

# Out of the Dark: child sexual abuse and the web of sin

John Dunnill

Give me back my broken night  
my mirrored room, my secret life  
it's lonely here,  
there's no one left to torture.  
Give me absolute control  
over every human soul  
and lie beside me, baby,  
that's an order! ....

When they said REPENT REPENT  
I wonder what they meant  
When they said REPENT REPENT  
I wonder what they meant

(Leonard Cohen: *The Future*)<sup>1</sup>

In the opening sequence of the movie *Jaws* we see children at play on the edge of the sea, splashing in the blue waters under a warm sun. But dark forces are moving beneath the calm surface.... The sexual abuse of children is one of those monstrous forces which surface into consciousness from time to time and make us re-evaluate our sense that all is well. While writing this essay the newspapers have been filled with the story of Josef Fritzl, the Austrian pensioner who admits to having imprisoned his daughter Elisabeth in a dungeon for twenty-four years along with three of the seven children he fathered by her. The mind is staggered by such calculating cruelty, such a depth of human misery that one human being can inflict on another.

Though child abuse is now very much in the public eye, it has been treated powerfully if obliquely in literature. John Fowles' first novel *The Collector* (1963) presents, through the story of a young woman's death and the metaphor of a butterfly, a vivid picture of the psychology of abuse. Benjamin Britten's great opera *Peter Grimes* (1945), based on an 18<sup>th</sup> century poem by George Crabbe, explores with compassion the story of a man driven by dark compulsions leading to the death of several boys under his care within the apprentice system. While the sexual element in this story is veiled, its power is inescapable. The greater publicity of this area now, such that the topic can be treated more openly (for example in Alan Bennett's *The History Boys*<sup>2</sup>), is largely due to the feminist movement with its critique of the structures, social and psychological, by which the weak are oppressed by the strong.

Instances of child abuse in recent decades have produced awareness of evil manifested in unexpected forms, in unexpected places, and to an unexpected degree, until psychological accounts of evil seem inadequate to explain what is really going on. Books dealing with radical evil become more common, and increasingly refer specifically to child abuse as a motivating factor, or address evil under the heading 'sin', or both. Further, the complexity of the vision of evil that now appears causes Christian theology to take up again the neglected doctrine of original sin.

When one of those ‘unexpected places’ is the Christian church, child abuse comes to represent an evil we, as Christians, need to purge from our midst, and with urgency. We have to acknowledge its presence in all denominations, among Christians of all theological persuasions, and at every level of hierarchy, so that it becomes a contamination, a stain on the family life of the community. More than that, our very attempts to deal with this evil are seen to be contaminated by its power, so that revered institutions become havens for known abusers, and respected leaders are seen to turn a blind eye to gross offences, cover up evidence, lie and blame the victim. We conclude that a church which defends the power of the powerful against the weakness of the weak has lost its way.

But at the same time the miasma of child abuse encourages people inside and outside the churches to look for scapegoats. Naming abusers, calling on them to face their victims, seeking reparation where an institution has corrupted itself by allowing or supporting this practice – all these are means to the telling of truth and the establishing of justice. But the hate campaign against Peter Hollingworth which drove him out of office as Governor-General of Australia, for errors of judgement made when Anglican Archbishop of Brisbane, targeted the church as a guilty institution with a fury of revenge and purgation reminiscent of the stoning of the man gathering sticks on the Sabbath (Num 15: 32-36). This too is an evil which child abuse is causing.

In this paper I shall examine the way in which the sexual abuse of children reveals the character of sin, as understood in Christian doctrine, and requires such an understanding and doctrine to give adequate expression to its meaning.

### **Sexual abuse and sin**

The definition of child sexual abuse used here will be that given by Patrick Parkinson:

the involvement of dependent, developmentally immature children and adolescents in sexual activities with any person older or bigger, which they do not fully comprehend, and to which they are unable to give informed consent.<sup>3</sup>

The definition should be understood as covering a wide range of activities and situations. Another definition spells out what might be meant by ‘sexual activities’: ‘Children are sexually abused when they are involved in sexual activity, are exposed to sexual stimuli or are used as sexual stimuli by anybody significantly older than they are’.<sup>4</sup> It is important that the field is defined from the child’s point of view, and not tied to the stimulation or psychological motivation of the abuser.<sup>5</sup>

Given the fact that many societies ancient and modern have tolerated a number of activities involving children covered by this definition, and that many in our society, including Christians, have allowed them as at least relatively harmless, we have to ask what is the objective basis on which we can state that in Christian terms these are sinful acts.

