions of the holiness of God, of contrition for sins against God’s holiness, and, therefore, of grace that justifies sinners. A whole lot of that has dissipated.

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Another thing that strikes me is that ceaselessly cheerful worship doesn’t fit with the lives of people who come to worship. The Babylonian captivity of the church to popular culture is too often true and always tragic, but how about the people who attend church? How about the parents of a boy who has been relentlessly bullied in school and mocked online? Do they doubt the reality of human wrongdoing or of their child’s need for mercy? What about women whose men belittle them or cheat on them or beat them, and then accuse them of having triggered the beating? A man will beat a woman, and then accuse her: “You see what you made me do?”

How about a middle-aged man who has lost his job, not to automation or to outsourcing or to necessary downsizing, but to corporate politics driven largely by envy and greed? When a 48-year-old man feels emasculated, when nobody so much as acknowledges receipt of his job resumes and inquiries, when it looks as if he and his loved ones might lose the family home and his children simply cannot handle the downshift in the family’s happiness, what do you think this man and his family understand? Do you think a man cheated out of his job understands something about the old categories of sin and corruption and misery and lament? Maybe if he’s a believer, also a God who comes to heal and restore?

I believe a lot of ordinary people still do understand these things very well, even if their ministers aren’t talking about them. Maybe their minister won’t talk to them about sin and grace, so maybe they ought to talk to their minister about sin and grace, tell their minister it’s okay to talk about sin and grace and to do it right in church.

Are these concepts outdated? I don’t think so. The word “sin” has decayed, but I think what it stood for is there in all its appalling freshness every day. Today, as always, middle-aged daughters struggle to forgive their mom, who was never really a mom to them. People lose their savings to pious fraud and taste the deprivation every day. Politicians sell their votes to wealthy contributors to their campaigns. Comedians mock and jeer, and sometimes they mock God, and people find it mighty entertaining. Great nations launch costly wars against little nations, as the U.S. did in Vietnam. Two presidents from two different parties appear to have been willing to sacrifice more and more lives on both sides in a war they themselves believed was unwinnable because they did not want to appear weak.

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All over the world, every day — and I’m not telling you journalists anything — the stories pile up so that churches, that silence, the biblical message of sin and grace, simply aren’t anywhere near where people actually live their lives, including people in their own congregations.

In the last 17 years, kids who read *Harry Potter* knew all about good and evil. Maybe the word “sin” isn’t used in those books, but, fine, bracket the word and talk instead about what Voldemort does or what the Dementors do. Same thing with kids today who read *The Hunger Games*. Meanwhile, in films and TV dramas, Hollywood screenwriters are so conscious of good and evil that in many cases, if a character cheats on a good woman or kills an innocent person, something will happen to him. He won’t simply get away with it. Elsewhere, in films and on TV, the formula is the same as it always has been: Let dramatically portrayed evil entertain us, and then punish it satisfyingly before the end of the show. Do this because, of course, the guilty deserve to be punished. Screenwriters are old-fashioned people. They mostly don’t go to church, so they have never learned that personal guilt for wrongdoing has become passé.

Beyond screenwriters, some of the people in contemporary American society most conscientious about right and wrong are people like you. Twenty years ago, when I wrote of moral relativism in a no-fault culture, I don’t think I gave enough credit to journalism, that, year-in and year-out, observed practices and trends that threatened the public good. I still do think that a thick strand of moral relativism is among us and has been for decades, but right alongside it, in other quarters, is good, old-fashioned indignation at injustice and corruption, and some of the people I most trust to expose this injustice and corruption are journalists.

Every day, journalists write and speak about these realities, and in places like Russia, they do it at great peril, but everywhere, exposure of evil takes guts, and it takes integrity, and it is really necessary for the rest of us citizens to stay in touch with reality in this broken world.

Once again, ironies abound. The sexual abuse scandal among priests was covered up by bishops and archbishops. The Church was not about to confess its sins. It took *The Boston Globe* to confess them to the world in 2002. And if the sources that I have read on this

are correct, some of the people who worked hardest on that series in 2002 were, themselves, serious Catholics.

One last observation. Years ago, any of us could write about environmental determinism in some quarters. In these quarters, a poor upbringing by an absent father and a beleaguered mother was sometimes suggested as not just the context of criminal behavior, but also the cause. A criminal’s bad upbringing caused him to do his crimes. Accordingly, in those determinist quarters, society owed the criminal absolution for his crime on the ground that he had pre-atoned for it by suffering a poor upbringing.

Nowadays, there’s a new determinist competitor. Every once in a while, Arts & Letters Daily features essays or reviews by people who claim that contemporary brain science is revising the old ideas of personal freedom and moral responsibility that depends on personal freedom. The idea appears to be that because technology now allows us to look inside a functioning brain, via MRI or PET technology, we need to revise our everyday impression that we freely choose to think as we do and to act as we do and that, because we freely choose to think and act as we do, we are praiseworthy and blameworthy creatures.

Based on the research of people like Benjamin Libet, some scientists and philosophers have begun to believe that the brain activity associated with love, for instance, or envy, or longing — longing, when we listen to the five-note descending motif in the slow movement of Mozart’s clarinet concerto — these scientists have come to believe that the brain activity associated with love or envy or longing just *is* the feeling in question. My love is not just associated with a particular burst of activity in my brain. It is identical with that activity, without residue, and I do not cause that burst. Some material cause must be sought; one governed not by the law of love, but by the laws of physics.

Something similar is being said in various quarters today about all our thoughts and decisions. They are all reducible to brain states and brain activities that we harbor, but do not cause. Some proponents of brain materialism bite the bullet and conclude that human free will is therefore an illusion, along with the moral responsibility that depends upon it, along with the whole apparatus of praise and blame that comes along with moral responsibility.

