

THE UNIVERSITY OF MANITOBA

A STUDY OF SIN AS SELF-ABNEGATION IN  
CONTEMPORARY THEOLOGY:  
With Special Reference To  
Liberation Theology, Langdon Gilkey,  
Karl Rahner And John Cobb, Jr.

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## ABSTRACT

A STUDY OF SIN AS SELF-ABNEGATION IN  
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This thesis examines the notion of sin as self-abnegation as it is delineated in various theologies of liberation, and investigates whether this understanding of sin is addressed by contemporary Christian theology as represented in the writings of Langdon Gilkey, Karl Rahner, and John B. Cobb, Jr.

Chapter One establishes and presents the contention found in various theologies of liberation, that there is a moment of sin involved in the abnegation of the self, and that this sin is especially characteristic of oppressed and marginalized persons. To confirm this claim, I briefly examine some major representatives of feminist theology, Latin American theology, Black theology and Gay theology. Within this body of theological literature it is argued that self-abnegation involves a perception of the self as less than fully human, and acquiescence to the socio-cultural forces that compel such a perception. This condition is regarded as sin for three basic reasons: First, because self-abnegation is an offence against the

image of God which Christian theology has always regarded, in some way or another, as constitutive of our created being; secondly, self-abnegation violates the structure of human existence; thirdly, self-abnegation involves an abdication of responsibility for self-transcendence, self-determination, and self-actualization.

Chapters 2-4 examine the understanding of sin which is present in the theologies of Langdon Gilkey, Karl Rahner, and John Cobb, Jr., and determine their relevancy to the notion of sin as self-abnegation. This representation reflects the sensibilities of three very influential theological perspectives on the contemporary scene, namely, Christian Realism, transcendental Thomism, and Whiteheadian process theology. The investigation of this literature establishes that, contrary to the claim of several liberation theologians, Christian theology comprehends and is able to speak to the problem of self-abnegation.

Chapter Five clarifies the contextual factors which determined the development of the discussion of the sin of self-abnegation, and assesses the respective contributions of Gilkey, Rahner, and Cobb to this discussion. It is resolved that the common factor which determines the widespread recognition of the transgression involved in self-abnegation, is the conviction that it profanes the dignity, integrity, and worth of human reality created in the image of God.



## TABLE OF CONTENTS

PREFACE . . . . .	ii.
INTRODUCTION . . . . .	1.
Notes . . . . .	11.
CHAPTER	
I. LIBERATION THEOLOGY AND THE PROBLEM OF SIN . . . . .	12.
The Feminist Perspective . . . . .	12.
Self-Abnegation in the Experience of Women . . . . .	16.
The Latin American Perspective . . . . .	23.
The Black Liberationist Perspective . . . . .	30.
The Gay Liberationist Perspective . . . . .	35.
Notes . . . . .	41.
II. LANGDON GILKEY'S UNDERSTANDING OF SIN . . . . .	49.
The Christian Realist Influence . . . . .	49.
Gilkey's Early Statement on the Nature of Sin . . . . .	57.
Gilkey's Theological Anthropology . . . . .	64.
Gilkey's Understanding of Sin Revisited . . . . .	71.
Notes . . . . .	77.
III. KARL RAHNER'S UNDERSTANDING OF SIN . . . . .	84.
The Transcendental Experience . . . . .	84.
The Meaning of Transcendental Freedom . . . . .	90.
The Aim of Transcendental Grace . . . . .	98.
Rahner's Understanding of Salvation . . . . .	105.
Sin Within the Transcendental Experience . . . . .	110.
Notes . . . . .	123.
IV. JOHN COBB'S UNDERSTANDING OF SIN . . . . .	130.
The Whiteheadian and Feminist Influence . . . . .	130.
The Process View of Reality . . . . .	134.
The Process Doctrine of God . . . . .	140.
The Process Understanding of the Structure of Human Life . . . . .	151.
Sin in a Process Perspective . . . . .	157.
Notes . . . . .	166.
V. CONCLUSION . . . . .	176.
Notes . . . . .	208.
SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY . . . . .	213.

## PREFACE

My experience as both an undergraduate and graduate student in the Department of Religion, University of Manitoba, has shaped my thinking in ways still too deep for me to name. As the scope of this thesis suggests, each of my professors has made a unique contribution to my theological development. From them I have learned not only to appreciate the wide range of issues and concerns which taken together compose the discipline of Religious Studies, but I have also learned intellectual integrity and independent thinking. What more can education hope to accomplish but this! In a sense, this thesis represents a synthesis of the learning and insights which I have acquired through several years of lectures, seminars, discussions, debate, and study. In the final analysis, however, the responsibility for every word is my own.

I am also indebted to the members of my committee who readily agreed to guide and monitor my progress in the writing of this thesis. They are: Professor Klaus K. Klostermaier, Professor H. Gordon Harland, Professor Pamela J. Milne, Professor J. Brenton Stearns, Professor John M. Badertscher, and Professor Egil Grisliis, my faithful

advisor who has nurtured me throughout my academic career with encouragement, support, and challenge. From him I have learned to plumb the depths of every theological issue, and I am privileged to call him friend.

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The sustenance and love of friends, family and classmates have been invaluable to me during the course of my graduate work. For whenever I wavered, they were always there to set me on my feet again. In particular, I wish to thank my parents Jack and Irene Kapac for their generosity, their patience, and their understanding.

## INTRODUCTION

The issue of the relevance of theology to the modern world has now long been a preferred theme among theologians in the twentieth century. Familiar manifestations of this concern on the North American scene have been the broad petitions for the appreciation of the existential, the socio-cultural, and the historically relative aspects of existence characteristic of such movements as the Social Gospel, Christian Realism, Death of God theology, and most recently, Liberation theology.<sup>1</sup> As this trend continues, the demand for particularity and concreteness becomes evermore pronounced, and the once universal scope of theology suffers significant attenuation. The corollary of the demand for concreteness, however, is the admittance that the visions of theologians are affected by the particularities of their collective and personal experiences as male or female, black or white, and powerful or powerless.

If the experience of the theologian is subject to contingencies, then it can also be argued, so too are the paradigms which he adopts as illustrative of a particular concept or reality. And, it is precisely this circumstance which invites the task of this thesis, which is, to re-think the concept of sin.

Most recently, it has been charged by feminists that the traditional and predominant understanding of sin in terms of pride does not do justice to the experience of women. The impetus behind this contention can be traced back to an article by Valerie Saiving Goldstein which first appeared in 1960, and which has since come to be regarded as a landmark in feminist theology. Her essay "The Human Situation: A Feminine View",<sup>2</sup> was among the first attempts to place theology within the specific context of women's lives. Critical of the analyses of the human situation (and the corresponding concepts of sin and love) in the theologies of Reinhold Niebuhr and Anders Nygren, Goldstein argued that their respective assessments were at best partial, and at worst unrelated to the experiences of women in general. That is, she contended that the predominant theological understanding of sin in terms of pride, self-aggrandizement, and self-centeredness, (the aggressive patterns of human behaviour) more aptly depicted the temptations of men than it did women's. Goldstein observed that:

. . . the temptations of woman as woman are not the same as the temptations of man as man, and the specifically feminine forms of sin . . . - have a quality which can never be encompassed by such terms as "pride" and "will-to-power". They are better suggested by such items as triviality, distractibility, and diffuseness; lack of an organizing center or focus; dependence on others for one's own self-

definition; tolerance at the expense of standards of excellence; inability to respect the boundaries of privacy; sentimentality, gossipy sociability, and mistrust of reason - in short, underdevelopment or negation of the self.<sup>3</sup>

However, the real significance of Goldstein's observation does not lie in its characterization of the female personality per se. Rather, its primary significance lies in the disclosure of a peculiar form of behaviour which is apparent among other groups besides women, especially oppressed, marginalized, and minority groups. Hence, as this thesis will demonstrate, Goldstein's analysis of sin as underdevelopment or negation of the self is not only echoed in subsequent feminist theology, but is also paralleled in various other theologies of liberation, and even, to a greater or lesser degree, in more traditional theologies which are concerned to address the contemporary scene.

There are several methodological premises which have determined the scope, direction, and content of the discussion of this thesis and which therefore require brief explanation. To begin with, I wish to clarify what is intended by the phrase "abnegation of the self" or "self-abnegation". Language of course, is often ambiguous in its connotations and, at first glance, the term self-abnegation may conjure up both negative and positive associations. To treat the positive first, there is no

doubt that Christian spirituality has long maintained some ideal of self-denial both in the mystical sense (wherein absorption of the self into God or the infinite exists as a possibility), and in the ethical sense (wherein the concern is for regard of others). The discussion of sin as self-abnegation is not primarily intended to disparage either of these ideals though admittedly, it certainly stands in tension with them, particularly with the ethical association. Basically however, the notion of sin as self-abnegation exists as a corrective antithesis to the historical and practical preoccupation with identifying SIN as PRIDE. Yet, I must underscore the fact that this is not merely a theoretical quibble. On the contrary, self-abnegation is perceived to be a real and serious problem among certain people insofar as it entails subordination, vacuousness, moral and spiritual immaturity, diffidence, fearfulness, passivity, dependence, inauthenticity, acquiescence, stagnation and even in extreme circumstances, self-abasement. In connection with this, Philip Green has noted that "the real condition of being a 'minority' is precisely to be perceived as something less than fully human, above all less than fully independent."<sup>4</sup> When this perception of the self is internalized by any individual or group of individuals,

and when the conditions that compel such a perception are acquiesced to, the sin of self-abnegation discloses itself. Therefore, it is in reference to this specific condition (and in keeping with the language of Goldstein and others) that the terminology of self-abnegation is to be understood.

The second issue which requires clarification is the identification of self-abnegation with sin. Though the problem of the abnegation of the self assumes a certain psychological connotation, in the minds of a great many theologians, it has implications beyond the purely psychological concern for mental health or a good self-image. In fact, in the discussion of this thesis, self-abnegation implies disruption on at least three other levels by virtue of which the specifically theological designation of "sin" is warranted. There is first of all the distinctly religious level or dimension of sin which has received classic expression in the formula "estrangement or alienation from God, self, and others". In this context, underdevelopment or abnegation of the self may be regarded as sin insofar as it is operative as a violation of, or offence against, the image of God (*imago Dei*) which traditional Christian theology has always considered, in some way or another, as constitutive of our created being. It will be argued



that the abnegation of the self (1) contradicts God's intention for human life, (2) violates the structure of human existence, and (3) diminishes community in general. Secondly, sin encompasses a distinctly moral dimension which presupposes volitional capacities on the part of individual men and women. Accordingly, it may be argued that self-abnegation is effective as sin insofar as it involves an abdication of responsibility for transcendence, autonomous moral development, decision, judgment, and effective<sup>5</sup> acts of love and justice. Finally, there is the third level of sin's operation which is the social dimension. This dimension refers particularly to injustices embedded in institutional structures. Admittance of this aspect of sin, however, inevitably works to complicate the diagnosis of the type of sin suggested by self-abnegation. That is, for reasons both methodological and strategic, the social analysis of sin characteristic of much liberation theology will tend to focus more on the culpability of powerful structures, institutions and persons than it will on the apathy and fears of relatively powerless persons which foster collusion with an oppressive system. This of course is a necessary corrective to analyses of the human situation that would end up locating all responsibility for injustice and oppression in our permanently "fallen nature". The

dangers threatening this kind of assessment are those of blaming victims for their plight, regarding all evils as irremediable, and dampening all initiative towards developing more just and humane living conditions. However, and as the following chapter will attempt to demonstrate, the recognition of the social dimension of sin among liberation theologians does not preclude their further cognizance of the degree of complicity on the part of those participating in a sinful situation effected by the sin of self-abnegation. Moreover, this particular temptation is considered to be the product of a general Christian ethos which promotes quiescence, not least of all in the incessant warnings against sins of pride. This becomes most evident in the widespread disenchantment with and subsequent refutation of traditional Christian values and virtues in the theologies being developed by and for marginalized communities.

This introduces a third feature of the discussion which requires some comment, namely, the choice of theological representation. As I suggested earlier, the once universal scope of theology has suffered significant attenuation. Paradoxically, this development has proven both a bane and a blessing for contemporary theology. On the one hand, it has sharpened our awareness that any given theology may be limited in terms of its

outlook, its address, and therefore also in its authority and relevancy. It is unlikely to be meaningful to all situations, to all peoples, or for all times. On the other hand, however, if theologians are cognizant of the significant particularities shaping their experience of reality, they are in a better position to articulate both the ultimate and practical concerns of those who participate in a similar existence. The theological vision arising from a shared and common experience will enjoy an especial credence and pertinence. Still, the question arises, given all these variables and contingencies of experience: is it possible to indicate precisely what theology consists in, to determine wherein lies its unique task? In this consideration I have been guided by David Tracy's delineation of the revisionist model of theology in his Blessed Rage For Order.<sup>6</sup> As Tracy explains it:

. . . the revisionist model holds that a contemporary fundamental Christian theology can best be described as philosophical reflection upon the meanings present in common human experience and language,<sup>7</sup> and upon the meanings present in the Christian fact.

With greater or lesser acumen, all of the several theologians examined in this thesis engage in the kind of activity which Tracy has specified as theology. Though their emphases and concerns differ, the presence of these two resources of human experience and the Christian fact,

remains constant and pervasive. The value of Tracy's understanding of the task of theology is that it both establishes a distinct criterion, and yet leaves room for a diversity of expression.

These clarifications having been made, it is now possible to outline what this thesis intends. Chapter One will establish and present the contention found in various theologies of liberation, that there is a moment of sin involved in the abnegation of the self, and that this sin is especially characteristic of marginalized and oppressed persons. To this end, my method will consist in an examination of the understanding of sin present in feminist, Latin American, Black, and Gay liberation theologies. The choice of this specific representation was influenced by two basic considerations: firstly, because the communities they represent are recognizable as distinct social groups who have suffered oppression and who have been dispossessed of opportunities for power and dominance which generally characterize sins of pride; and secondly, because there exists a significant body of theological literature which purports to speak on behalf of these distinct communities.

This having been established, Chapters 2-4 will attempt to determine whether contemporary Christian theology

is either concerned or able to comprehend and address the transgression involved in self-abnegation. To this end, I purpose to investigate the view of sin that is present among representative thinkers of three distinct schools of thought. Chapter Two will concentrate on the understanding of sin espoused by Langdon Gilkey as a contemporary spokesperson for Christian Realism, and will comment on its suitability in speaking to the problem of self-abnegation. Chapter Three will first consider Karl Rahner's treatment of sin within the context of transcendental Thomism, and then endeavour to ascertain its adequacy in addressing the dilemma of self-abnegation as depicted in liberation theology in general. Chapter Four will focus on John B. Cobb's understanding of sin as it reflects the Whiteheadian Process perspective, and attempt to determine its relevancy to the discussion of the abnegation of the self.

Chapter Five, as a concluding statement, will primarily intend the following: (1) to clarify the context of the discussion as it develops; (2) to evaluate the respective contributions of Gilkey, Rahner, and Cobb to the analysis of sin as self-abnegation; and (3) to correlate the results of the investigation of this thesis. In essence, what this discussion hopes to confirm is the fact that, "Sin may flourish and grace abound where they have not yet been suspected."<sup>8</sup>

## NOTES

### INTRODUCTION

<sup>1</sup>The same concern, of course, is patent also in the more systematic metaphysical and philosophical theologies of such thinkers as Paul Tillich, Karl Rahner, and the Whiteheadian process theologians.

<sup>2</sup>Valerie Saiving Goldstein, "The Human Situation: A Feminine View," in Womanspirit Rising, eds., Carol P. Christ & Judith Plaskow, (San Francisco: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1979), pp. 25-42. Originally published in The Journal Of Religion, April, 1960, pp. 100-112.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 37. (emphasis mine)

<sup>4</sup>Philip Green, "The New Individualism", in Christianity & Crisis 41 (March 1981), p. 75.

<sup>5</sup>In the theologies of liberation consulted herein, effective acts of love and justice may entail violence and are often contrasted with ineffective acts of love such as charity and patience, etc., which are thought to accomplish little in the way of structural reforms. James Cone, e.g., writes: "Christian love is never fully embodied in an act. Love is the motive or the rationale for action. The attempt of some to measure love exclusively by specific actions, such as non-violence, is theologically incorrect." Black Theology And Black Power (New York: Seabury Press, 1969), p. 55.

<sup>6</sup>David Tracy, Blessed Rage For Order (New York: Seabury Press, 1978), see esp. chap. 3, pp. 43-63.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., p. 43.

<sup>8</sup>Judith Plaskow, "Sex, Sin And Grace: Women's Experience And The Theologies Of Reinhold Niebuhr And Paul Tillich" (Ph.D. dissertation, Yale University, 1975), p. 283.

## CHAPTER I

### LIBERATION THEOLOGY AND THE PROBLEM OF SIN

#### The Feminist Perspective

It is significant that among the first Yale dissertations on feminist theology was one explicitly concerned with the inadequacy of the traditional understanding of sin as pride to women's experience.<sup>1</sup> Judith Plaskow began her thesis "Sex, Sin And Grace"<sup>2</sup> by accepting and amplifying Valerie Saiving Goldsteins's identification of women's sin with the failure to take responsibility for becoming a self, that is, self-abnegation.<sup>3</sup> Unlike Goldstein, however, who tended to see the difference in the experiences of men and women pertinent to the discussion of sin as "rooted quite solidly in biology",<sup>4</sup> Plaskow focused on the socio-cultural factors which were responsible for the divergent temptations of the sexes. Primary among such socio-cultural factors, were the male characterizations of women given in textbooks, popular magazines, literature, psychological theory, historical works, and theology, and their influence in shaping women's self-conceptions. For Plaskow argued that if a

condition like underdevelopment or abnegation of the self were really inherent in the feminine persona, it could not properly be considered sinful at the same time.<sup>5</sup>

The emphasis placed on socio-cultural factors is indicative of a disinclination to become entangled in the moot question of the "natural" difference between groups of human beings. Or in other words, in the "nature versus nurture" debate, the latter argument enjoys more ready acceptance in feminist theory. However, this predilection is not unique to feminist theology, but is shared by other liberation theologies, whether the particular subjects under discussion be characterized by sex, class, race, or sexual orientation. The disinclination to cede priority to the nature side of the argument is not haphazard, but is reflective of several significant methodological considerations. Briefly, these include the following: (1) There is certainly no consensus among those engaged in the anthropological disciplines as to just what constitutes or defines essential human nature, let alone essential female or male nature. The combinations of factors material or mental, biological or cultural, formative of any anthropology are vast, as is, for example, the discrepancy between the socio-biologist's account of human nature on the one hand, and that of the



theologian on the other. It is for this reason that among the several theologians examined in this thesis, there appears a marked preference to speak of anthropology, humanness, or the structure of human existence, rather than human nature. (2) Even if, for the sake of argument, personal and psychological differences (as they derive from nature) between sexes, ethnic groups, races and classes could be said to exist, these have become so overlaid with ideological and mythological superstructures as to become virtually irretrievable. (3) Theological anthropologies in general, and the discussion of sin in particular, necessarily entail questions of value and transcendence. Seldom have Christian thinkers or other moralists consistently advocated that matters of goodness, oughtness, and righteousness be determined solely on the basis of "nature"<sup>6</sup>, (and especially not a fallen nature) in whatever that might be thought to consist. That is, even if the facts about nature were relatively clear, they do not necessarily point to or ensure the optimal living arrangements which a society ought to seek to pursue and establish. (4) Finally, and underlying all the above considerations, one can discern among the several theologians discussed in this thesis, the ascendancy of a world view which perceives all reality (including human

reality) more in terms of process, novelty, openness to the future, indeterminacy, and relativity, than in terms of an essential, given, unchangeable nature or prototype.

Returning, however, to the specific feminist concern that is the dubiousness of moral and behavioural prescriptions assigned to women on the basis of their gender or biology, Janet Radcliffe Richards aptly captures the absurdity which threatens discussions of "the natural" with her observation:

If "natural for" or "according to the nature of" something means "that which stems from its nature alone, without outside influence" it follows that nothing could possibly be in a natural state; everything is always in some environment or another and influenced by other things all the time . . . . If your pursuit of natural woman, for instance, led you to try to suspend her in empty space away from all influences, she would just die.

Thus, any characteristics or faults once regarded as expressive of the peculiar feminine persona or nature, are rather now considered illustrative of the fact that such are the logical consequences attaching to human beings whose horizons have been limited by the artificial socio-cultural expectations concerning them. Simone de Beauvoir, for instance, has noted that,

Many of the faults for which women are reproached - mediocrity, laziness, frivolity, servility - simply express the fact that their horizon is closed.

It will become clear that it is the very unnecessary and contingent nature of such "faults" which brands them as sin.

## Self-Abnegation in the Experience of Women

The renunciation of the self, and the related qualities of selflessness, service, sacrifice, humility, charity, humbleness, tolerance, forbearance, and patience, have long been lauded as preeminent Christian virtues with but one notable exception. The almost uniform testimony among nineteenth and twentieth century feminists concerning the dangers of self-abnegation in women's lives is remarkable indeed.

Elizabeth Cady Stanton, for example, has harsh words for those biblical stories which seemed to glorify and encourage submissive behaviour, particularly in women. Her preferred rendition of the story of Jephthah, who offered his daughter as a sacrifice to the LORD in order to honor a prior vow (Judges 11:30-40), poignantly captures the essence of her criticism. She remarked:

We often hear people laud the beautiful submission and the self-sacrifice of this nameless maiden. To me it is pitiful and painful. . . . I would have the daughter receive the father's confession with a stubborn rebuke saying: "I will not consent to such a sacrifice. Your vow must be disallowed. You may sacrifice your own life as you please, but you have no right over mine . . . I consider that God has made me the arbiter of my own fate and all my possibilities . . . . My first duty is to develop all the powers given to me and to make the most of myself and my own life. Self-development is a higher duty than self-sacrifice."

This precise sensibility radically pervades the writings of contemporary feminists as well. Mary Daly,

for instance, contends that self-abnegation perpetuates the subordination of women vis-à-vis men. She explains:

Much of the traditional morality in our society appears to be the product of reactions on the part of men - perhaps guilty reactions - to the behavioral excesses of the stereotypic male. There has been a theoretical one-sided emphasis upon charity, meekness, obedience, humility, self-abnegation, sacrifice, service. Part of the problem with this moral ideology is that it became accepted not by men but by women, who hardly have been helped by an ethic which reinforces the abject female situation . . . . A mark of the duplicity of this situation is the fact that women, who according to the fables of our culture (the favorable ones, as opposed to those that stress the 'evil' side of the stereotype) should be living embodiments of the virtues it extols,<sup>10</sup> are rarely admitted to positions of leadership.

Similarly, Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite maintains that women who attempt to escape or resist relationships of subservience to men, are told that Christian women ought to be meek and forgiving, and that to claim rights for themselves is the sin of pride.<sup>11</sup> Valerie Saiving Goldstein argues that self-abnegation among women frequently results in female vacuousness, or the establishment of a "chameleon-like creature" who responds to others but has no personal identity of her own. She observes:

. . . a woman can give too much of herself, so that nothing remains of her own uniqueness; she can become merely an emptiness, almost a zero; without value to herself, to her fellow men, or perhaps even to God.<sup>12</sup>

Again, Penelope Washbourn asserts that the denigration of self-love by centuries of Christian culture, and concomi-

tantly, the inability of women to affirm and love themselves, which is fostered by self-abnegation, results in insecure, parasitic, and manipulative attempts to love others.<sup>13</sup> In a word, according to Germaine Greer, self-abnegation in the lives of women promotes moral and spiritual immaturity and perversity.<sup>14</sup>

The specific feminist criticism of such as are the consequences of self-abnegation in the experience of women is not merely that they are the unfortunate by-products of otherwise ethical and meritorious behaviour. Rather, the specific accusation is that self-abnegation in the lives of women bespeaks a situation of frustrated and inauthentic existence. Germaine Greer captures the essence of the feminist indictment with her observation that,

So long as women must live vicariously, through men, they must labour at making themselves indispensable and this is the full-time job that is wrongly called altruism. Properly speaking, altruism is an absurdity. Women are self-sacrificing in direct proportion to their incapacity to offer anything but this sacrifice. They sacrifice what they never had: a self.

. . . The altruism of women is merely the inauthenticity of the feminine person carried over into behaviour.<sup>15</sup>

"Inauthentic existence", however, is easily translatable into the theological language of sin in its three-fold level of operation.<sup>16</sup> In connection with this, Mary Daly is but one of many who would contend that "it is the creative potential itself in human beings that is the image

of God."<sup>17</sup> In this context, the suppression of whatever creative potential is there to be actualized can only be regarded as a violation of the very image of God. The offence involved in self-abnegating behaviour is further demonstrable in more strictly logical and ethical terms which concur with the second dimension of sin's operation, namely, moral irresponsibility. For example, Janet Radcliffe Richards, as a philosopher, points out:

There cannot be a greater goodness, or a greater value of any sort in any woman's doing less good than she is capable of. A decision to devote oneself to the service of someone else, with no consideration of whether he is worth serving, is not the highest goodness but a total abnegation of morality.<sup>18</sup>

Clearly, limits to altruism must be set, and this requires critical judgment, discernment, decision and choice on the part of those for whom self-abnegation is presented as the norm of ethical and Christian behaviour. More exactly, the point that is being made is not that regard for others is inappropriate, but rather, that self-abnegation ought not to be regarded as the paragon of Christian virtue (or any other kind of virtue), nor as a panacea for potentially explosive situations or even lesser conflicts between individuals. For, in fact, it may foster more harm than good. The proper task of ethicists then ought to be the development of criteria

for discerning those situations in which an ethos of self-denial might be legitimate and appropriate. In this regard, those feminists (and other liberation theologians) concerned with ethical issues are prepared to say that sacrifice is almost never legitimate when it is demanded or expected of persons already dispossessed of economic, political and social power. For as Barbara Hilkert Andolsen has noted:

. . . idealization of sacrifice has played a role in the victimization of women. This suggests that sacrifice is often inappropriate for the disadvantaged. Sacrifice by the privileged on behalf of the oppressed is much more likely to be justified.<sup>19</sup>

This perception is indicative of an awareness that self-abnegation may also perpetuate sin in its social manifestations. That is, whether inadvertently or intentionally, the representation of self-abnegation as an ideal for human existence, may stifle natural impulses towards freedom, autonomy, and justice, by insinuating that such impulses are selfish, aggressive, impatient and not in keeping with Jesus' suffering example. In connection with this, Joan Arnold Romero remarks:

What was meant to be preached to the rich and powerful, and thus to be a potent force for change, when preached to the poor becomes a continuation of the suffering of the poor and the oppressed. By such preaching the hunger and thirst for justice has been castrated by becoming an impotent longing for the hereafter. Willy-nilly, theology is linked with politics, and we had better discover<sup>20</sup> and make explicit what the connections are.

It was within this context then, that Judith Plaskow developed her thesis that the traditional emphasis on sin as pride, characteristic of the theologies of Paul Tillich and Reinhold Niebuhr, not only ignored the sin of self-abnegation, but in fact elevated it to the status of a virtue. In so doing, Plaskow argued, theology done by men was responsible for encouraging and reinforcing among women behaviour that is in the long run detrimental to the development of mature individuals who would live responsibly before self, God, and others. My specific concern is not for the validity of Plaskow's critique of the theologies of Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Tillich. Rather, I am more interested in her observation that the theological insistence that the refusal to become selfless is sinful, serves to condemn those women who have discovered that their needs are not entirely fulfilled by meeting the needs of others. For example, the mother and wife may be made to feel guilty upon realizing that the self-giving love expected of her by children, spouse, and society in general, does not constitute the whole meaning of her life. If she believes the theological prescriptions concerning self-abnegation, she may feel obliged to overcome her want of separateness, and may attempt a life of unremitting self-sacrifice, though this to no salutary end. Plaskow therefore concluded:



. . . pride is only one human sin. Human nature as finite freedom imposes a danger but it also imposes a responsibility. Human beings can ignore their finitude, but they can also fail to live up to the obligations of their freedom. The refusal of self-transcendence ought to be, if one uses Niebuhr's categories, no less a sin than pride - a sin against oneself, against other persons, and against God. If pride is the attempt to usurp the place of God,<sup>21</sup> sensuality is the denial of creation in his image.

Plaskow's use of the term "sensuality", however, needs to be qualified. It does not, in the context of women's lives, present itself as a consequence or derivative of the sin of pride as in the theology of Reinhold Niebuhr.<sup>22</sup> She comments:

He [Niebuhr] focuses only on those aspects of sensuality which do seem to follow from pride, entirely neglecting important dimensions of the human flight from freedom. He is thus unable to speak to or evaluate those patterns of human behaviour<sup>23</sup> which are particularly characteristic of women.

Plaskow's aetiology differs from traditional accounts of sensuality in that she regards that condition that is "lostness in the world's vitalities" as a consequence of underdevelopment of the self, that is, self-abnegation.<sup>24</sup> This perspective is particularly interesting in view of the fact that sensuality and its expressions in carnality, licentiousness, gluttony and drunkenness, etc., have popularly been thought to characterize not only women, but other marginalized groups including the poor, the Black, and the homosexual. Rosemary Radford Ruether notes even further:

. . . the rejected group is always pictured as passive, dependent, unstable, emotional, potentially vicious, subject to unrestrained passions, lacking in true intelligence and reasoning power. All of this is summed up in the conclusion<sup>25</sup> that the group is not fully or truly "human".

According to the feminist perspective then, the condition that is "not being fully or truly human" is a consequence of self-abnegation. For this reason it has been called sin. What remains to be determined, is whether or not this feminist insight into the transgression involved the negation of the self is at all paralleled in the understanding of sin present in other theologies of liberation.

#### The Latin American Perspective

Theology done in the Latin American context is, of course, replete with analyses of the sin of the oppressor. By and large, the sin of the oppressor cannot help but be regarded as in some sense the consequence of pride, self-aggrandizement, selfishness and even malevolence. Furthermore, the methodological bias of many Latin American liberationists ( that is, especially Marxist class analysis) places a priority on economics and the socio-cultural context of theologizing. Leonardo Boff, for example, declares:

Liberation theology begins with an analytical, sociological, and structural reading of reality that is as scientific as possible.<sup>26</sup>

Accordingly, the psychology of the oppressed does not always receive as explicit attention as does the analysis of oppressive structures.<sup>27</sup> Oppressive structures are, of course, powerful structures, and their fault is seldom one of underdevelopment. As well, there is often a tendency in Latin American liberation theology to deal with people as groups or classes rather than as individuals. This, too, is necessitated by reasons of practicality and survival; that is, both in theory and in praxis, considerations of the individual's needs sometimes have to take second place to the urgent needs of an entire community. However, whatever subordination is required of an individual's needs is never regarded as good in itself, but is only a temporary measure which facilitates a tangible end.

Nevertheless, certain recurring themes pervade Latin American liberation theology which conduce towards an understanding of sin in terms of underdevelopment, self-abnegation, passivity, acquiescence, and the refusal of transcendence, and which, therefore, parallel the feminist perspective on sin. The most notable of these is the argument that economic, political and cultural dependency of poor nations upon the wealthier, or of the poor within each nation upon their more powerful compatriots,

bespeaks a condition of sin.<sup>28</sup> Conversely, autonomy, pride, self-definition and self-determination, (the antipodes of self-abnegation) are thought to constitute in some measure the substance of salvific liberation and the experience of grace. Moreover, at this point the Latin American theologians evince the same general dissatisfaction with traditional Christian morality as did the feminists considered in the above pages.

Leonardo Boff maintains:

Such Christian values as humility, submissiveness and the shouldering of Christ's cross were presented in ideological terms so that they ended up underpinning the status quo and castrating the people's potential for liberative reaction.<sup>29</sup>

Not surprisingly, it is again the specific traditional catechesis of sin that is thought to obstruct the effective realization of the very order of love and justice which Christianity purports to defend. Juan Luis Segundo, for example, writes:

. . . our traditional catechesis on sin . . . operates in only one sense insofar as class struggle is concerned. It becomes a natural ally and component of the mentality of the dominant class, justifying every unfavorable judgment passed on the violent and illegal vindications to which exploited people are often reduced in order to affirm their rights and their dignity.<sup>30</sup>

Consequently, the Latin American theologians argue that any ethos which fosters slavish behaviour and the uncritical acceptance of the values of the prevailing system, is

an ethos that enjoins sinful existence on the religious, moral, and societal horizons. Leonardo Boff's concept of "disgrace"<sup>31</sup> (i.e., sin), for example, as entailing "a lack of encounter", "refusal to dialogue", and naive adoption of the norms and values of any society, bears much in common with the feminist delineation of the sin of self-abnegation. He is especially aware:

Evil and wrongdoing attain their fullest form when they are committed by Christians who have the<sup>32</sup> best intentions but who are naive and uncritical.