If we turn to the Bible for guidance, we find that it makes no mention of child sexual abuse as a specific kind of activity or offence. In legal terms, it is covered by laws against adultery (Ex 20: 14), the seduction of virgins (Ex 22: 16f), homosexual practice

(Lev 18: 22) and any form of incest (Lev 18: 6). But as Patrick Parkinson argues, we have to look more widely:

The sexual abuse of children violates Scripture's general commands about the misuse of the gift of sexuality. However, it is not merely a sexual sin. It is wrong not because the Bible condemns both adultery and fornication. It is wrong not merely because the perpetrator has acted upon feelings of lust. To abuse children sexually, perpetrators violate many other commandments. There is the sin of covetousness, of wanting something that cannot be yours; there is the sin of deceit, since sexual abuse is an activity that can thrive only in the secrecy and squalor of an existence that is hidden from view. There is the sin of violence, since in many cases, perpetrators use force to make children do what they want.<sup>6</sup>

We might add that it conflicts with the positive commands to care for the poor, the alien, the orphan and the widow (Lev 19: 9f.; Deut 24: 19f.). Compare Jesus' pronouncement against anyone who makes 'one of these little ones' to stumble (referring to weak disciples, but perhaps originally to children): 'It would be better for you if a great millstone were fastened round your neck and you were drowned in the depths of the sea' (Matt 18: 6).<sup>7</sup>

But the Bible yields more than laws. It is also the deposit of a culture, and aspects of this culture, as they influence ours, may lead in a different direction. It shows us a culture in which violence against slaves, for example, was treated seriously, but not as seriously as against others 'for the slave is the owner's property' (Ex 21: 20f.), so that physical abuse was permitted up to a point. Was this true also of sexual abuse? Several stories presuppose the right and, in some cases the duty, of a father to offer a child in sacrifice (Gen 22, Judg 11). Were there any limits to a father's power within a patriarchal household?

Two parallel stories in Genesis 19: 1-8 and Judges 19: 22-26 have fathers offering their virgin daughters to crowds of foreign males, with the invitation 'do to them as you please' (Gen 19: 8; Judg 19: 24), rather than allow violence against a male visitor. These stories show the very high value which ancient culture placed on hospitality, from which we might learn much, but present a complete disregard for the body, mind or soul of a virgin daughter or a female slave. It seems they were understood as extensions of the father's person and therefore had no independent right of consent. These actions certainly display complicity in child abuse according to the definition adopted above.

There is an extent, therefore, to which the Bible is ambivalent on this subject, and may even be part of the problem, when its cultural influence has encouraged the notion of patriarchal rights over children. Josef Fritzl's lawyer is quoted by *The Sun* newspaper as saying:

Herr Fritzl admits he raped and imprisoned his daughter, but he does regret what he did, he is emotionally destroyed.... He thought he was protecting his family and said that was his job as the patriarch.<sup>8</sup>

## **Original sin**

If the Bible appears to be ambiguous and to permit some activities we would now declare abusive, it is when its laws or customs have been taken out of context, in separation from its fundamental assumption that life is lived before God. Consequently, sin is more than sinful actions, however defined; it is the disruption of a creature's relation with the creator, who is the ground of our being. This relation begins in love and proceeds in delight. This is the 'principle and foundation' of all Christian living, as expressed by Ignatius Loyola:

God who loves us creates us and wants to share life with us forever. Our love response takes shape in our praise and honour and service of the God of our life.<sup>9</sup>

That human being is not regularly experienced like this is the condition known in theological terms as 'original sin', by which is meant a universal condition of wrongness, of distorted relationship between humanity and God the creator.

