

MEDIEVAL CONCEPTIONS OF SIN

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Between the tenth and fifteenth centuries, conceptions of the nature of sin changed radically. This occurred despite the central nature of the idea of sin and redemption to Christianity. Christianity itself was changing. The shifting nature of society forced much of this evolution. Similarly, different pressures upon the Church and Christian thinkers caused them to think differently about sin.

In 10th century France, society was in flux. It was a turbulent and uncertain time, when violence prevailed and the nobility ruled their fiefs with harsh and often capricious hands. In the absence of an effective central authority, the Church often took the lead in attempting to provide stability to the community. This community included not only the church but also the village and laity in the demesne of the church. The notion of sin shown by churchmen supported this need. To sin was to breach the communal norms, to break the rules of conduct that kept the community ordered. Deeds could affect the community, thoughts did not, and thus the sin was in the deed. Sin was also external. The deeds that affected others and the community were more deadly than private sins that only affected the person. Punishment and discouragement of sin was also public not private. The prospect of shame within the community and of personal damage in the mundane world were more important than personal guilt and the possibility of hell.

The biography of the 10th century Sainte Foy illuminates these ideas. Sainte Foy was a regional saint who punished the wicked through miracles and frightened those who might sin from doing so. These sins were invariably deeds that affected the church or the community, often by the local nobility. In the gift economy of the 10th century, the giving of gifts to the church was very important. With these gifts, the church could increase its prestige and authority in the region. The church at

Conques also owned considerable amounts of land that provided resources that sustained the church and the community. Wealth was a preoccupation of the church. Most of the sins punished by Sainte Foy are those that threaten the land or wealth of the church. When the noblewoman Grassenda threatened a fief held by the church at Conques, her henchman Pons attempted to harm members of the church. Sainte Foy punished his sin with a lightning strike (Sainte Foy, 1.11). Similarly, Sainte Foy struck blind the knight Renfroi, who challenged the rights of the church to a fief near Quercy (3.14). The message to potential sinners was clear. To challenge the church, its people and its wealth was a sin and Sainte Foy would punish such sinners harshly. What is notable in its absence in Sainte Foy, however, is the idea of personal sin. Although there is a brief comment that Sainte Foy loves the “chaste” (1.27) it is only one paragraph within a whole work and the author presents it more as a result of Sainte Foy’s own childlike nature than as a testament to the innate sinfulness of the sexual acts themselves.

As the tenth century ended, the external threats to Europe had mostly dissipated. Europe was entering a new period of stability and prosperity. In this atmosphere, the stabilizing role of the church reduced in importance. Monastic orders increasingly focused upon the internal not the external. They managed their estates and took part in secular politics but no longer needed to be the sole source of order in society. This allowed a new contemplation of the nature of sin. In the memoirs of Guibert of Nogent, there is a new emphasis upon personal sins. Deeds that the authors’ of the *Book of Sainte Foy* largely ignored now take on new prominence. Guibert himself laments his own fickle nature and the “immodest stirrings of [his] flesh” (59). These thoughts and deeds did not threaten the church or the wider community. At the time, they were unknown to any but Guibert. Yet, the church, with its new sense of

solidity and strength, could now afford to look beyond the narrow definition of sins in Sainte Foy. Their presents secure, the monks could now reflect upon eternity.

To Guibert, sin is omnipresent and always dangerous. Yet, the monks cannot always perceive the sins of another. Sins become a matter of individual guilt rather than communal shame, threatening the individual soul of the sinner rather than the community. The lascivious monk who turned to black magic imperiled his own immortal soul, not the church, with his actions (89). The former chaplain of Guibert's mother, guilty of "abominable vices," sinned so severely that he became irredeemable. He died in torment and undoubtedly went to hell (84).

Even when the sin damaged the community, the emphasis remained upon the effect of the sin upon the individual. Wealth clearly is still a preoccupation of the monks but in a markedly different way from the clergy of Conques in Sainte Foy. To the latter, it was a sin to deny to the church their rightful wealth. In Guibert, wealth draws the churchmen themselves to sin. In his stories of the simoniac monk (75) and the subsequent tale of the unconfessed monk (76), Guibert clearly shows his fear of personal wealth and the sin of avarice. Temptation by this new wealth had become a real problem. Guibert had to struggle with the sins of avarice just as the Church had to struggle with the new paradigm of the capital economy. Yet, while the monks who gave into temptation did damage the church, they mainly damaged themselves. In this new thinking on the nature of sin, the monks who stole were punished not by an avenging saint but by the demons who drew them to hell. Sin threatened the soul as well as the community.

There was also a shift in the perceived cause of sin in Guibert. In Sainte Foy, the sinners usually sinned by making a conscious decision to oppose the church. The woman who began to plough the church's fields did so deliberately and knowing she defied the Church and through them, God. (3.16). As the church began to define sin more expansively and as temptation thus surrounded the monks at all times, sin thus often became the result of

weakness rather than intent. Guibert describes his own "penchant for sin" as the "outcome not of obstinate arrogance but of the impulse of a weak nature" (57).