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Now, here, humanists as well as religious people urge a little caution. It’s one thing to prove that brain states and activities accompany important human thinking and willing and feeling. It’s another to assume or assert that important human thinking and feeling are just identical with those brain states and that no human agent causes them. So I’m inclined, for the time being, to go on assuming that we human beings have been paid the inconvenient compliment of possessing moral responsibility.

MICHAEL CROMARTIE: Thank you, Dr. Plantinga. Everyone knows Ross Douthat, who joined *The New York Times* in April of 2009 as the youngest Op-Ed columnist in the history of *The New York Times*. You’ve heard this before. Ross’ new book is called *Bad Religion: How We Became a Nation of Heretics*. Thank you, Ross.

ROSS DOUTHAT: I’ll try and talk briefly about what I think dovetails with Dr. Plantinga’s points, which is the idea of the migration of the concept of sin in different ways and its transformation, which I think is as much a part of our contemporary American reality as a more straightforward loss of the sense of sin per se, because I think — one of the interesting things about writing for *The New York Times* or spending time in elite universities or spending basically any amount of time in the more secular parts of American life overall is that you don’t really have the sense, from talking to your friends or peers or getting attacked by your peers and so on, that secular America has actually lost a sense of sin overall.

Certainly, if you turn on cable television or read the comment threads on one of my columns, hypothetically, or just step into really anyplace in American life where people are having passionate debates about politics and morality and whatever else, you really have the palpable sense that very important issues are still at stake and that very important evils are being debated.

And, in certain ways, one of the difficulties we have in our culture is the tendency to cast too many stones, I think people usually assume, rather than necessarily casting too few. And obviously, you’re casting stones at people on the other side and maybe not examining your own conscience, but you can’t watch Fox or MSNBC without coming away with a very strong impression that the people responsible for those shows believe that sin is

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alive and well in the world, and it’s concentrated on the other side of the political spectrum, but it’s still very much there.

So I think that’s a backdrop that’s worth keeping in mind in these discussions, and so it’s worth thinking about transformations in the concept as well as its decline. And so I’m just going to quickly sketch, I think, four transformations that I think are useful for thinking about the topic.

And the first, I think, is what you might call the structuralization of the idea of sin. And this is an idea that I think is associated now with secular ideas in American life, that if you spend any time on an Ivy League university campus, any elite campus right now, and you listen to the language of good and evil that’s deployed on that kind of campus, it’s the language of structural evils. It’s the language of evils and problems that aren’t necessarily located in specific, discrete choices between good and evil, but, rather, in the more nebulous, numinous, society-wide categories with — the classic examples that come up again and again are capital R Racism, capital S Sexism, capital H Homophobia, and then beyond that, more specific terms, like “rape culture”; the idea that if you’re looking for the root of sexual violence on campus, you need to look in a kind of structural category that surrounds life in fraternities and sororities and surrounds campus parties and so on and is more important to understanding specific sins than the particular choices of one guy who’s drunk with a girl in a particular context.

And this structuralization is actually rooted in religious ideas. I think structural ideas about sin are deeply rooted in the text of both the New and Old Testament. So it has that fairly clear religious root that, in certain ways, has been secularized over ensuing generations, which is how you go from a Walter Rauschenbusch, the founder of the Social Gospel, to a Richard Rorty, his direct genetic descendent who has a more secular moral and political worldview. But there are commonalities.

That kind of structural view of sin is seen, again, by some of its critics, some of my ideological fellow travelers and so on, as often becoming purely impersonal and becoming a way of letting individual choice off the hook and so on. And I think sometimes that’s true, but I also think, again, just in my own experience, that it actually lends itself to a great deal of very specific personal policing of language and behavior and decision-making

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and often personal self-policing, so it isn’t just a case of campus feminists attacking the rape culture that is out there.

I think if you read, as I try to a lot, left-wing blogs and intra-left debate and so on right now, there is a lot of what, in old-fashioned Christian terms, would be called scrutiny, right? A hyper scrutiny of conscience and then of language of people saying, well, have I written this from a vantage point of privilege. One of the terms that’s cropped up a lot over the last few years is this term “mansplaining,” right? Which is what a man does when he essentially is theoretically having a conversation with a woman about politics, but is actually having both sides of the conversation himself and reading her out of the conversation altogether.

So — but that kind of language, again, isn’t just deployed against people. You will often read writers saying, “Well, I felt like I was speaking too much from privilege in that case,” or “I wasn’t thinking about how this dialogue would play out.” And you get — I don’t know if any of you saw the big piece on microaggressions that ran recently. Right? This is where you have this concept of essentially very small, unconscious ways in which, in casual conversation, men talking to women, white people talking to African Americans, straight people talking to gay people, and so on, the more privileged party in the conversation aggresses against the less privileged party, just in unstated ways. Like you’re at a literary dinner and there’s one black guy there, and you come up, and you say, “Yeah, how did you come here?” or something like that, intending nothing racial, but, in fact, on some level, you are intending something racial, and so on.

And I think in that phenomenon, whatever — both in the phenomenon itself, but, more importantly, in the way that people are talking about it and trying to police others, but also self-police and so on, you see the persistence of a certain kind of concept of sin that is very much focused on a close reading of human conduct, human behavior, and so on, and that then spills out into more ostentatious forms of consumer culture in the upper middle class, in the decision to buy a Prius rather than a gas-guzzling SUV and the decisions about the choices of the artisanal over the mass market, the local over the international, your local farmers’ market over the supermarket and so on — you can, again, see the way ideas about structural sinfulness play out in everyday life, even when the language of sin isn’t necessarily being applied to them. And, again, I think they do play out in both ways, in judging others, but in also policing your own behavior.

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So I think that on the more liberal and secular side of American culture, a place where ideas about sin are present very intensely in ways that are not often acknowledged because the culture itself is not particularly religious, and so the language of sin sounds jarring and inappropriate.