In fact, as far as Boff is concerned, the refusal of self-transcendence or growth, self-definition and self-determination, is damnable behaviour and a violation of the image of God.<sup>33</sup> He also contends:

. . . the continued closing up of the human person to any higher destiny and the ongoing betrayal of God's appeals in reality<sup>34</sup> can give rise to the total loss of God's grace.

I know of no clearer way to indicate sin than this. In a similar vein, Juan Luis Segundo, while certainly cognizant of the reality of the sin of egoism, is equally aware of the pervasiveness of the sin that is "inertia". He observes:

We often choose not to see something that would mean too costly an expansion of our own ideological horizons and that passivity and drifting represents a "fallen nature".<sup>35</sup>

This is the sin of underdevelopment which, according to Segundo, manifests itself on both cosmic and personal levels.

At the level of cosmic evolution, it is visible as stagnation and atrophy. It is the,

. . . tendency toward the degeneration of energy which, of and by itself would make all further evolution impossible. . . . Statistically speaking, we can say that on its own level 'sin' has been all the easy syntheses that have taken place on the threshold of other new, better and more complex syntheses that might have been.<sup>36</sup>

In the context of human history, this sin is disclosed as conservatism, ideology, impotence, and opposition to novelty.<sup>37</sup> At the level of the individual man or woman, this sin appears as the rejection of new and unforeseen possibilities for growth offered by reality. It is facile, risk free, immature existence. It is the abnegation of the duty of self-definition and self-determination, and the capitulation of the self to the societal super ego which, according to Segundo, leads to death.<sup>38</sup> Segundo refers to the individual who freely reverts to immaturity as "mass man". He elucidates further:

"Mass man" is the person who, whatever his social position may be, delegates his power of judgment and decision to others in any given area or aspect of his existence . . . human mass is sin. At the human level there is always an element of volition intermingled with the degradation of energy. It is the rejection of a creative but costly liberty.<sup>39</sup>

Hence, in the Latin American context, where marginalized people already suffer from a loss of personhood, the counsel or practice of self-abnegation is vicious. For whether it is coerced or voluntarily embraced, it

entails the cessation of personal responsibility and control to "external superficiality", alienating subjects from their own inner selves. Segundo believes that for an adult human being, "this alienation is a thousand times more terrible - and sensible - than the idea of being hurled forever into a pit of fire for having died after overstepping the line into grave sin."<sup>40</sup>

For the poor in Latin America, it is precisely pride and anger that is wanting, not humility and patience. Accordingly, Latin American theologians are prepared to insist (with their feminist counterparts) that an ethos of abnegation and sacrifice can no longer be regarded as an appropriate or effective solution to the problems of sin and injustice in their countries.<sup>41</sup> In keeping with this, Boff argues that only "self-love" can be the suitable measure of our love for others since "the other closest to hand is yourself."<sup>42</sup> Similarly, Segundo contends that the love demanded by Jesus for all time of his followers, is not self-sacrificial, passive, or impotent, but is only and ever "efficacious love".<sup>43</sup> Efficacious love, contrary to traditional interpretations, does not consist in "turning the other cheek" and not harming one's neighbor. This the Latin American theologians regard as a terrible distortion of the essential meaning of the great

love commandment. For at best, such innocuous love is but an excuse for the sin of omission which, according to Segundo, is one of the greatest sins which Latin American Christians commit. He writes:

. . . the most efficacious love is not a love that avoids occasions of harming others; it is a love that moves evolution forward and leads it<sub>44</sub> toward more human forms and structures of life.

At worst, the espousal of the traditional ethos of love, abnegation, and sacrifice may mask the vested interests of the status quo. In either case, if it engenders collusion and complicity with an oppressive system, it's embrace by the individual means sin. For as Gustavo Gutierrez concludes:

Every attempt to evade the struggle against alienation and the violence of the powerful and for a more just and<sub>45</sub> more human world is the greatest infidelity to God.

The moment of sin which the feminists have called self-abnegation is clearly comprehended in the Latin American liberation theology, though the descriptives sometimes vary. But whether the moment is described as self-abnegation, underdevelopment, inertia, a lack of encounter, refusal to dialogue, refusal of growth, alienation from the self, capitulation of the self to a societal super ego, dependency, superficiality, or immature existence, the dynamic is the same: it is the refusal of self-transcendence.



The Black Liberationist Perspective

Too much love  
 Too much love,  
 Nothing kills a nigger like  
 Too much love.<sup>46</sup>

The above ditty is a poignant indication of the revolution of morals, values, and attitudes required for Black liberation. Even the moderate Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., while adamant in his insistence upon non-violent resistance,<sup>47</sup> was nonetheless aware of the detrimental effect that the religious and social platitudes of humility, sacrifice, deference and patience, etc., could have upon the movement for Black liberation. For one thing, if ever these qualities were seemingly embraced by blacks, King maintains this was largely due to reasons of coercion, depersonalization, and despiritualization.<sup>48</sup> Therefore, he insisted:

. . . the Revolution is not indicative of a sudden loss of patience within the Negro. The Negro had never really been patient in the pure sense of the word. The posture of silent waiting was forced upon him psychologically because he was shackled physically.<sup>49</sup>

Moreover, even where quiescence were voluntarily opted for as the best strategy for advancing the goal of Black liberation, the best it could hope for was tokenism, which King rejected on all levels.<sup>50</sup>

King recognized that, notwithstanding the systematic forces which perpetuated racism, the internalization of

an ethos that stifled retributive action born of the experience of oppression, could be injurious to the black person's quest for basic civil rights and human dignity.

Thus he advised:

The old order ends, no matter what Bastilles remain, when the enslaved within themselves, bury the psychology of servitude.<sup>51</sup>

King was primarily concerned with the distinct proclivity of oppressed blacks towards quiescence. He regarded this tendency as sinful complicity with an oppressive system, since it represented a violation of personal integrity, (and therefore, also, of the image of God) and an abnegation of morality and responsibility. Therefore, King argued that it was incumbent upon every black man, woman, and child to refuse cooperation with an evil system. He declared:

To accept passively an unjust system is to cooperate with that system; thereby the oppressed become as evil as the oppressor. Non-cooperation with evil is as much a moral obligation as is cooperation with good. The oppressed must never allow the conscience of the oppressor to slumber. . . . The Negro cannot win the respect of the white people of the south or the peoples of the world if he is willing to sell the future of his children for his personal and immediate comfort and safety.<sup>52</sup>

In this context, the virtues which blacks ought to consciously attempt to embody are never abnegative, but are rather pride, self-definition, and self-determination. For as King discerned:

We must never let the fact that we are victims of injustice lull us into abrogating responsibility for our own lives.<sup>53</sup>

The attention paid by James Cone to the religious ideas and concepts of Western culture and their impeditive effect on the movement for Black liberation is far more focused and critical than were King's observations. He writes, for example:

The religious ideas of the oppressor are detrimental to the black people's drive for freedom. They tend to make black people nonviolent and accept only the prescribed patterns of protest defined by the oppressor himself. It is the oppressor who attempts to tell black people what is and is not Christian - though he is the least qualified to make such a judgment.<sup>54</sup>

In his specific discussion of sin, he does not deny the reality of the sins of pride and self-aggrandizement, self-centeredness, and the desire to become like God (i.e., the aggressive patterns of human nature). However, he tends to associate these kinds of sins with the powerful oppressor, in this case "white society". The sin of the Black church, by contrast, is something quite other than pride according to Cone. It is rather accommodation, and lending credence to black enslavement. In connection with this, he comments:

. . . the real sin of the black church and its leaders is that they convinced themselves that they were doing the right thing by advocating obedience to white oppression as a means of entering at death the future age of heavenly bliss.<sup>55</sup>

Cone maintains that in a situation of oppression, accomodation and acquiescence represent a violation of the image of God in man, and the abnegation of freedom's responsibilities. This in turn implies a denial of God, for he reasons:

The biblical emphasis on the freedom of man also means that one cannot allow another to define his existence . . . When man denies his freedom and the freedom of others, he denies God.<sup>56</sup>

Later, in his A Black Theology Of Liberation, Cone more specifically counsels that Black theology must break with all traditional theological speech and doctrine that softens the drive for black self-determination. Again, as in the case of feminist and Latin American theology, he is particularly concerned that the popular identification of sin with pride might subvert the impetus towards Black liberation. Hence, he maintains:

The biblical concept of image means that man is created in such a way that he cannot obey oppressive laws and still be a man. To be a man is to be in the image of God, i.e., to be creative - revolting against everything that is against man. Therefore, whatever we say about sin and man's inability to know God because of the Fall, it must not in any way diminish the freedom<sup>57</sup> of man to be in revolt against his oppressors.

Within the context of Black liberation theology, there is no sufferance of the notion that self-abnegation is in any way a virtue which blacks ought to attempt to emulate. For not only is it ineffective vis-à-vis an oppressive

racist society, but it also contributes nothing of worth to a people who are already labouring under a poor self-image and a loss of identity. Therefore, Cone concludes:

Sin then for black people is the loss of identity. It is saying Yes to the white absurdity - accepting the world as it is by letting white people define black existence. To be in sin is to be contented with white solutions for the "black problem" and not rebelling against every infringement of white being on black being.<sup>58</sup>

This understanding of sin clearly corresponds to the notions of sin delineated by feminist and Latin American liberation theologians. It is a moment of sin wherein the self is abnegated, underdeveloped, stunted, inauthentic and dependent upon superficial societal definitions. Even more significantly, it is a transgression which is not explicable in terms of pride or hubris, self-aggrandizement, and self-centeredness. For this reason the laudation of the ethos of sacrificial love receives severe censure by Cone (as it did by the feminist and Latin American theologians thus far consulted). Cone is especially critical of what he perceives to be the arrogance of white intellectuals who presume to prescribe what the proper Christian love-response to a situation of oppression ought to be. And, he leaves his readers to ponder the following vexatious problem:

How could white scholars know that love means turning the other cheek since they have never had to do so? Only the man who is in the oppressed condition can know what his love-response ought to be to his oppressors.<sup>59</sup>

### The Gay Liberationist Perspective

The intent of this brief section is not to canvass biblical material and related theological texts in an effort to determine the status of homosexuality vis-à-vis God and Judeo-Christian morality. Neither am I concerned to debate the aetiology of the homosexual condition, nor to speculate as to its "naturalness".<sup>60</sup> Rather, the basic and only presupposition operative here, and of particular relevance to our discussion of sin, concurs with John J. McNeill's observation:

. . . human sexuality, like all human reality precisely as human participates in the radical freedom of man. In forming their respective judgments, many moralists seem to ignore the rather obvious fact that human sexuality is not a totally instinctive and, therefore, determined phenomenon. Whatever participates in human freedom cannot receive its total explanation in terms of causal determinacy. Rather, it can be adequately understood only in terms of ideal goal or purpose.<sup>61</sup>

In the theological literature of Gay liberationists (as in that of the feminist, Latin American and Black liberationists), "ideal goal or purpose" requires of each individual: mature and responsible relationship to self, others, and God; growth; autonomy; self-definition; self-determination; self-transcendence; life lived honestly and with integrity; effective love; in a word, the full flowering of the image of God integral to all human life. It is within this context that popular Christian morality,

insofar as it scorns pride and espouses self-abnegation, is judged to be inadequate to the needs and experiences of gay men and women, both in terms of their interpersonal relationships, and in the broader context of their situation in a society which is hostile to their very existence. For the gay person, like other marginalized persons, is already victimized on two counts. Firstly, he or she may be regarded by society as the embodiment of all that is reprehensible and undesirable, namely, abnormality, neuroses, promiscuity, lust, perversion, and frivolity. On this count gay persons are subject to systematic discrimination and persecution in law, housing, employment, political membership, church membership, and even to physical violence. Secondly, they may be victims of the emotional disturbances that can result when such societal animosity is internalized, namely, a poor self-image, diffidence, guilt, instability, self-loathing, and alienation. In either case, the problem is not a consequence of the sin of pride, nor would the counsel of self-abnegation appear to offer any kind of realistic solution. Hence the question arises, in what manner may sin manifest itself among homosexual persons? Louie Crew, poet, professor, and Gay activist, answers:

I believe that it is sinful for homosexual persons to think of ourselves as less than children of God.<sup>62</sup>

Professor Crew has here pointed out the danger of the sin of self-abnegation in the lives of gay men and women. But he is not alone in his observation. John J. McNeill, Catholic clergyman and theologian, remarks in a similar vein:

Homosexuals will never be able to master their sexual drive in a positive way and integrate it successfully into their whole personality development until they become aware of themselves as persons of infinite dignity and worth, worthy of their fellow human's respect and consideration.<sup>63</sup>

One corrective to this temptation towards self-abnegation, and the fundamental tenet pervading all the theological literature commendatory of Gay liberation, springs from that precept attributed to Saint John of the Cross, namely, that "In the evening of our day, we shall be judged by our loving". That is, the experience of giving and receiving love, and the pride taken therein, is the singular experience through which the presence of God is mediated in the lives of human beings.

Norman Pittenger's theological anthropology, for example, is particularly expressive of this theme. He argues that the essential constitution of the human person, and its likeness to God, is given not in terms of a capacity for rationality, or volition, or even morality. Rather, it consists in our potentiality to become lovers. Accordingly, it is not primarily pride,<sup>64</sup> but the frustra-



tion or distortion of the potential for love that is regarded as SIN. Pittenger explains:

Sin in the deepest and truest sense is the rejection, negation, or violation of loving relationships with others and with God himself . . . human sexuality is the physiological/psychological base or condition for our possibility of moving towards love.<sup>65</sup>

Similarly, William Johnson, a United Church of Christ clergyman, argues that since love is the power of God, the rejection of love involves one in sin, as sin is the specific denial of the power of God in one's life.<sup>66</sup> In the lives of many men and women, it is the very condition of "Gayness" that enables and facilitates the experience of love, and therefore, also, the presence and power of God in their lives. Johnson continues:

My experience as a Gay man in a hostile society has often been an experience of separateness - from God and from other persons. For many years I believed it was necessary to hide the fact of my Gayness, thinking that doing so would overcome the separateness. I lived with pretense, and related to others with deception and denied my experience of love. In doing so, I denied the power of God in my own life.<sup>67</sup>

For authentically gay persons to deny their orientation (which to all intents and purposes is to abnegate their selves) is to preclude the possibility of any deep and affectionate human relationship, to therefore retard personal growth, to inculcate self-hatred, to abrogate the responsibility for self-definition and self-determination, and to collude with those coercive forces which oppress

persons whose lives do not respect the boundaries of the circumscribed existence permitted them. Hence, Gay liberationists contend that the abnegation of such a significant aspect of one's personality as is one's sexual orientation, is culpable. McNeill, for instance, maintains that the real issue of morality concerns our choosing, or failing to choose to commit ourselves to a fellow human being. He continues:

Insofar as the subjective ambiguity of one's sexual preferences is used as a means of rationalizing a failure to commit oneself with fidelity in a genuine sexual love relationship - that ambiguity should be considered an amoral state.<sup>68</sup>

Moreover, to adopt a lifestyle and expression that is contrary to one's essential feelings, is to effect sin and perversion.<sup>69</sup>

Given the insufficiency of societal prescriptions concerning sexual love relationships, the theological literature approbatory of Gay liberation underscores the necessity of self-definition, self-determination, and self-realization on the part of an individual. It also stresses that pride should be taken in those determinations. For as Malcolm Macourt argues, such self-determinations, and the pride taken therein, are not manifestations of sinful egotism and self-centeredness, but are rather the crucial prerequisites for fulfilling the Christian love commandment. He explains:

The wish of Christian gay liberationists must be that the choice of life patterns which makes most sense to each and every person will be seen by each most clearly to allow them to accord with the injunctions: "love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength" and "love your neighbour as yourself". (Mark 12:30f.)<sup>70</sup>

Finally, to briefly consider the issue of sin and Gay liberation within a social context, the specific query is whether self-abnegation impedes or facilitates the dissolution of heterosexism and homophobia on the one hand, while enhancing and freeing all human existence on the other. Pittenger, for example, contends:

The movement for Gay liberation is a movement for human liberation. It's main concern is to free human existence from bondage to outmoded traditions and (even more importantly) bondage to prejudiced<sup>71</sup> and ignorant denials of something good in itself.

In this, Gay liberationists draw specific parallels between heterosexism on the one hand, and sexism and racism on the other.<sup>72</sup> In the case of the latter, it has been shown that self-abnegation betrays the movement towards liberation for women, blacks, and the poor in Latin America. Similarly, in the case of Gay liberation, it is argued:

The truly moral and ethical posture for persons under the yoke of oppression is a stance taken personally and collectively against that oppression.<sup>73</sup>

What remains to be determined is whether the sin of self-abnegation as depicted in various liberation theologies, is acknowledged to be a real and serious transgression in the theologies of Langdon Gilkey, Karl Rahner, and John Cobb.

## NOTES

### CHAPTER I

<sup>1</sup>Since the several theologians examined in this thesis frequently appeal to experience, it might be helpful to specify what is intended by the term. None of the theologians discussed in any of the five chapters understand experience in the narrow empirical sense of the word wherein: (1) experience is confined to the reception of data disclosed through the five senses; (2) experience is regarded as the passive reception of what is objectively given to a theoretical observer; (3) experience is viewed as a mental/subjective perception which distorts from some alleged neutral matter of fact. While it is not possible in this limited space to offer a detailed examination of the various epistemologies operative among the liberation theologians, Langdon Gilkey, Karl Rahner, and John Cobb, I can nonetheless state with a fair degree of accuracy that each of them generally approves a theory of experience which includes the non-sensuous apprehension of the self in relation to a larger totality, as well as apprehension of values, qualities, and relations.

<sup>2</sup>Judith Ellen Plaskow, "Sex, Sin And Grace: Women's Experience And The Theologies Of Reinhold Niebuhr And Paul Tillich" (Ph.D. dissertation, Yale University, 1975).

<sup>3</sup>Valerie Saiving Goldstein, "The Human Situation: A Feminine View," in Womanspirit Rising, eds., Carol P. Christ & Judith Plaskow (San Francisco: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1979), pp. 25-42.

<sup>4</sup>More specifically, Goldstein believed the differences between the sexes to be rooted in biocultural factors, i.e., the interpretations given to their greater or lesser proximity to nature. In the case of women, Goldstein argued that their experience of menstruation, defloration, pregnancy, childbirth, lactation, menopause, etc., fostered a psychic structure seemingly more embedded in nature and thus conducive to passivity. She contended that, ". . . underneath the specific additions which each culture has imposed, there remains a substratum or core of masculine and feminine orientations which, if too drastically contradicted by the superstructure may threaten the very existence of the society and its members." Ibid., p. 29.

<sup>5</sup>Plaskow, "Sex, Sin And Grace", p. 3.

<sup>6</sup>Notwithstanding traditional Catholic natural law theory. Even here, however, its proscriptions and prescriptions concerning sexuality (e.g., contraception, procreation, homosexuality, and abortion, etc.) are increasingly being called into question, not only by lay persons, but by ecclesiastics in whose moral theology are operative the testimonies of the modern behavioural sciences and more generally, a dynamic view of human reality. For an interesting discussion of the directions being taken in Catholic moral reasoning, see James M. Gustafson's Protestant And Roman Catholic Ethics (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 1978), esp. chap. 2 entitled "Practical And Moral Reasoning".

<sup>7</sup>Janet Radcliffe Richards, The Sceptical Feminist: A Philosophical Enquiry (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980), p. 48. See also her discussion of "The Issue of the Natural", p. 43ff.

<sup>8</sup>Simone de Beauvoir, The Second Sex, trans. & ed. by H. M. Parshley, (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), © 1952, p. 670. See also Plaskow's "Sex, Sin And Grace", p. 98ff.

<sup>9</sup>Excerpt from "Elizabeth Cady Stanton And The Woman's Bible", in Women And Religion, eds., Elizabeth Clark & Herbert Richardson, (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1977), p. 220. See also Stanton's exegesis of Matthew 25:1-12, Ibid., p. 221f.

<sup>10</sup>Mary Daly, Beyond God The Father (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973), pp. 100-101. See also Daly's Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics Of Radical Feminism (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978), esp. p. 66ff.

<sup>11</sup>Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite, "Battered Women And The Bible: From Subjection To Liberation", in Christianity & Crisis 41 (November 1981). Thistlethwaite writes: "But no sooner do women in violent relationships begin to develop an ideological suspicion that their subordination is wrong than they are told that resistance to this injustice is unbiblical and unchristian. They are told that Christian women are meek and that to claim rights for themselves is the sin of pride. Some women at this point cease to struggle further. Some continue to struggle but abandon the church." p. 311.

<sup>12</sup>Goldstein, "The Human Situation: A Feminine View," in Womanspirit Rising, p. 37.

<sup>13</sup>Penelope Washbourn, Becoming Woman (San Francisco: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1977). She writes, e.g., "Until she [woman] loves herself, her loving will be manipulative, dependent, and destructive of the freedom of others since it will not spring from an active, alive, and potent attitude toward the self and the world." pp. 59-60.

<sup>14</sup>See Germaine Greer's discussion of "Soul" in The Female Eunuch (London: Granada Publishing Limited, 1981), © 1970, pp. 67-161.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., p. 180. Cf. Mary Daly's Gyn/Ecology where she notes that, "... in contrast to male modes of self-sacrifice, which are rewarded with the ecstasy of merging, the self-sacrifice imposed as an ideal upon most women is the radically unrewarding handing over of their identity and energy to individual males - fathers, sons, husbands - and the ghostly institutional masters." pp. 374-375.

<sup>16</sup>See Introduction, pp. 4-7.

<sup>17</sup>Daly, Beyond God The Father, p. 29. It is worth noting that there is a proclivity among liberation theologians to understand the concept of "imago Dei" in terms of human potentiality, whether for love, self-definition, self-transcendence, self-determination, freedom, growth, and self-actualization, etc. This more open-ended and processive orientation differs significantly from some traditional interpretations of the image of God in terms of the presence, in human beings, of such faculties as reason or rationality, volition, or even the moral imperative.

<sup>18</sup>Richards, The Sceptical Feminist, p. 174. (emphasis mine)

<sup>19</sup>Barbara Hilkert Andolsen, "Agape In Feminist Ethics," in The Journal of Religious Ethics 9 (Spring 1981), p. 83. Similar arguments appear in the following: Carol S. Robb, "A Framework For Feminist Ethics", Ibid., pp. 48-68; Eleanor Humes Haney, "What Is Feminist Ethics: A Proposal For Continuing Discussion", Ibid., 8 (Spring 1980), pp. 115-124; Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite, "Battered Women And The Bible: From Subjection To Liberation", in Christianity & Crisis 41 (November 1981), p. 311f.

<sup>20</sup>Joan Arnold Romero, "The Protestant Principle: A Woman's-Eye View Of Barth And Tillich", in Religion And Sexism, ed., Rosemary Radford Ruether, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1974), p. 337. Note also Arnold's criticism of the theological obsession with the sin of hubris and its inadequacy for addressing the situations of marginalized and oppressed groups. Ibid.

<sup>21</sup>Plaskow, "Sex, Sin And Grace", p. 104.

<sup>22</sup>See Niebuhr's The Nature And Destiny Of Man, vol. 1: Human Nature (New York: Charles Scribners Sons, 1941), pp. 228-240. Certainly, Niebuhr recognizes that sensuality, under certain circumstances, may represent a flight from the self. However, according to Plaskow, Niebuhr does not regard such flight as a significant human sin in itself, and one independent of pridefulness. Rather, he seems to regard sensuality primarily as the self's undue identification with, and devotion to, particular impulses and desires within the self. With regard to this point see Plaskow's "Sex, Sin And Grace", pp. 95-104.

<sup>23</sup>Plaskow, "Sex, Sin And Grace", p. 98.

<sup>24</sup>N.B. Plaskow also suggests, therefore, that "sensuality" is not the best word for the sinful phenomenon she is concerned to depict. Ibid., p. 98, n. 45.

<sup>25</sup>Rosemary Radford Ruether, Liberation Theology: Human Hope Confronts Christian History And American Power (New York: Paulist Press, 1972), p. 129.

<sup>26</sup>Leonardo Boff, Liberating Grace, trans. John Drury, (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1979), p. 79.

<sup>27</sup>By point of contrast, feminist theology incorporates the personal experience of oppression communicated in dreams, oral history, music, literature, etc. Judith Plaskow's analysis of women's experience in "Sex, Sin And Grace" is a case in point. For it embodies not only academic sociological and psychological material, but also the description of women's lives given in the novelist Doris Lessing's series Children Of Violence.

<sup>28</sup>Boff writes, e.g., "From the standpoint of faith, the situation of dependence and underdevelopment that characterizes our continent cannot help but be seen as an enormous social structural sin." Liberating Grace p. 84. For similar arguments see also Gustavo Gutierrez, A Theology Of Liberation (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1973), e.g., pp. 109-110; and esp. José Porfirio Miranda, Marx And The Bible (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1974), passim.

<sup>29</sup>Boff, Liberating Grace, pp. 29-30.

<sup>30</sup>Juan Luis Segundo, A Theology For Artisans Of A New Humanity, vol. 5: Evolution And Guilt (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1974), p. 62. Further to this point, see also pp. 40-41, pp. 120-123, & p. 138.

<sup>31</sup>Boff, Liberating Grace, p. 85f., & pp. 142-144.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid., p. 86.

<sup>33</sup>With regard to the notion of the image of God; Boff writes, e.g.: "The basic intuition underlying the notion that we are 'sharers in the divine nature' lies in the realization that human beings experience themselves as fully human only when they completely surpass themselves . . . They do not find their realization in the factual but in the totally utopian and transcendent." Ibid., p. 179.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid., pp. 132-133.

<sup>35</sup>Juan Luis Segundo, A Theology For Artisans Of A New Humanity, vol. 2: Grace And The Human Condition (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1973), p. 33.

<sup>36</sup>Segundo, Evolution And Guilt, p. 27. I note that Segundo's account of cosmic sin is heavily influenced by the theology of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid., p. 52f.

<sup>38</sup>Ibid., pp. 34-35.

<sup>39</sup>Ibid., p. 62. See also Segundo's Grace And The Human Condition, p. 139f.

<sup>40</sup>Segundo, Grace And The Human Condition, p. 166.

<sup>41</sup>Unless, of course, such an ethos were sincerely embraced by the oppressors themselves. But even this would not suffice since it is social or structural change that is required if justice is to be guaranteed.

<sup>42</sup>Boff, Liberating Grace, p. 101.

<sup>43</sup>Segundo, Evolution And Guilt, pp. 120-121.

<sup>44</sup>Ibid., p. 122.



<sup>45</sup>Gustavo Gutierrez, A Theology Of Liberation, p. 272.

<sup>46</sup>From Vincent Harding's "The Religion Of Black Power" cited in James H. Cone's Black Theology And Black Power (New York: Seabury Press, 1969), p. 48.

<sup>47</sup>It is noteworthy that King's stand on non-violent resistance is not always shared by more contemporary Black liberationists. James H. Cone, for instance, remarks: "One cannot help but think that most whites 'loved' Martin Luther King, Jr., not because of his attempt to free his people, but because his approach was the least threatening to the white power structure. Thus, churchmen and theologians grasped at the opportunity to identify with him so that they could keep blacks powerless." Black Theology And Black Power, p. 56.

<sup>48</sup>Martin Luther King, Jr., Stride Toward Freedom (New York: Harper & Brothers, Publishers, 1958), p. 36ff.

<sup>49</sup>Martin Luther King, Jr., Why We Can't Wait (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1969), p. 15.

<sup>50</sup>Ibid., p. 19ff.

<sup>51</sup>Ibid., p. 121.

<sup>52</sup>King, Stride Toward Freedom, p. 212. See also p. 51ff.

<sup>53</sup>Ibid., p. 223.

<sup>54</sup>Cone, Black Theology And Black Power, pp. 20-21. See also pp. 130-131.

<sup>55</sup>Ibid., p. 105. Further to this point, see Cone's A Black Theology Of Liberation (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1970), esp. p. 100, p. 110, & pp. 133-134.

<sup>56</sup>Cone, Black Theology And Black Power, p. 137.

<sup>57</sup>Cone, A Black Theology Of Liberation, p. 169.

<sup>58</sup>Ibid., p. 196.

<sup>59</sup>Ibid., p. 134.

<sup>60</sup>The issue of the "naturalness" of the homosexual condition is here bracketed for reasons outlined in pp. 13-15 of this chapter.

<sup>61</sup>John J. McNeill, The Church And The Homosexual (Kansas City: Sheed Andrews & McMeel Inc., 1976), p. 104.

<sup>62</sup>Louie Crew, "Gays As An Occasion Of Grace", in Christianity & Crisis 41 (November 1981), p. 303.

<sup>63</sup>McNeill, The Church And The Homosexual, p. 155.

<sup>64</sup>Pittenger notes that among the misunderstandings of sin pervasive among theologians is that concept which views it as "a variety of pride which suggests that its opposite . . . is a Uriah Heep mentality requiring . . . [persons] to become . . . doormats for others to walk on." Time For Consent: A Christian's Approach To Homosexuality (London: SCM Press, Ltd., 1976), p. 34. For a fuller discussion of Pittenger's understanding of sin, see his Cosmic Love And Human Wrong (New York: Paulist Press, 1978).

<sup>65</sup>Norman Pittenger, "What It Means To Be Human", in Towards A Theology Of Gay Liberation, ed., Malcolm Macourt, (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1977), p. 85.

<sup>66</sup>Sally Gearhart & William R. Johnson, eds., Loving Women/Loving Men: Gay Liberation And The Church (San Francisco: Glide Publications, 1974), p. 101.

<sup>67</sup>Ibid., p. 100.

<sup>68</sup>McNeill, The Church And The Homosexual, p. 178.

<sup>69</sup>More specifically, Johnson remarks: "In the lives of Gay people, the conditioning toward heterosexual expression is contrary to our essential feelings. To expect or require Gay people to live heterosexually is to compel perversion. The truly perverted person is she/he who denies her/his truest feelings and seeks to relate sexually in ways that are alien to her/his essential emotional, psychological, erotic, and social nature." Loving Women/Loving Men, p. 112.

<sup>70</sup>Macourt, Toward A Theology Of Gay Liberation, p. 25.

<sup>71</sup>Pittenger, "What It Means To Be Human" Ibid., p. 88.

<sup>72</sup>McNeill, for instance, observes that "there is an intimate connection between gay liberation for men and women's liberation, so that any real advance in either cause necessarily will represent an advance in the other." The Church And The Homosexual, p. 144. See also pp. 85-86. As well, similar observations are made by Jim Cottes in "The Gay Challenge To Traditional Notions Of Human Sexuality", in Towards A Theology Of Gay Liberation, esp. p. 63ff, and by Gearhart & Johnson in Loving Women/Loving Men, p. 151f.

<sup>73</sup>Gearhart & Johnson, Loving Women/Loving Men, p. 91.

## CHAPTER II

### LANGDON GILKEY'S UNDERSTANDING OF SIN

#### The Christian Realist Influence

The choice of Langdon Gilkey as a spokesperson for that general world view advanced by Christian Realism stands in need of some explanation and qualification. On the one hand, it is never entirely accurate to identify the thought of an individual theologian with a larger school of thought, since he or she always introduces something unique in the way of experience and perception to the theological task. And, in fact, Gilkey's theology has, in its development, incorporated a phenomenal range of influences (from neoorthodox Barthianism in its earliest stages,<sup>1</sup> to the insights and emphases of Whiteheadian metaphysics and political and eschatological theologies in its later stages,<sup>2</sup> and most recently, the perspective of Eastern spirituality).<sup>3</sup> Thus has David Tracy, for instance, claimed Gilkey as a representative of that model of theology called "revisionist".<sup>4</sup>

On the other hand, however, Gilkey's theology stands as an example of that post-liberal American theology inspired by Christian Realism. Hence it is possible to discern in Gilkey's writings certain statements of fact

as well as pervasive methods, themes, and emphases which indicate a substantial association or kinship with the Christian realist movement.

Described in the broadest possible terms, Christian Realism owes its inception to Reinhold Niebuhr, who sought to combine a distinctly Augustinian and Reformation spirituality with an equally distinct North American pragmatic or politically realist perspective. In his autobiographical work Shantung Compound, Gilkey explicitly confesses interest in and attraction to the realism of Reinhold Niebuhr,<sup>5</sup> and in fact, the influence of this mentor is always and everywhere patent and acknowledged in Gilkey's theology.