As society continued to grow more prosperous and stable, thinkers could reflect more upon the nature of sin and redemption. While in Guibert, the sins affected the community as well as the individual, these later thinkers considered only the effects of sin upon the individual. Perhaps that is because, increasingly, those contemplating sin were not part of the traditional clergy. Marguerite of Porete, a twelfth century thinker, was a member of the educated laity and concentrated upon the internal nature of sin. In *The Mirror of Simple Souls*, sin once more becomes the result of a deliberate will rather than weakness in the face of temptation. However, it takes on a much more abstract nature. To Marguerite of Porete, sin is not a single deed or thought. It is not merely stealing or lust or avarice. When a person "with her free will [...] removed her will from God Himself" she sinned (ch. 107). As the soul can only ascend to the supreme ecstasy of divine love through voluntarily giving up their will to God, the sinner by retaining her will, denies herself any chance of achieving divine love. To say, "sin is nothing" appears to imply that sin is not important, but this is a misinterpretation of her meaning. To Marguerite of Porete, God is everything. The opposite of everything is nothing. When she says, "sin is nothing" she is thus equating the nothingness of sin to the absence of God. Sin is not a small nothing, an insignificant thing, but rather an enormous void into which divine love cannot travel.

As sin is no longer a simple act, neither confession nor paying penance can redeem a sin. These simple acts of sorrow no longer suffice for salvation. While Guibert of Nogent suggests this in the fate of his mother's confessor, that would seem to be the result of the enormity of the man's terrible deeds. However, in Marguerite of Porete, the depth or breadth of a person's sins does not necessarily count. What matters is the will, and only through the will can a person be saved. If a person has sinned even once by imposing her own will, she owes God a debt that she can

only repay with divine goodness, by giving up her will to God. In the seven stages towards transcendence, the soul accepts the grace of God and denies her own will. Through this grace, she loses the will to sin (Ch 103). Later, she can fully give her will to God and thus achieve the fifth stage of ecstatic love and the ultimate unity with the godhead.

For St Francis and Julian of Norwich, as for Marguerite of Porete, sin and love were connected. Yet, while to Marguerite of Porete, pure love was unknowable to the sinner, for St Francis, love could prove to be the means to avoid sin. As in Guibert, sin often came from giving into the weakness of the flesh. However, to St Francis, through love for God a person could resist such weakness. They could purge the “vomit” of sin from their lives and come closer to God and to salvation. In the life of St Francis, sin does not seem to be everywhere. Demons do not lurk around every corner as in Guibert. He also rejects the extreme position of Marguerite of Porete and her abstract notions of sin and redemption in favor of more concrete and attainable ideas. Sin is living a bad life. Sin is being proud not humble. Sin is treasuring wealth not poverty. Sin is disobedience to the Church. Sin is a single deed, many deeds and the intent behind them. Yet, St Francis accepts that the path to God is often very hard. Not everyone can accept the asceticism with which he lived his life. Nor do they need to. Every small step a person takes on the right path, takes them closer to God.

Julian of Norwich also appears to reject Marguerite of Porete’s ideas of sin and redemption in favor of a less stringent, more loving view of God, sin and redemption. She believed that God accepted the reality of sin, the inevitability of sin in those to whom he gave free will. Sin was everywhere, the manifestation of man’s weakness in the face of temptation. Yet, unlike in Guibert, the temptation came from within a person not from external “demons.” Sin was a positive act of wickedness, the deliberate rejection of God (ST ch. 18). It was also the absence of love. She wrote, “If any man or woman ceases to love any of his fellow Christians, then she loves none [...] he who loves all his fellow Christians in this way, he

loves all; and he who loves in this way is saved” (ST ch. 6).

Indeed, given the inevitability of sin, God even uses it as a tool to greater understanding of the enormity and all encompassing nature of God’s love. Julian of Norwich wrote, “It is necessary for everybody to have such experiences [of sin] to know that [...] he loves us as much in sorrow as in joy” (ST ch 9). God would love all sinners and never abandon them. God also uses Sin as a “scourge” to bring a sinner to utter despair of redemption, so that when the Holy Spirit brings them grace they realize their mistakes. The punishments imposed thereafter are badges not of shame, but of “glory” (ST ch 17). However, she makes clear that man should not seek to sin for the glory of the punishment. Those who do not repent of their sins ultimately have “nothing at all.” By rejecting God, they accept the “hardest hell,” the absence of God (ST ch. 18).

Salvation is always possible to Julian of Norwich. Writing as she did in the late fourteenth century, in the wake of the plague that swept Europe in the late 1340s, the sins of men must have seemed an overwhelming cause of the horrors inflicted upon the world. Hope for redemption thus became an imperative. Unlike Marguerite of Porete, the way from sin to salvation was not the sole responsibility of the individual sinner. Instead, the Passion of Christ provides hope to all sinners. The intense love of a God who could sacrifice himself in the body of his own son could “overcome” the “Fiend” (ST ch. 6.) Sin and wickedness would never be as strong as such a God. Through love, and the understanding of God’s love, the sinner could find the strength to recognize their own failures and to find salvation. It is a remarkably hopeful message.

The concept Sin began the tenth century as a function of the communal will, an idea that aided the church in providing stability and order to a disordered world. Sins existed in the deeds that threatened the strength of the community. They were external, shaming and punished in this world. As time went on and Europe began to stabilize, sin began to become less a communal problem

and more a threat to the soul of an individual. Yet, sin remained the single act, the deed or thought that contradicted the laws of God. Gradually, however, ideas that were more abstract emerged. Sin as the imposition of

individual will over that of God, Sin as the absence of God or even as tools God used to improve mankind, all moved firmly away from the idea of sin as deed to the idea of sin as an ongoing state of mind.