But the kinds of behaviors that religious people enacted around their own moral lives and the moral lives of others are still very much a part of the way people relate to one another and think about morality and ideology and so on. So that’s one place where I think there’s been a clear persistence, but migration of ideas about sin.

And then in a related way, I think there’s been a kind of transmutation, and this is where joking about the way sin shows up in advertisements for restaurants and chocolate and food and so on, it’s funny, but it also, I think reflects a natural move in a culture that is unsure to skeptical about our connection, potentially, to a deity towards a view of sin that’s rooted in a broad concept of health.

There’s a whole mess of issues that I’m not qualified to unpack here — but where a language of physical health blends into a language of mental health, blends into the language of utilitarianism, even if it’s unspoken, where you’re measuring happiness and human flourishing and good and evil in implicit utilities of well-being and flourishing and so on. And so there is a — in a weird way, it makes sense to say, half- jokingly, but half-seriously, that you’re sinning a little by breaking off your diet and gorging on chocolate cake or something, because your diet is connected to your bodily well-being, and that’s connected to your mental well-being, and that’s connected to your flourishing and the flourishing of everyone around you.

And it’s a way too, I think, of dealing with the concept of sin in a context where you’re not sure whether you really have the kind of classic free will, choosing between good and evil that a less deterministic age would have assumed you had, right?

So, maybe you are only your body and you are only this accumulation of firing neurons and impulses and responding to those impulses and so on, but if that’s the case, there is still a holistic sense in which what is good for your body and your mind is good, more broadly, and you measure the health of the society by the health and well-being of its members. And so things that clearly are bad for that kind of health and well-being and

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the clearest way in which things can be bad is that they just make you sick and they make you fat and what have you. That does have some connection, still, to an attenuated, but still real sense of sin.

And so, again, this is how you end up with the figure like Michael Bloomberg, right? Michael Bloomberg is a moralist. Michael Bloomberg cares very, very strongly about the specific choices that every single human being in New York under his tenure was making. But the choices he cares most about are the ones that are most quantifiable. It’s crime on the one hand, and it’s obesity statistics on the other.

And, it was interesting at the end of his tenure, when he got in a little trouble in certain ways by pressing a campaign on teen pregnancy that rubbed some people the wrong way as being a little bit too moralistic, because he was stepping into the landscape of sex, which was a landscape that’s, I think, harder to quantify than the landscape of murder, rapes, on the one hand and childhood obesity on the other hand. But to the extent that health and well-being are quantifiable, I think there is a clear sense that something — again, we’re not calling it sin, but something that’s like sin — exists that is a violation of the shalom that you can maintain in your physical form, even if your physical form is all there is.

So there’s that transmutation, and then related to the issue of sex that I just gestured at, there’s a sense in which the story of liberal modernity is the story, in certain ways, of the disentanglement of the legal from the moral. But it also happened in financial terms, that five or six hundred years ago the hot issue in the Roman Catholic Church wasn’t divorce and remarriage, it was usury laws; are they a good or bad idea? And, ultimately, the culture decided for the church, in effect, that the whole medieval structure of laws against usury attempts to maintain a just wage, a whole economic system founded on trying to police individual economic and financial decisions couldn’t work anymore.

And we made the same kind of decision with sex and sexuality over the last 50, 20, or even 150 years ago, depending on how you think about it. And in many ways, that’s obviously represented a large advancement for human flourishing, in the sense that the Adam Smith vision of economics ended up working better than the medieval guild’s version of economics. I think most people rightly think now that the attempt to use the

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law to specifically police lots and lots of sexual decisions was cruel and inhumane and unjust.

But the flipside of that that you see in our culture now, I think, is in a difficulty thinking about the moral, except in terms of the legal. The two used to be entwined, as that entwinement ends, you have a period where there’s a cultural enforcement of moral norms, but that ultimately has to be connected at some level to legal norms, in some way. And then as that disappears, people retain a deep and intense moralism about the sins that are also crimes, but have a tough time becoming intensely moralistic about sins that aren’t crimes.

And I think this is actually part of why the Hollywood blockbuster, Harry Potter phenomenon is not necessarily evidence of a broad sense of what sin means. It’s more a sense of what sin means in a context where the things that we can all agree are sins are only the worst of the worst. So, yeah, Voldemort is a sinner. Everybody who reads *Harry Potter* can get behind that, but most people that you interact with in your daily life aren’t Voldemorts, and most of the examples that you so eloquently offered of interpersonal sin of abuse and neglect and all the ways in which sin warps everyday human lives are not cases where it shows up in the form of Lord Voldemort.

Maybe what we’ve lost isn’t a sense of sin, but a sense of penance. That people don’t really think that cheating on your wife is okay; it’s more that, after you’ve cheated on your wife, people are willing to give you a break and reelect you to public office a lot faster than they used to be.

And that, I think, is perhaps particularly strong in religious communities, where even if you strip away all of the language of sin from your Sunday liturgy, the Bible is still there. The idea that certain things are wrong are still there.

People, especially religious people, can’t quite get away from it. But what you can get to — and I think our culture gets to this very easily — is what Dietrich Bonhoeffer called cheap grace, right? Where you’re sorry, you’re really sorry, and that lasts for about five minutes or five days, and then you move on to the next relationship, the next set of decisions, and so on. And I think that its most direct political application, especially for

those of us who cover politics, is just to the way politicians’ personal lives interact with their careers.

We’ve all become very familiar with the spectacle of the public apology from a public official over the last 20 to 25 years, and in certain ways, we’ve had more public contrition in the last generation than we used to ever have in American public life, because what used to happen is that extramarital affairs and the like were hushed up, and the press didn’t cover them. The press didn’t write about what John F. Kennedy got up to in the White House and elsewhere. They didn’t write about Dwight D. Eisenhower’s wartime affair and so on.

And so now that’s covered, and now people come out and apologize for it, but then they move on, and we all decide to move on too. This is the Mark Sanford phenomenon, basically, that somebody who is a conservative politician representing a very religious and very conservative state betrays his wife and family in the most public and humiliating fashion imaginable and says he’s sorry and says he’s in love, and people accept that, and he gets elected to Congress again in incredibly short order.