The concept of original sin is not well understood today. The term is misleading if by the word 'original' and by the singular word 'sin' it appears to refer to a supposedly historical story of a single wrong action committed once, 'in the beginning'. While the story of the 'Fall' in Genesis 2-3 may be read as historical fact, the figures are presented as human archetypes, Adam (*adam*, humanity) and Eve (*hawwah*, life). It is a narrative representation of a permanent or pervasive truth – the rebellious character of human being, for whom sin, as a condition, is woven into the frame of our being (though it is not all we are). But there are other difficulties. St Paul's argument, based on Genesis 3, that sin causes death (Rom 5: 12), is in obvious tension with the perception that death is a natural feature of created existence.<sup>10</sup> Likewise, St Augustine's argument that sin is, if not caused, at least transmitted by sex, is criticised on exegetical grounds today, as well as for its negative valuation of sex.<sup>11</sup>

To understand the doctrine, the threads need to be unravelled. What unites sin, sex and death is that they are all universals: we all sin, we all die, we all come about through sexual reproduction. What is questionable is the causal links that have been suggested. Sexuality is associated with transmission of life, and with certain conspicuous forms of temptations to sin, but to treat that association as an explanation of how sinfulness passes from one generation to another substitutes a mystery for a fact, and implies that bodily living is somehow inherently sinful. Likewise, alongside Paul's argument that mortality derives from sin (Rom 5: 12, although the connection is less clear than most translations suggest),<sup>12</sup> we could say, with Hebrews 2: 15, that it is more nearly the other way round, that death, or at least the fear of death, causes anxiety which generates the forms of disordered conduct we call sinful.<sup>13</sup>

Sin will be approached here as a fundamental alienation or disorder in our relation with the ground of our being. Instead of living in open relation to God, the human being is, as Luther put it, *curvatus in se*, turned away from God and in on itself. This is a universal condition, springing from the universal awareness of death, and it is transmitted by processes of socialisation: we teach it to our children by spoken words and unconscious modelling. Through corporate structures and individual choices, we bequeath to them 'an enduring distortion of the self'.<sup>14</sup> In the process, the lost animal innocence of the pre-aware, pre-anxious child becomes an object of regret and desire.

We find ourselves inhabiting what John Zizioulas calls the ‘biological hypostasis’, a mode of existence constituted by death.<sup>15</sup>

This is the picture of life as idolatry, described by Paul in Romans 1:

So they are without excuse; for though they knew God they did not honour him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking and their senseless minds were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools; and they exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling a mortal human being or birds or four-footed animals or reptiles. Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the degrading of their bodies among themselves.... (1: 20-24)<sup>16</sup>

Wrong perception, wrong thinking, wrong feeling and wrong action flow out of a wrong relationship to God the creator and bind the human person into its disorder. The result is that whatever we perceive to be good we still cannot do it, as Paul laments in Romans 7: 14-25.

The domination of the world by sin, presented by Paul in Romans 1: 18 – 3: 20, is followed (from 3: 21 onwards) by an exposition of the gospel of Christ. Theology and evangelism have generally followed suit, by arguing from the human plight to the divine solution. Yet in fact Paul’s argument runs the other way. His proclamation that ‘The wrath of God is revealed from heaven...’ (Rom 1: 18) is preceded by his announcement that the gospel is ‘the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith’ (1: 16). Nor is this just about the order in which ideas are presented. E.P. Sanders and others have shown that this is both the way Paul’s thinking developed out of his encounter on the Damascus road, and its underlying logic.<sup>17</sup> Who must Jesus be, if God had chosen to raise him from the dead? What must the human predicament be if, despite the age-old existence of the Law and the prophets, this act was necessary to deal with it? It is the presence of life, in the fullest possible sense, that reveals the death-bound character of living ‘in Adam’ (1 Cor 15: 21-2).

From a different angle, James Alison too has argued that this must be so. A society whose worldview is bounded by mortality – which makes sense, so far as it can, of life, death and everything without reference to God – cannot grasp a theistic claim that this worldview, just because it is not oriented on God, is essentially disordered. Without an anchor in the reality of God, theological claims will have no point of reference. In concrete terms, the attempt to talk about original sin, or salvation, or even God, to people habituated to modernity with its premise of the autonomy of the self, is largely self-defeating. This is the ‘Kantian man’ described by Iris Murdoch: ‘free, independent, lonely, powerful, rational, responsible, brave ... the offspring of the age of science’.<sup>18</sup> From that starting point, where we have effectively ‘abolished God and made man God in his stead,’<sup>19</sup> all talk of sin or salvation can only suggest heteronomy and oppression, the dominating demands of a patriarchal God.