The method, themes, and emphases which characterize Christian Realism, and, subsequently, which influence Gilkey's understanding of sin, include the following:

- (1) A paradoxical vision of human nature and history which, while it does not abjure epistemological and broader philosophical concerns over matters of logical coherence, metaphysics, and systematization, for example, nonetheless maintains that the truth and the facts of experience are often most adequately explicated in mythical and symbolic terms, particularly those derived from biblical anthropology and the orthodox theological tradition. Dennis McCann accounts for this peculiar sensibility with the observation:

Given the metaphysical fact that experience is characterized by both "coherence" and "incoherence", rational systems of metaphysical belief are impossible . . . Christian realism was born out of practical conflicts over the shape of "adequate spiritual guidance" for politicians and Christian social activists. His [Niebuhr's] methodological reflections were to remain ad hoc even though promising.

Gilkey's methodological approach towards certain issues similarly defies any strict systematization. This becomes especially evident in his discussion of sin. For in his analysis of the human condition, for example, certain elements of his description plainly comprehend the transgression involved in self-abnegation, while yet other statements explicitly advocate the exercise of self-abnegation as a remedy for fallen human nature. This disjunction does not necessarily suggest basic incoherence on Gilkey's part. Rather, it is indicative of a dialectical method which, because it is not bound to any systematic principle of interpretation, is at liberty to lift up, examine, and respond to the fact of whatever realities present themselves for consideration, even if they are apparently antithetical to each other. Beyond this, however, Gilkey's approach might be called phenomenological. That is, originally, he describes an event or phenomenon as it essentially presents itself, or in terms of its facticity.<sup>7</sup> It is only then subsequent to this moment that Gilkey attempts to illuminate the event

in terms of the symbols and doctrines of the biblical and orthodox theological tradition, that is, in terms of free will, sin, grace, redemption, and providence,<sup>8</sup> etc. Hence, consistent with the Christian realist hypothesis, Gilkey maintains:

The biblical interpretation is becoming increasingly strange and incredible to ordinary wisdom, - and yet - . . . more and more in tune with the actual contours of concrete historical experience.<sup>9</sup>

As will become apparent, however, the phenomenological moment of Gilkey's theology eventually compels him to broaden his understanding of sin.

(2) The second feature of Christian Realism which influences Gilkey's theology is its critical stance towards the adequacy of the modern secularist and liberal self-understanding. In particular, Christian Realism vehemently opposes the belief in a progressivistic history, and the notion that human nature is essentially good. Thus, throughout all of Gilkey's writings, the themes of the bondage of freedom, driving self-interest, and the moral ambiguity which attaches to our motives and most creative achievements remain constant and pervasive.

(3) Langdon Gilkey's theology shares with Christian Realism, the insistence of God's hiddenness in history, and therefore, the contention that the discernment of God's will in history always remains difficult and ambiguous. For this reason, Gilkey is critical of what he

perceives to be Liberation theology's identification of political and social deliverance with the salvation promised in the gospel. He is also critical, therefore, of its corresponding identification of sin with whatever impedes political and social deliverance.<sup>10</sup>

(4) In Christian Realism, there appears to be some discontinuity between its theological anthropology on the one hand, and its understanding of history and social relations on the other. Some, like Dennis McCann, maintain that the issue is really one of emphasis and not of discrepancy; that is, McCann argues that Reinhold Niebuhr's theological anthropology simply dominates Christian Realism at the expense of a theology of history.<sup>11</sup> The relevance of this issue to the discussion of sin is this: that in dealing with individual anthropology and personal relationships, priority is given to the exigency of cultivating proper moral dispositions on the part of individual agents, namely, humility and self-restraint. However, when Christian Realism addresses the issue of public and political relationships, a different criteria of moral behaviour emerges, namely, justice, tolerance, and a balance of power. Niebuhr himself, for example, advised:

The victim of injustice cannot cease from contending against his oppressors, even if he has a sense of the relativity of all social positions and a contrite recognition of the sin in his own heart. Only a religion full of romantic illusions could seek to persuade the Negro to gain justice from the white man



merely by forgiving him. As long as men are involved in the conflicts of nature and sin they must seek according to the best available moral insights to contend for what they believe to be right. And that will mean that they will contend against other men. Short of the transmutation of the world into the Kingdom of God, men will always confront enemies.<sup>12</sup>

Yet, others have been more critical than McCann is noting the discrepancy in Christian Realism between anthropology and history, personal morality and public morality. For instance, J. Deotis Roberts, in an article entitled "Christian Liberation Ethics: The Black Experience", has attributed this discrepancy to an unfortunate cleavage in Niebuhr's theology, "between that manifestation of love and the pushing and shoving of justice."<sup>13</sup> Similarly, Barbara Hilkert Andolsen has remarked that "according to Niebuhr sacrificial love is the operating norm for personal life; justice the standard for social life."<sup>14</sup> She also maintains that this view rests upon "an uncritical acceptance of the dichotomy between the private and public spheres of life."<sup>15</sup> However, in Gilkey's theology attempt is made to link private and social or historical existence through his identification of certain ontological categories which necessarily prevail in both spheres, for instance, power, and the polarity of actuality and possibility.

(5) Finally, and related to all of the themes mentioned above, characteristic of both Christian realism

and Gilkey's theology is the propensity to associate sin with pride and the particularly aggressive patterns of human behaviour. With regard to this, McCann has noted:

A psychological profile on Niebuhr's anthropology would probably suggest that he was concerned with the aggressive personality and its problems. He assumes a high level of "vitality" and an almost spontaneous tendency to think and act in one's own interest. His "human nature", in short, is an active, dynamic "self", driven by anxiety, but also capable of a high level of personal integration - perhaps a model of the successful urban American of his day. For the most part, Niebuhr's counsels seek to channel constructively the force of this type of personality, by challenging him or her to adopt a measure of self-restraint and an attitude of self-criticism. "Humility" and "sacrificial love" thus are commended as the resources of Christian faith for social action.<sup>16</sup>

It is precisely this perspective that most distinctly characterizes Christian Realism, and the profundity and validity of such perspective Gilkey does not question.<sup>17</sup> Yet, it is precisely this perspective that is challenged by liberation theologians in their concern for disintegrated persons whose sin is excessive "self-restraint", "self-criticism", "self-sacrifice", and "humility", that is, whose sin is that of self-abnegation. The following pages will attempt to demonstrate that even though Gilkey certainly advances that perspective of Christian Realism profiled above by McCann, and here challenged by liberation theology, there nonetheless develops in his theology, an understanding of human existence and relationships which

comprehends the dangers of self-abnegation as delineated in Chapter One. More specifically, there appears in Gilkey's later writings a broadening or reworking of the concept of sin which, while not forsaking the Christian realist insight into the aggressive patterns of human nature, nonetheless begins to comprehend that sin may also encompass moments of self-abnegative and self-destructive behaviour. I believe that his comprehension derives from a theological anthropology that has gradually diversified to correspond to Gilkey's changing notion of the function and activity of God in relation to human life. To demonstrate this, I will first briefly examine Gilkey's earliest specific statements on the nature of sin, and indicate the kinds of behaviour and relationship it presupposes on the part of the individual vis-à-vis God. The second section will then investigate certain aspects of Gilkey's theological anthropology as it develops in subsequent writings, and specify what they imply about the essential structure of human existence, and how the violation of that structure is effective as sin. The concluding section will then revisit Gilkey's understanding of sin, with a view to clarify how certain elements of Gilkey's anthropology, initially only indirectly related to his earlier notion of sin, finally compel him to acknowledge the transgression involved in self-abnegation.

### Gilkey's Early Statement On The Nature Of Sin

Consonant with the Christian realist emphasis, Gilkey's earliest formulation of a doctrine of sin is particularly concerned with addressing the aggressive patterns of human behaviour. This emphasis receives partial impetus from a specific understanding of the nature of the divine-human encounter or relationship. In Maker Of Heaven And Earth, for example, Gilkey's delineation of the meaning of the symbol creatio ex nihilo proposes the notion that existence derived solely from God, indicates first and foremost, that our lives are not our own but are claimed by a power beyond us, to whom ultimate allegiance and obedience is owed. He asserts:

. . . the doctrine of creation concerns the fundamental relation between God and the world on which depends the other significant ideas that make up the Christian Gospel.<sup>18</sup>

One such significant idea is that of sin which, according to Gilkey, consists in the denial of the relationship that the symbol creatio ex nihilo suggests. More specifically, Gilkey argues that the symbol creatio ex nihilo implies a fundamental distinction between creator and creature which, when not observed by the latter, results in the primordial and definitive sin, namely, pride or hubris. He contends, for example:

The biblical aversion to idolatry, and the biblical understanding of sin as the claim by a creature to be God, receive their meaning and significance from this primary ontological distinction between the Creator and His creatures.<sup>19</sup>

Yet, although this understanding of sin derives its meaning from the ontological distinction that is posited between Creator and creatures, according to Gilkey, the actual occasion of sin itself does not result from any ontological necessity. Rather, sin is a historical fact, an "inevitable" though not "necessary" perversion which originates in the misuse of free will.<sup>20</sup> The notion of free will or freedom, of course, is the hinge on which any viable doctrine of sin must turn. And, it is argued, although freedom belongs to the essential structure of human existence, its misuse does not. Thus it remains, in some sense, a *surd* phenomenon. Initially Gilkey assumes the possession and exercise of freedom by all persons to be a matter of fact.<sup>21</sup> As he describes it:

Freedom is the mystery of the self as the spontaneous center of its own reactions and activities, the self-transcendence of man which makes him able to use his own powers. It is what transforms man from a thing to a person, from an object to a subject. At one and the same time, freedom is the essential structure of man that gives human life its uniqueness and value, and also its potentiality for evil . . .<sup>22</sup>

Granted the possession of freedom, however, its misuse could theoretically tend in either one of two directions. The liberationist understanding of sin in terms

of self-abnegation suggests that the misuse of freedom is actually its dis-use; that is, freedom remains unactualized. Yet in his early writings, Gilkey, in accordance with the Christian realist orientation, appears to conceive of the misuse of freedom strictly in terms of its over-use in self-aggrandizement. He writes, for instance:

[Man] attempts, through the power of his mind and will, to become the spiritual center of his own existence, to establish his own security despite his manifest contingency, to carve out the meaning of his life despite his weakness and temporality, to attain through his own thought to the truth despite his finite partiality. He tries, in other words, to be his own God, to replace the true source and center of his being by his own creaturely powers. This effort of the dependent creature to declare his spiritual independence from God is sin, and its results are devastating for man's total being.<sup>23</sup>

Given this particular understanding of sin, its remedy, and the meaning of the Christ event and redemption, can only lie in the practice of humility, self-sacrifice, and surrender. Accordingly, Gilkey declares:

Because Jesus Christ, the Son of God, humbled himself to death on the cross, the path to the eternal security of God's unconditional power must be in this world the path of powerlessness, of self-surrender, and even of suffering.<sup>24</sup>

Thus far, Gilkey appears totally oblivious to the problem of self-abnegation, and there is certainly no indication that he regards it as in any sense sinful. On the contrary, he contends that it is an estimable ideal. However, as I suggested earlier, Gilkey's initial exclu-

sive identification of sin with pride, self-aggrandizement, false self-sufficiency (in a word, replacing God with the self as the focal point of one's existence) relies heavily for its lucidity on two basic presuppositions. Firstly, and as indicated earlier by McCann, it assumes a universal human nature characterized by a high level of vitality, dynamism, integration, and possessing a significant degree of power and freedom. Secondly, the association of sin with pride receives stimulus from the assumption of an absolute ontological distinction between God and humanity which dominates Gilkey's early theology. That is, this notion accentuates our condition of finitude vis-à-vis a God wholly other and transcendent, and in so doing, significantly circumscribes our opportunity for sin (namely, disregarding that finitude). However, when these two presuppositions become questionable, (i.e., those of a vital, dynamic, and powerful personality, and an absolutely transcendent God) the issue of the divine-human relationship and its violation in sin broadens, or is cast into a new light.

In fact, in his later work entitled Naming The Whirlwind, Gilkey displays a marked change in certain of his theological sensibilities. Here questions about the reality of God and the possibility of meaningful language about that reality (taken for granted and presupposed in

Maker Of Heaven And Earth) are raised and critically examined. Of particular interest, is Gilkey's discussion of the weaknesses of neo-Orthodoxy, especially its insistence on the otherness of God and its failure to relate itself to actual ordinary experience.<sup>25</sup> Significantly, the notion of God's transcendence which Gilkey once underscored and which accentuated the confines and limitations of human nature, is now regarded as being somewhat problematical. He observes:

. . . historically, psychologically, and theoretically, transcendence has often warred with joy in life, with human activity, and with freedom - with the free exultant realization of one's own potentialities as a finite being. It is no accident that the symbol of transcendence and the symbol of the father<sup>26</sup> figure have always been historically identified.

Corresponding to this recognition is the awareness, on Gilkey's part, of the presence of disintegrated, selfless, powerless, and ineffectual persons in our world. In his discussion of guilt as a significant factor in modern experience and consciousness, for example, Gilkey notes:

A sense of inner disunity and self-betrayal which we have called "alienation", drains away our self-awareness of our own reality and of our own powers. Sensing the ineffectiveness of our own conscious ideals and wills, we feel ourselves to be unreal and empty among a world made up of solid, weighty people who do do what they intend . . . A man who cannot accept and love himself as real and as worthy enough to affirm his own being in feeling, thought, and act, cannot be moral, let alone selfless and loving of others; and feeling himself unreal and unclean, he apprehends himself only as separated from the real, strong, and good people around him.<sup>27</sup>



Here alienation is no longer conceived of solely in terms of the prideful and aggressive disregard of God's sovereignty, as self-centeredness and self-aggrandizement. Now there appears a nascent awareness that alienation from God also threatens to manifest itself in terms of a lack of the sense of our own reality and selfhood, as emptiness, powerlessness, self-betrayal, weakness, and passivity. According to Gilkey, these conditions make impossible morality, love, and other-regard. Clearly, in this perception lies some incipient understanding of the possibility for a moment of sin which liberation theology has called self-abnegation. Correspondingly, Gilkey's view of Jesus redemptive activity becomes more comprehensive. That is, where he once regarded Christ's self-surrender, suffering, and powerlessness to define the essence of his salvific efficacy, he now juxtaposes this perception with impressions of Christ's sense of freedom, his self-identity, integrity, autonomy and creative concern. He remarks:

The freedom of Jesus from the pressures of tradition and convention and for the welfare of others, his freedom from self-concern and his corresponding creative concern for all who approach him, this combination of inner integrity and outgoing love, has engrafted itself onto our culture's consciousness and so been recognized as the true measure of our humanity, the form in which the ultimate mystery which is the origin of our being claims us for itself.<sup>28</sup>

Yet, despite these indications of sensitivity towards the dilemma of self-abnegation, Gilkey's discussion of sin in Naming The Whirlwind still remains dominated by the view that it is chiefly synonymous with pride and self-interest.<sup>29</sup> Therefore, the abnegation of the self is yet perceived as a corrective measure against inherent self-interest. For Gilkey concludes:

. . . however true it may be that ultimately self-love is involved in all authentic humanity, granted the tendency of our freedom to love itself inordinately, the true self is a moral achievement and it is more often found<sup>30</sup> by self-denial than by a simple self-affirmation.

Considering Gilkey's grooming in the Christian realist school, and the data of which he had to take notice, this concluding statement in Naming The Whirlwind is not surprising. That is, at the time of its writing, the criticisms and concerns of liberation theology, whether feminist or Latin American, Black or Gay, had not yet been either solidly articulated or widely received in the North American theological community. In Gilkey's next major theological work, however, the situation is a changed one. In Reaping The Whirlwind, the criticisms and concerns of liberation theology (that is, issues of language and imagery, the fact of oppression and marginalization, the necessity of the politicization of theology, the harkening to voices never heard before, indeed, even new attention paid to the significance of metaphysics), all these are specifically and carefully noted and given

address.<sup>31</sup> The theological anthropology which develops from the appropriation and discussion of such concerns, becomes particularly pertinent to the discussion of sin as self-abnegation, as the following section will attempt to demonstrate.

### Gilkey's Theological Anthropology

There are, in particular, three aspects of Gilkey's theological anthropology, as developed in his Reaping The Whirlwind, that are of importance to the discussion of sin. These all have to do with his analysis of the ontological structure of human existence. The first of these is his understanding of the role of power, not only as it affects and shapes the direction of the historical process, but also as a crucial property of life at the levels of personal and social existence. According to Gilkey, power is a positive ontological category. He explains:

Many theoreticians and moralists find the category of power or force negative because both connote to them exclusively the power of the state over against all its members or of one dominant group over another, and so heteronomous, crushing and arbitrary dominance. However, analysis shows that what is really evil in any situation of dominance is that the oppressed groups have no power: no power to sustain itself, to exert in some measure its will, and so in some measure the power to direct its own destiny. In such circumstances of powerlessness, the group is literally helpless with regard both to its existence and to its welfare, . . . It is then subject to fate, and incapable of

self-determination and of freedom; . . . Consequently, it is the total loss or lack of power on the part of any group and the total accession to power of either the whole or of some other group within the whole, that are here the most significant grounds of evil.<sup>32</sup>

Gilkey regards the possession of power as antecedent even to the possibility of exercising freedom. Therefore, power is also the prerequisite for misusing freedom aggressively towards sin, that is, as long as sin is identified with aggrandizing freedom. Aside from this, the capacity to assert one's being vis-à-vis another, is a right and a responsibility basic to the structure of existence. Conversely, the absence of this capacity for assertion is, in Gilkey's words, "the most significant grounds of evil". In fact, Gilkey contends that the exercise of power towards security, identity, autonomy, and self-determination, is in accordance with God's intention for human life, indeed, is one aspect of life lived in the image of God. Hence he argues:

. . . wherever men and women are called to political action to ensure the security of others in society, to eradicate whatever in nature, or the social order makes others insecure or in want, or threatens their life and their self-determination - a large part of the meaning of justice - there they are hearing a call to participate in God's providential work in giving new being through new possibilities for social life. Whatever natural and social forces tend to assure the security of life for all, in them we know the hidden work of God as creative providence in time takes place.<sup>33</sup>

Thus far then, for Gilkey the possession and exercise of power is an important component of authentic human life

lived in the image of God. It is not, in and of itself, sinful. On the contrary, it is the absence of power that is vicious. When this capacity remains un-used, the structure of human existence is being violated. This, of course, is one aspect of the sin of self-abnegation.

The second feature of Gilkey's theological anthropology, again an ontological category and pertinent to the discussion of sin, is his understanding of self-transcendence. Gilkey largely identifies self-transcendence with self-awareness and self-determination.<sup>34</sup> As was demonstrated in Chapter One, the presence of these particular facets was regarded by liberation theologians as crucial for the development of mature and responsible individuals. Conversely, the absence or refusal of self-transcendence, or self-awareness and self-determination, was considered characteristic of the sin of the abnegation of the self. In a related manner, Gilkey observes:

Perhaps the most fundamental level of neurosis is the lack of this awareness of one's own being or reality, a lack which results in the sense that I alone am weightless, substanceless, and so totally vulnerable, passive, weak (and persecuted) in a world of weighty, self-directing and powerful other people. . . . No persons, one may hazard, can be creative, morally, culturally, or politically who are not blessed with this fundamental self-affirmation and joy or exuberance in being, this sense of the reality of their own being and so this basic vitality and activity. It is the ground of all creative self-determination, independence and originality of spirit, of physical, moral and intellectual courage, and of the capacity genuinely to love another

person. Alienation from the self at this level only cripples our powers of life for ourselves, in relation to others, and surely in all political activity.<sup>35</sup>

The argument of the liberation theologians suggested that practically and theoretically, the association of sin with pride and aggressive patterns like self-aggrandizement (and corresponding to this, the espousal of the qualities of humility and self-denial) did little to correct that fundamental level of neurosis described above by Gilkey. In fact, it not only emasculated the impetus towards achieving certain political and social ends, but also made for the development of persons morally and spiritually bankrupt of the full measure of their humanity, and therefore incapable of any positive contribution of worth and value to the world at large. Likewise, Gilkey contends that no persons can be creative or genuinely love, "who are not blessed with this fundamental self-affirmation", that is, with self-transcendence. This aspect of Gilkey's anthropology thus comprehends the dangers of self-abnegation.

Finally, the third facet of Gilkey's theological anthropology which is especially relevant to the discussion of sin as self-abnegation, is his contention that the fundamental ontological structure of all existence (and history) is constituted by a polarity of destiny and freedom, or more exactly, a polarity of actuality

and possibility.<sup>36</sup> Gilkey argues that the establishment of possibility constitutes an essential aspect or function of deity in relation to the world, and he calls this function Providence.<sup>37</sup> Deriving from God, potentiality or possibility ontologically secures the opportunities for all autonomous human creativity. Thus, it possesses a distinct religious and moral imperative. That is, the appropriation of occasions for growth, change, self-determination and self-actualization, which possibility provides, is regarded as normative. Or as Gilkey puts it:

. . . new possibilities do not appear in historical existence as merely neutral; they appear, as Tillich noted, as "demands" on our conscience, as an ought which our actions must seek to embody and realize. Possibility enters history with a moral tone, as a claim on our integrity and responsibility.<sup>38</sup>

As suggested earlier, this particular emphasis corresponds to a diversified notion on Gilkey's part, of the function and purpose of God in relation to human life. The issue of the divine-human relationship is no longer perceived in terms of belligerent finite creatures who disregard the sovereignty of a "wholly other" Creator. Rather, the issue of the divine-human relationship turns on the responsibility of persons to actualize the possibilities provided by God. It is the embrace or refusal of such possibilities which establishes sinful or moral beha-

viour, respectively. The substance of this contention is reflected, for example, in Gilkey's understanding of Providence. He explains:

. . . Providence will no longer be understood as ordaining and maintaining a limited set of unalterable forms or orders of creation, nor will the intention of the divine will be the perpetuation structurally of what has always been. The changeless structures of life are no longer a sign of divine ordination, nor symbols of the presence of God. On the contrary, what is changeless and static has now precisely the reverse connotation, namely, as a sign of irrelevant archaism unrelated to the needs of a changing world.<sup>39</sup>

On the other side of the polarity, there is destiny or actuality, which is the actual material of life given us to work with. In itself it is not fate, but may become such in the absence of occasions for change, participation, and response. Fate, then, is stagnant actuality, and though Gilkey does not yet call it sin, he nonetheless regards it as evil, a spiritual and historical condition which bespeaks alienation from God.<sup>40</sup> Interestingly, Gilkey also observes that the experience of fate is a distinct feature in the lives of oppressed and marginalized persons. He writes, for instance:

In institutional situations of slavery, political dominance, economic exploitation, racial or sexual injustice, people come to be as fated - unfree, oppressed, in material want, dehumanized, void of significant choices or opportunities - and tempted<sup>41</sup> as are their rulers and exploiters, to further sin.

Yet, it is not certain at this point precisely what manner of sin the oppressed are tempted to. Gilkey con-



tinues in Reaping The Whirlwind to speak about sins of pride, self-aggrandizement, and self-centeredness.<sup>42</sup> However, his theological anthropology in fact demonstrates an awareness of sin's other possibility, namely, the refusal of persons to exercise their freedom and to actualize the full dimensions of their humanity. In fact, he declares:

Sin is the mis-use which freedom makes both of the destiny which is given to <sup>43</sup>it and of the possibilities relevant to that destiny.

It was demonstrated in Chapter One that the refusal of the possibilities afforded by God and reality is a significant feature of the sin of self-abnegation. The ontological categories that typify Gilkey's anthropology, that is, power, self-transcendence, and the polarity of actuality and possibility, establish the exigencies of self-affirmation, self-assertion, self-determination, in a word, the necessity of human activity and response which accords with the meaning of creation in the image of God. Hence, Gilkey concludes:

In every case, then, human response is an essential aspect of the divine work: In acceptance of our destiny, in affirmation of our freedom; in the courage to dare new possibilities; in repentance for our sins; in new trust in God's mercy and love; in the risk of loving relations with others; and finally in the courage, wisdom, and self-giving required for creative politics. Human creativity is a part of history and thus is that response necessary.

According to such a perspective, any refusal of response can only be understood as a denial or rejection of "an essential aspect of the divine work", that is, as sin. It is this phenomenon that is called the sin of self-abnegation. These features of Gilkey's anthropology thus far only implicitly related to the discussion of sin, finally compel Gilkey to broaden his understanding of sin. Hence in his most recent writings, Gilkey speaks of sin in a manner that is congenial to the liberationist notion of sin as the abnegation of the self. The examination of this development will occupy the remainder of this chapter.

#### Gilkey's Understanding Of Sin Revisited

I have suggested that the concept of sin developed in Gilkey's more recent theological works reflects a changed perspective in his views on deity and the divine-human relationship. This also influences his analysis of the human condition. For example, where once the discussion of finitude, anxiety, and the aggressive perversion of freedom dominated his assessment of human existence, now a different set of categories are employed to exemplify human nature. In Message And Existence, for instance, Gilkey contends:

. . . despite the complex of causes and the relativity of everything entailed by it, the essential character of the human is its self-direction and self-creation, its autonomy of thought, feeling, willing and acting.<sup>45</sup>

Again, Gilkey attempts to verify this analysis by reference to the meaning of creation. But where once he argued that the symbol of creation primarily indicated an ontological distinction between Creator and creatures, now the emphasis is placed upon another aspect of its meaning. He writes:

. . . in essence and so in possibility each moment, in what is given to us and in our own capacities, represents creative opportunities for self-actualization and for enriched experience. That is, I take it, the only genuine meaning the affirmation of the goodness of the creation as historical could have; namely, that all of us have a genuine, and not a sham chance for realizing our own innate capacities and actualizing our possibilities. The radical political implications, uncomfortable as they may<sub>46</sub> be, of such a theological affirmation are obvious.

In Gilkey's earlier statement on the nature of sin, the notion of free will or freedom was indispensable insofar as the aggrandizement of freedom was synonymous with sin. Now however, the spontaneous possession and exercise of freedom by all persons is not immediately assumed to be a matter of fact. Still, its exercise is regarded as a moral responsibility. He explains:

Freedom refers to the indubitable fact that while that given to us is unremovable and unavoidable, what we do with it in the present and for the future remains in part open and up to us. While we must accept, appropriate, affirm, and work with both our own given self, however paltry, and the world about us, however discouraging, nevertheless there are open alternatives . . . This experience of freedom to choose the self and reshape the world has in our culture been known and expressed by the middle classes; it is still a matter of<sub>47</sub> faith rather than of experience for the oppressed.

In this context, the perversion of freedom can tend in either one of two directions. That is, according to Gilkey, the self is tempted by freedom into estrangement either by "forgetting its concrete destiny - and seeking to be all of its possibilities - or to forgetting its real possibilities - and so to cease to be a real self, a unique self, at all."<sup>48</sup> The first temptation obviously corresponds to the traditional understanding of sin as pride. The latter temptation indicates the sin of self-abnegation. In fact, Gilkey identifies three distinct moments of sin, namely, pride or self-centeredness,<sup>49</sup> concupiscence,<sup>50</sup> and finally, the disintegration and loss of the self. Since this last moment corresponds to the notion of sin as self-abnegation, Gilkey's description of the dynamic involved is particularly interesting. He writes:

The opposite of the demonic where the self and its group are elevated to the status - and privileges - of deity, this self-destructive aspect of estrangement reduces the self and its community to fated, empty objects, to virtual nonbeing. Politically and historically, the 20th century has manifested the demonic; but inwardly it has felt more the stark chill of creaturely unreality and condemnation.<sup>51</sup>

Gilkey's recognition of the first two moments of sin, that is, pride and concupiscence, is reflective of the Christian realist sensitivity towards the aggressive patterns of human behaviour, and therefore pervades all

of his theological writings. However, it is his awareness of that third moment of sin which presents itself as a relatively novel element in his theology. Corresponding to this, Gilkey now maintains that the redemptive action of Christ is also directed towards the transgression of self-abnegation. He explains:

In the absence of God, our self-transcending finitude, our temporal creatureliness manifests itself as demonic, lustful, and self-destructive, as self-elevation that oppresses others, as a desire that devours all else, and as a non-being oppressed by fate and lacerated with emptiness; It is to both the demonic and the self-destructive aspects of estrangement that the redemptive action of God in Christ addresses itself, namely, to redeem us from sin and the demonic consequences of sin and to rescue us from self-destruction and fate.<sup>52</sup>

It is significant that Gilkey regards the self-destructive moment of sin as especially characteristic of oppressed groups, namely, women, blacks, and lower classes.<sup>53</sup> The circumstance that makes this condition culpable, that is, that justifies calling it sin, is the self's refusal to challenge and change both its own reality and the reality of the world about it. Juan Luis Segundo contended that "at the human level there is always an element of volition intermingled with the degradation of energy. It is the rejection of a creative but costly liberty."<sup>54</sup> Similarly, Gilkey maintains:

. . . the self can through its successive decisions and its accumulating habits close off gradually and inexorably the creative possibilities for its own continuing future, for its "presents" to come. In social existence, this is even more objectively manifest.<sup>55</sup>

In conclusion then, what has transpired both in Gilkey's theology in general, and in his understanding of sin in particular, is the development of a dialectic of affirmation and negation. He elucidates further:

This means that there are elements of affirmation of the world, of space, of time, and of human existence (of "being") in Christian faith that have been both creative and dangerous - as Christian and western history show. It means also that there are elements of renunciation, negation, and denial (of "non-being") in Christian faith which historically have also been part of its creativity and its difficulties. To reinterpret creatively this fundamental dialectic in and for each age is the major task of theology. I suspect that it is more crucial for a theology, or for preaching, that it is faithful to this dialectic than that it adopt any particular philosophical scheme.<sup>56</sup>

With regard to the matter of sin, Gilkey believes that where either of the temptations of pride and self-abnegation continue unchecked, they tend towards their respective opposites in a vicious dialectical circle.<sup>57</sup> Strangely, Gilkey's understanding of sin has come full circle. I find it interesting to contemplate whether this development is due to Gilkey's own perception and sensitivity, regardless of the Christian realist orientation, or whether perhaps the Christian realist methodology, particularly its dialectical method, facilitated this movement in the first place. In any case, Gilkey's broadened understanding of sin is sensitive to the dangers of self-abnegation on at least three points. Firstly,

he recognizes it as a condition of estrangement from God, a refusal of self-transcendence or of actualizing possibilities established by God, and as a diminution of one's humanity. Secondly, he is aware that the abnegation of the self on the part of the oppressed constantly tempts the oppressor to further excesses of sinful pride and dominance. And thirdly, he warns that the debilitating consequences of self-abnegation, that is, emptiness, despair, dependency, powerlessness, and passivity, might find their release in extreme fanaticisms or other violent and destructive behaviour. Thus, Gilkey concludes:

A dialectical unity of being and nonbeing, of self-affirmation and of self-negation . . . - seems alone to promise love and peace, genuine<sup>58</sup> freedom, genuine integrity, and genuine community.

NOTES  
CHAPTER II

<sup>1</sup>See especially Gilkey's Maker Of Heaven And Earth (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Co., Inc., 1965), © 1959. In this early work, Gilkey argues that the doctrine of creatio ex nihilo conveys and protects the absolute sovereignty or otherness of God, which idea is "the indispensable foundation on which the other beliefs of the Christian faith are based . . .". See e.g., pp. 1-7.

<sup>2</sup>These particular influences are most clearly present and acknowledged in Gilkey's Reaping The Whirlwind (New York: Seabury Press, 1976), and Message And Existence (New York: Seabury Press, 1980).

<sup>3</sup>See e.g., Gilkey's Society And The Sacred (New York: Crossroad Publishing Co., 1981), esp. the essay entitled "The Mystery of Being and Nonbeing". He writes, e.g.: "The encounter and slow interpenetration of the spirituality of the West and that of the East constitutes the major intellectual and religious event of our era. Its results in the Orient have for a century been spread before us in every facet of their thought and life. Its results on ourselves are largely still to come, but, like spring they are bound in the end to make themselves known, and their signs therefore are of vast importance. On a somewhat lesser scale - to put it mildly - my own encounter with the East represents the major event in my own recent existence and thought, again an encounter in depth that is still pending but which, like its larger counterpart, will be - for me at least if not for world history - of vast importance." p. 123.

<sup>4</sup>David Tracy, Blessed Rage For Order (New York: Seabury Press, 1978), p. 32 & passim. It is worth noting that Gilkey has responded to the "revisionist" label with the following rejoinder: "Since my friend and colleague, David Tracy, has published his excellent book, Blessed Rage For Order . . . as an example of "revisionist theology", I have been frequently asked if I consider myself to be a "revisionist theologian". On thinking carefully about this, I have realized that unquestionably I am. Every time I read something I have written before, I think to myself, 'That really needs revision!'" Message And Existence, p. 19, n. 2.