I think that looking at that, not as a loss of a sense of sin, but as a loss of a sense of the penance and making whole that should follow sin is maybe a useful way of thinking about where we’ve ended up. So I’ll leave it there.

CORNELIUS PLANTINGA: I think the one illustration of it, which I know you know very well, about the migration of the concept of sin, is that it used to be that people thought of homosexual acts as sinful. Now they think of criticism of homosexual acts as sinful. So it’s not that anybody lost the sense that there are some right things and some wrong things, but just that they started to change which things they thought were sinful.

ERICA GRIEDER, *Texas Monthly*: Dr. Plantinga, you talked about sin as the culpable disturbance of shalom, something that subverts special human excellence and capacities and something that makes us blameworthy, but in thinking about that, that framework doesn’t necessarily make us blamed, right? So there’s the sense in your formulation where the sinner is disturbed, has disturbed himself or herself. Their mental health suffers because their moral health has been impaired, but it doesn’t necessarily get beyond that

or kind of get into the public eye or even their community eye. So is there an intermediary step of penitence, judgment, before grace can be restored or experienced by the sinner?

CORNELIUS PLANTINGA: My own view is that, because I’m a Christian and a theist, that it is entirely possible for me to be culpable for something I have done, even when I am massively self-deceived, and that no judgment of my own, and maybe no judgment of anybody else, is coming to bear explicitly on me, saying, “What you did was wrong.” I think it’s possible to be culpable, so to speak, in the eyes of God, even when massively self-deceived about my own wrongdoing. So, sure, it’s healthy and right and good if I see that I have done wrong and reproach myself, or maybe if I’ve got somebody that I’m on a very trusted basis with who will help me see it, that’s all great. But even in cases when I deceive myself about my wrongdoing, I think I’m still culpable for it.

BARBARA BRADLEY HAGERTY, NPR: What we are actually seeing is an erosion of this idea of free will among elite scientists, many of whom believe that we actually don’t have free will; that every decision we make is based on our genetic predisposition, our brain functions, and nature and nurture; what our life experiences have been, and all of that. Given that there is an increasing kind of prevalence of this idea that we don’t have free will, what does that do to religion? Because especially Judaism and Christianity are based on this idea of free will — freely violating the laws of God. If you don’t have free will, you don’t have sin, you don’t have the need for repentance, you don’t have a need for redemption, you don’t have need for religion.

CORNELIUS PLANTINGA: If I came to believe that nothing I did had been chosen, that all of it had been caused either by circumstances or by chemicals, I would give up my religion, because I would then have to give up the whole apparatus, as you say, of sin and grace, which is the main traffic at the intersection in Christian teaching and preaching.

But I think that I do not have to give those things up. The cause of human action, of thought, of intention is an enormously elusive thing. We can sometimes tell what has motivated ourselves, or maybe even somebody else. We can almost always tell what circumstances or context surround what we do. What’s much, much harder is to figure out what exactly was the cause of my action?

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And, just, now, imagine what’s entailed here. We all have this very lively, phenomenal impression that we are making choices, that we are doing things that follow our choices, that we are acting freely, at least most of the time — there are times when we say, “I don’t know why I did that” — but most of the time. To cause people to have to give that up you would need powerful proof, not just a very widespread suspicion among scientists, many of whom are materialists, that it’s all an illusion. You’d need something like flat-out proof. And even imagining what form that flat-out proof would take is challenging.

ROSS DOUTHAT: The free will issue is not one that hasn’t come up in religious debates in the past, and there, the issue is about God’s sovereignty. But there are, I think, actually some overlaps in terms of the meaning. Free will is a premise, right? Of all of human action, all of human reasoning. All of the reasoning that produces critiques of free will depends, at some level, on some kind of premise of free will. And so what happens in world systems that seem deterministic is not an abandonment of — “Well, we don’t have free will, so everything goes.” What happens instead is an effort to vindicate that in the case of Calvinism, you, yourself, were one of the elect, right? So, you couldn’t know if you were one of the elect, but your life would manifest it, so the best you could do was live a life that seemed to manifest it.

These scientists who profess not to believe in free will do not, as a general rule, behave as if they don’t believe in free will, nor do they behave that way in their public argumentation, right? Many of these figures are associated with a very strident form of public moralism, often against Christianity. In a culture that claims not to believe in free will, what you tend to get is a sensibility of “I don’t have free will, but I think I have free will, so I’d better manifest and make arguments as if I have free will to prove that I’m fully healthy, in a way, that there’s a healthiness to my being.”

DAN HARRIS: Professor, I was struck when you were listing sins, that one of them was the writer who experiences a rush of *schadenfreude* when another writer is poorly reviewed. I’m interested that you listed *schadenfreude* as a sin when it’s unsummoned and it comes from the void. What’s your view on that, and is that a corruption of thought, and can we be held responsible for what we think?

CORNELIUS PLANTINGA: There’s a place in *Paradise Lost* in which Eve is afraid she has sinned before she actually bites into the fruit, because she dreams she’s doing it and she’s worried, so she approaches Adam and says, “Was that wrong, for me to dream of disobeying God?” And Adam says, “Evil into the minds of gods or men may come and go so unapproved and leave no spot or blame behind.” So in this case, the application would be that the initial impulse to take joy in somebody else’s misfortune, I think, can be blameless, but if we nurture it, if we take it to our hearts, if we enjoy it over some period, there, I think we’re getting into a pretty clear sense of uncharity.

ROSS DOUTHAT: Probably both the Christian and Aristotelian traditions would say that ultimately the thoughts that you have reflect the choices, in part, that you’ve made about past thoughts. So some thoughts may come unbidden, but you, as a person, are an accumulation of choices and experiences and so on, so at a certain point, the thoughts themselves are reflections of the person that you are becoming. And so there’s a habitus of mind and thought and so on where the moral life is not only about controlling your actions; it is about controlling, at some level, the thoughts that lead to them, I think.

