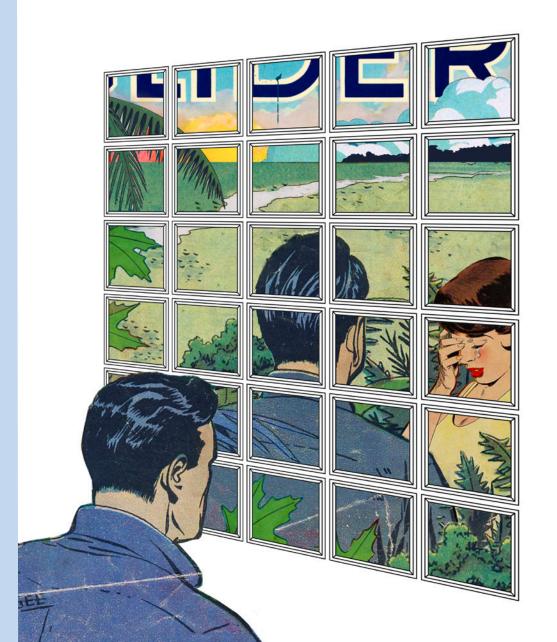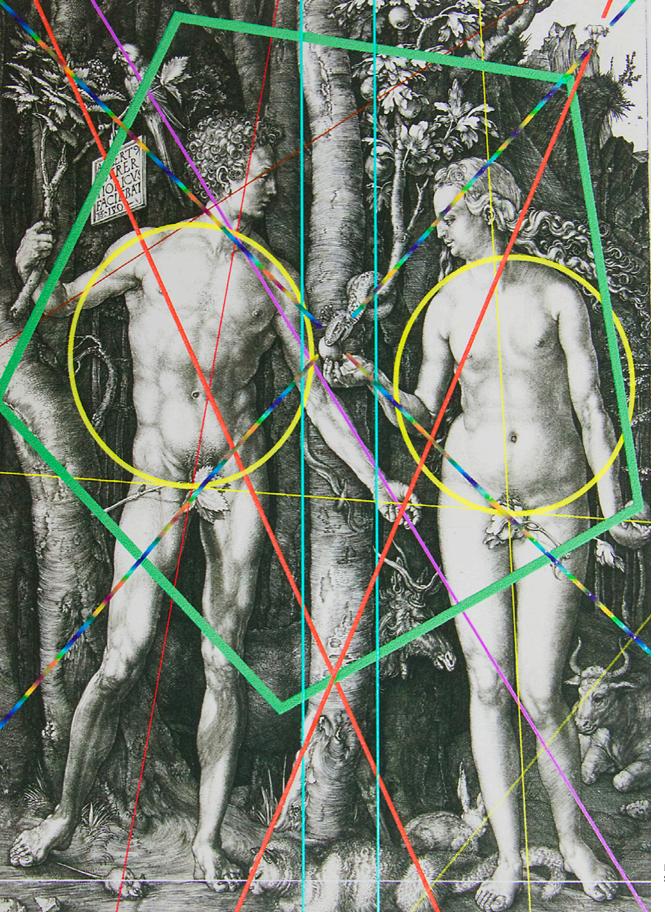# THE Mockingbird

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POEMS BY MARY KARR

Hiding in Plain Sight

The Lost Doctrine of Sin

by **Simeon Zahl**

This essay was originally a talk given at the 2016 Mockingbird Conference in New York City.

The Pharisees … said to his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?" When [Jesus] heard this, he said, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have come not to call the righteous but sinners" (Mt 9:11-13).

The theologian Robert Jenson makes a comment in his *Systematic Theology*, almost in passing, that I've been ruminating on for the past couple of years. It comes in a passage where he is writing about the place of the Christian Church in the modern world. Jenson points out that in the ancient Church there developed an "instructional institution," a kind of school, called the *catechumenate*. The purpose of the catechumenate was to provide people who wanted to become Christians with an initial schooling and shaping in Christianity. This was seen to be necessary in a largely pagan context because, as Jenson puts it, "Life in the church was too different from life out of the church for people to tolerate the transfer without some preparation." In the passage, Jenson wonders whether the time has come for the church to remember this aspect of its mission, to revive the catechumenate:

The [late modern] church is [now] returned to the situation in which the catechumenate was born: those to be integrated into the life of the church come from an alien culture; the church's life, if she is faithful, must be a shock and a puzzlement to them.