<sup>5</sup>Langdon Gilkey, Shantung Compound (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1966), esp. p. 72ff.

<sup>6</sup>Dennis P. McCann, Christian Realism And Liberation Theology (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1981), p. 49.

<sup>7</sup>I am indebted to David Tracy for this insight. In his The Analogical Imagination (New York: Crossroad Publishing Co., 1981), Tracy contends that a reader can "make an informed guess but never an a priori prediction on Gilkey's position on a particular issue. For there, as in all good interpretation, the particular subject matter takes over and the heuristic value of the method guides but ultimately yields to the subject matter itself." p. 406. For related remarks, see also Tracy's Blessed Rage For Order, esp. pp. 47-48.

<sup>8</sup>Gilkey acknowledges this, e.g., in the chap. entitled "Revelation And Theology" in Message And Existence, pp. 39-64. For further discussion of the importance of the biblical interpretation of human existence and history, see also Gilkey's Society And The Sacred, pp. 57-72.

<sup>9</sup>Gilkey, Society And The Sacred, p. 71.

<sup>10</sup>See e.g., Gilkey's Reaping The Whirlwind, where he argues that according to political and eschatological theology, "since essentially a 'good' humanity is defined as freedom from the past and for the future, the achievement of such freedom for the future is equivalent to the conquest of sin, unambiguous in its results and can almost be equated with salvation." pp. 230-231. For a more detailed analysis of this issue and related matters, see Gilkey's juxtaposition of contemporary political/eschatological theology with the thought of Reinhold Niebuhr in "Reinhold Niebuhr's Theology Of History", in The Legacy Of Reinhold Niebuhr, ed., Nathan A. Scott, (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 1975), pp. 36-62.

<sup>11</sup>McCann, Christian Realism And Liberation Theology, p. 53ff.

<sup>12</sup>Reinhold Niebuhr, An Interpretation Of Christian Ethics (New York: Seabury Press, 1970), © 1935, pp. 140-141.

<sup>13</sup>J. Deotis Roberts, "Christian Liberation Ethics: The Black Experience," in Religion In Life 48 (Summer 1979), p. 231.

<sup>14</sup>Barbara Hilkert Andolsen, "Agape In Feminist Ethics," in The Journal Of Religious Ethics 9 (Spring 1981), p. 71.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., p. 76. Consequently, Andolsen argues that the concept of agape or Christian love is best understood in terms of healthy self-regard and mutuality, which makes it an appropriate norm for both the private and the public spheres. For a similar argument, see also Eleanor Humes Haney, "What Is Feminist Ethics? A Proposal For Continuing Discussion," Ibid., 8 (Spring 1980), pp. 115-124.

<sup>16</sup>McCann, Christian Realism And Liberation Theology, p. 127.

<sup>17</sup>In Message And Existence, e.g., Gilkey clearly declares his approval of the perspective in question, writing: ". . . in much recent theology did pride replace concupiscence as the central symbol for sin, and the harm we do others (injustice) edged out the destruction we wreak upon ourselves (vice) as the primary examples in behavior of the immorality that followed upon sin. That this important shift represents a gain in the profundity and validity of theological analysis, I do not question - as this whole volume shows." p. 150.

<sup>18</sup>Gilkey, Maker Of Heaven And Earth, p. 41.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., p. 57. It is worth noting that initially, the theological perspective reflected by Gilkey in Maker Of Heaven And Earth is one specifically critical of Whiteheadian process metaphysics because of its failure to maintain the transcendence or "otherness" of deity. (see e.g., pp. 86-98) However, this criticism is somewhat mitigated in Gilkey's later writings by his subsequent realization that God's transcendence or divinity need not necessarily be construed in terms of a wholly distinct mode of being obtaining on deity's part. Thus, although Gilkey maintains against certain Whiteheadians that God is not subject to a more ultimate metaphysical principle, namely, creativity, (see e.g., Reaping The Whirlwind, pp. 113-114) he nonetheless comes to agree with the Whiteheadian contention that God's modality shares in common with created beings, such features as relatedness, temporality, changeability or contingency, and potentiality, (see esp. chap. 5 of Message And Existence, pp. 87-106). Gilkey's specific divergence from the Whiteheadian doctrine of God is indicated in Reaping, chaps. 5 & 12, and more briefly in Message, p. 85, n. 2.

<sup>20</sup>Gilkey, Maker Of Heaven And Earth, p. 215ff.

<sup>21</sup>In contrast to later writings where in fact Gilkey says of freedom: "This experience of freedom to choose the self and reshape the world has in our culture been known and experienced by the middle classes; it is still a matter of faith rather than of experience for the oppressed." Society And The Sacred, pp. 48-49.

<sup>22</sup>Gilkey, Maker Of Heaven And Earth, p. 218.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., p. 232.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., p. 254.

<sup>25</sup>See esp. chap. 3 of Naming The Whirlwind (New York: Bobbs-Merrill Co., Inc., 1969). Gilkey writes, e.g.: ". . . as neoorthodoxy developed, its original powerful vision of the mystery of God's grace and of man's need hardened into supernatural doctrines which presented us often with a system of divine answers to problems and crises of which we were not aware, and resolved them with divine realities and events invisible to us . . . this theology at the end claimed to know too much. A vision that had begun with a sense of the almost impenetrable mystery of life amidst loss and despair ended as a system of dogmas asserted with apodictic certainty and vast overconfidence; like a good political administration that had been in power too long, it was ripe for a fall." p. 90.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid., p. 140.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid., pp. 399-400.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid., pp. 380-381.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid., passim, but see e.g., pp. 384-389.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid., p. 383.

<sup>31</sup>This is even more evident in his two most recent works Message And Existence & Society And The Sacred. I do not believe that it is a coincidence that at the point where Gilkey becomes aware of the feminist critique of exclusionary language and imagery, etc., (this is demonstrated by his subsequent use of inclusive language in his references to human beings and deity) he also displays a greater sensitivity towards the dangers of self-abnegation in the experience of the oppressed.

<sup>32</sup>Gilkey, Reaping The Whirlwind, p. 26.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid., pp. 288-289.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid., p. 41ff.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid., p. 47.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid., see esp. pp. 43-49. Related discussions appear in Message And Existence, chap. 4, pp. 69-86, and in Society And The Sacred, p. 31ff.

<sup>37</sup>Gilkey, Reaping The Whirlwind, see esp. chaps. 9-10.

<sup>38</sup>Ibid., p. 252.

<sup>39</sup>Ibid., p. 193.

<sup>40</sup>Ibid., p. 54ff., & also pp. 236-257.

<sup>41</sup>Gilkey, Message And Existence, p. 255. See also Reaping The Whirlwind where Gilkey notes: "One of the most fundamental needs and therefore rights of a human being, as basic as the rights to security, to privacy, or to free speech, is this right to participate in the creation of meaning for ourselves and for the social world of which we are a part - a right systematically denied to our racial minorities and to women." p. 57.

<sup>42</sup>Gilkey, Reaping The Whirlwind, passim, but see e.g., p. 258ff., & p. 263ff.

<sup>43</sup>Ibid., p. 258. (emphasis mine)

<sup>44</sup>Gilkey, Message And Existence, p. 250.

<sup>45</sup>Ibid., p. 88.

<sup>46</sup>Gilkey, Society And The Sacred, p. 49. (emphasis mine)

<sup>47</sup>Ibid., pp. 48-49.

<sup>48</sup>Gilkey, Message And Existence, pp. 139-140.

<sup>49</sup>He writes, e.g., "The rebellious act of Adam and Eve is, therefore, the rebellion of each self in centering its world around itself, its lack of trust in God, its estrangement from the ground of its being and meaning." Ibid., p. 141.

<sup>50</sup>Gilkey writes, e.g., "It seems clear . . . that inordinate desire, lust, or concupiscence do constitute . . . a major and not a minor aspect of estrangement and that, in fact, concupiscence rather than the demonic may represent the central symptom or moment of sin in our time." Ibid., p. 150.

<sup>51</sup>Ibid., pp. 154-155. See also Society And The Sacred, esp. p. 35 where Gilkey writes: "With its divine ground obscured, freedom loses touch with its own destiny, and so with itself - and the present entity faces self-negation or self-elevation. Overwhelmed by contingency or fatedness in the given and in itself, freedom despairs of its roles in self and in world creation. And possibility, no longer related creatively to destiny, appears as arbitrary, orderless, and unreal. Sin results, ontologically and experientially, in the loss of the unity of past, present, and future: the vanishing of the past into inaccessible reality, the smothering of the present as determined by fate, and the closing of the future as bereft of possibility."

<sup>52</sup>Gilkey, Message And Existence, pp. 155-156.

<sup>53</sup>See e.g., Ibid., esp. p. 203 where Gilkey notes: ". . . participation in the creative work of the world has . . . in the past been rigorously denied to many groups: to 'lower' classes and to blacks, who have been allowed to work for but not with the world, and to women who have worked only at home. As each of these groups has progressively realized, such a denial of creative participation in the wider community, in objective labor in the world, and thus in the judgments of worth by one's peers effects a truncation of one's humanity, a refusal of full dignity, and a lessening of the reality and uniqueness of the individual self. Even more important, our individual selves become themselves and so are fulfilled only if they are enabled to love, and so again to be, but in a different sense, participants in community."

<sup>54</sup>Juan Luis Segundo, A Theology For Artisans Of A New Humanity, vol. 2: Grace And The Human Condition (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1973), p. 139.

<sup>55</sup>Gilkey, Society And The Sacred, pp. 49-50.

<sup>56</sup>Gilkey, Message And Existence, pp. 183-184.

<sup>57</sup>More specifically, Gilkey writes: "The demonic and the self-destructive are, of course, intimately interrelated in history . . . The dialectical cycle of ambitious pride, inglorious fall, ravaging emptiness and despair, followed by even more extravagant pride and even more total destruction - illustrated clearly in recent German and Japanese history - appears and reappears, not as much in myth as in historical actuality." Ibid., p. 155.

<sup>58</sup>Gilkey, Society And The Sacred, p. 137.

## CHAPTER III

### KARL RAHNER'S UNDERSTANDING OF SIN

#### The Transcendental Experience

Karl Rahner today occupies a unique position in the theological field inasmuch as his work is characterized by both a firm commitment to Catholic orthodoxy, and regard for the wider ecumenical, methodological, and intellectual concerns which compose the theological discipline in general. This mediatory position is not new to Rahner. Robert Kress notes:

From the very beginning of his teaching career Rahner has had to contend with extremes in his church: from the right those who regard everything except the incantation of past formulae as heresy; from the left those who evoke not diversity and variety, but hostility and division.<sup>1</sup>

The positive influence that Rahner had on Vatican II further attests to the prominent role which his theology has come to play in the last few decades of the twentieth century. According to Kress, Rahner's contribution was such that, "With other theologians like Yves Congar, Edward Schillebeeckx, and Joseph Ratzinger, he was able to rescue the Council from the preparatory commissions' restrictive approach and content."<sup>2</sup>

The scope of Rahner's interests is extensive, ranging from pastoral and historical theology on the one hand, to reflections on dogmatic and philosophical theology on the other. Similarly, the range of sources that pervade Rahner's theology is immense. It is possible to see in Rahner's writings elements of the philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas, Kantian metaphysics, existentialism, biblical exegesis, patristic theology, and even the influence of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. And then, of course, one can discern in Rahner's theology the unique creativity and innovation of the man Karl Rahner himself.

The particular feature of Rahner's theology that I am concerned with, however, is its delineation of the transcendental structure of existence. More specifically, Rahner's understanding of the transcendental experience, as it is determinative for the experiences of knowing, personhood, and freedom, provides a key to comprehending many of the facets and potentialities of human existence, including the tendency towards sin. For as Rahner points out:

. . . it is only in terms of the particular 'transcendental horizon' involved here that we can understand what would otherwise be quite unintelligible, namely, why original sin really applies in some sense to ourselves, and is not reduced to the level of a mere fact of the<sub>3</sub>past and one to which we can be quite indifferent.



Before proceeding to the discussion of the relevancy of certain features of the transcendental Thomist conceptuality to the analysis of sin as self-abnegation, a brief description of the structure of the transcendental experience is in order.

According to Rahner, the original moment of the transcendental experience is constituted by an a priori principle, grounded in the mind's structure, of pure openness for absolutely everything. He explains:

We shall call transcendental experience the subjective, unthematic, necessary and unfailing consciousness of the knowing subject that is co-present in every spiritual act of knowledge, and the subject's openness to the unlimited expanse of all possible reality. It is an experience because this knowledge, unthematic but ever-present, is a moment within and a condition of possibility for every concrete experience of any and every object. This experience is called transcendental experience because it belongs to the necessary and inalienable structures of the knowing subject itself, and because it consists precisely in the transcendence beyond any particular group of possible objects or categories.<sup>4</sup>

Yet as the term "experience" suggests, the transcendental experience also comprises an a posteriori moment, insofar as it can only be mediated by an encounter with concrete reality, that is, the world of things and the world of people. This contention clearly establishes Rahner's connection with the Thomistic tradition. With regard to this point, Rahner remarks:

. . . the scholastic tradition is correct when it emphasizes against ontologism that man's only knowledge of God is an a posteriori knowledge from the world. . . Hence our transcendental knowledge or experience has to be called a posteriori insofar as every transcendental experience is mediated by a categorical encounter with concrete reality in our world, both the world of things and the world of persons.<sup>5</sup>

However, the transcendental experience is not manifested solely in the apprehension of knowledge. It is also realized in the encounter with freedom, so that, in Rahner's words, "one can ask about the source and the destiny of the subject as a knowing being and as a free being together."<sup>6</sup> This encounter with freedom in the transcendental experience is especially pertinent to the discussion of sin as the following pages will attempt to demonstrate. For in Rahner's theology, freedom's ultimate end is the fulfillment of the human person. And there are still further features of Rahner's transcendental Thomism which purpose human fulfillment, namely, its understanding of grace and salvation; that is, self-actualization is not only freedom's ultimate act, it is also the intention of grace and the substance of salvation. Therefore, each of the themes of freedom, grace, and salvation will be briefly considered in turn, since each intends the establishment of a type of existence characterized by self-possession, self-determination, and

self-realization. Within this context the abnegation of the self does not appear as a positive or intrinsic value. In fact, I will argue, self-abnegation may actually work at crosspurposes to all that is estimable according to the transcendental Thomist perspective. Where this is the case, it can fairly be regarded as sin insofar as it offends God's will, violates the structure of human existence, and diminishes community in general.<sup>7</sup>

Many of Rahner's explicit statements on the nature of sin indicate that, in his mind, it is essentially an absolutization of finite values effected by egotistical, self-opinionated and presumptuous human beings. Thus, Rahner does not dispute the fact that sin may be manifested in pride, self-centeredness, self-aggrandizement, and related aggressive tendencies. But this does not necessarily undermine the argument of this thesis which contends not that pride is never a sin, but rather, that it is not the only sin and does not always do justice to the experiences of marginalized and oppressed persons. And, in point of fact, Rahner never unequivocally identifies SIN with pride.

As I have suggested, the notion of sin described in terms of the aggressive patterns of human behaviour presupposes a self-reliant dynamic self. Conversely,

the notion of sin as the renunciation of the self presupposes that a responsible, dynamic self has not yet been accomplished. Rahner's understanding of freedom, grace, and salvation, intends to foster precisely that drive towards self-actualization. It points to a dynamism in human beings which continually propels us beyond any given limit of being towards an infinite horizon. According to Rahner, this dynamism is a definitive constituent or "existential" of our created nature. It is what makes us human (and not something else), and it defines our affinity to God since it is constituted in grace by the universal saving will of God. This dynamism aims toward the appropriation of greater being, and in so doing, it discloses the discrepancy between what we are and what we ought to be. Its objective is for the self to become more rather than less (which latter condition is suggested by self-abnegation). Rahner has also identified this structure of human existence as that of "being-by-becoming", and describes it thusly:

. . . the concrete salvific activity of man is always simultaneously characterized by the starting-point from which we came, by our own lost condition which we have left behind, and also by the goal which we already possess in hope but towards which we also still reach. Here is realized the being-by-becoming of the creature. One can only recognize created man in his historical being-by-becoming, in his tension between beginning<sub>g</sub> and end, by pointing to the beginning and the end.

Hence, notwithstanding Rahner's appreciation of the classical paradigm of sin as pride, it will become clear that his theology concedes a further possibility of sin, namely, the decay and corruption of the "being-by-becoming" dynamic. This is the possibility of self-abnegation.

### The Meaning of Transcendental Freedom

Freedom, of course, is a multi-faceted concept and has been diversely understood and lauded throughout history. By far, its most popular expression has been the affirmation that freedom is immunity from peremptory compulsions, that is, coercive social, political and economic restraints. Rahner concurs with this sense of the social dimension of freedom,<sup>9</sup> and argues further:

. . . the passion for social and cultural freedom is principally a Christian passion, even though Christians often had to learn it from those who had abandoned Christianity.<sup>10</sup>

Often, "those who had abandoned Christianity" had perceived that religious authority or God's precepts (when represented in an intolerant institutional church or by a combination of moralism and dogmatism) frequently functioned as but further instances of peremptory compulsion. Thus especially of late, Rahner observes, has atheism been postulated in the name of human freedom. Contrary

to this position, however, Rahner regards human freedom as "the central blessing of salvation itself" and God as "the source of that freedom."<sup>11</sup> In fact, Rahner contends that dependence upon God enhances rather than diminishes human freedom, and correspondingly, that human autonomy develops in direct proportion to our dependence upon God. He writes:

Not until one experiences himself as a free subject responsible before God and accepts this responsibility does he understand what autonomy is, and understand that it does not decrease, but increases in the same proportion as dependence on God.<sup>12</sup>

As such statement indicates, according to Rahner freedom is transcendental in that it derives from God, and is intended by God, to be an operant component of our being. Consequently, in Rahner's view the exercise of freedom "is always at least implicitly the decision between existential theism and atheism."<sup>13</sup> Even more importantly, within the transcendental Thomist conceptuality which Rahner represents, freedom is the means by which we accomplish either our salvation or damnation.<sup>14</sup>

Since in Rahner's theology freedom has a unique end, namely, the self-actualization of a subject towards salvation, it should not be understood as the mere ability to choose some object or course of action over another. Rather, the very essence of freedom consists in its power to eventuate self-constitution. Or as Rahner puts it:

When freedom is really understood, it is not the power to be able to do this or that, but the power<sup>15</sup> to decide about oneself and to actualize oneself.

At first glance, such freedom appears (at least to Rahner's critics), to be unreal, elusive, and evanescent; that is, this freedom seems to be unrelated to historical and practical exigencies. Robert Kress, for instance, has observed that the most persistent criticism of Rahner's theology in general (and consequentially, of his understanding of freedom as well) is that it is too transcendental and betrays the concrete historicity of the Christian faith.<sup>16</sup> Among those concerned with political realities, there is the suspicion that Rahner's transcendental methodology does not support tangible and measurable freedoms. In connection with this, Kress has noted:

Liberation theologians bemoan the universalist balance of traditional continental theologians like Rahner, who are presumed to be paralyzed, inactive, and thus irrelevant<sup>17</sup> in the real suffering and exploited world.

Yet against this type of criticism, Rahner characteristically maintains that "a freedom which could not appear in the world would certainly not be a freedom of any special interest to us. Nor would it be freedom as Christianity understands it."<sup>18</sup> For Rahner, freedom must be concretely mediated and realized in space and time. He insists:

. . . our freedom is bodily freedom, and this means it is realized as the original self-determination<sup>19</sup> of a personal subject in space and time.

Even more importantly, since according to Rahner, freedom is the means toward salvation, precisely for this reason the Christian ought to be committed to the enlargement of the sphere of freedom.<sup>20</sup> Rahner does not doubt that the enlargement of the sphere of freedom may prove dangerous and invite fresh calamities of sin and guilt. Nevertheless, he believes that the risk involved in the extension of freedom ought not, on principle, to frighten Christians. He explains:

. . . we Christians have every reason to regard the enlargement of the sphere of freedom through modern developments first of all as a positive chance for Christian existence, for as free children of God we can realize the grace of freedom that generates eternal salvation only in the freedom also of the natural spirit.<sup>21</sup>

Certainly, Rahner recognizes that an enlarged sphere of freedom for one individual or group of individuals inevitably threatens the freedom of others since it implies a diminished field of the latter's activities. However, he reasons:

The common good which limits the freedom of the individual is only another's right to freedom, so that the sphere of freedom is limited for the sake of freedom itself, and not by an alien element."<sup>22</sup>

This having been said, it is now possible to clarify the significance of Rahner's understanding of freedom to the identification of sin as self-abnegation. In Rahner's theology, freedom is practically synonymous with self-



determination. Or in other words, freedom is primarily the subject's being responsible for himself or herself. This contention is so pervasive in Rahner's Foundations Of Christian Faith, for example, that it is difficult to specify its most poignant expression. Yet, the essence of the argument is captured, for instance, in the following statement:

. . . in reality freedom is first of all the subject's being responsible for himself, so that freedom in its fundamental nature has to do with the subject as such and as a whole. In real freedom the subject always intends himself, understands and posits himself. Ultimately he does not do something but does himself."<sup>23</sup>

This proposition clearly establishes as normative the requirement that, having freedom, each individual ought to be self-determinative. It also implies that the refusal to be self-determinative violates the transcendental structure of human existence which is essentially fixed by our relationship to deity. For as Rahner points out:

. . . man is always under the obligation to use his freedom as much as possible for shaping his life; he may never abdicate this responsibility under pretext that everything happens in any case as it must happen."<sup>24</sup>

Given this understanding of freedom's obligation, it is arguable that a moment of sin arises whenever the responsibility for self-determination is abrogated, and we allow confining societal and cultural expectations to completely determine our existence. It has been argued in

Chapter One that this failure describes the sin of self-abnegation. Rahner, too, is cognizant of the fact that the failure to accept the responsibility of being self-constituting is a distinct and common temptation, for he notes:

Just as with subjectivity, so too a person can evade his responsibility and freedom and can interpret himself as the product of what is not himself.<sup>25</sup>

If the refusal to be self-determinative is an evasion of freedom, it is also an avoidance of transcendence which in turn signifies a retreat from God. For according to Rahner, the transcendental experience in which the self is posited and actualized in freedom is at the same time an experience of God, and of course, vice versa.<sup>26</sup> Consequently, it would be accurate to say that the loss of self (which is a concomitant of the abnegation of the self) is in some sense a loss of the experience of God.<sup>27</sup> This fact alone would suggest that self-abnegation bespeaks a sinful condition to the extent that it effects estrangement from God. However, there is a further factor involved in Rahner's concept of transcendental freedom which conduces toward an understanding of sin in terms of self-abnegation. I have just noted that freedom's obligations include that of becoming a self-determinative individual. But even more importantly, freedom has a single unique end, namely, self-actuali-

zation or the realization of the greatest possible fullness of being in which (according to Rahner) our salvation consists. Hence, insofar as the abnegation of the self entails disregard of the exigencies of freedom (which is the means toward salvation), and self-actualization (which is the end freedom seeks), it risks the forfeiture of salvation.

Finally, I wish to point out that Rahner's understanding of transcendental freedom implies the presence of a dynamism in human nature which is openness towards the infinite possibilities of being. This dynamism places into question all the limited and provisional levels of existence that we have thus far accomplished, and informs us that there is more being to be realized. This orientation should function in such a way that persons (and especially oppressed persons) resist all attempts to circumscribe what they may become, what they may believe, how they may think, feel, and act. The opposite of this dynamism is freely chosen closure to the absolute future (which for Rahner is God) and its infinite possibilities. It is ideology, stagnation, inertia and passivity. Again, these features are symptoms of the kind of sin which is of concern to liberation theology.

Exercising our freedom, actualizing ourselves, is not without its risks. It may invite fresh sins, guilt,

and danger. But Rahner argues that the ambiguities that attach to our motives and actions do not constitute reason enough to discontinue our "being-by-becoming". As he explains it:

. . . the Christian's historical action in society, state and Church bears inevitably the character of risk, of uncertainty, of walking in the dark. . . . If, because of this risk, a Christian thinks himself dispensed of making individual decisions, he sins against the historicity of his existence and becomes all the more guilty . . . As a Christian too, he must not only suffer but act without the correctness and success of his action being guaranteed by the correctness of his principles.<sup>28</sup>

Therefore, although it is conceivable that self-abnegation, practised on a wide scale, could reduce the level of strife, guilt and evil that is otherwise introduced into historical existence by self-actualizing men and women, this is still not reason enough to regard it, beyond all question, as beneficial behaviour. On the contrary, what underlies Rahner's understanding of transcendental freedom is the conviction that we are subjects whose authenticity or inauthenticity (and correspondingly, our relationship to God) depends upon the exercise of our freedom. As I have pointed out, in Rahner's theology the proper exercise of freedom manifests itself in terms of self-acceptance, self-understanding, self-determination, self-realization, autonomy, growth, and openness to the absolute future which is God. Furthermore, it will become clear in the following section that these same achievements, according to Rahner, are intended and made possible by the grace of God.

### The Aim of Transcendental Grace

Robert Kress has remarked that it is grace, and not philosophy, which is at the beginning and heart of all of Karl Rahner's theology.<sup>29</sup> He argues further that the entire purpose of Rahner's theology "has been to show that God created the human being precisely so that he or she can be graced."<sup>30</sup> In this sense then, it is accurate to say that Rahner regards the intention of grace more as the fulfillment of human nature than as quittance from the penalties of sin and guilt. And in fact, the starting point for Rahner's explication of the Christian message is not a sinful humanity that needs to be justified, but is rather the human self as it is already graced. This condition is accomplished by "that self-bestowal of God (who is of his nature holy) upon man in grace which ipso facto sanctifies him prior to any moral decision on man's own part, i.e., which sets him in the ambience of God in his holiness."<sup>31</sup>

Because Rahner looks for the foundations of Christian faith in the human self as it is already graced, the problem of sin appears in a slightly different light than it would were an ungraced humanity to constitute his starting point. For it is not as though the issue of sin revolves around the fact of a totally depraved human

nature that is incapable of accomplishing anything of real value in the eyes of God (even though it remains justified by the grace of God). Rather, the problem is one of failing to participate in that structure of existence which is intended and established by God. Or as Rahner describes it:

. . . God's free mercy lifts man to the mysterious participation in the divine nature and the divine life. This participation transcends human comprehension. Nevertheless, a man has to safeguard it by a way of life which corresponds to his call to share in the life of God.<sup>32</sup>

For Rahner, grace is basically the orientation of human existence towards the immediacy of God. As such, it is "an inescapable existential of man's whole being even when he closes himself to it freely by rejecting it."<sup>33</sup> What this orientation reveals is the absolute and forgiving self-communication of God to all persons. Thus grace is effective both in God's offer of himself, and in the response to that offer. Or in Rahner's words, grace possesses a "two-fold modality". He explains:

. . . God's self-communication to man as a free being who exists with the possibility of an absolute "yes" or "no" to God can be present or can be understood in two different modalities: in the modality of the antecedent situation of an offer and a call to man's freedom on the one hand, and on the other hand in the once again two-fold modality of the response to this offer of God's self-communication as a permanent existential of man, that is, in the modality of an acceptance or in the modality of a rejection of God's self-communication by man's freedom.<sup>34</sup>

According to Rahner, this ontological self-communication of God is given for the sake of immediate knowledge and love of the divine. More specifically, it is "the condition which makes personal and immediate knowledge and love for God possible."<sup>35</sup> This in turn has divinizing effects on the individual in whom this self-communication of God takes place.<sup>36</sup> Thus the ultimate goal of grace is the divinization of the subject.

Yet, in Rahner's theology divinization and humanization are more or less interchangeable terms. For the process of divinization does not imply transportation into another 'supernatural' realm. Rather, it takes place in our very human environment. As finite beings, we experience the path towards immediacy with God as a process which has its most radical possibility still ahead of it. This is the lure of the absolute future. Therefore, Rahner advises:

The doctrine about this grace and its fulfillment . . . bids us keep ourselves radically open in faith, hope and love for the ineffable, unimaginable and nameless absolute future of God which is coming, and bids us never close ourselves before there is nothing more to close, because nothing will be left outside of God, since we shall be wholly in God and he shall be wholly in us.<sup>37</sup>

The prevenient occasion of grace, which permits the transcendental experience of knowledge and freedom in the first place, is gratuitous and yet remains intrinsic to

the structure of human existence. As its source and goal is infinite (i.e., God), grace instills, as an intrinsic element of human existence, a dynamic of continual transcending or surpassing. With regard to this point, Robert Kress remarks:

The human being actually experiences and transcends limits in a world in which God has established Himself as the personal apeiron and proper end of human transcending. Thus, in the real world, human transcendence in act has as its "natural" outcome intimate personal communion with God. Supernatural existential means that God has provided the world with an ontological horizon other than some other possible world might have had. Since this horizon is God, it is called grace. . . . This graced human world is a real ontological determination of the human being. It precedes and thus constitutes the conditions of the existence of individual human beings. Therefore it is said to condition existentially their action, cognition, and volition.<sup>38</sup> This is the meaning of supernatural existential.

In this sense, the path towards immediacy to God which grace intends and makes possible, is also an human movement, or a process of humanization.

Within the conceptuality which Rahner represents, a graced existence recognizes, accepts, and exercises the capacity of human transcendence. Furthermore, it subordinates that transcendence to nothing save the infinite horizon of God, which means precisely that our transcendence is in principle limitless. By contrast, an ungraced and therefore sinful existence is one in which the call of grace to transcendence is evaded, denied, rejected or subordinated to a finite and provisional horizon. Even more



importantly, however, if human transcendence has as its natural outcome intimate personal communion with God, then the failure of the same transcendence may have as its outcome the exact opposite, namely, non-communion with God, estrangement from God, in a word, damnation.

This argument obviously presupposes freedom on the part of men and women to respond to the call of grace (which is the call to transcendence). However, as has been pointed out, in Rahner's theology grace primarily manifests itself in the establishment of freedom to respond (whether in a negative fashion or a positive fashion). Therefore, Rahner contends that "the entire life of a free subject is inevitably an answer to the question in which God offers himself to us as the source of transcendence."<sup>39</sup> According to Rahner, the acceptance of God's free self-communication in openness to the absolute future is usually called justification, while its rejection is called unbelief and sin.<sup>40</sup> Hence, although we begin our lives already graced in the transcendental structure of existence, it is possible to forfeit (in this case through inactivity) that sanctified state in which we originate. Or, as Rahner remarks in an essay entitled "Sin As Loss Of Grace In Early Church Literature":

. . . there are sins which deprive the justified person of the interior personal grace, received at

the moment of justification. However this assertion may be formulated, it is at the basis of the Catholic notion of the essence of serious sin. The personally culpable loss of sanctifying grace is the specific mark of serious sin which the justified person commits.<sup>41</sup>

What remains to be determined is the nature of the sin which results in a loss of grace within the specific context of the transcendental experience. Given Rahner's understanding of the intent of grace, namely, transcendence into personal communion with God (or alternatively, divinization-humanization), sin appears in the refusal, on the part of human beings, of further transcending. This means that the proffer and acceptance of grace is not always or even primarily linked with acts and beliefs associated with dogma, piety, and religious rites. With regard to this point, John P. Galvin, for example, has commented:

The offer of grace is present, modifying our consciousness, throughout the whole of our lives . . . all deeds which engage the depths of our freedom affect our relationship with God. Acceptance and rejection of grace are thus not limited to acts with visibly religious content. They take place in any true exercise of our freedom, even if the specific act seems to have nothing to do with God.<sup>42</sup>

As a permanent existential of the human being, grace is operative as a dynamic orientation towards infinity. Therefore, it demands of human beings a continual process of growth. To ignore this, that is, to refuse to exercise our freedom in continual self-surpassing,

implies that the proffer of grace is either being overlooked or perhaps even rebuffed. The rejection of grace itself, and its consequence of non-communion with God, is clearly tantamount to sin.

According to liberation theology, the abnegation of the self entails precisely this evasion of transcendence. It defies the injunction confirmed by grace, that our becoming and our growth, because it is oriented towards an infinite horizon, be inexhaustible. Even more significantly, self-abnegation defies what grace ultimately purposes, namely, that process of humanization or self-actualization which becomes divinization. It is for these precise reasons that the abnegation of the self is called sin.

As Rahner points out, the rejection of grace does not reflect negatively upon the efficacy of God's original self-communication. Rather, it is an indication of the kind of relationship which we, as spiritual creatures, assume towards the same self-communication of God.<sup>43</sup> For this reason, Rahner too calls such rejection "sin" and "unbelief". That self-abnegation further contradicts the purpose of salvation will become evident in the following pages.

