FROM HOPE TO DESPAIR: THE SEVEN DEADLY SINS IN MEDIEVAL AND MODERN SOCIETY

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Sin cannot be eradicated in this life. Take William Langland's description of Gluttony, who goes past the brew house on his way to confession:

> And whither he would go the brew-wife asked him.
> 'To holy church,' quoth he, 'for to hear mass,
> And then sit and be shriven, and sin no more.'
> 'I have good ale, gossip Glutton, wilt thou assay?'
> 'Hast thou' quoth he, 'any hot spices?'
> 'I have pepper and peony and a pound of garlic,
> a farthingworth of finkleseeds for fasting days.'
> Then Glutton goes in, and great oaths after...
> They sat so till evensong and sang all the while
> Till Glutton had gobbled a gallon and a gill.
> His guts began to gurgle like two greedy sows;
> He pissed a pot full in a paternoster while,
> He blew his bold bugle at his backbone's end,
> And all who heard that horn held their nose after,
> And wished it had been washed with a wisp of briars.
> And when he dashed to the door, then dimmed his eyes,
> He thrumbled on the threshold and threw to earth,
> And Clement the cobbler caught him by the middle,
> And for to lift him aloft, laid him on his knees.
> But Glutton was a great churl, and groaned in the lifting
> And coughed up a gut full in Clement's own lap;
> There's no hound so hungry in Hertfordshire
> Durst lap of that leaving, so unlovely it stank.
> (*Piers Plowman*, vi.354-414)

Glutton repents again, will sin again, and will repent again. As Langland says, man's body is a boat floating on the water of the world:

man is always stumbling, but always able to 'repent and arise and row out of sin'. (x.48-55)

A few months ago a lapsed Catholic friend who had behaved badly the night before, rang me up and said, 'Mea culpa', that expression of contrition from the old Latin Confiteor: Mea culpa, mea culpa, mea maxima culpa - 'through my fault, through my fault, through my most grievous fault'. Even for a lapsed Catholic, the formula retained its power. Escaping from sin requires contrition, and therefore an understanding of our sin. Medieval Christians found this understanding through contemplating the Seven Deadly Sins.

Today I will concentrate on three medieval texts - Dante's *Purgatorio*, Chaucer's *Parson's Tale*, and Langland's *Piers Plowman* - and one modern one - the 1992 ABC TV Dramas - and discuss what the comparison reveals about modern society.

In *Piers Plowman*, the Dreamer, Will, who represents both the human will and the author, contemplates his life as a loller, who has 'limbs to labour with', but prefers 'to drink and to sleep' (PP. v.8-9). Reason and Conscience rebuke him for his idleness, and ask what contribution he makes to the community (v.20-8). After several feeble excuses, Will confesses:

> 'That is true,' I said, 'and so I beknow
> That I have teened time and time misspent [harmed]
> And yet, I hope, as he who has often chaffered [bargained]
> And always lost and lost, and at the last it happened
> He bought such a bargain he was the better for ever,
> And set his loss at a leaf at the last end,
> Such a winning he won through words of grace...
> So hope I to have of him that is almighty
> A gobbet of his grace, and begin a time,
> That all times of my time to profit shall turn.
> (*Piers Plowman* v.92-101)

Will weeps and wails for his sins, and dreams he sees the Seven Deadly Sins confessing. They are contrite but comic backsliders who need Repentance's constant assurances of Christ's mercy. Hope blows his horn and, as penance, the sinners attempt a pilgrimage to Truth, under the guidance of Piers Plowman. Actually, because of Langland's concern with famine and the need to work, they plough Piers's half-acre instead, thus dramatising the three stages of Confession: contrition

of heart, confession of mouth, and satisfaction of works (cf PP. xvi.32).

At the end of the poem Christian society is destroyed when the Seven Sins return as terrifying giants (PP. xxii.215), the friars give absolution for money, and 'Contrition clean forgot to cry and to weep'. (PP. xxii.369) With the corruption of Confession, there is no spiritual health, so Conscience searches for Piers Plowman, who will destroy Pride (PP. xxii.380-2).

Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* end with the Parson's sermon on Penitence and the Seven Deadly Sins. Chaucer concludes his life's work by confessing that he has written 'many a leccherous lay' (CT. x.1090), and praying that through penitence, contrition, and satisfaction, he may achieve Christ's salvation.

In Dante's *Inferno*, which is not based on the Seven Deadly Sins, the sinners do not understand their own sin. Ugolino, for example, chewing the head of his betrayer, speaks only of hatred, saying nothing of the treachery for which he himself is punished in the deepest circle of hell (*Inferno*, xxxiii.1-75). Purgatory, however, is based on the Seven Sins, and the sinners are kindly towards each other, confess to Dante, and willingly purge their sin by practising the opposite virtue. The slothful run night and day, shouting, 'Haste, haste...that zeal in well-doing may make grace come green again' (*Purgatorio*, xviii.103-5). Green is the colour of hope, and Purgatory is full of hope: the souls are guarded by green-garbed angels (viii.25-30), and comforted by justice and hope (xix.86-88). At the foot of the mountain, an angel marks Dante's forehead with seven P's - from peccato, the Italian for sin - and one is removed after he performs the penance on each terrace, stooping with the proud, groping through the fog of anger, and burning in the fire of lust. At the top of the mountain, he sees a vision of Christ's redemption, confesses to Beatrice, and is cleansed in the waters of Lethe.

Failure to understand the consequences of sin leads to despair. St Thomas Aquinas says that a person who fornicates does not intend to withdraw from God, but to enjoy carnal delight. However, in consequence, the sinner disdains spiritual delights, withdraws from God, and falls into despair - the most serious sin in its effects, because without hope the sinner plunges into unrestrained vice (*Summa Theolgica* II-II. xx.1-4).

After the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215 made Confession compulsory, the Seven Deadly Sins became a popular means of helping penitents to remember and understand their sins (Bloomfield 1952, pp.91-3). Dante, Chaucer, and Langland discuss the Sins as a whole, in

the context of Confession and the remedies for sin. They confess their own sins, and believe that they can win salvation through Christ's mercy. In the Middle Ages, recognition of sin induced hope in God's grace rather than despair.

None of this is true of the 1992 ABC TV Dramas. Here the sins are treated separately, and, apart from the odd blasphemy, a nun on a train, and two characters lighting candles before a statue of the virgin, I could find no Christian references. There is no recognition of sin, no repentance, no movement towards salvation. The result is despair.

One of the writers, Glenda Adams, said that the aim of the series was "to look at characters ... who do not find redemption, who are not punished for their transgressions, who get away with, and thus are stuck with, their sins" (1993, p.28). The depressing thing is that the characters are "stuck with their sins", not because they can't eradicate them, but because they don't understand them.

I want to make two points about the Dramas: firstly, that without a Christian context which balances the knowledge of sin with the knowledge of virtue, the characters cannot possibly understand their sins, and viewers may also remain unenlightened; secondly, that pride and avarice are downplayed. These features reflect the nature of our society.

At the November conference on Francis Webb, Sister Veronica Brady remarked that our society was due for a revival of the notion of evil and sin. Although Lent is a time of repentance, my parish liturgy meeting was shocked when I suggested the Seven Deadly Sins as a theme: even in Lent, sin was a dirty word. The modern mass has lost many of the Tridentine references to sin, and usually the Confiteor as well; Catholics now go to Reconciliation instead of Confession. This is, no doubt, a reaction to the excesses of the past - as a child in a Catholic school, I was taught to pray that my Anglican father and divorced aunt would not go to hell. But even then, outside Catholic schools, the concept of sin was ridiculed. Remember the minister in Pollyanna, shaking the chandelier with his roars of "Death comes unexpectedly!", until Pollyanna converted him to optimism? Now we blame parents, schools, stress, society at large, anything to avoid admitting that we are sinful.