In other words, in an increasingly secular world, Christians can no longer take for granted that their ideas and practices and morals will be intelligible anymore to contemporary people. People simply no longer have the language or the concepts to understand Christianity.

Now, much of what Jenson in fact has in mind has to do with a cultural disconnect on topics to do with moral values, and there are shades of Alisdair MacIntyre and perhaps the Benedict Option lurking behind all of this. But what struck me is that his point is undeniably true of one Christian doctrine, one core Christian concept, in particular: the doctrine of sin. It seems to me that the doctrine of sin does indeed come across today as a puzzlement and as a shock.

Certainly this is true of my students. My job is to teach theology to undergraduate and graduate students at a public research university. This means that for most of the past nine years, first at Cambridge, then at Oxford, and now at the University of Nottingham, I have been giving undergraduate introductory lectures in systematic theology. In these lectures, I try my best to communicate the key doctrines and concepts that form the core of traditional Christian theology. Probably something like half the students in these courses in a given year are Christians of some kind, and half are not. We talk about things like the Incarnation, the doctrine of the Trinity, and the idea that human beings are created in the image of God. I like teaching, and I like to think I do a decent job of this most weeks.

But there is one topic where I never feel like they are tracking with me—there is one theological bone they just can't seem to swallow. And that is the doctrine of sin. When I try to explain that Christians have traditionally believed that human beings are deeply flawed from birth, and furthermore that God is profoundly unhappy about these flaws, I watch my students' eyes grow skeptical. I watch their postures shift the way students always do when they disagree with what you are telling them. Not all of the students disagree, but many do. It is the annual skeptical moment in these lectures.

And as a teacher it is a difficult situation. What do I do to overcome their skepticism, at least enough for them to develop a little bit of understanding for why so many Christians have found the doctrine plausible through the years?

Do I recite statistics about the World Wars and genocide and human trafficking and basically just rhetorically pound them into submission? But then they'll just think of sin as a big, angry abstraction, and they won't actually understand it the way that Christian theology does.

So do I go personal instead, try to get them to engage in some self-analysis? Something like, "Let's reflect on the not-so-good parts of how your parents treated you growing up," or "Think back to a time when you were really hurt by somebody," or "Let's think about just how quickly your principles fade when a lot of money is at stake, or when you fall in love with someone else." By instinct I know that this kind of thing is probably the most effective way to talk about sin, if I really want them to see why it might be worth taking seriously as an idea. But frankly, this strategy is flying pretty close to the sun in a public university. As a teacher, it is dangerous ground to set yourself up as your students' therapist. And this is particularly the case when it comes to religion—a professor, including a theology professor, is not and should

not be a preacher, or an evangelist, for a number of good reasons.

Another option is a bit safer: I could refer to serious moral problems I know my students are aware of and care about, like racism and #MeToo and Wall Street greed. I could say that Christianity has a term for the way in which the world is full of big, complex evils like these, and that term is *sin*. This might be a good opening; certainly it would get them listening. The problem with this strategy is that it carries substantial risks of them missing the point. Most college students—like most human beings—think of racism and misogyny and capitalist misbehavior as bad things that people *out there* do, other people, maybe people we know, but definitely not us. Many are aware that they are victims of such things—and they are—but almost none would think of *themselves* as participants or perpetrators.

Now, the reason all this matters is not because I think all the students should believe in the reality of sin. As a university professor, that isn't really my business, at least not in the classroom. The reason, rather, is pedagogical.

You see, almost none of the classic Christian dogmas make any sense unless you understand the sin part of the puzzle. When you have to teach introductory theology, you quickly discover that the doctrine of sin is fundamental to the coherence and intelligibility of Christian belief, and that this is true whether we like it or not. In other words, my students actually won't do well on the exam—they won't really acquire a deep understanding of Christology or the doctrine of the Trinity or the doctrine of revelation—unless they have some kind of feel for the doctrine of sin, for what it is and why Christians have found it so important through the centuries.

Take, for example, the most basic Christian claim about Jesus, that he is fully divine and

fully human at the same time. The reasons that Christians came to believe this over the first four and a half centuries of Christian history make no sense without the doctrine of sin. Very thoughtful people concluded at the time that only a human savior could enter our condition fully enough to save it and that, at the same time, only a divine savior could actually pull off the job. Thus, paradoxically but truly, Christ must be both fully human and fully divine. Otherwise, he couldn't deal properly with the reality of sin or with its chief consequence, death.