But, as Alison shows, the Christian doctrine of original sin is predicated, not on a pessimistic estimate of human nature, nor on an image of God as judge, but on the resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is because of the fact of the resurrection, ‘that, in the midst of history, this man who was *dead* is now *alive*’, that death passes from being ‘something which just is’ to ‘something which need not be’. If we then ask why, we see

that ‘the death of *this* man Jesus shows that death is not merely a biological reality, but is also a sinful reality’.<sup>20</sup>

### The dynamics of sin

In *Sin: Radical Evil in Soul and Society*, Ted Peters describes ‘seven steps to radical evil’, a generative dynamic showing how the unthinkable – which he identifies as Satanic ritual child abuse – is continuous with aspects of human behaviour widely regarded as normal and even natural, but yet part of a sinful structure of the self from a theological perspective.<sup>21</sup> He places child sexual abuse within a sketch of a properly theological account of sin, founded in lack of trust in the maker of all things.

The steps, which will be set out briefly here, should be thought of as cumulative rather than sequential, so that people who exhibit further stages will carry with them signs of all the earlier ones, while those who dwell predominantly in the middle range will be found to be drawn also, on occasions, into further stages.

1. The first step, as discussed above, is *Anxiety* in the face of death and loss, the experience of finitude and therefore of vulnerability. This is not itself sinful but it is a universal condition of human being, to know that we must die, and this prepares the ground for sin itself. It presupposes also that, as humans, we have an intrinsic knowledge of God, in however hazy and implicit a way. The question then is: faced with finitude, how do we respond?
2. *Unfaith*. There is the contingent possibility of responding with faith, trust in the source of life. If instead we respond to God with lack of trust we are turning away from the ground of our being and entering into unbeing. If God cannot be trusted, nor can others who stand between us and God – especially, for a child, parents and other significant adults. These elders become, to a greater or lesser extent, objects to manipulate as we seek to buttress our frail selves.
3. *Pride* is the next stage, which is idolatry of the self in place of the God who is no longer trusted. It manifests itself in narcissism, self-love (the ‘mirrored room’ of Cohen’s poem), which blinds us to who others really are. Defending the self engenders a tribal combativeness of Us vs. Others.
4. *Concupiscence*, the domination by desire (from Latin *cupare*, to desire; compare the name of the god Cupid) is the most common outworking of narcissism, as the ego is driven by desire to buttress itself with a world that responds to it and supports it. That world manifests itself in familiar forms like lust, envy, greed, avarice. It is a pattern of possession, building a ‘citadel of psychic safety’,<sup>22</sup> and where this succeeds (and for as long as it succeeds) it may create a relatively harmonious life based in addiction to sensual reality.<sup>23</sup> Nonetheless, the harmony can only be relative, for the self has been de-centred into its own possessions.
5. Peters’ fifth stage is *Self-justification*, therefore, because concupiscence does not protect us forever from that more fundamental reality, based on four things we know:
  - (1) We know that we are going to die;
  - (2) we know that concupiscence will fail to give us immortality;
  - (3) we know the difference between good and evil; and ...
  - (4) we suspect that good may be eternal.<sup>24</sup>

From facing these realities, no amount of ‘success’ at the level of the flesh is going to give us immunity. (The fourth element, eternity, may be debatable: but if we don’t know or at least suspect this it can only redouble our anxiety.) A positive response to this realisation is to look for what is real and stable, perhaps towards a renewed trust or faith in God. The negative response entails denial of responsibility, blaming others, finding scapegoats to deflect my attention from myself; or constructing rationalising arguments to justify what we know has no justification – such as, that there is no ‘eternity’, or no real distinction between good and evil.

6. In the sixth stage *Cruelty*, the anger implicit in Pride and in Self-justification, becomes an end in itself as the anxious and threatened self seeks to gain life by robbing it from others, by pointless destruction and the conscienceless exercise of power. At the extreme of this we find the pathology of sadism, in which cruelty masquerades as a philosophy, wreaking vengeance on the universe for being without transcendent good.
7. In the seventh step, *Blasphemy*, with the conscience split from consciousness, the good and the transcendent and whatever speaks of God becomes the prime target of evil.