WILL SALETAN, Slate: Has any empirical work been done to address the question of, is the old-fashioned way of looking at the world, with sin as a major category — does that, as Menninger says, produce better mental health by indices that we can measure?

Question number two: How flexible are we? How flexible should we be, even if we believe in the idea of sin? Are there examples in your own life of something where you — believing firmly in the idea of sin — have completely changed your view of whether something is sinful; went from believing it was to it wasn’t, or vice-versa? And then at what point do you, as a believer in the concept of sin, say we need to bend rather than break, and is homosexuality an example where you would say we want to preserve the idea that there can be sexual wrongdoing, that there can be sexual sin, and maybe we decide that this isn’t, for certain reasons that still allow us to believe in the idea of sexual sin?

CORNELIUS PLANTINGA: Let me start with your second question. Yes, there is a certain amount of plasticity where the content of sin is concerned. A number of Christians who used to believe that homosexual acts were disordered or wrong have come to believe

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that they were being unfair to people who could therefore not act on their disposition, and then blaming them for it, and came to think that they were now being uncharitable toward those people and changed their minds.

So, yes, there is some plasticity, but I think that it's seldom enough that a big example emerges that when it does emerge, it becomes remarkable, and people report it. So it's not happening in 50 percent of the sin landscape every day. It's happening in a much smaller part of it. And people who are morally serious will think that they have grown in their understanding of what pleases and displeases God; at least, they hope they have.

Empirical research? I don't know exactly what to say there. When Menninger wrote, back in the '70s, I think his confidence from that stemmed from his clinical practice, not from citing a number of studies to that effect.

ROSS DOUTHAT: Just on the studies point, does your conception of sin influence life outcomes, I think, is an area where the social sciences would have a hard time but also hasn't been impressively attempted. And then, just on the other point, I think part of the issue is that you always are going to have a concept of sin, or something like sin, in human society. I think part of the question is just — when you change, are you changing out of a revision of your standard, or are you changing in response to a new standard?

And I think a lot of the debates within the Christian community right now — and homosexuality is the prime example, but I think it's true in a lot of cases — are, is this a case that is going to look, in a couple hundred years, the way slavery looked? I think the problem for a lot of Christians is that it is so fundamental to Christianity, this idea that the human person and the human self is irreducibly intertwined with sinfulness, that just saying there's a genetic predisposition here and there's this here isn't necessarily a biblical-sounding argument. So if you ultimately want Christian churches blessing same-sex unions, you need an argument that sounds more biblical, I think, than just a case that talks about predispositions and inclinations and so on.

NAPP NAZWORTH, *The Christian Post*: So when I talk to my fellow evangelicals, what I hear is that the problem with sin is with the mainline Protestants, and here, you're talking about your own community, evangelicals. Why the hell would you do that? But more

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specifically, it sounds like you’re talking about these nondenominational generic evangelical churches, at least in your description, or are you talking more broadly? Is this a problem also with traditional denominations? And also with the gay question, I just want to ask it more specifically: If a scientist discovers that there is a gay gene, would that make a difference as far as Christian teaching about homosexuality?

CORNELIUS PLANTINGA: Well, on the first part of your question, I have been talking, not just about freestanding evangelical churches, but about churches in old, confessional, Protestant forms, like the Christian Reformed Church in North America, the Reformed Church in America, the United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America. It’s not just in freestanding evangelical churches, but also in confessionally reformed churches that at one time had a mighty inclination to confess sins and receive assurance of pardon in worship. They’re all slipping, too. And in conservative West Michigan, where I am from, I can go many weeks in reformed churches without encountering anything that looks like confession of sin. So it’s a lot wider than freestanding evangelical churches.

On the other question of if there were a gene that disposed somebody to a particular form of sexual activity, would that make a difference in my assessment of what that person did with respect to the inclination fostered by that gene? Sure.

CARL CANNON: Professor, this is for you, following on that. I understand why the saccharine songs in contemporary services or happy-talk sermons in evangelical churches might jar a Calvinist’s sensibilities, but isn’t a commitment to eschew sin an understood part of the Christian faith? It seems to me that growing the congregation is important. What good are thundering lectures on sin delivered from a pulpit to an empty congregation?

CORNELIUS PLANTINGA: Well, there is a great, great question. To what degree do people who plan worship have to bear in mind their faithfulness to Scripture and to its patterns of emphasis, and to what degree do they have to bear in mind whether the people who are going to come to their church can bear to hear what Scripture has to say? And people who think about this with a little bit of nimbleness are going to wonder whether they can deliver the scriptural message, but in a different language. Can they talk to people about human wrongdoing using terms from, say, wisdom and folly, which are other biblical

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terms? Can they talk about patterns of behavior that are futile or simply about things that cause us brokenness? Sure, they can do those things, and they can effectively strike true biblical notes, even while they are very culturally sensitive to how they will be heard. And I think many do this all the time.

CARL CANNON: You said when you spoke that what’s maybe missing is not sin, exactly, but a sense of penance. And I don’t really contest your larger point, but I’m wondering if what is at play in the easy grace that voters give to straying politicians is actually reflective of a more mature attitude by voters that it’s also a sin to cast the first stone?

ROSS DOUTHAT: Yes, to an extent. I mean, look, human life is a balancing act, right? And so I think the question that we should always be asking ourselves — and this is true in a religious context, but just in a societal context more generally — is where are you striking the balance between, mercy and justice, right? There is a level of hypocrisy that is obviously much more shameful than just reelecting Mark Sanford to a pretty meaningless House seat. And I think that the broader debate between social liberalism and social conservatism, writ large, isn’t always a debate about first principles. It’s a debate about where society is striking the balance at a given moment and whether that balance is being struck in the right place.