So without a robust doctrine of sin, the basic Christology which we confess in the creeds is just a weird and unnecessary paradox. And the same could be said in different ways of the doctrine of the Trinity, doctrines of salvation, and many other fundamental theological ideas.

My point is this: in the edifice of Christian belief, the doctrine of sin is a major load-bearing structure. It is not theologically optional. To lose it, or to downplay it, or to reframe it in terms that are less offensive to our sense of self-worth, is in the long run to render Christianity unintelligible to people. It will become a floating shell, unmoored from its historical foundation, from its own inner logic, and from the realities of human lives.

This brings me back to my students and their skepticism. If my job is to help them understand this doctrine so they can do well on the exam, then I need to understand why they find this doctrine so off-putting. With that in mind, here is my best guess:

When modern people hear the word *sin*—when they hear someone describe the idea that human beings are fundamentally flawed in a very deep way, seeking our own best interest over that of others (and for reasons that lie at the core, rather than just the periphery, of our nature), and when they hear that human beings might on this basis be liable, fundamentally, to

judgment—when they hear all this I think what they actually hear me say is something like: *It is right to judge people for their flaws rather than having compassion on them.* Or else perhaps: *I think I am better than other people and have the right to judge them.*

In a way, you could say that my students don't like the idea of sin because it sounds immoral to them! My students get uncomfortable because the doctrine of sin is heard as a violation of their moral values: it encourages judgmentalism, repression, not accepting people as they are, and creepy religious power dynamics.

Now it is in fact the case, at least in my own view, that these inferences—about the judgmentalism and lack of compassion and so on—are seriously inaccurate conclusions to draw from the Christian doctrine of sin. The reason people draw such conclusions is either because they've never really had a chance to think the issue through, or else because the form of Christianity they have thus far encountered is a decadent one.

Given this, I think one thing I can do, for them and also for us, is to communicate a few useful ways of thinking about sin and human nature that might help us to rescue the doctrine of sin from its current place of dishonor in contemporary cultural discourse, and to see why the doctrine of sin in fact remains a diagnostic tool of great power. In other words, I want to engage in a little of what Robert Jenson would call *catechesis*.

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Let me start by observing, and this is sort of Christian Theology 101, that first and foremost, sin is not best defined as *specific acts of moral transgression*—say, committing adultery, or embezzling from a charity, lying to get your way, and so on. Those are indeed what we might call *sins*, but they are not *sin* itself.
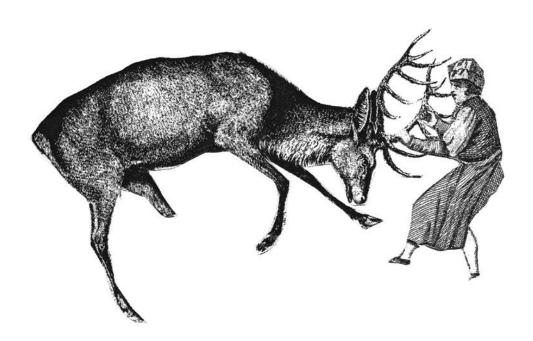
Rather in the first instance, theologically speaking, sin is a *condition under which human lives exist*. Sin is a way of describing the fact that there is a fundamental flaw in the human system and is an explanation for why that system keeps throwing up errors. The doctrine of sin is a way of saying that reality is like a lens with a subtle but pervasive flaw, such that everything that goes through it gets distorted—plans go wrong, communications fail, good intentions decay and corrupt—and of describing the fact that, in so many things that happen, there is this slight tilt towards the perverse and the cruel. In other words, it is a description of the fact that there is *a fundamental bias against flourishing* that appears to be written into our hearts. So, we have to think of sin as a *condition*. It is like gravity, only it causes enormous suffering.

And this condition is not just an idea; it is a reality. It is a fact on the ground and always has been. It is just that we late modern people have forgotten how to name it. Sin hasn't disappeared; we've just lost the equipment to detect it. The MRI machine may be broken, but the patient still has cancer.

Luther described the situation of our own culture very well in his commentary on Psalm 51:

> The Gentiles who are without the Word
> do not properly understand these evils
> even though they lie right in the middle
> of them … Thus they cannot properly
> evaluate any of human nature, because
> they do not know the source from
> which these calamities have come upon
> mankind.