These ‘seven steps down the path to radical evil’ naturally emphasise the negative side of the human story. Alongside them we may place a simpler but also more balanced picture offered by Joseph Tetlow when he sketches ‘four dynamics’ of human life, which he calls Christ-life, Humanism, Sarx, and the Spirit of the Dark.<sup>25</sup> It is plain that *Sarx*<sup>26</sup> in this scheme corresponds to Peters’ fourth and fifth steps, where we find those ‘who make up the vast majority of our teeming consumer society’ and who ‘live most characteristically for pleasure’. *Humanism* represents a counter-choice at this stage, a turning from ‘flesh’ in its outward and inward forms to pursue what is good and true and noble, with or without a belief in a God. Such people ‘live most characteristically for goodness’. *Christ life* represents a counter-choice at a prior level (Peters’ steps one, two or three), the life of faith and conversion to God made possible by grace. Such people ‘live most characteristically for love’. At the other end, *the Dark* corresponds to Peters’ steps six and seven, seen in:

hatred, revenge, destructive violence, maliciousness, love of the dark, lying. Thirst for power and fierce exhilaration, and the perversion of pleasure through pain. Self-degradation, first in bizarre costumes and sexual activities but finally in self-violation and atrocious behaviour of all kinds. Those who live this dynamic live most characteristically for power, particularly manifested by the possession of others, and for death.<sup>27</sup>

### **Child abuse and the Dark**

Where then does the sexual abuse of children operate within the dynamic of sin? Not uncommonly, and especially in the past, child abuse has been regarded as an aspect of concupiscence or sensuality – probably an extreme form, beyond the range of acceptable ‘preferences’ which in our tolerant society we like to regard as neutral alternatives, but

still of that familiar kind. As a fictional example, Alan Bennett's play and film *The History Boys* depicts with sympathy a teacher whose sexual interest in his adolescent charges is 'more appreciative than investigative', 'more in benediction than gratification', with a kind of innocence about it.<sup>28</sup> But such idealising will hardly stand up in the cold light of day, or of a law court; and nor should it, truly, because compulsions of all sorts are the place where 'pleasure' is motivated by forces from the dark; and because imbalance of ages introduces the element of power which, whatever is intended, turns appreciation into exploitation.

For Peters, it was something quite different, press reports about the ritual abuse of children by self-proclaimed Satanists, that led him to his investigation of 'radical evil'.<sup>29</sup> He investigates at length the claim that 'Satanism' is a real phenomenon running rampant in our society, with vast networks of secret clans inflicting on children the horrors of sexual abuse, human sacrifice and cannibalism. Despite the vastness of the claims sometimes advanced, the evidence found by police in several countries is virtually nil, causing Peters to conclude that this is not a reality but an illusion blown up by fundamentalist groups anxious to scapegoat phantom Satanists for the disorders of society.<sup>30</sup> But he quotes with approval the view of Walter Wink that all this still points to an underlying reality: "Satan is the real interiority of a society that idolatrously pursues its own enhancement as the highest good."<sup>31</sup>

Evil therefore is a real dimension of life, but it is in us, and comes out of us. It may not take the form of overt or even covert blasphemy, as Peters describes it, but it occupies a central place in the stage he calls cruelty. It is the force of non-being, the Mephistophelian ego whose motto is 'No'. For example: On 7 May 1945, only hours before the Armistice was due to bring the Second World War to an end, an SS unit arrived at Schloss Immendorf, near Vienna, a castle where the Nazis had stored a large number of artworks including thirteen paintings by Gustav Klimt. Dismissing the regular garrison, the officers proceeded to a night of orgies, and left next day having laid explosives that set fire to the castle, gutting it completely and destroying every one of the works of art.<sup>32</sup> Mary Midgley, in her book, *Wickedness*, identifies the 'motiveless malignity' of Shakespeare's Iago, and of Adolf Eichmann, as evidence of this empty centre, this person without a responsible self, acting out a cold destructiveness completely void of empathy for others or recognition of others as selves.<sup>33</sup>

Aligning this activity with 'the dark' is not meant to be a way of consigning it to a metaphysical or psychological black hole. Why do people – men mostly – engage in sexual abuse of children? Generalisations are dangerous because every case is different, but psychological and spiritual judgements about causation can still be made.