Shakespeare's *Hamlet* points out the danger of this:

> ... Mother, for love of grace,
> Lay not that flattering unction to your soul,
> That not your trespass but my madness speaks:

It will but skin and film the ulcerous place,
Whiles rank corruption, mining all within,
Infects unseen. Confess yourself to heaven;
Repent what's past, avoid what is to come;
And do not spread the compost on the weeds,
To make them ranker. Forgive me this my virtue;
For in the fatness of these pursy times
Virtue itself of vice must pardon beg,
Yea, curb and woo for leave to do him good.
III.iv.144-55

Or to quote Chaucer's Parson: "no wight that excuseth hym wilfully of his synne may nat been delivered of his synne, till that he mekely biknoweth his synne" (p.585).

As Langland says, the just man sins seven times a day (PP. x.21). The medieval writers presented sin on such a broad canvas that almost any reader can identify some of his or her own sins. According to the Parson, it is a sin to eat, drink, speak and sleep too much, to be late for church, to disregard the needs of the poor, to "apparel" food "moore deliciously than nede is", to promise what we cannot perform (CT. x.380): especially in the festive season, I am guilty of all these. Langland's Sloth prefers "rhymes of Robin Hood" to his prayers, isn't sorry for his sins, doesn't visit the sick or pay his servants. He has "...spoiled many a time both flesh and fish...bread and ale, butter, milk and cheese, forslothed in my service, and set the house afire" (vii.48-54). I remember this passage every time I clean the fridge.

Dante's sinners come from every age of history, and, drawing on classical and Christian thinkers, he illuminates the nature of sin. Sin is due to perverted love. Avarice, gluttony and lechery arise from excessive love of earthly goods. Sloth is caused by insufficient love of divine good. The spiritual sins of Pride, Envy and Wrath are the worst because they are negative, involving love of someone else's harm (xvii.91-139).

The ABC Dramas lack the breadth and tradition of the medieval texts - all the sinners are white and, apart from "Envy", middle class. There is no virtue, no mention of grace, and the sins are narrower and less serious: Envy becomes sexual jealousy; Sloth is merely the unwillingness to change; "Gluttony", includes the gluttony of the embryo, the feeding frenzies of the mother, and the father's passion for Calypso music, which as a friend points out, is the nicest thing about him - these are not really sins at all.

The only characters in the Dramas who know they are sinning are Laura and Tom in "Greed": Laura clearly feels guilty at each stage, and Tom admits, "I have appetites that exceed the bounds of good taste. So sue me, I'm human". This is fairly typical of the humanist attitude which trivialises sin. The series as a whole tends to trivialise sin by using distracting narrative devices. "Gluttony" includes ludicrous interpolations on pregnancy by waiters and gaolbirds. "Pride" portrays an actress portraying an actress portraying a woman talking about her marriage. "Wrath" is a palindrome playing on the nature of time. Without the titles, it would be hard to recognise that these films are about sin. This all makes it less likely that viewers will recognise their own sins. But then the aim of the Dramas is to entertain sinners, not to convert them.

The Dramas ignore the idea that spiritual sinners, rather than desiring a good for themselves, desire another's harm. Pride becomes pride in the appearance of a perfect relationship, and the wife clearly wants a good - the preservation of her marriage. In "Envy", Kerry is motivated by the desire to hang on to her lover, not by gratuitous resentment of other women. She is not as mean as the truly envious, who in Dante's Purgatory have their eyelids sewn together with iron wire, because they rejoiced more in another's hurt than in their own good fortune (*Purgatorio*, xiii.110-11). Dante says that a wrathful man "becomes greedy of vengeance, and ... must needs contrive another's harm" (*Purgatorio*, xvii.121-3). There is no sense of this in the film: Eve does not desire another's harm; her anger is downplayed to the point where it seems merely an irritable response to stress; the moral damage is caused by adultery rather than anger; and the disaster of the child's death is clearly accidental.