In the ideal society, you would want voters to make decisions in certain cases based on things other than a politician’s sexual behavior, right? And there are situations where you want the best possible politician in office.

And to push back on you, I’d just say that there are cultural advantages in not so much casting stones, but in having people feel and enact rituals of penance and shame. From the point of view of the Republican Party, which is notionally a party devoted to certain ideas about marriage and family and stability and so on, there’s a way in which forgiveness and grace does seem to become cheap in ways that I think pretty clearly have undermined the actual message that the party as a whole is trying to promote. If you reach a point where you’re the defense of marriage party, and David Vitter’s still in office in Louisiana, and Newt Gingrich is running for president and so on, it seems, at the very least, problematic.

And that doesn't mean that everything was better in 1947 when we swept these things under the rug and so on. It's not that there's like some golden age, but I think it's reasonable to look at the balance that society is striking right now and say, hey, in a society with some of the problems we have now, it might be better if public figures in positions of responsibility showed a little more shame and a little more penance about decisions that have destructive consequences for people in their personal orbits, and especially politicians whose ideological pre-commitments are to the idea that the family unit is really important and should be supported and sustained.

ANDREW FERGUSON, *The Weekly Standard*: You were both making the point about the durability of sin and also the plasticity of it. Isn't there something specific to the concept of sin, meaning Christian or Jewish lamentation over sin, that there's a metaphysical component to it that isn't just peripheral; that it's actually built into the definition of what sin is, which is a transgression against God, a transgression against the natural — or supernatural order, I guess I'd say — and that just to simply equate it with we know some things are good and some things are bad is to miss the distinctively weighty meaning of sin?

CORNELIUS PLANTINGA: When I began, I said that my own view is that sin is culpable disturbance of shalom, which includes the proper relationship of people to their creator, and in that respect, they owe their creator the right human response of gratitude, of love, of reverence. And so, sure, in my understanding, sin always includes a God-ward reference. That's what distinguishes it from mere wrongdoing. But in common parlance, when people like Menninger wrote, they themselves tended to equate sin with ordinary wrongdoing.

So in order to join that conversation, I did, for a part of my talk, as well. But what's special in Jewish and Christian understandings of sin and, to some degree, of Muslim ones, is that it grieves God, and the willingness to grieve God is itself grievous. And so that component in discussions about whether we've forgotten sin or whatever became of sin, that component, as you rightly say, is so often missing.

MOLLY BALL, *The Atlantic*: If we accept the idea that we, as a society, are out of touch, I guess, with the concept of sin and penance, what is the consequence of that? Is it

psychological, along the lines of Menninger’s analysis that mental illness somehow comes from our lack of reckoning with sin, or is it that it begets more sin?

Especially considering that, depending on how you measure it as a society, we have less crime, more material flourishing, and more dignity afforded to individuals, regardless of their circumstances of birth, than ever before, how do you square that with the idea of somehow a society that’s becoming decadent in its hedonism and lack of judgment?

CORNELIUS PLANTINGA: Ordinary Christians and Jews every day are very much aware of right and wrong, of injury and consequence. That hasn’t faded in the least. It may be that among Christians and Jews, the idea of grieving God has diminished to some degree, maybe; maybe not.

But a lack of seriousness with respect to human blameworthiness and praiseworthiness is bound to have unhappy consequences, because so many of our judgments, so many of our calculations about how human flourishing go, depend upon having a realistic eye with respect to what’s blameworthy.

So I think what happens is in the Scriptures, it would say in both testaments that we’re becoming foolish; we’re becoming blind; we’re not seeing reality straight and square; we’re not fitting into God’s reality properly, and the result is almost certainly not so much that we break the Commandments, but break ourselves on them, because they are all recipes for human flourishing.

They are all arising from a deep conviction that people who will not steal not only don’t do it, but wouldn’t do it, are people who are morally flourishing, are enjoying bursts of shalom, and that when you put this together with the whole apparatus of how they treat other people every day, what you’re looking for is moral seriousness that ends up with moral and spiritual and emotional and psychological health.

So the loss of seriousness with respect to whether — when I talk to somebody in an insulting way, whether it really matters in the long run, is, I think, a recipe for not only me, but for anybody who witnesses it and for the person who understands that I am not morally serious — these are all recipes for unflourishing and that, in the long run, if you

add them up, because we are all interacting with everybody and with nature, now you’re going to get a whole matrix of unhealthiness. So I think the consequences are a mess.

ROSS DOUTHAT: I’d also just raise the possibility that a modest decline in human flourishing is compatible with increasing wealth in society, and I think that that, at least at the moment, is what you’re seeing in the United States, that the country is not in any danger of turning into a lawless dystopia. Crime is down. The country isn’t breaking apart or something.

And by many indicators, notwithstanding the Great Recession, we are likely to remain extremely wealthy and stable, but if you dig into indicators of what you might call interpersonal health and the destabilization and decline of the two-parent family — the most extreme and visible example of this — but I think you can see it more generally in depression, medicalization of unhappiness, and so on.

I guess my master theory of American culture is that we’re sustainably decadent. There are aspects of American life that seem to be making people a little more narcissistic, a little more self-absorbed, and making people have a harder time forging the network of familial and communal relationships that leads to real lifelong happiness.

But, again, I completely agree that there are a lot of social conservatives, especially, who felt like crime was this great indicator that proved the social conservative or the religious conservative case in about 1991 or so and — that you had the ’60s, and you had a crime wave, and the family fell apart, and the crime rates kept going up, and so on.

And I think we’ve proven in America over the last 25 years that that kind of direct social chaos can be mastered without some return of Calvinist ideas about sinfulness. So the question is more what’s happening under the surface in homes and relationships than it is who’s running wild in the streets?