The incidence of sexual, physical or emotional abuse in the pre-history of sexual abusers of children is high.... Furthermore, relatively few abusers appear to be possessed of an innate sexual attraction to children.... More commonly...abuse seems to be a means for resolving issues of personal identity that reflect distorted identity structures sedimented through histories of distorted intersection.... Issues concerning security, trust, worth, vulnerability are resolved through power, domination, humiliation or a semblance of intimacy.<sup>34</sup>

In child abuse, always there is a differential dimension of power between abuser and abused, at least in terms of age. Despite the current concern about ‘stranger danger’, abuse usually takes place within structures of security such as the family, church, school or neighbourhood, in which the abuser stands as a figure of authority and trust. Psychologically and spiritually, the greatest damage is done when the security of the family, or its surrogate the church family, is exploited by power figures to establish a predatory semblance of intimacy. The disastrous consequences of this behaviour on a child’s image of herself and God are well known now: shame and loss of self-esteem from being treated as a sexual object; loss of trust in those who seek to guide and lead; cynicism about the manipulations of ‘love’; guilt at having participated in, even in some measure consented to, abuse; alienation from adults, and from other children; difficulties with intimacy and with sexuality. Especially when a minister is involved, it can cause huge disruption in a child’s ability to trust God as a loving, caring father.<sup>35</sup>

A child who learns not to trust others and God is forced into a place of unfaith towards the love of God and the safe structures of the world, resulting in a distorted sense of self. This self-perception may manifest itself as pride, a determination to blame and dominate others, perhaps leading to a replicated pattern of abusive and cruel behaviour. Or else it may manifest in the shamed and hidden self that blames itself and may go down the path of depression, self-violation and even suicide.

Deforming of trust and distortion of desire are just two of the ways in which abusive behaviour – however motivated – contributes to the totality of sinful effects. Another way in which power operates in an abusive situation is through the bending and binding of the will. Especially when, by means of ‘grooming’, ‘initiation of abuse is seductively incremental’,

the child’s willing may become habituated to abuse ‘by degrees’.... As she looks back, she is easily convinced that she was willingly accepting abuse from the outset and so she may feel trapped in the trajectory, not of the abuser’s coercive manipulation, but of her own willing.<sup>36</sup>

Does identifying abuse as a manifestation of ‘the dark’ make it special, weird, out of the range of ordinary evil? Unfortunately not. Even though many abusers seek out opportunities to groom a child into an object for their pleasure, much abuse is circumstantial, and this is particularly true of abuse within the family. The sheer ordinariness of many of those convicted of abuse (and this could be said also of serial killers and planners of genocide) casts doubt on the idea of a special, or specially evil group of people.<sup>37</sup> It seems that almost anyone might become an abuser in certain circumstances. This is a depressing conclusion but it supports the Christian doctrine of original sin. We live in a state of radical domination by the forces of distortion such that even Tetlow’s Humanists and pursuers of the Christ-life are vulnerable to attack by these dark forces, and maybe even more than others: high minded abstainers from casual sensualities may be the more liable to uncontrolled urges, on occasion, in relation to children in their charge.

Rather than focus on explicitly sexual motivation, therefore, we should see the sexual abuse of children as both a striving for and an attack on whatever represents the beautiful, the weak, the simple, the innocent, flowing out of a culture desperate to regain and repossess that lost symbol of the good and transcendent, or else to expunge its

existence from memory. Peters is probably right to conclude that the image of rampant Satanism, much of it expressed in a kind of theological pornography, does not point to an objective movement. But blasphemy, the deep desire to attack God, is in our culture a prevalent pathology, manifest at many levels from secret and criminal cruelties to the milder but still bizarre spectacle of a celebrated scientist like Richard Dawkins publishing a puerile rant against religion in the name of ‘science’ and ‘reason’.<sup>38</sup>

### **The church’s calling**

In this climate, the church needs to realise its call to be a sign of transcendent truth. This is not about an institution covering its back – which may be no more than an averagely sinful striving for security – but letting its life be transformed by the joy of the Triune God, and so revealing at once the possibility of fully human living and the weight of the opposition that we call sin.