In other words, Luther is saying we need to understand about sin because without it we will not be able fully to understand or describe the reality of the evils and sufferings we see around us. The Gentiles, Luther is saying, are like those

who try to make sense of the cancer they are suffering from but don't make use of the best diagnostic instrument available. Just read most political and social thinkpieces these days. No matter how intelligent or informed the writer, what is glaringly missing so often to a reader like me is a sense of sin. There is a naïve optimism about education or about human intentions or both, and a failure to recognize the basic bias against flourishing, which functions on both individual and societal levels.

But if sin is real, then where has it gone? Well, I want to argue that sin is hiding in plain sight. It's just that we have started calling it other things. I want to mention two. They are not at all exhaustive, but they are representative.

One way that we have relabeled sin is as what psychologists call *cognitive bias*. The term cognitive bias refers to various ways that our brains operate in such a way that we come to less than fully rational conclusions. Often these operations seem to have some adaptive function—they help us to not despair in the face of overwhelming odds, for example, and you could see why that might give an evolutionary advantage.

Usually, when we hear about cognitive bias today, it is in the context of some article on why political opinions are so difficult to change through rational argument, or why human beings are really bad at investing money because we always buy high and sell low. You read them and you say to yourself, "*Ha! So true!* Human beings and their foibles!"

It seems to me, however, that much of what

we call cognitive bias is in fact a scientific language for empirically verifiable, hardwired biological facts of human selfishness and irrationality. In other words, sin.

For example, there is a large literature on what are called "self-serving biases," like what cognitive scientists call the "fundamental attribution error." The fundamental attribution error refers to the fact that human beings very strongly tend to attribute good things that happen to us to our own efforts, and bad things that happen to us to external factors, and vice versa when it comes to other people. So, when I don't get a promotion at my job, I blame the system—no one could have done better in my circumstances, but my boss gave me all the bad jobs. When Steve over there doesn't get the promotion, however, I blame Steve—lazy, incompetent, problematic Steve.

The fundamental attribution error thus allows us to maintain the view that we ourselves are thoughtful people who are basically wise and good actors, even if there is evidence to the contrary, and it encourages us to judge other people as basically foolish and difficult actors, even if there is evidence to the contrary. Once upon a time, we called this sin. Now we call it the fundamental attribution error. When it gets pointed out, we can just sort of throw up our hands, with a sheepish grin, and say, "Hey, well, I know it isn't great, but what can I do—my brain is wired this way. Not my fault!"

Here's another bias with good empirical support: "choice-supportive" bias, also known as "post-purchase rationalization." Basically, this one describes the well-known effect that, once we have made a decision about something—say, to buy this expensive house instead of the other, cheaper one—then we are highly disposed to view the decision, in retrospect, as a good one. In other words, to think that the reasons we bought it are really great and to forget or

ignore or downplay reasons maybe we shouldn't have. Now, this obviously applies to more than just buying stuff. It is why we all think most of our past decisions were thoughtful and courageous and wise, even in the face of evidence that many of them were not. Post-purchase rationalization allows us to avoid learning lessons from failure, and to continue thinking of ourselves as wise and prudent and canny, even when there is clear evidence to the contrary.

Now, the English Reformer Thomas Cranmer knew about post-purchase rationalization. You may know Ashley Null's line about Cranmer, about how in Cranmer's vision of humanity, "what the heart desires, the will chooses and the mind justifies." This observation helps explain how human beings throughout history have justified awful actions towards each other through retroactive rationalization. It just sounds much less troubling when you call it choice-supportive bias.

So cognitive biases like these are, I think, a very concrete way in which the real condition that I am calling sin is standing right there in front of us, in plain sight. We just call it something else, something more scientific and less threatening.

There is another way that we have relabeled what early modern and pre-modern people called sin, another way that it is hiding in plain sight. This one is in fact a bit trickier because I think a great deal of good has in fact come from it. What I am referring to is *the medicalization of the symptoms of sin.*

In the Reformation era, which I study, personal, psychological, and emotional anguish was understood to be the chief sign of the presence of sin in the world. In the early sixteenth century, the chief symptoms of sin—the way you knew you had the disease—were things like powerful guilt feelings, or intense anxieties, or a deep sense of despair, or an abiding feeling of

personal worthlessness. Luther put it like this in his commentary on Psalm 51:

> This knowledge of sin, moreover, is not some sort of speculation or an idea which the mind thinks up for itself. It is a true feeling, a true experience, and a very serious struggle of the heart … The knowledge of sin is itself the feeling of sin.

This is a remarkable statement. The knowledge of sin is itself the feeling of sin. But what sort of feelings and experiences did he have in mind? And do we still have those experiences today?