### Rahner's Understanding of Salvation

When Rahner comes to speak of the substance of salvation, it is clear that he has in mind the consummation of that process of humanization-divinization. Thus John P. Galvin, in reflecting upon Rahner's theology, remarks:

"Divinization" and "humanization" are not alternatives between which we could choose; in the actual world in which we live, ~~they~~<sup>44</sup> they are one and the same goal of our existence.

According to Rahner, salvation "implies the absolute self-communication of God in himself as the innermost power of our existence and as our goal."<sup>45</sup> This is the end that the process of self-transcendence moves toward. When this self-communication of God is attained, accepted, and enjoyed, then salvation is accomplished.

This ultimate self-transcendence into absolute closeness to God is consummately exemplified in the event of the Incarnation. In this sense, it is apparent as a process of divinization. Rahner explains:

The God-Man is the initial beginning and the definitive triumph of the movement of the world's self-transcendence into absolute closeness to the mystery of God . . . the Incarnation appears as the necessary and permanent beginning of the divinization of the world as a whole.<sup>46</sup>

In Rahner's theology, this kind of ultimate self-transcendence is potentially available to all persons, even though Christians regard its actual accomplishment to

reside in only one historical personage, namely, the man Jesus of Nazareth. For Rahner reasons:

. . . the intrinsic effect of the hypostatic union for the assumed humanity of the Logos consists precisely and in a real sense only in the very thing which is ascribed to all men as their goal and their fulfillment, namely, the immediate vision of God<sup>47</sup> which the created, human soul of Christ enjoys.

Therefore, this movement into immediacy with God stands as the goal, the fulfillment, and the salvation of all men and women.

Yet, as I noted earlier, this movement towards divinization is also an event of humanization. The discussion of Rahner's understanding of grace established that the point of self-transcendence is not to escape the realm of being that we presently know and exist in. Rather, its point is to realize more of the very being in which we presently consist; its dynamic is one of becoming. For Rahner, becoming is "the coming to be of more reality, as reaching and achieving a greater fullness of being."<sup>48</sup> Since we transcend ourselves through realizing more being, and since being is what we are, therefore, the aim is to become more of ourselves, to realize more of ourselves.

Within this context, the very question of personal existence and the measure of being to which it aspires and actualizes, is at the same time a question of salvation. The whole dynamic towards salvation requires not only freedom and transcendence, but also a personal, complete,

and self-possessed individual who posits himself or herself as the subject of transcendence. Hence, Rahner maintains:

When one does not see the original starting point for an understanding of salvation in the subject and rooted in the very nature of freedom, salvation can only appear very strange and sound like mythology.<sup>49</sup>

Within the transcendental Thomism which Rahner represents, the exercise of freedom in self-transcendence, self-possession, and self-realization all acquire a distinct salvific significance. For as Rahner argues:

. . . the true theological notion of salvation does not mean a future situation which befalls a person unexpectedly like something coming from outside, and this happily or, if it is the opposite of salvation, unhappily. Nor does it mean something bestowed on him only on the basis of a moral judgment. It means rather the final and definitive validity of a person's true self-understanding and true self-realization by the fact that he accepts his own self as it is disclosed and offered to him in the choice of transcendence as interpreted in freedom.<sup>50</sup>

This having been said, it is now possible to determine the precise relevancy of Rahner's understanding of salvation to the notion of sin as self-abnegation. On the one hand, Rahner's soteriology presents for our consideration the following contentions: (1) Salvation can only be the event of a free person; (2) the means toward salvation is one of unceasing self-transcendence, prompted by openness to the infinite horizon of being; (3) salvation is the issue of self-determination and self-actualization.

On the other hand, it has been argued that self-abnegation entails the following consequences: (1) the discontinuance of the exercise of freedom; (2) evasion of, or indifference to the exigencies of self-transcendence and appropriation of greater fullness of being, prompted by closure towards the infinite horizon of being (which is God); (3) the capitulation of the self to false and arbitrary expectations and determinations to the point where there remains no authentic self to speak of, who could posit himself or herself as a subject of salvation.

When those factors which, according to Rahner, conduce towards our salvation are juxtaposed with those features which characterize the abnegation of the self, we discover that they mutually preclude each other. Such conclusion is not meant to disregard the universal saving will of God. Rather, it is meant to question whether the habit of self-abnegation actually facilitates our salvation within the structure of reality which Rahner delineates. If it does not, (and this clearly appears to be the case) then it can only be regarded as sinful.

In fact, Rahner plainly suggests that salvation can never take place without the supposition of a self who is characterized by freedom and self-actualization. He writes, for example:

But this salvation takes place as the salvation of a free person, as the fulfillment of a free person as

such, and hence it takes place precisely when this person in fact actualizes himself in freedom, that is, towards his salvation. It never takes place without the involvement of this person and the involvement of his freedom. A person who actualizes himself in freedom, and a salvation which would merely be a reified state produced by God alone on the person, are mutually contradictory notions. A salvation not achieved in freedom cannot be salvation.<sup>51</sup>

Given this understanding of salvation, its opposite (i.e., the possibility of eternal loss of God or damnation) can easily be regarded as a potential consequence of the abnegation of the self. For this condition involves a perception of the self as less than fully human, or less than the fullness of being prescribed as our essential inheritance. Where unmitigated disparagement of the self presides as the habit of individuals, there is no self-acceptance, no self-possession, no self-understanding, no self-determination or self-realization, no self to speak of whose salvation or damnation could become a matter of concern. Instead, there is only an inauthentic existent who defines what he is by what is not him; a being whose existence is controlled by the force of various determinisms and expectations; a being who may never know growth.

Yet, because none of these features appear to be aggressive, belligerent, disorderly, and blatantly impious or sacrilegious (these being the qualities popularly



associated with sin), self-abnegation itself has rarely been regarded as sinful (though the consequences it enjoins are certainly detrimental to the cause of salvation). It is my contention, however, that given Rahner's understanding of the goal of freedom, the intention of grace, and the meaning of salvation, his theology implicitly, but consistently, comprehends the transgression involved in self-abnegation. Further to this point, and in anticipation of the discussion of sin which is to follow, Rahner has observed:

In certain circumstances it is possible that nothing is hidden beneath an apparently very great offence because it can be just the phenomenon of a pre-personal situation, and behind the facade of bourgeois respectability there can be hidden a final, embittered and despairing "no" to God, and one that is really<sup>52</sup>  
subjectively done and not just passively endured.

### Sin Within the Transcendental Experience

Rahner's statements on the nature of sin can be divided into two categories. On the one hand, there is his discussion of sin within the specific context of Catholic dogmatic theology. This level of discussion presupposes acquaintance with the Catholic understanding of baptism, the nature of original sin, the distinction between mortal and venial sins, penance, etc.<sup>53</sup> On the other hand, there is Rahner's analysis of sin within the

specific context of foundational or philosophical theology. This latter analysis addresses the question of the nature of sin within the setting of the transcendental structure of existence and will be the focus of my attention, corresponding as it does, to the earlier discussions of transcendental freedom, grace, and salvation. The suitability of this approach is further suggested by the fact that, according to Rahner, such issues as original sin, guilt, redemption, justification, and the Fall cannot be connected in a temporal sequence, and that as they stand, they are simply not matters which trouble people much today.<sup>54</sup>

He notes, for example:

It must indeed be admitted and this has been expressed in sober honesty most recently, especially on the Protestant side, that man today is no longer terribly bothered about the question as to how from being a sinner - which he does not think he is in the first place - he becomes justified before God and finds a merciful God.<sup>55</sup>

In view of this, Rahner looks towards the presence of a particular kind of experience in persons which suggests itself as the most appropriate context for the discussion of morality and sin. Simply put, this experience is the awareness, on the part of individual men and women, of the discrepancy between what they are and what they ought to be.

To begin with, Rahner regards Christianity as a state of radical openness to the question of the absolute

future which is God. Correspondingly, he believes that this openness imposes upon Christians, at least, the peculiar responsibility of overcoming the gap between what they actually are, and what they may potentially become.<sup>56</sup> Within Rahner's theology, it appears that this process may be hindered by both egoism and inertia of the spirit. Prima facie, it is not clear whether these two habits derive from one and the same stand vis-à-vis God, (namely, false self-sufficiency) or whether in fact they constitute two distinct postures. This in turn raises the question of whether sin is always a matter of pride or conscious self-sufficiency in relation to God, or whether perhaps it is a matter of failing to grasp the power of Being (i.e., God) in the first place. This latter possibility, of course, defines the sin of self-abnegation.

For Rahner, sin is basically a process in which a person makes absolute a limited and finite value, whether for reasons of success, security, consolation, happiness or peace, and cannot see another or further value.<sup>57</sup> He explains:

In spite of the mere finiteness of these values in their competition among themselves, we are dealing here with an a-theistic person who closes himself in practice, not in theory, with a person who does not believe that the infinite fullness of all values dwells in unity beyond this immediately tangible reality, and that this fullness offers himself to

him in his self-communication through grace as the fullness and as the ultimate meaning of his existence. Basically he does not believe in God if he maintains a particular inner worldly value to the radical detriment of another value, even though both are finite, and makes this the absolute norm of his existence.<sup>58</sup>

It is clear that Rahner often regards the process in which a finite value is absolutized as a consequence of shortsightedness, pride, and blinding egoism. He also believes that these particular habits can threaten freedom more radically than all external restrictions and compulsions.<sup>59</sup> Where this is the case, Rahner speaks about the necessity of becoming loving and unselfish, of bearing burdens and accepting distress. In a word, he generally advocates that we follow the example of the passion of the crucified Lord and Saviour. Hence, Rahner recognizes that there are occasions in which we behave as "sinful, self-opinionated and presumptuous human beings."<sup>60</sup> To counteract this proclivity, prayer, faith, self-denial and humility are in order.<sup>61</sup>

However, these particular circumstances do not exhaust all that Rahner has to say about the problem of sin and the nature of the true Christian life. It is also possible that the absolutization of finite values may result from inertia of the spirit. Persons who willingly assent to a circumscribed existence assigned by the force of societal expectations (perhaps for reasons of security or expediency), and this to the radical detriment of a

superior possibility, could be culpable in the sense described above by Rahner. Of course, this assumes on the part of the individuals in question, not only some measure of consciousness that the prescribed role represents a diminution or violation of their essential being; it also presupposes that people have the means or potential to resist the force of superficial and detrimental compulsions. For this reason, Rahner places great emphasis on the priority of individual ethics, that is, the personal and unique responsibility of all individuals for determining the direction their lives take and what they actually become. In connection with this, Rahner observes:

. . . there are innumerable things in life which are asked from me and from nobody else, so that I cannot hide behind an anonymous crowd, public opinion or other obligations.<sup>62</sup>

Significantly, what underlies this observation is the conviction that individual (and also Christian) ethics is not primarily adherence to objective norms with which God has supposedly endowed reality. On the contrary, according to Rahner, norms are only moral, and adherence to the same is only ethical, when they express the structure of the person. This is because:

All other structures of things are below man. He may change and transform them as much as he can, he is their master, not their servant. The only

ultimate structure of the person which adequately expresses it is the basic power of love, and this is without measure. Fundamentally, all sin is only the refusal to entrust oneself to this measurelessness, it is the lesser love which, because it refuses to become greater, is no longer love . . . .<sup>63</sup>

Given this understanding, it is reasonable to conclude that any existence which contradicts the essential structure of the person (for example, a marginalized and oppressed existence) is sinful not only in itself but also in its consequences. This implies too, that the possibility of sin against God is intimately connected with the paucity of our experience and existence which, according to Rahner, ought to be characterized by freedom, subjectivity, and self-realization.<sup>64</sup> Where these three elements are wanting, Rahner observes that our social and personal existence is marked by stagnation, inactivity, and unquestioning identification with existing social structures. Culpability attaches to these tendencies because, as Rahner argues:

. . . anyone who as a Christian sought simply and uncritically to identify himself with his existing social situation would have to ask himself whether in that case he believed in the absolute future [i.e., God] in a really effective sense and in the real practice of his own living, instead of merely at the theoretical level and in some private and interior dimension.<sup>65</sup>

In such a situation, sin would not necessarily disclose itself in terms set out and expected by the traditional paradigm of hubris or pride (that is, as

self-aggrandizement, conceit, intolerance, and self-centeredness). Instead, sin might reside in much more quiescent attitudes and modes of conduct, such as diffidence, indifference, deference, apathy and submission. According to Rahner, even apparently harmless behaviour, insofar as it entails abrogation of responsibility for self-transcendence, and inasmuch as it is subjectively chosen, might signify serious estrangement from God.

Again, I refer to Rahner's remark:

In certain circumstances it is possible that nothing is hidden beneath an apparently very great offence because it can be just the phenomenon of a pre-personal situation, and behind the facade of bourgeois respectability there can be hidden a final, embittered and despairing "no" to God, and one that is really<sub>66</sub> subjectively done and not just passively endured.

The crucial insight which Rahner contributes to our discussion of sin then, is that even seemingly inoffensive behaviour (for example, self-abnegation) represents a "no" to God that is "subjectively done and not just passively endured." Rahner also points out that even though a "no" to God indicates a free decision, it is not parallel in value to the positive response which freedom could accomplish; it is abortive, self-destructive, and self-contradictory.<sup>67</sup> A negative response given to the invitation of self-transcendence not only closes us to the horizon of our freedom (i.e., God) but further effects a truncation of our selves and diminishes our existence.

However, because the refusal of transcendence remains one of freedom's possibilities (self-destructive though it may be) Rahner is prepared to speak of the liability of this kind of sin as a permanent "existential" or feature of human existence. He explains:

We never know with ultimate certainty whether we really are sinners. But although it can be suppressed, we do know with ultimate certainty that we really can be sinners, even when our bourgeois everyday life and our own reflexive manipulation of our motives appear to give us very good grades.<sup>68</sup>

Generally speaking, (that is, without reference to specific dogma) it is because of the liability to sin that it is possible to speak of original sin.<sup>69</sup> According to Rahner, the material of our freedom's actualization is the world of persons. As we appropriate and use this material, even its negative aspects co-determine and hence become constitutive elements of our own reality. Thus, Rahner argues that "the guilt of others is a permanent factor in the situation and realm of the individual's freedom."<sup>70</sup> He elucidates further:

All of man's experience points in the direction that there are in fact objectifications of personal guilt in the world which, as the material for the free decisions of other persons, threaten these decisions, have a reductive effect upon them, and make these free decisions painful . . . a good act itself always remains ambiguous because of the co-determination of this situation by guilt. It always remains burdened with consequences which could not really be intended because they lead to tragic impasses, and which disguise the good that was intended by one's own freedom.<sup>71</sup>



Yet, as Rahner points out, this kind of original sin must be distinguished from personal guilt and personal sin.<sup>72</sup> Even more importantly, in Rahner's theology the reality of original sin can never be grounds for advancing notions of human depravity and unworthiness. In connection with this, Karl Weger has commented that given Rahner's understanding of the Incarnation in which humanity is at one and the same time affirmed and divinized, "man is forbidden to have a low opinion of himself, because this is the same as having a low opinion of God."<sup>73</sup> And, as was noted earlier, the possibility that one's actions may become burdened with consequences not intended, does not excuse one from the responsibility of exercising freedom and making decisions. This much having been said, it is now possible to clarify the relationship between sin within the transcendental structure of experience and sin as the abnegation of the self.

Firstly, it is necessary to reiterate that according to the transcendental Thomist conceptuality, human nature is essentially constituted by freedom, continual self-transcendence, self-determination, autonomy, and self-actualization. This perception immediately recommends in the first place that self-abnegation is not what life primarily proposes. Under certain circumstances, it may serve some secondary purpose. But taken as an ideal in

and of itself, it is an aberration. Rahner's high regard for the integrity of the human person is of especial significance in the consideration of what is moral and ethical. That is, he believes that the norms and rules of conduct which a society prescribes can only be considered moral, and adherence to the same ethical, if they express and promote the real structure of the person.<sup>74</sup>

Rahner has also argued that the real structure of the person consists in freedom, self-transcendence, self-acceptance, self-determination and self-realization. Where these are wanting, the structure of the person is being violated and, therefore, sin has disclosed itself. James Bresnahan, in interpreting Rahner on this point explains:

The structures of nature are to be found not primarily by empirical observation but by looking within the immediacy of conscious self-experience. . . . There the core of nature is to be found, the most basic structure of the being of the person which, because it grounds freedom itself, must not be violated. . . . In its most basic sense, discovered at the heart of personal activity, freedom means responsibility for shaping one's own self and striving to do so.<sup>75</sup>

Self-abnegation, insofar as it discourages responsibility for "shaping one's own self and striving to do so", contradicts and betrays what freedom intends, what grace makes possible, and what salvation promises, namely, "the final and definitive validity of a person's true self-understanding and true self-realization."<sup>76</sup> In so

doing, self-abnegation clearly warrants the designation of sin. For as Rahner frequently asserts:

. . . the responsibility of every person for himself, for his freedom, for his own unfathomable self which he cannot make completely reflexive - all of this belongs to man's very essence, and it may not be taken from him.<sup>77</sup>

Furthermore, the failure to surpass ourselves, to grow, signifies closure to the infinite horizon which is God. When this habit of closure is persisted in throughout the course of one's life, then, Rahner contends, hell or the possibility of eternal estrangement from God becomes a genuine likelihood. He insists on this possibility because "otherwise the seriousness of free history would be abolished."<sup>78</sup>

Finally, according to Rahner's understanding of the transcendental experience, self-possession is a concomitant of God-centeredness, and of course, vice versa.

Here I specifically refer to his contention:

. . . in the history of experience of the self the experience of the loss of identity . . . is also . . . a loss of the experience of God or the refusal to accept the abiding experience of God.<sup>79</sup>

Such statement clearly indicates that for Rahner, the repose or centering of one's being in God does not mean selflessness and self-denial (although these qualities have often been extolled as preeminent Christian virtues). Indeed, the very point of this thesis has been

to argue that there are variations of God-centeredness and also, therefore, variations of the manner of sin which results when this centeredness is lost. John Carmody, in interpreting Rahner precisely on this point, lends support to this contention, arguing:

There can be many variations on this centering, and one should not pontificate just how it ought to proceed. If, for instance, an oppressive or patriarchal culture has made women by and large powerless and diffident, then their striving may not fit the classical paradigms of giving up "pride". As Valerie Saiving Goldstein argued years ago, women may have first to become more assertive and active - have first to develop selves rather than renounce them. But the basic striving, the central theme playing through all human stories, will never wander far from an increasing repose of one's freedom in gracious mystery . . .

Sin then, insofar as it entails estrangement from God, self, and others, always derives from misused freedom. But the mis-use of freedom might consists as readily in its surrender as it does in prideful aggrandizement. Persons may be pompously self-centered and belligerently self-sufficient, or they may lack selves at all and have failed to grasp that power of being which has endowed them with the capacity for freedom, self-transcendence, self-determination and self-realization. Rahner's understanding of the transcendental structure of experience clearly acknowledges this latter possibility. Even more to the point, he calls it sin because it is a response of "no"

to the demands of God, human nature, and the human community. It is sin because it is self-chosen impotence and non-being; it is sin because, in Rahner's words, it is "subjectively done and not just passively endured."<sup>81</sup>

## NOTES

### CHAPTER III

<sup>1</sup>Robert Kress, A Rahner Handbook (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982), pp. 4-5.

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 9. Further to this point see pp. 9-10.

<sup>3</sup>Karl Rahner, Theological Investigations, vol. 11: Confrontations 1 (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1974), p. 250.

<sup>4</sup>Karl Rahner, Foundations Of Christian Faith (New York: Seabury Press, 1978), pp. 20-21.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 51-52.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 21.

<sup>7</sup>Rahner clearly acknowledges these three levels of sin's operation, e.g., in the following statement: "Sin is opposition to the holy will of the eternal God; it is opposition to the love which he offers us and in which he wants to give and communicate himself more and more, so that we might participate, or increase our participation, 'in the divine nature'. The offence against this God is the very essence of sin. Over and above this, sin is however not only an offence against the nature of man and against the supernatural calling to grace, and against the growth and ever deeper personal acceptance of this grace. Sin is also an offence against the holy communion of the redeemed. . . . For the divine will of love and the supernatural calling of man, against which man offends by sin, are not realities which concern man only as an isolated individual or existent." Rahner continues: "There is no sin by which we do not also become guilty against our neighbour; this is only too obvious in the case of most sins, including venial sins." Theological Investigations, vol. 2: Man In The Church (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1963), pp. 136-137, & p. 151, respectively.

<sup>8</sup>Karl Rahner, Theological Investigations, vol. 6: Concerning Vatican Council II (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1969), p. 229.

<sup>9</sup>See e.g., Rahner's Grace In Freedom (New York: Herder & Herder, 1969), where he writes: "First, freedom is seen as freedom from social, economic, and political compulsion; it is the opposite of slavery, serfdom, etc." p. 204.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., p. 238.

<sup>11</sup>Karl Rahner, Theological Investigations, vol. 13: Theology, Anthropology, Christology (New York: Seabury Press, 1975), pp. 106-107.

<sup>12</sup>Rahner, Foundations, p. 79.

<sup>13</sup>Rahner, Grace In Freedom, pp. 227-228.

<sup>14</sup>Rahner writes, e.g., "The true nature of freedom appears precisely in this, that in the Christian revelation it is the cause of both absolute salvation and absolute rejection by the final judgment of God." Ibid., p. 211.

<sup>15</sup>Rahner, Foundations, p. 38. Cf. Rahner's Grace In Freedom, where he maintains: "Basically freedom is not the capacity to choose any object or mode of conduct, but the freedom of self-understanding, or saying Yes or No to oneself, the possibility of deciding for or against oneself which corresponds to the knowing subjectivity of man." p. 212.

<sup>16</sup>See Kress' A Rahner Handbook, p. 74f.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., p. 71.

<sup>18</sup>Rahner, Foundations, pp. 36-37.

<sup>19</sup>Rahner, Grace In Freedom, p. 232.

<sup>20</sup>With regard to this point see Rahner's Grace In Freedom, esp. pp. 235-239.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., p. 237.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., p. 243.

<sup>23</sup>Rahner, Foundations, p. 94.

<sup>24</sup>Rahner, Grace In Freedom, p. 263.

<sup>25</sup>Rahner, Foundations, p. 30. See also p. 27, where Rahner remarks: "A person looks inside himself, looks back at his past and looks at the world around him and discovers either to his horror or to his relief that he can shift responsibility for himself for all the individual data that make up his reality, and he can place the burden for what he is on what is not him."

<sup>26</sup>This relationship is explored in Rahner's essay "Experience of Self and Experience of God", Theological Investigations, vol. 13, pp. 126-135.

<sup>27</sup>In fact, Rahner clearly implies such consequence, e.g., in the following statement: "It could be shown that in the history of experience of the self the experience of the loss of identity (to the extent and in the manner in which such a thing is possible, since in fact even that which is lost remains present in its own way) is also (in the same sense and with the same provisos) a loss of the experience of God or the refusal to accept the abiding presence of God." Ibid., p. 132.

<sup>28</sup>Rahner, Grace In Freedom, p. 234.

<sup>29</sup>Kress, A Rahner Handbook, p. 4.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid., p. 36.

<sup>31</sup>Rahner, Theological Investigations, vol. 11: "The Sin of Adam", p. 255. It is important to note that for Rahner, the sanctification of human beings is not given by virtue of the fact that they belong to the human race; rather, it is given insofar as humanity draws its existence from Christ. He writes, e.g., "Now this self-bestowal of God upon men (whether as offered or as accepted) is given by God to the whole of humanity (and to the individual man as a member of this) only in virtue of the fact that this humanity as a historical and derived reality . . . draws its existence from Christ and is oriented to him. But this bestowal is not given to the individual man in virtue of the fact that he derives physically and historically from this human race, and in virtue of this derivation of his is a member of it. For the individual man his derivation from, and thereby his union with the single human race is neither the basis nor, in any direct sense the medium of his justification and sanctification by the self-bestowal of the holy God in his Pneuma." Ibid.



<sup>32</sup>Karl Rahner, Theological Investigations, vol. 15: Penance In The Early Church (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1982), p. 53.

<sup>33</sup>Rahner, Foundations, p. 57.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid., p. 118.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid., p. 122.

<sup>36</sup>According to Rahner, the divinizing effects of God's self-communication to human beings takes place by way of a formal causality, and in such a manner that the divine integrity and immutability remain intact. He explains: ". . . we are also familiar with formal causality: a particular existent, a principle of being is a constitutive element in another subject by the fact that it communicates itself to this subject and does not just cause something different from itself which is then an intrinsic constitutive principle in that which experiences this efficient causality . . . As distinguished from the intrinsic, essentially constitutive causes which are found elsewhere in our experience, this intrinsic, formal causality is to be understood in such a way that the intrinsic, constitutive cause retains in itself its own essence absolutely intact and in absolute freedom . . . In this mode of conceptualization it can then be said that in this self-communication God in his absolute being is related to the created existent in the mode of formal causality, that is, that he does not originally cause and produce something different from himself in the creature, but rather that he communicates his own divine reality and makes it a constitutive element in the fulfillment of the creature." Foundations, p. 121.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid., p. 126.

<sup>38</sup>Kress, A Rahner Handbook, p. 34.

<sup>39</sup>Rahner, Foundations, p. 101.

<sup>40</sup>Ibid., p. 193.

<sup>41</sup>Rahner, Theological Investigations, vol. 15: "Sin as Loss of Grace in Early Church Literature", p. 23. I believe that the context of this specific remark presupposes baptism as the moment at which a person is justified. However, this does not seriously alter the substance of what is being said. For even if we bracket the question of baptism, it still remains certain that Rahner regards the transcendental structure of existence as graced. Thus it is possible to speak of sins which violate the graced state of existence in which we originate.

<sup>42</sup>John P. Galvin, "The Invitation of Grace" in A World Of Grace, ed., Leo J. O'Donovan (New York: Seabury Press, 1980), p. 69.

<sup>43</sup>With regard to this point see Rahner's Foundations, p. 193f.

<sup>44</sup>Galvin, "The Invitation of Grace" in A World of Grace, p. 70.

<sup>45</sup>Rahner, Foundations, p. 205.

<sup>46</sup>Ibid., p. 181.

<sup>47</sup>Ibid., p. 200.

<sup>48</sup>Ibid., p. 184.

<sup>49</sup>Ibid., p. 39.

<sup>50</sup>Ibid., Further to this point, Rahner remarks: "We must always bear in mind here that salvation does not mean a reified and objective state of affairs but rather a personal and ontological reality. Hence, salvation takes place in the objectively most real reality of the most radical subjectivity." p. 309.

<sup>51</sup>Ibid., p. 147.

<sup>52</sup>Ibid., pp. 101-102. (emphasis mine)

<sup>53</sup>For examples of this level of discussion, I refer the reader to the following works by Rahner: Theological Investigations, vol. 2: "Forgotten Truths Concerning the Sacrament of Penance", pp. 135-174; Theological Investigations, vol. 6: "Guilt-Responsibility-Punishment Within the View of Catholic Theology", pp. 197-217, "Justified and Sinner at the Same Time", pp. 218-230, "The Church of Sinners", pp. 253-269, "The Sinful Church in the Decrees of Vatican II", pp. 270-294; Theological Investigations, vol. 11: "The Sin of Adam", pp. 247-262; Theological Investigations, vol. 15: "Sin as Loss of Grace in Early Church Literature", pp. 23-54.

<sup>54</sup>Confer Rahner's discussion of "Man as a Being Threatened Radically by Guilt", chap. 3 of Grace In Freedom, esp., pp. 90-92.

<sup>55</sup>Rahner, Theological Investigations, vol. 6:  
"Justified and Sinner at the Same Time", p. 218.

<sup>56</sup>See e.g., Rahner's Foundations, pp. 407-408.

<sup>57</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 409.

<sup>58</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>59</sup>See e.g., Rahner's Grace In Freedom, p. 250f.

<sup>60</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 27-28.

<sup>61</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 115-116.

<sup>62</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 134.

<sup>63</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 216.

<sup>64</sup>See Rahner's Foundations, pp. 97-100 and esp., p. 98 where he writes: "Freedom or subjectivity, which is the 'object' of freedom itself, freedom for something of final and definitive validity, and freedom for or against God are all connected . . . Subjectivity and freedom imply and entail that this freedom is not only freedom with respect to the object of categorical experience within the absolute horizon of God, but it is also and in truth, although always in only a mediated way, a freedom which decides about God and with respect to God himself."

<sup>65</sup>Rahner, Theological Investigations, vol. 12:  
"The Question of the Future", p. 199.

<sup>66</sup>Rahner, Foundations, pp. 101-102.

<sup>67</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 103.

<sup>68</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 104.

<sup>69</sup>For a discussion of original sin within the context of Catholic dogma, see e.g., Rahner's Theological Investigations, vol. 11: "The Sin of Adam", pp. 247-262.

<sup>70</sup>Rahner, Foundations, p. 107.

<sup>71</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 109.

<sup>72</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 111-112.

<sup>73</sup>Karl Weger, Karl Rahner: An Introduction To His Theology (New York: Seabury Press, 1980), p. 162.

<sup>74</sup>Rahner, Grace In Freedom, p. 216.

<sup>75</sup>James F. Bresnahan, "An Ethics of Faith" in A World Of Grace, pp.173-174.

<sup>76</sup>Rahner, Foundations, p. 39.

<sup>77</sup>Ibid., p. 423.

<sup>78</sup>Ibid., p. 444.

<sup>79</sup>Rahner, Theological Investigations, vol. 13: "Experience of Self and Experience of God", p. 132.

<sup>80</sup>John Carmody, "The Realism of Christian Life" in A World Of Grace, pp. 142-143.

<sup>81</sup>Rahner, Foundations, pp. 101-102.

## CHAPTER IV

### JOHN COBB'S UNDERSTANDING OF SIN

#### The Whiteheadian and Feminist Influence

In an early work entitled Living Options In Protestant Theology, John Cobb conducted a survey of the various theologies which had dominated the Protestant scene up until the early 1960's, paying particular attention to the conceptualities and methodologies that lay behind them.<sup>1</sup> He concluded his survey with the suggestion that the time was ripe for Protestant theology to look towards and embrace a new metaphysic which would facilitate the explication of the Christian message in the modern age. Cobb believed that the philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead (also known as the philosophy of Organism or Process philosophy) presented itself as the most suitable candidate for this task, since it offered a basis for an inclusive view of both history and nature, and demonstrated convictions which were congenial to the tenets of faith expressed in biblical and Christian religion.<sup>2</sup>

Much of Cobb's subsequent theological career has been dedicated to developing the Whiteheadian process conceptuality into a viable and distinctly Christian philo-

sophy. His success in this endeavour presents itself as the principal reason behind my choice of him as an appropriate spokesperson for process theology.

Yet there is a further consideration that confirms the suitability of my choice. It is that Cobb, especially in his most recent writings, has demonstrated an explicit awareness of, and sensitivity towards, many of the concerns raised by political and liberation theology. In his Process Theology As Political Theology,<sup>3</sup> while he deals specifically with the German political theologians Metz, Moltmann, and Sölle, he concludes that they together with liberation theology pose a serious challenge to process theology, namely, the challenge of developing its resources into the kind of theology which unambiguously grounds a central commitment to liberation. Interestingly enough, however, though Cobb is firmly convinced that process theology can and ought to deepen its commitment to the various liberation movements, he is also aware that this maturation will be difficult so long as process spokespeople remain exclusively male, white North Americans.<sup>4</sup>

This recognition introduces another feature of Cobb's work that deserves special mention. That is, both personally and professionally, Cobb demonstrates a particular appreciation of the importance of feminist theology. On a personal level, in an article entitled "Feminism And

Process Thought: A Two-Way Relationship", he confesses:

One main surprise of the last few years for me, resulting from my encounter with feminism, has been to learn the extent to which the patriarchal system has induced in women feelings of inferiority and existential incompleteness.<sup>5</sup>

Cobb attributes the systematic oppression of women in large part to the "explicit teaching and recommended practice of the church over most of its history."<sup>6</sup> On a professional level, Cobb often points out that process theology is especially congenial to, and also has much to learn from, the theology of women's liberation. He claims, for example:

Whereas process theology has just begun to respond to Black and Latin American liberation theologies, the relation to the theology of women's liberation is quite different. Among the theologies that were established before the rise of the current women's movement, process theology has proved the most congenial to it. The criticisms of the classical doctrine of God by process theologians, for example, are parallel to those directed against the doctrine by women. Also the oppositions to a dualistic separation of mind and body or "man" and nature are comparable in the two movements. Process theology and feminist theology today overlap in a healthy way, and there is every indication that feminists will play leading roles in the further development of process theology.<sup>7</sup>

In any case, firmly convinced that the theological perspective of white North Atlantic males is only a small part of what needs to be seen and heard, Cobb proposes that any viable theology which is concerned to address the world's needs must incorporate the experiences and insights not only of women, but of Blacks, Latin Americans, Jews, homo-

sexuals, the young, the old, the disabled, the emotionally disturbed, the geniuses and the free spirits.<sup>8</sup>

One of the aims of this thesis has been precisely to heed the voices of some of the groups that Cobb has just mentioned. That hearing has resulted in the proposal that common to the several liberation theologies examined in Chapter One, is the presence of a notion of sin described in terms of underdevelopment of the self or self-abnegation. The intent of this chapter will be to determine whether process theology, as represented in the writings of John B. Cobb, Jr., embodies certain basic convictions which conduce towards a similar understanding of sin. The basic convictions relevant to the discussion of sin are derived from respective examinations of the following: (1) the process perception of the nature of reality; (2) the process doctrine of God; (3) the process understanding of the structure of human existence. There is some unavoidable overlap between these three categories. That is because what emerges from all three discussions is the view that certain features or properties (namely, process or becoming, creative self-determination, freedom, self-actualization, novelty, intensity, and self-enjoyment) are common to all reality, whether natural, divine, or human. These properties prescribe the mode that existence must take if it is to accord with the structure of the



universe and the purpose of God. Within the process conceptuality, the violation of such structure becomes tantamount to sin. Hence the fourth and concluding section of this chapter will consist in a discussion of the notion of sin that is implied in sections 1-3, and a determination of its congeniality to the idea of sin as self-abnegation depicted in Chapter One.