Abuse is abuse of the capacity for joy. Or, in theological terms, of worship – of the possibility of standing in the proper economy of thanks and praise of God, which requires dynamic self-affirmation and openness to others in loving joy.<sup>39</sup>

Likewise the church needs to realise its calling to be a community characterised by trust, because it is the community in which God gives us to each other in love. Rowan Williams argues that

the slogan of the church’s life is “not without the other”.... The good life is one in which we have learned how to be for each other, and in so being to live fully as ourselves.<sup>40</sup>

He points out how important are both this calling and our awareness of our failure, individually and collectively, to live up to it, so that, in a climate where ‘we seem to be tolerant of all sorts of behaviour, yet are deeply unforgiving’, the church can be a bold and counter-cultural sign of repentance and forgiveness.<sup>41</sup>

To do this requires the church to model responsible living. One of the features of the Enlightenment assumption of the autonomy of the self (Murdoch’s ‘Kantian man’) is that we take responsibility only for what we do, or even only for what we consciously choose. This autonomous self is linked in Christian theology to the figure of Pelagius, who debated the question of original sin with Augustine around 400 AD, insisting that people have freedom to choose to act rightly.<sup>42</sup> In fairness, it should be pointed out that, unlike most modern exponents of human autonomy, Pelagius combined this, not with a ‘practical atheism’ which abolishes God and judgement, but with a high doctrine of the majesty of God, who he believed gives us power to live well, and will hold us to account when we fail. But for him the human will is detached, neutral and free to choose between good and evil. In contrast to this understanding of ‘the atomic will’,<sup>43</sup> it is the burden of this paper’s argument for the viability and necessity of the concept of original sin that sin runs always deeper than the will’s consent. It is a situation we find ourselves in, in which forces we have not necessarily chosen shape our intentionality and our actions. To live as a self that is oriented on God requires us therefore to be accountable for who we are at

every level, and thereby to open ourselves to be responsible for the other also ('not without the other').

The narrow Pelagian ego which drives a self-justifying self, a blaming self, has no power to cope with the dark forces at large in our psyche and our society, nor to discover the fullness of joy desired for us by God. For either or both to be real we need something like an Augustinian, Trinitarian self, a eucharistic self,<sup>44</sup> a blessing self, ready to bless and be blessed in the life God gives us to live with others. It is the vision captured in another verse from Leonard Cohen's poem *The Future*, quoted at the start, but this time spoken in a different voice:

You don't know me from the wind  
you never will, you never did  
I'm the little jew  
who wrote the Bible  
I've seen the nations rise and fall  
I've heard their stories, heard them all  
but love's the only engine of survival.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Leonard Cohen, *The Future*, no date, <http://www.leonardcohen.com>, accessed 24 April 2008.

<sup>2</sup> Alan Bennett, *The History Boys: The Film*, Faber and Faber, London, 2006.

<sup>3</sup> Patrick Parkinson, *Child Sexual Abuse and the Churches: Understanding the Issues*, second edition, Aquila Press, Sydney, 1997, p.7.

<sup>4</sup> Alistair McFadyen, *Bound to Sin: Abuse, Holocaust and the Christian Doctrine of Sin*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2000, p. 59.

<sup>5</sup> McFadyen, *Bound to Sin*, pp.59f.

<sup>6</sup> Parkinson, *Child Sexual Abuse*, p. 25, and see pp. 25-27 passim. On covetousness, deceit and violence, see Ex 20: 17, 16, 21: 12-14, 18f.

<sup>7</sup> Bible quotations are taken from the New Revised Standard Version.

<sup>8</sup> Quoted in *The Weekend Australian*, 3 May 2008, p.12.

<sup>9</sup> Paraphrased in David L. Fleming SJ, *Draw me into your Friendship: a literal translation and contemporary reading of the Spiritual Exercises*, Institute of Jesuit Sources, St Louis, Missouri, 1996, p. 27. A more literal translation is: 'Man is created to praise, reverence and serve God our Lord and by this means to save his soul' (Fleming, p. 26).