In one of the great theological texts of that era, the *Apology of the Augsburg Confession*, Luther's colleague Philip Melanchthon describes at great length these experiences, these feelings, these clues to the reality of sin, which he believes only belief in Christ could truly help to relieve. As we go through our lives, Melanchthon says, we experience "genuine terror" and "end up in despair." He talks about "the anxieties and the terrors of sin and death" and the way that we learn the truth about God's law "only in the midst of genuine sorrows and terrors." He quotes Psalm 6: "Be gracious to me, Lord, for I am languishing; O Lord, heal me, for my bones are shaking with terror." And Melanchthon interprets all these feelings, these powerful affects or emotions, as the evidence of God's wrath against sin. In "such real terrors," as he puts it, the "conscience" experiences "the horrible and indescribable wrath of God."

Here's the problem though. Modern people read these lines and say, "Well, people just don't fear God like that anymore. People today just aren't sitting at home feeling anxious about their sins." Lutheran theologian Jonathan Linman speaks for many, I think, when he says, "Traditional preoccupation with … the forgiveness of sins no longer speaks with immediate intel-

ligibility in our current milieu. The challenge of our age is not individual sin but isolation, alienation, and broken … community life."

I think it is indeed true that people aren't sitting around wondering if God will forgive them for their sins, but I don't think the conclusion Linman draws from this is right. The reason I think Linman is wrong is that *the feelings Melanchthon is describing* are just as rampant as they ever were in the 16th century, if not more so.

The difference is that today we *medicalize* these symptoms, and in so doing we remove them from the religious sphere. It never occurs to us to connect these things to religion. We still have all the anxieties and terrors, we just don't think they have anything to do with God.

For example, we are well aware that very many people suffer from crippling anxiety—awful, painful, debilitating anxiety. But today we understand this to be the consequence of an *anxiety disorder*, and we prescribe helpful drugs and cognitive behavioral therapy. Likewise, we know that people are still full of powerful guilt feelings, but instead of sending them to a minister or a priest we recommend mindfulness therapy. People still suffer from profound and durable feelings of worthlessness and despair, but now we call it *depression* and send them to the psychiatrist.

Now, I don't want to be misunderstood here. I think our medical understanding of these painful feelings and conditions is absolutely accurate on its own terms. I think therapies like antidepressants and CBT and mindfulness are gifts of a merciful God to help relieve our many sufferings in this vale of tears. In fact, I think that there is something profoundly Christian about separating mental health from the core of the person, the core which God said is good and beloved and made for communion with him. To medicalize these experiences helps give us compassion where in an earlier era there might

have been only judgment, and the world is a much better place for it.

Nevertheless, there is no question, I think, that this is one of the reasons that the traditional Christian understanding of sin, which people think is so implausible today, is in fact hiding in plain sight. We take these crucial clues about the glitch in the system, these symptoms and evidences and indicators of the flaw in the heart and the bias against flourishing, and we medicalize them.

And there are certain problems that arise when we view these things in exclusively medical terms. In particular, perhaps it becomes very hard to take seriously the very real consequences of our psychological problems on those around us. It is one thing to say, "Don't judge me for being depressed, my brain is broken and I can't help it" (like one of the protagonists of *You're the Worst* says so powerfully during the brilliant depression arc in season two).

This is true. It is, in fact, a profound truth so far as it goes. But what about the fact that my depression also means that during these periods of personal darkness I am an absent father to my small children, and I am simply unable to care about their needs as much as I otherwise would? Saying my brain is broken doesn't change the fact that the children get hurt, feel unnoticed and unloved, and wonder if it is their fault. Likewise, what about anxiety? The fact that it can be and often rightly should be called a disorder does not mean that it doesn't make life miserable for the people who have to deal with the anxious person. Or what about the devastation in many lives that can be caused by the addictions of one?

It seems to me that it is helpful to understand such brokenness as one of the many consequences of the fact that all human beings are operating under a universal condition called sin. Doing so gives us a way of holding together the

compassion birthed through the medicalization of sin symptoms while not ignoring the fact that there are real and terrible consequences to our brokenness. It also, perhaps, quietly leaves some room for the fact that somehow the broken brain is still *my* broken brain even though I do not have much power over it.

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I want to go back to my students for a minute. In light of what I've been saying, I think we can now say that they resist the doctrine of sin in significant part because it sounds like the doctrine blames people for things which are in fact medical and psychological conditions. They assume that to add a moral valence to such things would be to engage in victim-blaming. How can you judge a person for something if it is not their fault?