### The Process View of Reality

Whitehead has noted that "apart from the experience of subjects there is nothing, nothing, nothing, bare nothingness."<sup>9</sup> Therefore, the process conceptuality embraces an anthropological starting point, that is, it operates on the basis of the premise that human experience provides the clue to the ultimate nature of reality. As Cobb explains it:

In one way or another any model by which we attempt to understand reality or any part of it must arise from human experience. There is simply nowhere else to turn.<sup>10</sup>

As its name suggests, the axiomatic presupposition of process thought, derived from human experience, is that process itself constitutes the primary and original unit of actuality. That is, process (or change, concrescence, becoming, and transition) is what is really real in the world as we know it. Therefore, to be actual is to be a process. Cobb remarks further:

Anything which is not a process is an abstraction from process, not a full-fledged actuality.<sup>11</sup>

Consequently, the identity of an actual entity is not given in terms of an enduring substance or essence which then may or may not undergo accidental changes. Rather, an actual entity establishes identity, or becomes itself, through a continual process of prehending or grasping its data. Therefore, it is not so much a thing as an occasion of experience.

As all reality whatsoever, if it is to be considered actual, engages in this activity of prehension, a brief synopsis of the dynamics involved is in order. There are three basic factors involved in any prehension. There is first of all the subject that is prehending, or the actual entity in which the prehension is to be a concrete element. Secondly, there is the datum which is prehended and which functions as object and efficient cause vis-à-vis the prehending subject. Finally, there is a subjective form included in every prehension which determines how a subject incorporates its data.

Since every actual entity or occasion of experience possesses both a physical and a mental pole, its prehensions may be of a physical type, a conceptual type, or a combination of the two which is a hybrid prehension. Physical prehensions involve the apprehension, by the subject, of actual entities which sequentially antecede itself.

This means simply that physical prehensions are those which grasp past occasions of experience as data for synthesis. Conceptual prehensions are the prehensions of possibilities of form, relations, and qualities that may determine the configuration of the synthesis. Within the process conceptuality, such possibilities are abstract and are designated as eternal objects.<sup>12</sup>

As pure possibilities, eternal objects introduce opportunities for novelty. They promote the likelihood that a becoming occasion will embody some quality, form, or relationship not received from its past world. Cobb elucidates further:

Eternal objects are not actual entities like the occasions of experience. They are pure possibilities for realization in any experience at all, conceived quite apart from any such realization. Every actual occasion is the realization of some limited number of such possibilities.<sup>13</sup>

Process then, is not constituted merely by the repetition of what has been before (except perhaps in the lowest grade of entity where possibilities of deviation and novelty remain unactualized). Certainly, each actual entity receives influence from its past. There is some repetition or reenactment of the past which indicates the efficient causality of the past on the experiencing subject. But such causality is not all-determinative. There is also the possibility of deviation or novelty introduced

into the process by the experiencing subject, derived from eternal objects, and perhaps modified to become subjective form. This is particularly the case in higher grade organisms possessing a greater capacity for mentality.

Hence, reality is characterized not only by process, but by novelty and self-determination as well. In fact, according to Whitehead, life is defined as the presence, in occasions of experience, of the capacities for novelty and self-determination. More specifically, a living actuality (as opposed to that type of actuality we commonly regard as inert, perhaps a rock) is that entity in which the mental pole introduces a novel element into itself, one not derivable from its past world. Or in Whitehead's words, life is present where the "mental pole introduces the subject as a determinant of its own concrescence."<sup>14</sup>

The significance of this capacity for self-determination in human experience, and its relationship to the process understanding of sin, will become clearer in the following pages. For the present, suffice it to say that it defines life and suggests a further property of reality which assumes an especial importance within the process conceptuality, namely, the property of creativity.

According to the Whiteheadian understanding of the nature of reality, process is ultimately characterized by creativity. In fact, this notion of creativity was intended

by Whitehead, to replace the Aristotelian category of "primary substance" as the universal of universals. He explains:

"Creativity" is the universal of universals characterizing ultimate matter of fact. It is the ultimate principle by which the many, which are the universe disjunctively, become the one actual occasion, which is the universe conjunctively. It lies in the nature of things that the many enter into complex unity . . .

"Creativity" is the principle of novelty . . . The "creative advance" is the application of this ultimate principle of creativity to each novel situation which it originates.<sup>15</sup>

When process, novelty, self-determination, and creativity are thought to constitute the natural order of things to which there is no exception, a set of values emerge which are divergent from those values implied by a static world view. For instance, if we consider the case of an individual entity, according to the processive view it is not so much what it is, but rather that it continues to become, and how it enjoys that process, which determines its worth and value. As Cobb points out:

Whitehead shows that any movement must either advance or decay. There is no standing still. The effort to repeat the past while holding the present at bay leads to decadence. The vitality and zest that were of the essence of the worth of the past are lost. What remains are only dying forms.<sup>16</sup>

Generally speaking, the objective values proposed by the process conceptuality are primarily, though not exclusively, intrinsic to the process of an actual entity itself. These include self-enjoyment,<sup>17</sup> intensity of

experience,<sup>18</sup> and as suggested earlier, the frustration of established order.<sup>19</sup> These factors, harmoniously synthesized, allow for the greatest possibility for strength of beauty. Beauty, according to Cobb, is the ultimate value in the Whiteheadian philosophy, with truth and goodness following in order of importance.<sup>20</sup>

In anticipation of what is to follow, we might note now that the properties and values which comprise the process view of reality stand in stark contrast to those features which characterize an existence marked by self-abnegation. It was argued that self-abnegation involved an abdication of responsibility for transcendence, growth, self-determination and self-actualization, and fostered a type of existence typified by passivity, acquiescence, triviality, inertia, and disinterest. These features can only be regarded as liabilities by a world view which extols change, transition, novelty, intensity of experience, creative self-determination, and self-enjoyment. In fact, the abnegation of the self and all that it entails violates the universal structures and values of existence intended by deity. In this manner, it is effective as sin.

That deity intends a particular mode of existence will become evident in the following discussion of the process doctrine of God. Again, a processive view of reality

entails a vision of deity's being, purpose, and activity quite at variance with the understanding of God which derives from a world view that perceives reality somewhat as an automaton marked by constancy, and originating from inviolate substances and essences. In summary, the proclivity of the process view of reality is captured by Cobb in the following statement:

The appearance of life made possible far more rapid changes, and these in turn on the whole were in the direction of richer varieties of life, more possibilities of intensity of feeling, consciousness, and freedom, in short, of greater realizations of value. We can understand this whole process as response to the lure toward greater self-actualization.<sup>21</sup>

### The Process Doctrine of God

Within the process conceptuality, God is a universal datum of experience; that is, God is really experienced in the world rather than inferred by it. And although, as Cobb suggests, the constancy of God's presence militates against our consciousness of him, he remains nonetheless immanent in all reality.

If this claim of God's immanence is taken seriously, it implies a sharing of the same ontological structures between deity and the world. Hence Whitehead's maxim:

God is not to be treated as an exception to all metaphysical principles, invoked to save their collapse. He is their chief exemplification.<sup>22</sup>

More specifically, if Whitehead's premise is granted, then

a certain symmetry obtains between the properties which exemplify reality (for example, process, creativity, and relationality), and God's mode of being. This is the basic assumption which underlies the process doctrine of dipolar theism.

According to the notion of dipolar theism, God possesses an abstract (or primordial) aspect, and a concrete, actual or consequent aspect. The primordial pole consists in God's bare existence, and the potentiality to actualize the infinite possibilities which belong to God alone. Charles Hartshorne explains more fully:

A being necessarily all-inclusive must be one whose potentiality for change is coextensive with the logically possible . . . All-possibility - which is indeed infinite if anything is - coincides with divine potentiality. Thus, God is infinite in what he could be, not in what he is; he is infinitely capable of actuality, rather than infinitely actual. Not that he thus lacks an infinity which some conceivable being might have, but that an "absolutely infinite or unsurpassable maximum of actuality" makes no sense. Possibility is in principle inexhaustible; it could not be fully actualized.<sup>23</sup>

In his concrete or consequent nature, God is coextensive with all that is actual, relative to all, and responsive to all.<sup>24</sup>

The dipolar concept of God (as opposed to the monopolar or classical notion of God) allows for the possibility of internal as well as external relations between deity and the world. More accurately, internal relations obtain



with respect to God as contingent and responsive actuality, while external relations refer to God only in his absolute nature which is immutable. The exigency of such formula is elucidated by Hartshorne in the following manner:

A theistic philosophy must have a theory of internal relations and also a theory of external relations. Of internal relations, for a whole logically requires its constituents and God in his concrete actuality being the inclusive whole requires all things; . . . . Of external relations, for though God in his particular or contingent actuality includes all actuality, yet in his bare individual existence as the divine being and no other he - and he alone - is necessary, and what is necessary cannot include, or be constituted by, relation to anything contingent. Only the contingent can be relative. Hence the abstract necessary aspect of God does not<sup>25</sup> include the actual world, and is not relative to it.

Yet, whether in his abstract or concrete aspect, God alone is supremely perfect. Moreover, to suggest that the modality of God's being is comparable to that of other entities does not in any sense diminish deity's perfection. For as Hartshorne points out:

It is clearly nonsense to declare an entity wholly incomparable and yet compare it to all others as their superior. And if not superior, it is not worshipful! . . . God is "the most high" or the most excellent one, and this<sup>26</sup> means that he can and must be compared to others.

Having briefly outlined the basic features of dipolar theism, it is now possible to proceed to a discussion of deity's role in the universe and what he purposes of life. According to the process conceptuality, God is both the basic source of unrest and novelty in the universe, and

the principle of limitation or concretion. As source of unrest and novelty, God is experienced in the apprehension of ideals.<sup>27</sup> Cobb, for example, identifies such event among persons as experience of "the call forward" towards normative possibilities for self-actualization, intensified life, heightened consciousness, expanded freedom, and more sensitive love.<sup>28</sup> He states further:

My own view . . . is that what calls us forward has the unity and actuality as well as the worthiness of worship and commitment which warrants our use of the word "God".<sup>29</sup>

As principle of concretion, Whitehead explains, "the inclusion of God in every creature shows itself in the determination whereby a definite result is emergent."<sup>30</sup> In Cobb's own theology, this decisive role of God in the creation of each new occasion entails the proposition that God is "the ground of our being". He reasons:

How an occasion becomes is finally determined by its own decision, but that a new occasion occurs at all cannot be determined by itself. Whatever Whitehead's own intentions and preferences may have been, his thought systematically requires that we recognize God as the "ground of our being", as he upon whom we are dependent for our existence.<sup>31</sup>

However, as Cobb's statement indicates, God's role in the coming to be of an actual entity is not absolute. For although deity may entertain and present specific ideal aims to the experiencing subject, the subject may ignore or modify such aims. Yet, according to Cobb, this very freedom to be co-creators with God is grounded in God him-

self, or more exactly, is grounded in the fact that the agency of God's power is persuasive rather than coercive.

That is:

. . . whereas atheists see the power of human beings to shape their own destiny as arising out of their own given being or out of antecedent nature, process theology sees it as rising out of the persuasive power of God . . . If there were no God, there would be no freedom, and the future would not be open to be shaped by human decision. The future is open and we are free because of God. The power to open the future and give us freedom is a greater power than the supposed power of absolute control, for a power effective over free beings is a far greater power than<sup>32</sup> what would be involved in the manipulation of robots.

The process doctrine of God suggests several corollaries of some consequence to our understanding of human existence, its possibilities, and its responsibilities. To begin with, because the process doctrine of God perceives deity's power in terms of persuasion rather than coercion, the importance of human participation in shaping both personal and common history is accentuated. In connection with this, Cobb has noted that the most common objection raised against the classical portrayal of God as omnipotent and omniscient, is that it militates against the attainment of full humanity by evoking feelings of powerlessness, and undercutting our sense of responsibility for the course that history takes. Interestingly, Cobb identifies this notion of God with the masculine concept of God rejected by feminist theology.<sup>33</sup> Of this perception of deity, he observes:

It evokes the response of awe, obeisance, self-abnegation and resignation. It is thus in tension with the view that men have dignity in themselves. It is in tension also with the concern that men accept more radical responsibility for themselves and their societies and that they work against injustice and oppression . . . To the extent to which these consequences are effective, God is experienced as the enemy of man's claims to dignity and of his desire to assume responsibility for himself.<sup>34</sup>

Cobb believes that our understanding of God should rather correspond in every respect to Jesus' person and instruction (as of course, he regards dipolar theism to do). Jesus spoke more of human responsibility than of total dependency, represented more hope for the future than nostalgia and fearfulness, and exemplified more an autonomous personality than a self resigned to extraneous determinations.<sup>35</sup> In connection with this, process theology too, maintains that deity's main objective is to provide and order opportunities for the richest self-actualization of his creatures. Hence the process doctrine of God establishes as normative and valuable the self-realization of each and every person.<sup>36</sup> Within this context, sin appears not so much as prideful disregard of God's sovereignty, but as evasion of the divine requisite of self-fulfillment; that is, sin appears as self-abnegation.

A second corollary of the process doctrine of God relevant to the discussion of the human self, has to do with the nature of the ideal aims for self-actualization provided by deity. It has already been suggested that

right or wrong relationship to God is determined by our success or failure in realizing the aims provided by him.<sup>37</sup> However, the aims presented to an entity as possibilities for realization are formed in terms of all the factors relevant to the specific situation of that entity. Thus, since the content of an ideal aim varies according to the circumstances of an individual, one cannot specify for all time and for everyone the exact form that a right relationship to God ought to take. This point supports the contention of liberation theology, that self-sacrificial behaviour is not always indicative of a right relationship to God. In a volume concerned with pastoral care, Cobb explicitly addresses this issue, noting:

There is a particular challenge to Christian teaching in the demands made by women and by others seeking liberation. The attitude of demanding one's rights and laying down conditions for service seems diametrically opposed to the New Testament teaching about sacrifice as the way of life. Pastors often recognize that calling on counselees to sacrifice is inappropriate, but there is less clarity as to how to relate this recognition to continuing commitment to the Christian way.<sup>38</sup>

With regard to this point, I submit that, given the process understanding of what is objectively valuable in life, whatever form a right relationship to God might take, it ought to be characterized by growth, creative self-determination, novelty, freedom, and intensity, in short, all those factors that make for enjoyment on the part of the experiencing subject.<sup>39</sup> Moreover, this indicates that a

measure of self-interest is, or ought to be, an important and appropriate component of every individual's makeup.<sup>40</sup>

According to Cobb, there are two basic reasons why self-interest does not exclude (whether metaphysically or ethically speaking) concern for others and for the future. Firstly, self-interest does not exclude concern for what is not the self, because of the intimate internal relations that obtain between a self and its environment which, of course, includes other persons. The dynamics involved in this relationship are such that a self is enhanced when it shares in a strong and healthy society, and conversely, a society is enhanced when it is composed of strong and healthy selves. Cobb also observes:

. . . the fact that the quality of an individual's enjoyment is partly a function of that individual's total environment means that, if we are concerned with promoting the enjoyment of others, we cannot neglect the quality of their environment. In fact, no neat line can be drawn between the individual and its environment, since what is the "environment" in one moment essentially enters into the individual in the next moment.<sup>41</sup>

This relationship clearly invalidates the rather arbitrary distinction that is made between personal morality on the one hand, and concern for social justice on the other. It does not, however, guarantee that improving an environment will always succeed in increasing a person's happiness since we remain, in significant portion, self-determinative. Still, as Cobb observes, it is better to "seek to provide

an optimum environment, which heightens the probability that the enjoyment will be enhanced,"<sup>42</sup> than to do nothing at all.

The second reason why self-interest is not exclusory, is that though an entity naturally aims at an experience characterized by enjoyment, part of its enjoyment in the present arises from its sense of contribution to the future. As Cobb describes it:

Every occasion aims at intensity of feeling both in its own subjective immediacy and in the relevant occasions beyond itself. This means that absolute self-interest is metaphysically excluded! Every occasion's self-actualization has a view to its impact upon future occasions and this sense of relevance for the future is essential to its satisfaction.<sup>43</sup>

This insight is especially significant in that it contradicts that ethical theory which assumes that since all decisions are made in terms of satisfying our own immediate desires, the cultivation of self-abnegation is salutary. In contrast to this, Cobb argues that "that moral code is best which promotes that kind of order which promotes maximum attainment in the strength of beauty enjoyed by individuals."<sup>44</sup>

A third corollary of the process doctrine of God has to do with its identification of deity as "the organ of novelty" or "the call forward". According to Cobb, this perception of God's function has a profound effect upon the orientation of a believer's life, insofar as it engen-

ders an attitude of openness to the future, to growth, and to change. He writes:

The believer in God so understood attends to the sensitization of his psychic life to the claim of new possibilities and of his neighbor rather than to inherited rules or religious feelings. . . . The relative weighing of the aspects of his experience is thus altered. One experiences guilt, not in the recognition that his acts are in conflict with past laws or socially approved patterns, but in the recognition that his bondage to the past and conformity to human expectations have inhibited his response to new possibilities of growth and service.<sup>45</sup>

Within this context, one's primary moral obligation is not conformity to those established procedures whose aim it is to secure an undisturbed or placid existence. Rather, one's primary moral obligation is cooperation in the process of "creative transformation". In fact, for Cobb, "creative transformation" is the manifestation of Christ or the Logos.<sup>46</sup> Hence, Christ is present in the transitions of art and theology, as he is in the movements for social, political, economic, ethnic, national, and women's liberation.<sup>47</sup> Christ is incarnate in Jesus, whose impact was "to jar [his] hearers out of complacency and to open them to creative transformation."<sup>48</sup> Furthermore, Cobb argues that because God in Christ is also the image of hope, "No image is Christian that leads to closure or to indifference to the events that transpire in our world here and now."<sup>49</sup>



Significantly, Cobb recognizes that the temptation to closure (which I have argued is especially characteristic of the sin of self-abnegation among marginalized persons) is strangely often manifest in victims, in the powerless and the oppressed. He believes that this is the result of a loss of hope or faith which, in my mind, certainly suggests a condition of estrangement from God.

Cobb explains:

. . . without an image of hope, people are unwilling to give up what security the existing system affords. Even catastrophe could serve to heighten resistance to change. Paradoxically many of our society's victims, for example, the elderly, oppose most bitterly attempts to alter it. As we lose the prospects of all segments of our society increasing their wealth because of the ever expanding economic pie, each will fight tenaciously to hold and increase its relative position unless a new image of hope becomes effective.<sup>50</sup>

Finally, the process doctrine of God, or more exactly its notion of the kingdom of God (which Whitehead posits in deity's consequent nature) seriously suggests that we are accountable for either enhancing or diminishing the divine being itself. The kingdom of God is understood as that pole of deity which incorporates into the divine being all the experiences of its creatures. But not all the experiences generated by human beings contribute equally to this aspect of the divine nature. Cobb argues that "they differ in their contribution according to their intrinsic value, their richness, or their own immediacy."<sup>51</sup> Therefore, the richness or paucity of our existence quali-

tatively affects God's experience, in spite of deity's redeeming capacity. As Cobb explains it:

The fact that God can find some value in whatever occurs and can give to it some place in the growing harmony does not reduce the importance of what is contributed to him. It increases it. How I act matters not only for the brief moment of the occurrence and the somewhat longer period of its discernible effects in the environment. It matters also and primarily because forever more it alters the quality of the harmony that is the Kingdom of Heaven, contributing more or less according to my free decision.<sup>52</sup>

Given the consequences that the quality of our existence has for God, it becomes imperative that our experience embodies to the greatest extent possible, all that is valuable and enhancing, namely, creative self-determination, novelty, intensity, self-actualization, and self-enjoyment. Clearly, these features are neither easily derived from, nor reinforced by, self-abnegation.

In conclusion, the process doctrine of God implies first and foremost, that "no type of social order is to be maintained if it no longer tends to maximize the enjoyment of the members of the society."<sup>53</sup> It is with this in mind that we must evaluate the worth and the status of the abnegation of the self in human experience.

#### The Process Understanding of the Structure of Human Life

According to Cobb, the most significant hallmark of human existence is the autonomous development of the psyche. This development entailed the production of a

surplus of psychic energy which was then made available for activity not immediately concerned with the maintenance and preservation of the body.<sup>54</sup> He argues, for example:

. . . we can say that at that point at which the surplus psychic energy became sufficient in quantity to enable the psychic life to become its own end rather than primarily a means to the survival and health of the body, the threshold was crossed dividing man from the animal. Man is that being in which the psyche aims at its own well-being. Since that well-being largely depends on the survival, health, and comfort of the body, the psyche continues in man to serve these. But the human psyche also seeks its satisfaction in ways that have nothing to do with the functional needs of the body and even in ways that are detrimental to the body.<sup>55</sup>

As it continued in its evolution, Cobb believes that the human psyche established different modes or stages of existence, variously characterized, for instance, by the rise of the concepts of individuality and freedom,<sup>56</sup> by the origination of the notion of responsible personhood,<sup>57</sup> and ultimately, by the attainment of spirituality or the capacity for self-transcendence. Cobb identifies this latter stage as "Christian existence".<sup>58</sup> And, it is this stage that shall occupy my attention since Cobb initially regards it as a normative exemplification of the structure of human existence.

Cobb identifies spirit or soul with the capacity for self-transcendence.<sup>59</sup> Hence, the soul is not a singular or substantial element embodied in a physical and contingent matter, but is rather a society of events or a

sequence of experiences. With regard to this point Cobb remarks:

. . . when we speak in Platonic or Christian terms, we think of a single soul for a single man. If we hold fast to this usage, and Whitehead basically does so, then we must think of the soul as that society composed of all the momentary occasions of experience that make up the life history of the man. The soul is not an underlying substance undergoing accidental adventures. It is nothing <sup>60</sup> but the sequence of the experiences that constitute it.

Within this context, the soul's value or uniqueness does not lie in those attributes popularly associated with it, for instance, preexistence, immortality, or that spark of divinity which links us to God. For according to Cobb, "the soul is in every sense a part of nature subject to the same conditions as all other natural entities."<sup>61</sup>

Rather, the value of the soul is that it invests an entity with mentality, high levels of consciousness, originality, and aliveness.<sup>62</sup> Accordingly, Cobb posits the locus of the soul in the brain.<sup>63</sup>

The duty of the soul appears to be that of appropriating and ordering what is valuable; that is, it aids an actual entity in its process of becoming. As Cobb points out, this prehending capacity, which is really a matter of continual self-transcendence or self-surpassing, brings with it a radical sense of personal responsibility for the manner in which we constitute ourselves.<sup>64</sup> He notes further:

In principle, we can press this responsibility ad infinitum. At whatever level we ask the question about what we are, we also must acknowledge our responsibility for being that. We cannot simply accept what we are as the given context within which our responsibility operates.<sup>65</sup>

Such statement assumes, as in fact does process theology as a whole, that freedom is a fundamental feature of the structure of human existence. Cobb largely identifies freedom with self-determination.<sup>66</sup> However, freedom necessarily operates within certain limits, for according to Cobb, the notion of unqualified freedom is nonsensical. He writes:

Freedom must always be freedom within some settled conditions. These settled conditions are the totality of the world as it has been handed down to the moment of the becoming of the new occasion. The new occasion must occur in just that world and it must take account of all that has occurred in that world.<sup>67</sup>

Thus it is accurate to say that within the process conceptuality, freedom's efficacy and power lies not so much in what it takes account of, as in how it takes account of its past. In connection with this, Cobb remarks:

Our vague and persistent experience is that we are both determined by our past and also free. That is, the determination by the past is real but not absolute. What I have been in the past, and what the world as a whole has been, may narrowly limit what I can become in the next moment. But within those limits it is still my decision as to how I shall react to all these forces impinging upon me.<sup>68</sup>

Consequently, freedom is one of three factors which warrants our sense of moral responsibility. The other two factors consist in: (1) objective distinctions between

better and worse, so that it matters how freedom is exercised; and (2), the question of the distribution of values, that is, the relations of self-interest to other-regard, and of immediate enjoyment to concern for the future.<sup>69</sup> These factors which establish our sense of morality, in turn require consciousness or self-awareness on the part of an individual, and an objectivity of values. For as Cobb points out:

Only where consciousness eventuates in self-awareness and self-awareness comes to include awareness of choosing among alternatives do we arrive at clear instances of moral choice.... Morality presupposes the objectivity of values. Until we know what is valuable in itself, apart from all considerations of further consequences, we have no basis for morality and no meaning for life.<sup>70</sup>

As has already been noted, what is ultimately and objectively of value, according to process theology, is the experience of becoming itself as it is characterized by subjective immediacy, creative self-determination, novelty, complexity, self-enjoyment, intensity, and harmony.<sup>71</sup> Hence, Cobb insists:

The aim at becoming - and at becoming in such a way as to achieve some optimum of satisfaction, immediately and also for the sake of a wider future - is a factor in human experience that should not be reduced to the conformal pressures of the past. It is the principle of novelty, spontaneity, growth, and self-transcendence. It is that element in experience by which a continuing restlessness is introduced into the human race, a refusal of mere acquiescence in the given.<sup>72</sup>

Hence, within the process conceptuality, becoming or self-transcendence, and the enjoyment that belongs to that

process, ultimately defines the structure of human life. Yet, the significance of the emergence of this structure in human history lies not only in its generation of the notions of freedom, responsible personhood, self-transcendence, and self-determination. It also introduced a new opportunity or level of sin. For as Cobb observes:

. . . the new spiritual "I" is responsible both for what it is and for what it is not, both for what lies in its power and for what lies beyond its power. For the spiritual "I" need not remain itself but can, instead, always transcend itself.<sup>73</sup>

One of the temptations or sins that a capacity for self-transcendence discloses is narrow concern, whereby the soul impoverishes itself by closing itself to novelty, transition, and in general, the influence of the world. Such closure is a violation of the structure of human existence; that is, it opposes the dynamic of becoming. This possibility introduces a problem of considerable consequence to the discussion of this thesis. Namely, is closure or narrow concern indicative of a self-transcending individual culpably preoccupied with himself or herself, driven by excessive and exclusory self-love, and oblivious to his or her own finitude and relativity? If so, then it is suggestive of the classical paradigm of the sin of pride, and all the aggressive and self-aggrandizing tendencies that such sin involves. Or, is narrow concern indicative of a self which has resisted transcendence, a self frozen by fear and inhibited by inertia? If so, then it is suggestive of the sin of self-abnegation and all the

passive and self-limiting tendencies that such sin implies. Cobb's own opinion on this matter seems to shift from approbation of the former position in his early theology, to an appreciation of the latter possibility in his most recent writings. Personally, I have come to the perhaps paradoxical conviction that narrow concern, as an ultimate and pervasive evil, results from both sins of pride and self-abnegation, though the dynamics respective to each differ.

#### Sin in a Process Perspective

It has been argued that the enjoyment of becoming is an ultimate value in the process conceptuality, intended by God to constitute the meaning of life. There are, however, two basic variables which combine to produce our experience of enjoyment, namely, harmony and intensity. Correspondingly, the absence of these two variables gives rise to evil, which is the nonexistence of enjoyment, and which is manifest as discord and triviality. According to Cobb's description:

Discord, which is physical or mental suffering, is simply evil in itself, whenever it occurs . . . . Triviality, however, is only evil in some cases. A trivial enjoyment is not evil in itself; in fact, as an enjoyment, it is intrinsically good, insofar as its harmony outweighs its discordant elements. But if it is more trivial and hence less intense than it could have been, given the real possibilities open to it, then it is evil . . . . Hence, while discord is absolutely evil, triviality is only comparatively evil.<sup>74</sup>



Nevertheless, Cobb argues that "a morally good being would seek to prevent both discord and unnecessary triviality."<sup>75</sup> There is a certain dilemma contained within such proposition. That is, on the one hand, to prevent triviality by aiming at intensity is in fact to risk discord! On the other hand, to prevent discord often entails the surrender of intensity, the consequence of which is an existence more trivial than it ought to be! With regard to this dilemma, process theology clearly advocates the former risk, for three reasons. Firstly, because the entertainment of risk for the sake of intensity corresponds to the divine mode of existence.

The divine reality, who not only enjoys all enjoyments but also suffers all sufferings, is an Adventurer, choosing the former mode, risking discord in the quest for the various types of perfection that are possible.<sup>76</sup>

Secondly, as was noted in the earlier discussion of the process doctrine of God, a trivial experience or existence may diminish rather than enhance the kingdom of God, or more exactly, deity's consequent nature. Finally, the inclination towards trivial existence, that is, an existence more paltry than it ought to be, is indicative of narrow concern. Again, however, what remains to be determined is whether narrow concern originates in that type of egoism and pride traditionally thought to define sin, or whether it receives its cause in self-abnegation.

To begin with, it is important to confirm that narrow concern carries with it an element of responsibility or culpability which alone establishes it as sin. Clearly, in Cobb's mind it does, as he writes:

I find within myself that which blinds me to the possibilities of life and refuses to embody them even when I see them clearly, and I can think of no better way to speak of that than as sin.<sup>77</sup>

In his early deliberations on this matter, Cobb appears to concur with that general outlook which posits fault for narrow concern in excessive self-preoccupation and self-centeredness.<sup>78</sup> He writes, for example:

It is no wonder that the radical self-transcendence that leads to self-preoccupation is sometimes regarded as a sickness. It does disrupt and distort the spontaneous and healthy relations possible to those who live unselfconsciously. What is required if this sickness is to be escaped at the level of spirit is a genuine concern for the other that is free from self-regard. That is, the vicious circle of self-preoccupation is broken only when a person loves others without regard to the fact that only by such love can he break out of his self-enclosedness. But every effort to love, in order to break out of the misery of self-preoccupation, is also an expression of that self-preoccupation and is condemned to intensify it.<sup>79</sup>

Again, as Cobb's explanation indicates, the sickness of self-regard presupposes the capacity for self-transcendence on the part of an individual. In fact, it appears that the sin of self-preoccupation is simultaneously both a consequence of, and a violation of, the self-transcending structure of human existence. Yet, Cobb argues that self-preoccupation may manifest itself in terms of either self-

aggrandizement or self-condemnation. He elucidates further:

. . . self-preoccupation is spiritual pride. This word is not to be narrowly understood. In its narrow use, "pride" may be juxtaposed to modesty or humility as two modes of personal bearing. Or pride may be understood as having a high opinion of oneself and one's abilities. In these senses, pride is a limited and manageable problem and even has much to commend it. Self-centeredness in the self-conscious man can manifest itself in these ways, or in self-aggrandizement at the expense of others. But it can equally well, and perhaps more insidiously manifest itself in self-pity, self-condemnation, and fearfulness. These are alike forms of self-preoccupation.