MICHAEL PAULSON, *The New York Times*: I’m interested in this concept of sin-free evangelicalism. So you talked about the absence of discussion of sin as a kind of potential pandering to seekers, and I wonder if what’s really going on might be more like a kind of disappearance of a consensus about what sin is and that as some of these churches become larger and more diverse, it becomes more difficult for clergy to enunciate or

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denounce, and because it's not clear that the clergy know what sin is or that their congregations would be with them.

The second part of that question is whether it's right to reach a conclusion about their posture on sin from visiting churches on Sunday mornings. And it gets to something larger that I've been wondering about, about the role of Sunday mornings in church life. Sin might still come up in various ways in small groups, in interactions with the teaching staff, the pastoral staff during the week, if simply Sundays are no longer the context in which sin is brought forward, but that doesn't mean that it doesn't exist in the lives of these communities.

CORNELIUS PLANTINGA: The first one, I would think that most evangelicals who read Scripture and have been formed by a certain history, would be very inclined to think that there is a pretty long list of human behaviors and inactions that virtually everybody would understand and agree were wrong.

I don't think that we have confused clergy or clergy who know what is sinful, but don't really care about it much anymore and decide not to talk about it. I think there are other reasons. I think that the culture has seeped in. It's not just the seeker phenomenon, but this is part of the culture. There is still a strand of culture in which to suggest that other people have done wrong is awkward. It induces shame. It sounds judgmental. It sounds like you yourself are free of wrongdoing. And so hesitancy on that point is almost a gut impulse.

When I was a kid, nobody was slow about those things; they just went at it. But I think that that's gotten in, and I think some of it is even charitably intended. But the fact is that in order to do a straight, clean job of representing where the center of the Christian religion is — namely, at the intersection of sin and grace — you have to talk about sin. And when people are hesitant to do it, when they euphemize it, they are losing every reason why the world needs a savior.

Could it be in other parts of the church? Yes, and I should have said that in counseling sessions and in teaching sessions, maybe in adult forums where big moral issues are discussed. Yes, I acknowledge that it can be in other parts of the church, even when it's not in Sunday morning services, but I would also remind us that in most churches, in most

places, the single occasion in which the church ministers to the most people is the worship service.

PAUL VALLELY: I just wanted to go back to this question of whether Voldemort’s a sinner or not, and I have to confess my knowledge of Voldemort is limited to the movies. I’m not a reader of the actual scripture on this. But Voldemort’s obviously evil, but sin is about abrogating a moral code, and it’s not clear to me that Voldemort subscribes to any moral code in the first place.

And there was a mention of psychopaths earlier on and that they have the deficiency of empathy and whether someone can be blamed for it. Obviously, a psychopath who’s a murderer can be locked up on grounds of mental health for as long as they’d be locked up for on grounds of murder, but nonetheless, that distinction is there.

And I wondered, especially coming from Europe, whether there is a kind of erosion or a shift in the social consensus of what constitutes sin, especially as the advance of secularism seems so much more advanced in Europe. So it’s really a question about what is the basis for the consensus of what sin is and whether or not that’s something that we see shifting.

ROSS DOUTHAT: I guess I’d say that I see American culture as having multiple overlapping conceptions of what sin is, and there is a small orthodox Christian conception of sin that is still very potent and powerful. There is a health and human flourishing, Bloombergian idea of sin that is also very powerful. And the more explicitly left-wing view of sin that I think is actually quite powerful in Europe that has a structural vision of where sinfulness lies and thinks about it in those terms and has carbon offsets as its indulgences and so on, but I do think that in that space, the good of environmentalism and the awfulness of racism have a religious component.

I just think our culture is acted on now by so many different forces that it’s very hard to draw a clean line and say over here, you have religious or Christian ideas of sin, and over here, you have secular, post-Christian, whatever ideas of sin.

I think that the Bloombergian idea of sin is post-religious in certain ways, but partakes of Christian ideas and religious ideas in certain ways. The sin as social evil, as I suggested, clearly partakes of Social Gospel and going all the way back ideas about sin. So I just think

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it’s very hard to get a fix on a single cultural definition, because you have so many definitions. Like if you look at the rhetoric that conservative politicians use of penance surrounding adultery, they’ll mix in traditional Christian language of repentance with more contemporary self-help language and so on. I just think they’re overlapping, they’re mixed up, and they’re overlapping and mixed up within all of us, not just in the culture as a whole.

CLAIRE BRINBERG, ABC News: I just want to go back to some of the points that were made about churches and sin within the churches. And I was wondering whether you think this trend is likely to reverse itself at any point; whether there’s any kind of a conversation among church leaders about reintroducing the concept of sin in a way that can continue to grow their congregations.

CORNELIUS PLANTINGA: I certainly would not say that the trend is irreversible. There are lots of twists and turns and surprises in the way things go in churches and in the culture. There are plenty of people who think hard about how to talk about sin in ways that people will listen.

ROSS DOUTHAT: I think one of the interesting things about the discussion we had this morning about Pope Francis is that part of the appeal of Francis is that he’s unafraid to use the language of sin; he uses it in both predictable, but also unpredictable contexts. The way Francis talks about the global economy is clearly a structuralist critique of sin in a way that, again, is a Catholic social teaching version of the Social Gospel and so on. And the fact that people are responsive to that and are particularly responsive to the language of sin in a way that breaks up categories and doesn’t just feel like a pontiff shaking his finger at sexual depravity or something, is a sign that there’s life in the concept yet.

The story of the churches in particular in the U.S. over the last 40 or 50 years has been a story of struggle and of partial successes followed by big setbacks in terms of membership, morale, and so on. And what you’re talking about with the world of a shallower evangelicalism, you might say, has been a world that saw, in many ways, immense growth over the last 20 or 25 years, but now is itself in some difficulties.

And so I don't think there's any clear — while Francis suggests possibilities, there's no ecclesiastical model that clearly embodies something that's gaining ground culturally.