If you were to see "Pride", "Envy", and "Wrath" without their titles, you might think they were all about lust. The same predominance of lust is evident in Alex Skovron's recent poem, "A caffeine addict considers creation". Here anger is fuelled by gluttony, which is a surrogate for sex. The poet is "proud to be a Connoisseur of Sin ... can tell the odour of adultery from incest's reek", and envies himself for the lustful excesses of the day before, as well as envying the younger sex objects on TV ads. Covetousness is purely sexual, and sloth involves a "tendency ... to languish, to luxuriate." The Latin word *luxuria* means lechery.

The permissive society is more concerned with lust than with pride, which means that pride is not properly understood. As Matthew Fox said in a recent talk on spiritual sins, anthropocentrism, colonialism,

racism, and sexism are all forms of pride. For the Middle Ages, pride is the fundamental sin, the sin of Lucifer, Adam and Eve, the sin which refuses to be subject to God (ST. II-II.cxlii.6). As the Parson points out, by refusing to subject his reason to God, man destroys the divine order, reason loses control over sensuality and the body, and all the other sins follow (CT. x.265). In the modern world, pride lies at the heart of moral relativism, the elevation of individual conscience as the only guide, the refusal to take the notion of sin seriously.

For Chaucer, Pride included disobedience, bragging about good deeds, and conspicuous consumption - of horses, feasts, excessive clothing, "trailynge in the donge and in the mire", or scanty clothing that shows the buttocks "as it were the hyndre part of a she-ape in the fulle of the moone. And mooreover, the wrecched swollen membres that they shewe ... in departynge if hire hoses in whit and red ... then semeth it ... that half the partie of hire privee membres were corrupt by the fir of seint Antony, or by cancre ... that partie of hir body ther as they purgen hir stynkynge ordure, that foule partie shewe they to the peple proudly, in despit of honestitee..." (p.425).

This linking of pride and what we might normally class as avarice is interesting because the two modern versions demote avarice as well as pride. Skovron's poem gives covetousness a purely sexual meaning, so that avarice completely disappears from his list. In the Dramas, avarice is replaced by "Greed". Laura uses the house and clothing of another woman, not really out of avarice, but because she wishes to escape into another persona. Her real sin is pride in her own virtue: as Tom says, "You think you're the queen of the ethical universe". Tom deflates this by setting Laura up to commit adultery, and Laura is rewarded by conceiving with Tom when she is unable to with her husband. Lust again usurps the role of avarice.

Yet Western society is perhaps more avaricious now than it has ever been. Because of our failure to value the eternal goods of religion and morality, we fill the void with worldly goods - food, drink, sexual permissiveness, and gambling. A reporter recently described how she and a professional blackjack player used pseudonyms, disguise, and an "uncle and niece routine" to persuade Las Vegas casino staff that they were unskilled players. She comments "I had to remind myself we were performers, not cheats ... in the rush of new experiences, I discerned one thing clearly: if anyone's earnings were immoral, it was the casinos" (Benjamin, 1993).

George Eliot in *Daniel Deronda* condemned gambling because it makes a gain from another's loss (ch.29). Today, despite knowing the

dangers of crime syndicates and addiction to gambling, we build casinos, buy scratchies, play lotto and the pokies. Several times a year, a charity sends a glossy brochure inviting me to buy raffle tickets for a mansion complete with swimming pool, tennis court, billiard table, gold bars, a luxury car and a flat on the Gold Coast. Is this what charity has come to mean?

Matthew Fox, talking of conspicuous consumption and advertising, says that our society has institutionalised avarice (1992). We have the lavish extravaganza of the Olympics, and calculate the cost of winning "gold" for Australia. Although we cannot keep our promises to increase aid to the third world, we can afford to buy larger and larger houses, more and more microwaves, videos, and designer clothing. The temple of modern society in these pursy times is the shopping mall, often underground, its hordes of shoppers swarming down escalators like something in a vision of hell by Hieronymus Bosch. We do not understand our sins, and so we are stuck with them.

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