Hence at this point, for Cobb, whether we feel good about ourselves or bad about ourselves, both alike imply a preoccupation with our selves. Interestingly, at first glance self-preoccupation manifested in terms of self-condemnation seems to possess a certain semblance to self-abnegation. For instance, both wreak their havoc subtly or as Cobb puts it, "insidiously"; both insinuate feelings of worthlessness and fearfulness on the part of those caught in their respective grips; and of course, both appear to suggest a certain inertia or inability to move on to more meaningful pursuits. However, there exists a singular difference between the two conditions which renders their apparent similarities more or less superficial. That is, while the self-condemnatory possibility of self-preoccupation presumes a self possessed and in control, self-abnegation does not!

Significantly, one can discern in Cobb's most recent writings, the awareness that not all persons participate

in that self-transcending structure of existence wherein self-possession is a matter of fact, self-realization and self-determination is a standard accomplishment, and whose danger lies in the tendency towards excessive self-preoccupation. Where this is the case, the sin of pride is not the problem, nor is the corresponding laudation of selflessness and sacrifice appropriate. Cobb observes, for instance:

In our century it has often been pointed out that while white males, who have had the greatest opportunities for spiritualization give only lip service to the ideal of sacrificial service, they have inculcated it successfully in their women and in minority groups, who have not had equal opportunity to develop fully individualized personal strength. Acceptance of the ideal as a moral principle has then inhibited the move towards personal strength. What has been sacrificed is not the self-transcending spiritual self, for that has not been attained. What is sacrificed instead is the possibility of becoming a spiritual self.<sup>81</sup>

Consequent to this realization, Cobb eventually came to consider the possibility that his earlier attempt to identify the normative structure of Christian existence in terms of self-transcending selfhood, was inappropriate. It reflected an "essentialist mode of thinking" which he now regards as untenable, and in fact, was bound up with a "patriarchal cast of thought and experience."<sup>82</sup> Yet Cobb's theology presents an alternative to the ideal of self-transcending selfhood, namely, physical, mental, and emotional wholeness.<sup>83</sup> In connection with this, he notes:

Unless and until the self is strong and assured, it cannot expand from private identity to corporate inclusivism. The losing of the personal self through the widening of interests . . . is possible<sup>84</sup> only through the heightening of the momentary self.

Given this understanding of the relationship between individuality and participation, the abnegation of the self diminishes not only the self and God, but also the health and quality of society in general.

Granted then, that self-abnegation is problematical, where is it most evident and most serious? Cobb appears to suggest (in accordance with the argument of this thesis) that the problem is most obvious among marginalized and oppressed persons, noting:

. . . unnecessary constraints do not operate chiefly upon the rich and the powerful but upon the poor and oppressed. It is among them that there exists the greatest gap between the quality of experience as now realised and what they<sup>85</sup> are capable of realising as circumstances change.

However, the question must be raised whether the gap between actuality and possibility among persons implies culpability on their part. The answer must be yes, and no! To treat the latter position first, certainly, a person cannot help being born black in a racist society, or female in a sexist society, or poor in a society which values material wealth and affords little opportunity for upward mobility. Still, they can decide whether the unnecessary slurs, constraints, and social pressures which accompany such circumstances shall completely control and manipulate them. One who has

never had to experience the force of such compulsions (for example, having to choose between spouse and career, or parenthood and career) might regard societal pressures as rather insignificant and easily resisted. But they are formidable nonetheless. This is a delicate point and should not be twisted to insinuate that persons in a disadvantaged situation have no one but themselves to blame, or that historical, sociological and economic factors are unimportant. The issue at point is whether any such coercive factors are readily (though perhaps resentfully) acquiesced to, or whether they are met with critical resistance. Do we believe those who would circumscribe not only our relative social position, but also our aspirations, our emotions, our intelligence, our moral sense, our knowledge of the truth, and even our feelings of our own worth in the eyes of a God in whose image we are created - simply because it is easier to accomodate others' expectations than to discover and fulfill our own! There is a measure of blameworthiness which accrues to those caught in a web of self-abnegation, for as Cobb notes:

In real life the causal influence of the past is continuously confronted by multiple possibilities for the future. The present is the meeting ground for past and future, the place of anguish and decision. The decision may be to let the causality of the past be all-determinative. If so, the ruts of habit and custom become deeper, and life relapses into meaningless repetition, or, if patterns of expectation change, the individual passively accomodates to them. But a

man can decide against his past habits and against social pressures, not simply as a rebellion against them, but as responding to the claim of truth, of the neighbor, or of some ideal possibility. Then life means growth, freshness, and intensification.<sup>86</sup>

Those participating in the sin of self-abnegation need also to question the representation of the New Testament teaching about sacrifice as normative. In connection with this, although Cobb in speaking about Christ as the image of love, recognizes and approves that element of vicarious suffering embodied therein, he also argues that it is not the goal of ordinary Christian life.<sup>87</sup>

More exactly, he states:

The central element in the Christ figure is vicarious suffering. When a man gives his life freely for the sake of other people, we see Christ in him.

But such utter self-sacrifice cannot be the goal of ordinary Christian life . . . It is far better if one can serve others and live, indeed, if one can enjoy serving others and be served by them as well. When we picture the goal for mankind it is surely not a world in which everyone is dying for everyone else's sake. It is a world in which mutual love fulfills all. The man who desires to die a martyr's death is not a Christian hero. He is simply sick.<sup>88</sup>

Persons who realize that they are victims of that ethos of self-sacrifice advocated and sometimes insisted upon by the church, by theologians and pastors, and by the powerful who exploit the message, often have an angry reaction which is directed against Christianity itself. This was evinced in some of the liberation theology examined in Chapter One, where certain Christian precepts were thought to misdirect energies and establish false goals.

To those persons, and to other presently participating in self-abnegation, Cobb offers this salutary advice:

. . . there are many ways toward Christian existence, and for many people the self-assertion of the responsible self against unreasonable and inappropriate demands is a major step toward that existence. As long as this is recognized as what is needed now and is not turned into an ultimate ideal of existence, the Christian can and should call for the self-assertion of all those who need liberation from unreasonable demands and expectations. In some measure that is all of us.<sup>89</sup>

In conclusion, the process understanding of reality, God, and the structure of human existence, all conduce towards locating value in a life marked by self-enjoyment, creative self-determination, novelty, intensity, and complexity. Within this context self-abnegation does not stand as an ideal. Indeed, it was demonstrated to often operate to the detriment of human existence, divine existence and society in general. Moreover, it has been established that to some degree, persistence in self-abnegation bespeaks an element of culpability on the part of those involved in it. Hence, according to the process conceptuality which Cobb represents, there is more than sufficient reason to regard self-abnegation as sinful both in itself and in its consequences. The purpose of the following and concluding chapter will be to clarify the results of the investigation of this thesis and to evaluate the contribution which contemporary theology has to make to the discussion of sin as self-abnegation.



## NOTES

### CHAPTER IV

<sup>1</sup>John B. Cobb, Jr., Living Options In Protestant Theology: A Survey Of Methods (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1962). To be more specific, Cobb's survey involved analyses of the following categories: (1) Natural theology as exemplified in the Thomism of E. L. Mascall, Boston Personalism, and the writings of Henry Nelson Wieman; (2) Theological positivism as illustrated in the writings of Karl Barth and Emil Brunner; and (3) Theological existentialism as typified in the works of such men as Rudolf Bultmann, Paul Tillich, and H. Richard and Reinhold Niebuhr.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., see p. 315f.

<sup>3</sup>John B. Cobb, Jr., Process Theology As Political Theology (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1982).

<sup>4</sup>Ibid. Cobb writes, e.g.: "Process theology ought to become a political theology. For a few, this political theology may take the form of a liberation theology. But most male, white North American process theologians will not become liberation theologians for the same reason that the German theologians are not liberation theologians. As members of the dominant society our task is to become aware of how we, as citizens, as theologians and as churches, share in sustaining and strengthening the structures of oppression and destruction which govern our world." p. 15.

<sup>5</sup>John B. Cobb, Jr., "Feminism And Process Thought: A Two-Way Relationship", in Feminism And Process Thought, ed., Sheila Greeve Davaney, (New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 1981), p. 36.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 41.

<sup>7</sup>Cobb, Process Theology As Political Theology, p. x. It is worth mentioning that Cobb's claim regarding the overlap of process theology and feminist theology is corroborated by the "Conference on Feminism and Process Thought", (sponsored by Harvard Divinity School and the Center For Process Studies in Claremont, California) which took place at Harvard University in the autumn of 1978. Sheila Greeve Davaney has assembled and edited some of the essays presented at the conference in Feminism And Process Thought.

<sup>8</sup>More exactly, Cobb writes: "We must see the world's reality and needs in a way that is informed by the experiences of all its people. Blacks, women, and Latin Americans have much to contribute to this - but there are others. For example, we must not forget the experience of the Jews who have suffered more than any others at the hand of Christians through nineteen centuries. A global vision that unites many groups of Christians at the expense of continued anti-Judaism will not do. Again, the flight of homosexuals from Cuba reminds us that a society committed to many forms of liberation may yet oppress some of its minorities. There are also the young and the old, the disabled and the emotionally disturbed, the geniuses and the free spirits." Process Theology As Political Theology, p. 153.

<sup>9</sup>Alfred North Whitehead, Process And Reality (New York: Free Press, 1929), p. 194.

<sup>10</sup>John B. Cobb, Jr., A Christian Natural Theology: Based On The Thought Of Alfred North Whitehead (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1965), p. 27.

<sup>11</sup>John B. Cobb, Jr., & David Ray Griffin, Process Theology (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1976), p. 14.

<sup>12</sup>Eternal objects are basically the unchanging possibilities for realization of an actual entity. Or as Whitehead has written: ". . .the metaphysical status of an eternal object is that of a possibility for an actuality." Science And The Modern World (New York: Free Press, 1925), p. 158f. See also Whitehead's Process And Reality, p. 70.

<sup>13</sup>Cobb, A Christian Natural Theology, p. 34.

<sup>14</sup>Whitehead, Process And Reality, p. 380. See also e.g., p. 124 where he argues: "Thus a single occasion is alive when the subjective aim which determines its process of concrescence has introduced a novelty of definiteness not to be found in the inherited data of its primary phase. The novelty is introduced conceptually and disturbs the inherited "responsive" adjustment of subjective forms."

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., pp. 25-26.

<sup>16</sup>Cobb & Griffin, Process Theology, p. 130.

<sup>17</sup>With regard to the value of self-enjoyment, Whitehead explains that, ". . . the notion of life implies a certain absoluteness of self-enjoyment. This must mean a certain immediate individuality, which is a complex process of appropriating into a unity of existence the many data presented as relevant by the physical processes of nature. Life implies the absolute, individual self-enjoyment arising out of this process of appropriation. . . . The process of self-creation is the transformation of the potential into the actual, and the fact of such transformation includes the immediacy of self-enjoyment." Modes Of Thought (New York: Free Press, 1938), pp. 150-151.

<sup>18</sup>See e.g., Whitehead's Process And Reality where he argues that, ". . . God's purpose in the creative advance is the evocation of intensities." p. 125.

<sup>19</sup>Whitehead writes, e.g.: "The essence of life is to be found in the frustrations of established order. The universe refuses the deadening influence of complete conformity. And yet in its refusal, it passes towards novel order as a primary requisite for important experience." Modes Of Thought, pp. 87-88.

<sup>20</sup>See e.g., Cobb's A Christian Natural Theology, pp. 100-104 & also p. 107 where he notes: "Whitehead tells us repeatedly that it is more important that a proposition be interesting than that it be true. There are innumerable true propositions that are so trivial as not to be worth entertaining. There are many false propositions that alter the course of history, sometimes for the better."

<sup>21</sup>John B. Cobb, Jr., God And The World (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1969), p. 92.

<sup>22</sup>Whitehead, Process And Reality, p. 521.

<sup>23</sup>Charles Hartshorne, A Natural Theology For Our Time (La Salle, Illinois: Open Court, 1967), pp. 20-21. N.B. As Charles Hartshorne has done much towards the formulation of dipolar theism, and in fact continues to be one of Cobb's chief mentors, I have found it helpful to make occasional reference to his work in outlining the basic features of the process doctrine of God. A more detailed discussion of Hartshorne's concept of God can be found in his The Divine Relativity (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1964), © 1948.

<sup>24</sup>The proposition that God is affected by others stands as a radical divergence from the classical concept of God wherein deity is held to be impassive and immutable. That some find this suggestion unpalatable is curious since,

<sup>24</sup>as Hartshorne points out: "That a being with zero response must be better than one with ideal scope and power of response is far from self-evident." A Natural Theology For Our Time, p. 41.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., pp. 26-27.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid., p. 35.

<sup>27</sup>Whitehead explains more fully: "There are experiences of ideals - of ideals entertained, of ideals aimed at, of ideals achieved, of ideals defaced. This is the experience of the deity of the universe. The inter-twining of success and failure in respect to this final experience is essential. We thereby experience a relationship to a universe other than ourselves. We are essentially measuring ourselves in respect to what we are not." Modes Of Thought, p. 103.

<sup>28</sup>Cobb, God And The World, p. 56f.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid., p. 57.

<sup>30</sup>Alfred North Whitehead, Religion In The Making (New York: New American Library, 1974), © 1926, p. 92.

<sup>31</sup>Cobb, A Christian Natural Theology, p. 226.

<sup>32</sup>Cobb & Griffin, Process Theology, p. 119.

<sup>33</sup>See e.g., Cobb & Griffin's Process Theology, pp. 9-10 & also p. 61 where the substance of the masculine concept of God is described in the following manner: "The traditional concept of God is in many respects stereotypically masculine. God was conceived to be active, unresponsive, impassive, inflexible, impatient, and moralistic. This being had none of the stereotypically feminine traits - it was not at all passive, responsive, emotional, flexible, patient, and it did not balance moral concern with an appreciation of beauty. This has led to a one-sided and hence unhealthy Christianity."

<sup>34</sup>Cobb, God And The World, p. 28.

<sup>35</sup>Cobb writes, e.g.: "For Jesus, to know God was not to intensify obedience to ancient laws; it was to be free from bondage to such laws. To respond to God was to give up the security of habitual, customary, and socially approved actions and to live in terms of a radically new and uncontrollable future. The present moment was always a time for a decision required by the coming of the new reality. . . ." God And The World, pp. 44-45.

<sup>36</sup>See e.g., Cobb's God And The World, p. 81 where he contends that, ". . . by the way God constitutes himself he calls us to be what we can be and are not. He constitutes himself so as to provide each occasion with an ideal for its self-actualization, and it is in relation to that ideal that each human energy-event forms itself."

<sup>37</sup>See e.g., Cobb's A Christian Natural Theology, pp. 245-246.

<sup>38</sup>John B. Cobb, Jr., Theology And Pastoral Care, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977), p. 40.

<sup>39</sup>See e.g., Process Theology, pp. 56-57: "Process theology sees God's fundamental aim to be the promotion of the creature's own enjoyment. God's creative influence upon them is loving, because it aims at promoting that which the creatures experience as intrinsically good. . . . God wants our enjoyment to be such as to increase the enjoyments of others. To be moral is to actualize oneself in such a way as to maximize the enjoyments of future actualities, insofar as these future enjoyments can be conditioned by one's present decisions. Hence, although the development of moral attitudes is of extreme importance, it is a derivative concern, secondary to the primary value, which is enjoyment itself."

<sup>40</sup>In fact, Whitehead maintains that self-interest is a value inherent in actuality itself. He explains: "To be an actual entity is to have a self-interest. This self-interest is a feeling of self-valuation; it is an emotional tone. The value of other things, not one's self, is the derivative value of being elements contributing to this ultimate self-interest. This self-interest is the interest of what one's existence comes to. It is the ultimate enjoyment of being actual." Religion In The Making, p. 97.

<sup>41</sup>Cobb & Griffin, Process Theology, p. 25.

<sup>42</sup>Ibid., p. 26.

<sup>43</sup>Cobb, A Christian Natural Theology, p. 109.

<sup>44</sup>Ibid., p. 125.

<sup>45</sup>Cobb, God And The World, pp. 61-62.

<sup>46</sup>Christ as "creative transformation" is the theme of Cobb's christological work entitled Christ In A Pluralistic Age (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1975). The same theme is treated more briefly in Process Theology esp. p. 100f., where Cobb explains: "Creative transformation is the essence of growth, and growth is the essence of life. Growth is not achieved by merely adding together elements in the given world in different combinations. It requires the transformation of those elements through the introduction of novelty. It alters their nature and meaning without suppressing or destroying them. The source of the novelty is the Logos, whose incarnation is Christ. Where Christ is effectively present, there is creative transformation."

<sup>47</sup>Cobb argues that "this recognition of Christ in the liberation movements of our time is now widespread. It is also widely recognized that these movements are essentially transformations of consciousness and understanding which then express themselves in new organization and overt action." Christ In A Pluralistic Age, p. 57.

<sup>48</sup>Ibid., p. 111. See also p. 126 where he remarks: "Jesus' words open their hearers to Christ by shattering established self-images in a context of ultimate reassurance."

<sup>49</sup>Ibid., p. 188. A fuller discussion of Christ as the image of hope can be found in chap. 11 of Cobb's Christ In A Pluralistic Age, pp. 177-189.

<sup>50</sup>Ibid., p. 193.

<sup>51</sup>Ibid., p. 226.

<sup>52</sup>Ibid., p. 227.

<sup>53</sup>Cobb & Griffin, Process Theology, p. 60.

<sup>54</sup>John B. Cobb, Jr., The Structure Of Christian Existence (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1967). See esp. chap. 3 entitled "Primitive Existence".

<sup>55</sup>Ibid., p. 39.

<sup>56</sup>According to Cobb, the rise of the notions of individuality and freedom are associated with the emergence of "axial" existence, that is, existence in which rationality assumes increasing importance. He argues,

<sup>56</sup>e.g.: ". . . the emergence of axial man was not only the emergence of a new understanding of man as individual, but of a new individuality. When the seat of existence shifted effectively to reflective consciousness, a new type of continuity between successive occasions of experience arose as well as a new separation of the individual thus constituted from all other individuals . . . With the rationalization of reflective consciousness and the shift of the seat of existence to the rational consciousness, a new element appeared, namely, conscious control of symbolization and, thereby, also of action. In axial man this possible conscious control was extended in principle to the whole gamut of human action and thought. One no longer need do and think just what had been done and thought, and the mythical meanings by which man had lived so long were now problematic rather than simply given. At this point, we can and should speak of human freedom as something of utmost importance and distinctiveness in relation to mere unconscious self-determination. In this very important sense, the appearance of axial man was the emergence of freedom in the world." The Structure Of Christian Existence, pp. 57-58.

<sup>57</sup>Cobb specifically locates the emergence of the notion of responsible personhood in the life of Israel and identifies experience marked by such notion as "prophetic existence". He writes, e.g.: "The combination of the understanding of the individual as the one addressed by God, and thereby placed in decision, and the awareness of the inwardness of the decision joined in producing that peculiar kind of responsible, self-conscious individuality which justifies the term 'person'. The person, in this sense of the term, emerged clearly for the first time in seventh century Israel. Jeremiah is the striking example." Ibid., p. 104.

<sup>58</sup>See chap. 10 of The Structure Of Christian Existence, entitled "Christian Existence", pp. 107-124.

<sup>59</sup>Ibid., see esp. chap. 11, pp. 125-136.

<sup>60</sup>Cobb, A Christian Natural Theology, p. 48. Cobb remarks that: "Whitehead is remarkable among recent philosophers for his insistence that man has, or is, a soul. Furthermore, he is convinced that this doctrine has been of utmost value for Western civilization and that its recent weakening systematically undercuts the understanding of the worth of man." Ibid., p. 47.

<sup>61</sup>Ibid., p. 48.

<sup>62</sup>Ibid., see pp. 49-52.

<sup>63</sup>More specifically, Cobb writes: ". . . we can conceive of the soul occupying generally the region of the brain, receiving the causal efficacy of every portion of the brain at once, and experiencing its own synthesis of all of these influences in its own unified subjective immediacy." Ibid., p. 91.

<sup>64</sup>Cobb explains: "The Christian experienced himself as radically responsible for himself beyond the point of his actual apparent ability to choose . . . Somehow, the Christian knew himself as responsible for choosing to be the kind of self he was, even when he found that his desire to change himself into another kind of self was ineffectual . . . This meant that he must understand himself as transcending his will in the sense of his power of choice among practicable alternatives in a given situation. He was responsible not only for his choice but also for the motive of his choosing. He was responsible for being the kind of self who could not will to choose to have the motive he should." The Structure Of Christian Existence, p. 121.

<sup>65</sup>Ibid.

<sup>66</sup>See e.g., A Christian Natural Theology, p. 94f.

<sup>67</sup>Ibid., p. 95.

<sup>68</sup>Ibid., p. 39.

<sup>69</sup>Ibid., pp. 92-93.

<sup>70</sup>Ibid., pp. 97-98.

<sup>71</sup>Harmony, of course, is suggestive of peaceful existence which possibility is commended within the process framework. However, Cobb is concerned that peaceful existence is often confused with a type of anaesthetic existence which aims at "the curtailment of experience in the avoidance of disruption." Ibid., p. 132.

<sup>72</sup>Cobb, Christ In A Pluralistic Age, pp. 69-70.

<sup>73</sup>Cobb, The Structure Of Christian Existence, p. 124.

<sup>74</sup>Cobb & Griffin, Process Theology, p. 70.

<sup>75</sup>Ibid.



<sup>76</sup>Ibid., p. 75. A similar point is argued in Cobb's God And The World where he writes: "God seems to call every living thing to a self-actualization in which immediate satisfaction looms large. This means that God values intensities of feeling even at the price of endangering harmony and order. In the long run, future entities can themselves achieve higher values only when this risk is taken." p. 94.

<sup>77</sup>John B. Cobb, Jr., Liberal Christianity At The Crossroads (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1973), p. 88.

<sup>78</sup>See e.g., The Structure Of Christian Existence, p. 133ff. Also, in Process Theology it is noted that "there is a tension between the tendency to narrow self-interest and God's aim for a self-actualization that conduces also to the wider good." p. 125.

<sup>79</sup>Cobb, The Structure Of Christian Existence, pp. 134-135.

<sup>80</sup>Ibid., p. 134.

<sup>81</sup>Cobb, Theology And Pastoral Care, p. 41.

<sup>82</sup>Cobb, "Feminism And Process Thought: A Two-Way Relationship", in Feminism And Process Thought, pp. 41-42.

<sup>83</sup>He contends, e.g., that the idea of Christian wholeness "includes the idea of a strong and healthy body, strong and healthy emotions, a strong and healthy reason, a strong and healthy imagination, and a strong and healthy will, as well as a strong and healthy spirit." Theology And Pastoral Care, p. 28.

<sup>84</sup>Cobb, Christ In A Pluralistic Age, p. 219. See also Process Theology, p. 82, for the related point that: ". . . participation and individuality are polar, so that the more we participate with others in community the more we become individuals, and the more we become individuals, the more richly we participate in community. It is the view of isolated self-identity from birth to death that is the illusion."

<sup>85</sup>Cobb, Process Theology As Political Theology, p. 148.

<sup>86</sup>Cobb, God And The World, p. 49. Similarly, in Theology And Pastoral Care, Cobb argues that "the thrust of spiritual existence is to break the power of community

<sup>86</sup>over the individual. Insofar as we transcend ourselves, we transcend also the emotions, purposes, and meanings that we derive from others, and we are thus enabled to decide about them. We can constitute ourselves with some freedom in ways that are not produced by the community. In the language of Martin Heidegger, we are capable of authenticity. We become strong individuals able to stand against the pressures of society, assuming responsibility for what we are and do." p. 35.

<sup>87</sup>See Liberal Christianity At The Crossroads, esp. chap. 12, pp. 108-116.

<sup>88</sup>Ibid., p. 109.

<sup>89</sup>Cobb, Theology And Pastoral Care, p. 42.

## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSION

#### The Context of the Discussion

This thesis has been guided by two purposes. The first of these was to establish and present the contention found in various theologies of liberation that there is a moment of sin involved in the abnegation of the self, that this sin is especially characteristic of oppressed and marginalized persons, and that this sin has not received adequate acknowledgement and address by Christian theologians in general. To confirm this claim, I briefly examined some major representatives of feminist theology, Latin American theology, Black theology, and Gay theology.<sup>1</sup> My choice was influenced by two basic considerations: First, because the communities they represent are recognizable as distinct social groups who for various reasons have suffered both covert and open oppression, and in some instances, even active persecution; and second, because there exists a growing body of theological literature which purports to speak on behalf of these distinct communities. The investigation of this literature confirmed that the abnegation of the self was perceived to be a widespread and substantive problem among liberation theo-

logians, and therefore, could not be dismissed out of hand as the peculiar complaint of a particular interest group. This having been established, my second purpose was to investigate the validity of the liberationists' contention that the sin of self-abnegation has not been appreciated by Christian theologians in general. To this end, I examined some major representatives of contemporary theology,<sup>2</sup> namely, Langdon Gilkey, Karl Rahner, and John B. Cobb, Jr., in order to ascertain whether or not in fact Christian theology does comprehend the transgression involved in self-abnegation. The choice of this representation was largely determined by the fact that each of these theologians respectively reflect the sensibilities of three very influential theological perspectives on the contemporary scene, namely, Christian Realism, transcendental Thomism, and Whiteheadian process theology. The examination of these three theologians established that in fact, there is both implicit and explicit comprehension of the transgression entailed by self-abnegation in contemporary theology, contrary to the liberationists' contention. Hence, in its construction this thesis has assumed the form of challenge and response. This structure was not arbitrarily decided upon, but was chiefly determined by the original liberationists' complaint, and the context in which it was articulated. This context

presupposes certain issues and difficulties which stand in need of clarification before proceeding to the more substantive discussion of the findings of this thesis.

Throughout this thesis the moment of sin wherein an individual fails to take responsibility for becoming a self has been variously referred to as self-abnegation, underdevelopment of the self, and the refusal of self-transcendence. The usage of such terminology on my part is neither arbitrary nor novel, but has precedent, for example, in the writings of Valerie Saiving Goldstein, Judith Plaskow, and Mary Daly. As I suggested earlier, the sin of self-abnegation should not be identified with, nor is it intended to disparage, the ideal purposed by self-denial. If anything, self-abnegation represents an aberration of self-denial. What it describes, is not the denial of an integral self, but rather, the abrogation of the possibility of becoming a self or, the disparagement of the self. Now the difficulty arises, whence this aberration?

The argument of several liberation theologians is that the ethos of self-denial and sacrificial love has been misapprehended and sometimes exploited. In the case of misapprehension, such may be the result of a one-sided presentation of the meaning of the Christian faith; that is, historically and practically, the New Testament teaching

about sacrifice as a way of life, for example, may not have been balanced by the also Christian concern for the worth and integrity of the individual. Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite offers one instance of the kind of aberration which may result from such imbalance with her observation:

. . . no sooner do women in violent relationships begin to develop an ideological suspicion that their subordination is wrong than they are told that resistance to this injustice is unbiblical and un-Christian. They are told that Christian women are meek and that to claim rights for themselves is the sin of pride. Some women at this point cease to struggle further. Some continue to struggle but abandon the church.<sup>3</sup>

Other liberationists like Frantz Fanon, James Cone, and Leonardo Boff, contend that the notions of self-denial and sacrificial love have intentionally been exploited to stifle legitimate impulses towards self-determination, self-actualization, autonomy, freedom, and justice, by insinuating that these impulses are selfish, aggressive, impatient, dangerous, and not in keeping with Jesus' example.<sup>4</sup> In fact, similar observations pervade the entire body of liberation theology examined in Chapter One, such that the validity and substantiveness of their concern cannot be dismissed out of hand.

In connection with this, the question does arise whether it is necessary and useful for the liberationists to refer to the Christian faith in the statement of their

particular grievance. By this I mean, is it possible that the tenets of Christianity are incompatible with the agenda of liberation movements? On the one side of this issue, there are those who would argue that Christianity actually subverts the impetus and power of liberative action. For example, Mary Daly radically denies the possibility of being both feminist and Christian.<sup>5</sup> Her contention rests on the givenness of Christianity as a patriarchal religion. Frantz Fanon too, is obviously antagonistic towards the expression of Christianity, though not for the same reason that Daly is. He writes:

The colonialist bourgeoisie is helped in its work of calming down the natives by the inevitable religion. All those saints who have turned the other cheek, who have forgiven trespasses against them, and who have been spat on and insulted without shrinking are studied and held up as examples.<sup>6</sup>

On the other side of this issue there is the instance in which again, the attempt of liberation theologians to validate their causes by way of reference to the Christian faith is disapproved, though for a quite different reason than the one I have just mentioned. That is, here the concern is not for the potential subversion of liberative action, but is rather that the purity and integrity of religion remain intact. The suspicion is that the attempt to legitimize a social or political

program by way of reference to a religious fact actually distorts the intention and substance of that very same fact. This does not necessarily imply that those opposed to this practice are antagonistic towards the aims of a particular liberation movement (though in fact this may be and has been the case). Rather, they are opposed to the violation of the integrity of a religious system. For example, as I noted in Chapter Two, Langdon Gilkey is critical of what he perceives to be the liberationists' identification of political and social deliverance with the salvation promised in the gospel, and their corresponding identification of sin with whatever impedes such deliverance.<sup>7</sup>

While I do appreciate the concerns respective to both sides of this issue, in the final analysis, I cannot agree with either position. I am convinced that the concerns of liberation movements, and Christianity, are relevant to each other. Or, to state the matter differently, they are not mutually exclusive. And while on the one hand, it is true that religion ought not to change just because the fashions dictate that it should, or because people are not happy with it as it stands, on the other hand, Christianity for example, has not yet achieved some singular and pristine expression which automatically precludes further interpretation. Indeed, the



precise contention of liberation theologians is that the radical message of Christianity has been muted. For example, Robert McAfee Brown points out that in the past, women, ethnic minority groups, homosexuals, political radicals, and the physically and mentally handicapped have received such intemperate treatment from the churches that:

. . . Christ's open ended invitation appears to have been amended by his followers: "Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest (except, of course, for gays, people with leftist leanings, women who want too much to be ordained, and all social misfits who clearly belong somewhere else.)"<sup>8</sup>

In any case, within the context of this thesis, the discussion of self-abnegation is regarded as a theological issue. As far as the liberation theologians who have raised this issue are concerned, it is a problem of sin. Sin is a theological and Christian concept, and therefore, it must be with reference to religious fact that the discussion of self-abnegation proceeds.

There is a further contextual factor which has affected the emphases of this thesis and which therefore requires some explanation. This involves the juxtaposition of the notion of sin as self-abnegation against the understanding of sin as pride. It is often the case that when a particular point or contention is presented for consideration, it is juxtaposed against a rival notion which has

hitherto enjoyed a certain hegemony. In the original discussion of self-abnegation as sin (that is, as it appeared in the article by Valerie Saiving Goldstein, and subsequent to this, in the writings of other feminist theologians like Judith Plaskow, Joan Arnold Romero, and Mary Daly) the antithesis was located in the pre-occupation with the notion of sin as pride. However, the intention of Goldstein and others was not to discredit the analysis of sin as pride per se, but rather was to point out that it did not command universal application. That is, because the understanding of sin as pride primarily addresses the aggressive patterns of human behaviour, it cannot speak to the problem of suppressed and passive personalities whose transgressions are sins of weakness. Hence, the purpose of this thesis has not been to suggest that self-abnegation is more of a sin than pride, or that we must choose between the two, or even that the two are mutually exclusive. Rather, the point has been to confirm that there are different moments of sin, and that it is unwise and unsalutary to define one of the undesirable propensities of human beings as the quintessential and primordial SIN, in such a way that we become blind towards and oblivious of the fact of equally undesirable proclivities in human beings.

However, if there is a particular point at which liberation theology is open to criticism, it would consist

in their failure to thoroughly investigate what past and present Christian theology has had to say about sins of weakness. For example, historically, Christian theology has always recognized at least seven deadly sins, of which pride is but one (the other six consisting of envy, sloth, intemperance, avarice, ire, and lust). Again, Catholic theology has long maintained a distinction between mortal sins and venial sins, the latter being particularly appreciative of sins of weakness.<sup>9</sup> But even more important than either of these avenues there was, as Patrick Kerans points out in his book Sinful Social Structures, the medieval notion of acedia, which located moral evil in a "deep lassitude which whispers that it is not worth the effort."<sup>10</sup> As Kerans describes it further:

The temptation is to give up hope, to cease to try to put the future together by putting myself together now . . . And thus human evil emerges. For this is not a simple choice among competing options. This is a decision against being human in its fullness. This is a decision to shut out of my life part of my reality. It is a decision to keep my horizon narrow.<sup>11</sup>

Finally, of course, the examination of the contemporary and influential theologies of Langdon Gilkey, Karl Rahner, and John Cobb, Jr., established that in fact, there is in Christian theology, comprehension of sins of weakness including that of the abnegation of the self. Hence, the delineation of the sin of self-abnegation among liberation theologians cannot be regarded as a novel breakthrough

for Christian theology. However, I believe we can appreciate it as a corrective measure taken against excessive historical and practical preoccupation with sins of pride, or at least as a warning against the inappropriate application of a concept (that is, sin as pride) to all situations (for example, predicaments of marginalized existence).