DAVID GIBSON, Religion News Service: A lot of our discussion seems to talk about sin in very categorical terms, and I wonder if that turns people off, and I wonder if there's space in your theology or in your thinking for those kinds of things. Is that useful, or would that further degrade our notion of sin?

And also, given what we were talking about with neuroscience, et cetera, there's no doubt we can't explain certain pathological aspects. Is there a way that, thinking in graded terms about sin, you could say that if an alcoholic does X, Y, Z, they're culpable to a certain degree; that kind of thing?

CORNELIUS PLANTINGA: Yeah, I think anybody who ponders sinfulness will come up with some kind of conclusion to the effect that all sin may be equally wrong, but not all sin is equally bad, by which I mean all sin, whether it's assault or it's littering, breaks a standard, but not all sin has the same set of deleterious consequences.

And so the Catholic distinction between mortal and venial sin is essentially a distinction about the seriousness, about the degree to which a particular sin upsets shalom and causes deleterious consequences. The criminal code does something similar in distinguishing different kinds of murder; gets your motive into it, for example, and the like. So I don't think that I have ever met anybody who had thought seriously about sin who did not have a concept of a gradation in the severity or the badness of sin, according largely to motive and to consequences. I think it's intuitive. I think a parent makes this distinction all the time with children.

NINA EASTON, Fortune: We hear about the seven deadly sins. There's the Ten Commandments. Now, I Googled “list of sins.” I got one out of the New Testament, 124 sins, which also include, by the way, banqueting/drinking parties, which apparently this group is guilty of. Then the next one that came up was 600 sins cited in the Old Testament, which included women wearing gold jewelry to enhance their beauty. So give us a list.

ROSS DOUTHAT: I'll defend the seven deadlies. I think the list of seven deadly sins is a pretty useful way, obviously, starting out of Christian theological premises, to think about sinfulness. The list of specific sins is as numberless as the human race. Because every sin,

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as we’re talking about, is happening in a very specific, personal context, mitigated by all kinds of factors, worsened by all kinds of factors, but if you’re thinking of a typology, I think, what the seven deadlies try to do is just tease out some broad-based categories, and you have the — I mean, lust, wrath — there’s a lot of obvious things, both banal yelling at your wife to all the way up to beating your wife. That’s all wrath, right? That’s all manifestation of wrath. And lust, you can imagine examples, and so on.

And then, the maybe more subtle theological point is that out of the seven deadlies, pride is the controlling sin, in a sense that — except in cases of a true personal lack of culpability, at some level, pride is woven into every sin, because it’s a reflection of a form of rebellion against God.

You can do it with the Ten Commandments, too. And I’ve always found the guides — this is getting too personal, maybe — but I’ve always found the guides pivoting off the seven deadlies to be a little more effective, because with the Ten Commandments, there’s a little bit more of an extension from the original Commandment to the sin itself.

CORNELIUS PLANTINGA: Each is thought to be deadly, not in the sense of mortal, but in the sense of being a fountain, the source of many other sins. So pride has got arrogance and conceit and hauteur and vain glory, and then anything that follows from this, thinking that God is your junior partner or thinking that other people ought to be in orbit around you, and which then may lead to forms of entitlement. So as a root sin, pride’s a pretty good candidate, and envy, following from pride, because envy is resentment of somebody else’s good — that person should not have a good superior to my own.

All the great Christian writers, certainly St. Augustine, believed that while sin may grieve God and offend neighbors, it also is a form of self-abuse, because we get stretched by reverence toward God, transcended by reverence toward God, and when we do not have it, we tend to scrunch down into a little wad and become almost invisible. So Augustine thought that pride was demeaning and that humility was exalting.

ROBERT DRAPER, *The New York Times Magazine*: I’m wondering if specifically Ross’ observation that there is an overabundance of casting stones, which Carl also referenced, if there’s any relationship between that and Dr. Plantinga’s observation that there’s an

overabundance of cheeriness in evangelical churches; in other words, if the latter has become a refuge from the former.

CORNELIUS PLANTINGA: I suspect that it is in the mix someplace, that people might come to church and think, “I know that I’m broken, and I hear in culture all the time people’s accusations of and realizations of their brokenness. What I want to hear in church is that God loves me.” Yes, I think there is something to that. And so far that that’s something to it, I think that I understand.

But I also think that in order to be serious, where Scripture is serious, where the actual human condition is serious, I think it has to be in the mix, because otherwise, the reason why we proclaim that the world needs its savior is never acknowledged. It’s just subterranean. And we can become pastorally very sensitive and wise, and need to be, but recognition of reality is part of wisdom, and wisdom has to be in church as well.

JAMES HOHMANN: You offer these two strands of thinking, the rise of self-deception, but also that social norms are changing about what is sin, and there’s some definitional element. Which of those do you think is a bigger factor that is driving the transformation you talked about?

CORNELIUS PLANTINGA: I don’t want to be understood as suggesting that I think people are less aware of right and wrong than they used to be. I think there is a strand of that, but I think there is also new awareness in many quarters of right and wrong and that that’s evolving in ways that we talked about earlier. But self-deception has always been with us. That is nothing new. And what’s worrisome about self-deception is that it covers its own tracks. First we deceive ourselves, and then we deceive ourselves about the fact that we have deceived ourselves. And it generally takes a jolt of some kind for a person to come to on self-deception. It may be that the person is, himself or herself, spiritually alive and mature enough that they are alert to their own vocabulary of evasion: “I’m only human.” “Everybody does it.” “I was only following orders.” Those are little alarms going off, and the spiritually mature person will recognize them.

Or if they are in trusted relationships with spiritually mature people, they trust each other to help them see that they didn’t used to do what they’re now doing, and what’s that all

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about? And then, of course, in confession of sin, confession of sin is clarifying. Sometimes you set out to confess your sins, and more occur to you. So in all those ways, the spiritually healthy person is always alert to the probability that she is pulling the wool over her own eyes.

♦ END ♦

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