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- <sup>10</sup> Note Cranfield's comment that 'It is not only in modern times that the difficulty of this doctrine has been felt': C.E.B. Cranfield, *The Epistle to the Romans*, T & T Clark, Edinburgh, 1975, p. 281, citing Aquinas, p. 844.
- <sup>11</sup> Cranfield, *Romans*, pp. 274-77.
- <sup>12</sup> Note the ambiguity of the term *eph' ho*, which can be translated 'because' ('because all have sinned', NRSV) or more loosely 'in that'. See Cranfield, *Romans*, pp. 274-79.
- <sup>13</sup> Jesus' death was 'to free those who all their lives were held in slavery [to the devil] by the fear of death'.
- <sup>14</sup> McFadyen, *Bound to Sin*, p. 34.
- <sup>15</sup> John Zizioulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church*, Darton Longman and Todd, London, 1985, p. 50.
- <sup>16</sup> On sin as idolatry, see McFadyen, *Bound to Sin*, pp. 221-26.
- <sup>17</sup> E.P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, SCM. Press, London, 1978, pp. 442-47.
- <sup>18</sup> Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, Routledge, London, 1970, p. 78.
- <sup>19</sup> Murdoch, *Sovereignty*, p. 78.
- <sup>20</sup> James Alison, *The Joy of Being Wrong: Original Sin through Easter Eyes*, Crossroad, New York, 1998, pp. 116-7.
- <sup>21</sup> Ted Peters, *Sin: Radical Evil in Soul and Society*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1994, pp. 10-17, and more fully explored in pp. 34 – 262.
- <sup>22</sup> Peters, *Sin*, p.13
- <sup>23</sup> On addiction, see Gerald G. May, *Addiction and Grace: Love and Spirituality in the Healing of Addictions*, Harper, San Francisco, 1988.
- <sup>24</sup> Peters, *Sin*, p. 161.
- <sup>25</sup> Joseph Tetlow: *Choosing Christ in the World*, Institute of Jesuit Sources, St Louis, Missouri, 1999, pp. 240-241.
- <sup>26</sup> 'Sarx' is the New Testament word for flesh. See Galatians 5: 16-21.
- <sup>27</sup> Tetlow, *Choosing Christ*, p. 241.
- <sup>28</sup> Bennett, *History Boys*, pp. 66, 91.
- <sup>29</sup> Peters, *Sin*, pp. 1-4.
- <sup>30</sup> Peters, *Sin*, pp. 223-252
- <sup>31</sup> Walter Wink: *Unmasking the Powers*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 1992, p. 25, cited by Peters, *Sin*, p. 254.
- <sup>32</sup> Jonathan Jones, 'His dark materials', *Weekly Guardian* 23 May 2008, p. 32.
- <sup>33</sup> Mary Midgley, *Wickedness: A philosophical essay*, Routledge, London, 2001 (1984), pp. 13, 144, citing Coleridge and Hannah Arendt.
- <sup>34</sup> McFadyen, *Bound to Sin*, pp. 114-5.
- <sup>35</sup> Parkinson, *Child Sexual Abuse*, pp. 127-159.
- <sup>36</sup> McFadyen, *Bound to Sin*, p. 124.
- <sup>37</sup> Midgley, *Wickedness*, chapters 4, 6, 7.
- <sup>38</sup> Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, Bantam Press, London, 2006. For measured responses, from evangelical and atheist perspectives respectively, see Alistair McGrath with Joanna Collicutt McGrath, *The Dawkins Delusion: Atheist fundamentalism and the denial of the divine*, SPCK, London, 2007; Terry Eagleton, 'Lunging, Flailing, Mispunching', *London Review of Books*, 19 October 2006, <http://www.lrb.co.uk/v28/n20/01.html>, accessed 6 June 2008.
- <sup>39</sup> McFadyen, *Bound to Sin*, p. 238.

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<sup>40</sup> Rowan Williams, *Tokens of Trust: An introduction to Christian belief*, Canterbury Press, Norwich, 2007, pp. 106, 110.

<sup>41</sup> Williams, *Tokens of Trust*, p. 152

<sup>42</sup> See McFadyen, *Bound to Sin*, pp. 167-99

<sup>43</sup> McFadyen, *Bound to Sin*, p. 179.

<sup>44</sup> David F. Ford, *Self and Salvation: Being Transformed*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1999, pp. 137-165.