By this point, it has become obvious that there is no one standard expression or manifestation of sin, though we know that whatever form it appears in, it is a consequence of estrangement from God. The question then arises, with regard to what criteria can the presence of sin be determined; that is, how is sin identified. The various theologies examined in this thesis rely on three basic sources in diagnosing sin. These are: (1) biblical and traditional Christian teachings; (2) philosophical reflection upon the structure of reality and human existence, and the moral sensibilities derivative from that reflection; (3) sociological reflection upon the optimal living conditions that a society ought to seek to realize. This latter rumination may include consideration of social, political, and economic injustices.

In actual fact, it is difficult to determine whether any one of these three factors enjoy an exclusive influence in any of the several theologies considered in this

thesis. However, it is possible to discern particular emphases, though even these are qualified by the presence of a second or third influence. For example, in liberation theology, the concern for social justice is paramount in its discussion of sin. Yet, this concern is always referred back to biblical imperatives. And of course, reflection upon that needs that must be fulfilled if genuine human existence is to be accomplished is never lacking. Again, in the thought of Langdon Gilkey, the biblical influence appears to enjoy a certain hegemony in his understanding of sin. However, it is of the essence of Christian Realism, which perspective Gilkey shares, that it has been formulated with reference to certain political and social facts. As the chief mentor of this school of thought, Reinhold Niebuhr appears as an excellent example of one who attempted to balance the demands of the Christian gospel on the one hand, with harsh political reality on the other. For him, the sin of pride manifested itself precisely in social and political aggression and national aggrandizement. Hence, he maintained, for instance:

. . . it is not even right to insist that every action of the Christian must conform to agape, rather than to the notions of relative justice and mutual love by which life is maintained and conflicting interests are arbitrated in history. For as soon as the life and interests of others than the agent are involved in

an action or policy, the sacrifice of those interests ceases to be "self-sacrifice". It may actually become an unjust betrayal of their interests. Failure to understand this simple fact and this paradoxical relation between individual and collective action has resulted in the unholy alliance between Christian perfectionism and cowardly counsels of political expediency in dealing with tyrants in our own day.<sup>12</sup>

In the case of the theologies of Karl Rahner and John Cobb, while philosophical reflection often seems to dominate much of their thinking on sin,<sup>13</sup> this is always intermingled with references to biblical testimony.

In connection with what has just been said, it sometimes appears that the sins of self-abnegation and pride are differentiated on the basis of a social distinction, namely, the dispossession or possession of power. Hence, the temptation exists to associate sins of pride with powerful people, and sins of self-abnegation with powerless people. This association needs to be qualified.

On the one hand, I want to point out that a certain correlation seems to obtain between the possession of power, and blatant instances of aggressive and self-aggrandizing behaviour. This is by no means a new discovery but has a very powerful precedent, for example, in Reinhold Niebuhr's contention that the most obvious social manifestation of the sin of pride is injustice.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, it is no coincidence that the people among whom self-abnegation is considered problematic (that is,

marginalized peoples) are recognizable as distinct social groups who for various reasons have not wielded much power.

On the other hand, however, the variable of power alone does not determine that sin shall be, where sin shall be, and what sin shall be. It has clearly been argued that the sin of self-abnegation implies not merely social disparity, but also represents a violation of the structure of existence intended by deity, and a truncation or diminution of one's "humanness". It is only in relation to God, self, others, and community, that self-abnegation exists as sin. This means that while the sin of self-abnegation may appear in some instances as a function of powerlessness, it is always more than this. Hence we are left with a correlation, but not a strict equation. That is, power does not cause, but tempts and facilitates the expression of sins of pride. Correspondingly, powerlessness aggravates and contributes to sins of self-abnegation.

Having thus clarified the context in which the discussion of sin as self-abnegation was developed, it is now possible to proceed to the analysis of the respective contributions of Gilkey, Rahner, and Cobb, to this issue.

The Contribution of Langdon Gilkey

One of the more surprising discoveries of this thesis has been that a theology originating in the Christian realist perspective, as does Gilkey's, in fact has a significant contribution to make to the discussion of sin as self-abnegation. After all, Reinhold Niebuhr, the founder of Christian Realism, was quite convinced that human evil is primarily expressed in undue self-concern.<sup>15</sup> He argued:

Biblical and Christian thought has maintained with a fair degree of consistency that pride is more basic than sensuality and that the latter is, in some way, derived from the former. We have previously considered the Biblical definition of basic sin as pride and have suggested that the Pauline exposition of man's self-glorification ("they changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like unto corruptible man") is really an admirable summary of the whole Biblical doctrine of sin.<sup>16</sup>

It was precisely this contention of Niebuhr's that was originally criticized by Valerie Saiving Goldstein and Judith Plaskow as being inadequate to the experiences of women and unappreciative of sins of self-abnegation. However, Goldstein and Plaskow themselves do not seem to fully appreciate the historical context in which Christian Realism arose. Basically, this school of thought developed in opposition to a liberal culture and mentality deemed naive in its belief in a progressivistic history, the unambiguous goodness of human nature, and unrealistic in



its tendency towards pacificism in an age when fascism and tyranny threatened to have its way in much of the world. Therefore, while it is quite legitimate to point out that certain perspectival limits attach to Niebuhr's theology and Christian Realism in general, it is illegitimate to insinuate that therefore, they are incapable of appreciating the difficulties of oppressed peoples (though something of this nature is implied by Rubem Alves in his article "Christian Realism: Ideology Of The Establishment").<sup>17</sup> In connection with this, Dennis McCann remarks:

. . . the perspectival limits of Niebuhr's view of human nature [i.e., his preoccupation with the aggressive personality and its problems] do not necessarily render Christian realism irrelevant. Niebuhr's characteristic emphases may be complemented by developing certain of his other insights. It should be possible, for example, to develop a more discerning interpretation of moral paralysis in politics by rethinking his dialectical understanding of pride and sensuality. At any rate, the fragmentation of the "self" characteristic of oppressed peoples merits deeper reflection if Christian realism is to address the situation of social activists today. Niebuhr, however, may still be uniquely qualified as a prophet to North American politicians. As long as the aggressive personality type continues to predominate among us, his dispositional ethic remains indispensable.<sup>18</sup>

In the theology of Langdon Gilkey, one discovers a Christian Realism that is aware of and concerned to address the problem of self-abnegation, or as McCann puts it, the phenomenon of the "fragmentation of the self characteristic of oppressed peoples".

The unique contribution of Gilkey's theology, is that it is able to thoroughly comprehend the sin of self-abnegation while not forsaking the Christian realist insight into the dynamics of sins of pride. This juxtaposition reflects the Christian-realist contention that human nature and human history are paradoxical.

The examination of the one side of the paradox, that is, of sin as pride and the aggressive patterns of human behaviour, is especially conspicuous in Gilkey's earlier works (for example, in Maker of Heaven And Earth,<sup>19</sup> and Shantung Compound).<sup>20</sup> Hence, at this point, the themes of human finitude and driving self-interest dominate Gilkey's theology. Still, Gilkey is aware of precisely whom the victims of expressions of pride are. He notes, for example:

. . . sin has intervened in the good creation, and made out of a bountiful variety an endless occasion for arrogance, domination, and conflict; men have dominated women, white men have dominated black, the Aryan has dominated the Jew . . . Creation viewed through our own partial and biased eyes always sanctifies our own prejudices, and reveals to us that the security, preservation, or advancement of our own race,<sup>21</sup> nation, class, or sex is the purpose of existence.

As I indicated in Chapter Two, in Maker of Heaven And Earth, Gilkey's understanding of sin as pride proceeds from the absolute ontological distinction that he posits between God and humanity. Sin is specifically located in the denial of human finitude vis-à-vis God's absoluteness. It

manifests itself in the tendency to replace God with the self as the focal point of one's existence. Yet at the same time as this understanding limits Gilkey's notion of sin, it also implies certain assumptions about the kinds of features that are thought to naturally constitute the human being. These include a high level of vitality, self-possession, the possession of freedom and power, and a capacity for self-transcendence. This ideal understanding of the makeup of the human person exists as a norm or standard by virtue of which it is possible to identify where that ideal is not being fulfilled. As Gilkey's theological anthropology develops (and diversifies to correspond to his changing notion of the function and nature of God in relation to human life), his understanding of sin broadens to the point where it explicitly comprehends the transgression involved in the underdevelopment of the self. Again, this development in no way implies a disavowal of the original Christian realist analysis of sin as pride. On the contrary, consonant with the dialectical method of Niebuhr, Gilkey's theology is able to lift up, examine, and respond to the fact of whatever human reality presents itself for consideration. Hence he is prepared to argue:

With its divine ground obscured, freedom loses touch with its own destiny, and so with itself and the present entity faces self-negation or self-elevation.

Overwhelmed by contingency or fatedness in the given and in itself, freedom despairs of its roles in self and in world creation. And possibility, no longer related creatively to destiny, appears as arbitrary, orderless, and unreal. Sin results, ontologically and experientially, in the loss of the unity of past, present and future: the vanishing of the past into inaccessible unreality, the smothering of the present as determined by fate, and the closing of the future as bereft of possibility.<sup>22</sup>

This analysis of sin comprehends the transgression involved in both self-abnegation and self-aggrandizement.

The examination of Gilkey's theological anthropology also disclosed the following contentions: (1) Power is a positive ontological category and, therefore, the wielding of power as far as it is necessary unto self-determination and self-actualization, is an indispensable component of authentic human life lived in the image of God; (2) Self-transcendence, which Gilkey largely identifies with self-determination, insofar as it is a possibility established by the structure of existence, is a moral and religious imperative; (3) The fundamental ontological structure of all existence is constituted by a polarity of actuality and possibility. Possibility is regarded by Gilkey as a function of God's activity in relation to the world. It establishes the opportunity for all autonomous human creativity, change, growth, and participation in directing the course of history. Thus Gilkey maintains that:

. . . new possibilities do not appear in historical existence as merely neutral; they appear as "demands" on our conscience, as an ought which our actions must seek to embody and realize. Possibility enters history with a moral tone, as a claim on our integrity and responsibility.<sup>23</sup>

Within this context, Gilkey warns that the self can be tempted into estrangement (i.e., sin) by forgetting its real possibilities and so ceasing to be a real and unique self at all.<sup>24</sup> This possibility is clearly a moment of the kind of sin which liberation theology has been concerned to depict, namely, a moment of self-abnegation.

In the final analysis, Gilkey's theology abides as confirmation of the relevance that Christian Realism may possess for the situation of social activists today. For not only does he appreciate the sins which may afflict oppressed and marginalized peoples, but he also warns of their dialectical relationship to more demonic expressions of sin. That is, sins of self-abnegation among the oppressed, constantly tempt the oppressor to further excesses of pride and dominance. Moreover, the debilitating consequences of self-abnegation may find their release only in extreme fanaticisms and other violent and destructive behaviour. This must always be born in mind lest, in our concern to uncover the positive potential of human existence, we overlook its darker and aggressive possibilities.<sup>25</sup>

### The Contribution of Karl Rahner

As Anne Carr observes, Karl Rahner begins "not with God, nor with Scripture, nor with the teachings of the Church, but with the person who is presupposed by Christianity as the hearer of its gospel."<sup>26</sup> Immediately, this starting point affords Rahner a vantage ground from which it is possible to view the several proclivities of human beings, including that of the abnegation of the self; that is, because Rahner is concerned with the human person as a whole, and as the question he is for himself, he escapes the pitfall of circumscribing human reality to fit some preconceived theory of human nature.

For Rahner, the fact that man appears as a question to himself, indicates that he is capable of self-transcendence, and is oriented towards an unlimited or infinite horizon. This means that the structure of human existence, and all the experiences which eventuate from that structure are of their nature transcendental. He explains:

In spite of the finiteness of his system man is always present to himself in his entirety. He can place everything in question. In his openness to everything and anything, whatever can come to expression can be at least a question for him. In the fact that he affirms the possibility of a merely finite horizon of questioning, this possibility is already surpassed, and man shows himself to be a being with an infinite horizon.<sup>27</sup>

Rahner's understanding of this transcendental experience, as it is determinative for the experiences of know-

ing, personhood, and freedom, is essentially intended to illuminate not the limits, but the vast potential of personal existence. The transcendental structure of reality establishes a particular ideal for human existence, namely, an existence characterized by self-acceptance (this is necessary because an integral self must be posited as the subject of transcendence), self-determination, and self-actualization. In Rahner's theology, these possibilities actually constitute freedom's ultimate end, the intention of grace, and the substance of salvation. Thus, within this context, the abnegation of the self appears as a blatant contradiction of everything that is originally purposed by existence, and even of the cause of salvation.

According to Rahner, the ultimate goal of self-actualization (which becomes synonymous with divinization) is accomplished and ratified in eternity or the consummation of time which occurs personally for everyone, at the moment of death. He writes, for example:

Eternal life is not the "other side" so far as our personal history is concerned, but rather the radical interiority, now liberated and brought to full self-realization, of that personal history of freedom of ours which we are living through even now and which, once it has been fully<sup>28</sup> brought to birth in death, can no longer be lost.

Rahner is primarily concerned to embolden integral, self-determinative, and self-actualized existence. The fact

that the realization of this kind of personal existence is of especial significance at the moment of death, does not mean that it is inconsequential to the entire span of existence which precedes that moment. On the contrary, a certain urgency attaches to the exigency of cultivating this kind of personal existence quickly, within the span of our own lifetime, lest death should overtake a life unaware of, and unprepared for, the fruition of salvation in self-actualization. For Rahner, freedom, personhood, self-determination, and self-actualization can only be concretely mediated, and therefore also measured, in space and time, that is, in history. And even though these possibilities are consummated in eternity, they must first originate, develop, and manifest themselves in the concrete personal and social circumstances of our lives. Otherwise, there would be nothing which could be consummated, and salvation would be without its substance, which is to say, it would not be at all. Hence Rahner maintains:

If anyone were to tell us that the state we had lived in up to now would simply continue on into eternity, in that self-same moment we would have to recognize ourselves as damned. For in that case each successive transitory moment of our lives would be divested of its own special value, a value which consists in the fact that these moments in our temporal existence provide the possibility for us to take a decision that is irrevocable. For it is the exercise of our freedom in these particular moments that <sup>29</sup>gives birth to that which will remain and endure.



Within this context, the abnegation of the self - insofar as it entails loss of the self, refusal to take responsibility for becoming a self, inauthenticity, the refusal of self-transcendence, superficiality, dependence, and indeed, a contradiction of salvation's purpose of self-actualization - plainly finds no sufferance in Karl Rahner's theology. Even Rahner's occasional statements wherein sin is discussed as the absolutization of a finite value caused by pride, shortsightedness, or blinding egoism, do not in any way offset his theology's patent comprehension of the transgression involved in the abnegation of the self. That is because for Rahner, sin at its deepest root has to do with personal inauthenticity and personal closure to the infinite horizon. And he is only too aware that this may manifest itself as self-chosen impotence. Hence, Rahner is first and foremost concerned to represent "man who is alive not merely at the level of the material and the biological, but on the plane of self-awareness, personhood, freedom, responsibility, love and faithfulness; man whose mode of existence is such that it is charged with the responsibility of his self-awareness and his freedom."<sup>30</sup>

The particular contribution that Karl Rahner makes to the discussion of sin as self-abnegation comes by way of his understanding of the human person as situated in

a transcendental structure of existence. The orientation towards the infinite horizon instills in the human being, a dynamic process of continual self-surpassing. In this movement, the discrepancy between what we are, and what we ought to be, is disclosed. It is in the awareness of this discrepancy that Rahner locates the moral experience. This experience tells us that the movement of life is toward the appropriation of greater or more being, not toward the abnegation of being. Thus has Rahner identified the normative structure of human existence as that of "being-by-becoming". What is ever of significance in the transcendental structure of existence, is the fulfillment of the human person as subject, as free, as autonomous, as self-determinative, as self-aware, and as self-accepted.

In addressing the problem of self-abnegation among marginalized and oppressed persons, liberation theologians would do well to present a more systematic and philosophically grounded model of what human existence ideally expects and promises of each individual. Karl Rahner's theology presents itself as such a possible model, for it possesses the depth and the breadth to speak both personally and universally.

The Contribution of John Cobb

Among the several theologies considered in this thesis, that of John Cobb is distinguished by its unwavering indebtedness to a single particular systematic metaphysic. Yet, according to Cobb, the hegemony of the Whiteheadian conceptuality is warranted precisely because of its correspondence to the tenets of faith expressed in biblical and Christian religion.<sup>31</sup> The entire thrust of the process metaphysic which shapes Cobb's theology immediately, intrinsically, and consistently precludes any sufferance of the abnegation of the self.

As was demonstrated in Chapter Four, according to the process conceptuality which Cobb represents, all reality whatsoever, be it natural, divine, or human, is characterized by, and finds its value in process, creative self-determination, self-enjoyment, intensity of experience, the frustration of established order, and self-realization. Because these properties do not exist primarily as the means to a further or ultimate value (save perhaps that they enhance deity's experience), their worth consists precisely in the fact that they are experienced, enjoyed, and realized in space and time.

Beyond this, the process doctrine of God was shown to be particularly relevant to the discussion of self-abnegation, because the very function and purpose of deity

is to establish and promote exactly those qualities which are antithetical to the abnegation of the self, especially self-interest and self-enjoyment.

Process theology sees God's fundamental aim to be the promotion of the creature's own enjoyment. God's creative influence upon them is loving, because it aims at promoting that which the creatures experience as intrinsically good . . . Hence, although the development of moral attitudes is of extreme importance, it is a derivative concern, secondary to the primary value, which is enjoyment itself.<sup>32</sup>

According to Cobb, God constitutes himself in such a way as to provide each person with an ideal for his or her self-actualization.<sup>33</sup> Given this understanding, the kinds of sin that are of especial concern to Cobb and process theology in general, are sins of evasion. That is, when we are confronted with the choice of either advancing into new possibilities of existence established by God, or reposing in the security of what has already been, Cobb observes:

It is easier to ignore the lure of God than to overcome the weight of that past; hence the appalling slowness of our progress toward full humanity and the ever impending possibility that we turn away from it catastrophically.<sup>34</sup>

It is precisely these kinds of sins of evasion that are of particular concern to liberation theologians in their discussion of self-abnegation. Furthermore, within the process conceptuality, because God's influence in the world is persuasive rather than coercive, history, the future, indeed the entire movement of the universe remains

truly open, and human beings have a definite share in, and therefore responsibility for, deciding and determining the outcome. By contrast, the theologies of Gilkey and Rahner are more teleological in the sense that eternity and the consummation of history is already assured by God, and the chief decision of human beings is whether or not they will participate in that end. Yet, Cobb believes that the openness of the future does not defy Christian faith, but rather illuminates it. He explains:

In the Christian community . . . there is both divine grace and human responsibility. Christian action entails both. There is no divine action apart from creaturely action, but equally the divine action is the principle of hope in the creaturely action. Hence we cannot divide up responsibility for an action, supposing that the more God is responsible for what occurs, the less human beings are responsible - or the more human beings are responsible, the less God has to do with it. On the contrary, it is precisely in the freest and most responsible of human actions that the action of God is most clearly discerned.<sup>35</sup>

It is for this reason that the cultivation, the exercise, and the expansion of freedom is so crucial, since it has ramifications beyond the existence of an individual person. Accordingly, the refusal to take responsibility for becoming a self, the refusal to exercise freedom which self-abnegation implies, not only contradicts God's purposes but betrays them. For Cobb, freedom is measured by the extent to which we are moved by persuasion rather than by the force of the constituting world, and its expansion or

diminution characterizes history's advance or decline, respectively.<sup>36</sup> Thus the expansion of freedom must occur concretely in personal and social life; it has no other reference point. Or as Cobb puts it:

The expansion of freedom is both a matter of extending the areas of individual life in which we are free and of expanding the number of people who are free. Hence one main aspect of progress in the modern world has been the abolition of slavery.<sup>37</sup>

Yet, the congeniality of Cobb's theology to the notion of sin as self-abnegation is not determined solely on the basis of the process metaphysic which underlies it. Beyond this, Cobb explicitly demonstrates awareness of how the New Testament ideal of sacrifice has been misapprehended to impede the movement towards self-actualization among oppressed and marginalized groups. Therefore he advises:

. . . there are many ways toward Christian existence, and for many people the self-assertion of the responsible self against unreasonable and inappropriate demands is a major step toward that existence. As long as this is recognized as what is needed now and is not turned into an ultimate ideal of existence, the Christian can and should call for self-assertion of all those who need liberation from unreasonable demands and expectations. In some measure that is all of us.<sup>38</sup>

In connection with this, Cobb maintains that the original Christian commitment has always been to selfhood, to the person, and to the individual. Though this commitment has not been without certain drawbacks and excesses, Cobb believes that Christianity would no longer be itself if

it abandoned its affirmation of the personal self.<sup>39</sup> Consequently, he concludes:

. . . we must think through more radically the meaning of love in relation to the personal self.  
 . . . I am suggesting that rather than abandon our selfhood we can<sup>40</sup> perfect it in new kinds of communities of love.

The particular contribution that John Cobb makes to the discussion of sin as self-abnegation, is that of a systematic metaphysic which consistently and coherently grounds the contention that the purpose of life lies in the direction of change, growth, self-enjoyment, creative self-determination, novelty, intensity of experience, the frustration of established order, and self-actualization.<sup>41</sup> That is, in Cobb's theology, the establishment of these values derives not only from the point of view of human experience, but from the very nature of reality and the very being of God.

In the final analysis, the unambiguous congeniality of the process metaphysic to the understanding of sin in terms of self-abnegation, and the fact that Cobb explicitly acknowledges this sin among oppressed and marginalized persons, confirms two things: first, that Cobb's theology is a valuable resource for rethinking the concept of sin; and once again, that contemporary Christian theology appreciates and is able to address the problem of the abnegation of the self.

Resolution

Since the construction of this thesis has generally assumed the form of challenge and response, some type of resolution is in order. The discussion of this thesis has established two basic facts. On the one hand, it has confirmed that the abnegation of the self is perceived by several liberation theologians, to be a widespread and substantive problem, especially among marginalized and oppressed persons. It was argued that the tendencies which self-abnegation enjoins included unhealthy self-sacrifice, refusal to take responsibility for becoming a self, refusal of self-transcendence, diffidence, moral paralysis, inauthenticity, dependency, fearfulness, self-abasement, inactivity, and acquiescence. In a word, self-abnegation was thought to discourage and impede self-acceptance, self-determination, and self-actualization. Consequently, the abnegation of the self was demonstrated to be sinful, both in itself and in its effects. This far, I am convinced that the liberationists' delineation of this sin is valid, accurate, important, and necessary.

On the other hand, however, the examination of the contemporary theologies of Langdon Gilkey, Karl Rahner, and John Cobb, Jr., established that Christian theology does comprehend the transgression involved in the abnegation of the self, and is prepared to address the problem.



Hence, the contention of some liberation theologians that main-stream theology is oblivious towards or indifferent to the problem of self-abnegation must be disallowed.

Interestingly, what has developed is a situation in which liberation theology explicitly names a sin that has already been presaged in Christian theology. One of the puzzling questions that arises in connection with this is: What is the common factor which determines the general recognition of the sin involved in self-abnegation? Two possible answers which immediately come to mind are:

(1) The several theologies considered in this thesis share in common a dynamic understanding of human nature. Therefore, whatever contradicts the dynamic orientation of human nature, as does self-abnegation, is effective as sin. While this sounds plausible enough, it would be difficult to substantiate; that is, a more essentialist understanding of human nature might well yield the same disapprobation of self-abnegation. Therefore, I am compelled to think that a more basic tenet is responsible for the general condemnation of self-abnegation. Tentatively, I propose that the second answer is more likely to account for the widespread recognition of the transgression involved in the abnegation of the self. It is, (2) the conviction that while human beings are finite, we are also created in the image of God. The fact that we are created

in the image of God imparts to every human being a worth, an integrity, and a dignity which ought not to be violated. When we commit sins of pride, self-aggrandizement, and aggression, we profane the worth, integrity, and dignity of others. And when we commit sins of self-abnegation, we profane the worth, the integrity, and the dignity of ourselves. This conviction is shared by liberation theologians, by Langdon Gilkey, by Karl Rahner, and by John Cobb. And it is this conviction which establishes the abnegation of the self as SIN!

## NOTES

### CHAPTER V

<sup>1</sup>Of course, this is not an exhaustive representation of marginalized groups. One might have also included a discussion of the elderly, the handicapped, African liberation movements, etc. However, the particular groups that I have chosen to represent are highly visible and articulate, at least on the North American scene.

<sup>2</sup>With this representation I am not attempting to outline the history of all theology, but only that of three very influential theological perspectives. I concede that there is always an element of arbitrariness involved in the selection of one theologian over another, but such constitutes the natural and unavoidable limits of any discussion.

<sup>3</sup>Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite, "Battered Women And The Bible: From Subjection To Liberation", Christianity & Crisis 41 (November, 1981), p. 311. A review of the section entitled "The Feminist Perspective" in chap. 1 will remind the reader that Thistlethwaite's is not an isolated observation. Similar points are made by Valerie Saiving Goldstein, Judith Plaskow, Janet Radcliffe Richards, Simone de Beauvoir, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Mary Daly, Germaine Greer, Barbara Hilkert Andolsen, Penelope Washbourn, Carol S. Robb, and Eleanor Humes Haney.

<sup>4</sup>Frantz Fanon, e.g., argues: "The colonialist bourgeoisie is helped in its work of calming down the natives by the inevitable religion. All those saints who have turned the other cheek, who have forgiven trespasses against them, and who have been spat on and insulted without shrinking are studied and held up as examples." The Wretched Of The Earth, trans. Constance Farrington, (New York: Grove Press, 1963), p. 67. Similarly, James Cone contends: "The religious ideas of the oppressor are detrimental to the black people's drive for freedom. They tend to make black people nonviolent and accept only the prescribed patterns of protest define by the oppressor himself. It is the oppressor who attempts to tell black people what is and is not Christian - though he is the least qualified to make such a judgment." Black Theology And Black Power (New York: Seabury Press, 1969), pp. 20-21. Again, Leonardo Boff maintains that "Such Christian values

<sup>4</sup>as humility, submissiveness and the shouldering of Christ's cross were presented in ideological terms so that they ended up underpinning the status quo and castrating the people's potential for liberative reaction." Liberating Grace (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1979), pp. 29-30.

<sup>5</sup>See Daly's Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics Of Radical Feminism (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978), passim.

<sup>6</sup>Fanon, The Wretched Of The Earth, p. 67.

<sup>7</sup>See Gilkey's Reaping The Whirlwind (New York: Seabury Press, 1976), p. 230ff., and esp. his essay "Reinhold Niebuhr's Theology Of History" in The Legacy Of Reinhold Niebuhr, ed., Nathan A. Scott, (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 1975), pp. 36-62.

<sup>8</sup>Robert McAfee Brown, Theology In A New Key (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1978), p. 167. I note that nowadays there are several exceptions to Brown's observation, especially among Protestant churches.

<sup>9</sup>See e.g., Rahner's discussion of 'The Sinfulness of Man through Venial Sins' in Theological Investigations, vol. 6: Concerning Vatican Council II (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, Ltd., 1969), pp. 218-230.

<sup>10</sup>Patrick Kerans, Sinful Social Structures (New York: Paulist Press, 1974), p. 44.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid.

<sup>12</sup>Reinhold Niebuhr, The Nature And Destiny Of Man, vol. 2: Human Destiny (New York: Charles Scribners Sons, 1943), p. 80.

<sup>13</sup>That is, it would be ludicrous to maintain that Rahner's description of sin as an "absolutization of finite values" is strictly a biblical formulation. Likewise, Cobb's contention that sin is "that which blinds me to the possibilities of life and refuses to embody them even when I see them clearly" is not easily derived from any biblical passage that I am familiar with.

<sup>14</sup>Niebuhr writes, e.g.: "Man is insecure and involved in contingency; he seeks to overcome his insecurity by a will-to-power which overreaches the limits of human crea-

<sup>14</sup>tureliness. Man is ignorant and involved in the limitations of a finite mind; but he pretends that he is not limited. He assumes that he can gradually transcend finite limitations until his mind becomes identical with universal mind. All of his intellectual and cultural pursuits, therefore, become infected with the sin of pride. Man's pride and will-to-power disturb the harmony of creation. The Bible defines sin in both religious and moral terms. The religious dimension of sin is man's rebellion against God, his effort to usurp the place of God. The moral and social dimension of sin is injustice. The ego which falsely makes itself the centre of existence in its pride and will-to-power inevitably subordinates other life to its will and thus does injustice to other life." The Nature And Destiny Of Man, vol. 1: Human Nature (New York: Charles Scribners Sons, 1941), pp. 178-179. (emphasis mine)

<sup>15</sup>See e.g., the preface to Niebuhr's The Nature And Destiny Of Man, vols. 1 & 2.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., vol. 1, p. 186.

<sup>17</sup>Rubem Alves, "Christian Realism: Ideology Of The Establishment" in Christianity & Crisis 33: (1973), pp. 173-176.

<sup>18</sup>Dennis P. McCann, Christian Realism And Liberation Theology (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1981), p. 127. N.B. Niebuhr's dispositional ethic suggests the cultivation of the dispositions of humility and self-restraint on the part of individual moral agents.

<sup>19</sup>Langdon Gilkey, Maker Of Heaven And Earth (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Co., Inc., 1965), © 1959. See esp chap. 7 entitled "Creation And Evil". Gilkey writes, e.g., "The second guise of evil is the most important contributor to the external fate of history. It is the internal fate of sin, a baffling irresistible force that subtly twists each of our acts and intentions into a glorification of the self, that turns the self in on itself so that all it does is done for its own glory and security." Ibid., p. 244.

<sup>20</sup>Langdon Gilkey, Shantung Compound (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1966). Although this work is autobiographical, describing Gilkey's internment in a Japanese prison camp during World War II, it is replete with theological ruminations. Gilkey writes, e.g.:

<sup>20</sup>"The experience of camp life and the lessons of history generally, established to my satisfaction that men act generally in an 'immoral' way when their interests are at stake. With equal force, however, they showed me that men remain at least moral enough to be hypocritical, to wish to seem good - even if it is beyond their capacities to attain it." p. 112. For more specific references to Reinhold Niebuhr, Christian Realism, and sin, see pp. 72-96, p. 115ff., & p. 121ff.

<sup>21</sup>Gilkey, Maker Of Heaven And Earth, p. 274.

<sup>22</sup>Langdon Gilkey, Society And The Sacred (New York: Crossroad Publishing Co., 1981), p. 35.

<sup>23</sup>Gilkey, Reaping The Whirlwind, p. 252.

<sup>24</sup>Langdon Gilkey, Message And Existence (New York: Seabury Press, 1980), pp. 139-140.

<sup>25</sup>I note that historically, Christian Realism has and continues to perform just such a corrective function in the twentieth century.

<sup>26</sup>Anne E. Carr, "Starting With The Human" in A World Of Grace, ed., Leo J. O'Donovan, (New York: Seabury Press, 1980), p. 17.

<sup>27</sup>Karl Rahner, Foundations Of Christian Faith (New York: Seabury Press, 1978), pp. 31-32.

<sup>28</sup>Karl Rahner, Theological Investigations, vol. 13: Theology, Anthropology, Christology (New York: Seabury Press, 1975), p. 175.

<sup>29</sup>Karl Rahner, Theological Investigations, vol. 11: Confrontations 1 (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1974), p. 320.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid., p. 317.

<sup>31</sup>See e.g., Cobb's Living Options In Protestant Theology (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1962), esp. p. 315ff.

<sup>32</sup>John B. Cobb, Jr., & David Ray Griffin, Process Theology (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1976), pp. 56-57.

<sup>33</sup>See e.g., Cobb's God And The World (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1969), p. 81.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid., p. 82.

<sup>35</sup>Cobb & Griffin, Process Theology, p. 157.

<sup>36</sup>John B. Cobb, Jr., Process Theology As Political Theology (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1982), p. 145.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid.

<sup>38</sup>John B. Cobb, Jr., Theology And Pastoral Care (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977), p. 42.

<sup>39</sup>See e.g., Cobb's Liberal Christianity At The Crossroads (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1973), pp. 115-116.

<sup>40</sup>Ibid., p. 116.

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