The key here, I think, lies behind this notion of fault and blame. The resistance to the idea that things with natural explanations might also be explicable in sin terms comes from, I think, the baseline cultural and human assumption that something can only be understood as a moral problem if the person in question has freely chosen it. Maybe there are some medical conditions that it is OK to blame the patient for—maybe in some cases they have "made bad food choices," and that is why they have some ailment. Or maybe you can blame a smoker, at least a little, sort of on the quiet, if they get lung cancer—after all, they should have "known better." But you can't blame the consequences of anxiety disorders or depression or the fundamental attribution error or a predisposition towards addiction on someone. They never had a choice.

In other words: we resist the notion of sin because we don't know how to think of moral transgression other than as a form of making "bad choices." The belief that we must let the

world off the hook for its problems and its sufferings because so many of them were not chosen only makes sense if we *also* believe, quite robustly, in the freedom of the will.

But here we run into problems. The fact is, the world is still really, really screwed up. People still do terrible and selfish things all the time, and it is demonstrably the case that, given the chance, we tend to oppress others, we tend to seek our personal advantage at the expense of our neighbors, and we are heavily biased to-

wards plugging our ears to the sufferings of those around us.

So, what happens if you want to acknowledge that such evils do exist but you also believe that the only form that true human moral transgression takes is that of conscious and freely-chosen evil? Well, you end up in a terrible bind, because then you can't really make sense of evils that aren't freely chosen. I think this is part of why most moral discourse today focuses on structural evil—evils which are, of

course, very real. We have to lay the blame for all evils on big, external structures because we no longer have a vocabulary for making sense of the fact that the realities of personal sin are always explicable in other terms, that the way that sin manifests in the world almost never looks or feels to the perpetrator like deliberate and freely chosen evil. Once you believe that if something isn't actively chosen it can't be truly morally destructive or problematic, you have to start blaming things outside of the actual sphere of your experienced life and downplaying the moral significance of your own self and circumstances. To turn the lens inward is too uncomfortable—how can it be my fault if I couldn't help it?

Jesus had a way of talking about all of this. For Jesus, both things were true: the sins of the world really are my fault. And I really and truly can't help it.

Those who are healthy have no need a physician, but the sick. For I have come not to call the righteous, but sinners.

Here, the moral knot becomes untangled. In the eyes of such mercy, human beings are indeed caught in an unbearable situation. We are truly transgressors, and we truly cannot help it. Sin really is a sickness—a disease contracted, a corruption unchosen, a natal condition. And it really is sin. Our brains and hearts are indeed broken, and this fact is not morally neutral. We need an answer from outside, one that has both compassion and moral seriousness. And, well, you know the rest.

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So, let's take a look back. First, I said that the doctrine of sin is basic to the structure of Christian belief, such that to lose touch with it is for Christianity to become incoherent and incomprehensible.

Second, I said that sin is hiding in plain sight—for example, in the biases and conditions that shape our suffering and our complicity in the sufferings of others. We have just learned to relabel it as other things.

Third, I said that the reason modern people resist the idea of sin is that we believe by default that only *freely chosen* sin is really sin, and today it is clearer than it used to be that most sin is *not* in fact freely chosen. The problem with this is that it fails to explain most destructive behavior in the world. It lets us off the hook, at the expense of our not being able to understand the world around us with honesty. And so we get surprised when we catch a glimpse of the underbelly and find ourselves wondering for a moment whether the arc of history does not, in fact, bend towards justice. We get surprised when our efforts to help keeping go awry, when good intentions prove to be laced with condescension and self-regard, when sincerely given help is spurned or ignored, and when lovely and true things gradually go corrupt and decay and even the loving parent is sometimes cruel. We get angry, and we blame, and we do not understand the world around us.

And finally, I've said that understanding sin as a universal human condition gives us a language for understanding how we are *both* always complicit *and* never exclusively responsible for our troubles. It makes it possible to have both compassion on people and no easy expectation of change, without having to pretend that bad things are in fact good things.

But how are we really to come to believe all this, given our cognitive biases and our egoism and so on? Well, perhaps we can begin with a kind of catechesis. We can begin by drawing attention to the ten thousand clues around us that sin is actually an accurate word for the condition in which we live and move, that the doctrine of sin is in fact an immensely powerful cultural-diagnostic instrument in this age and in every age.

And it seems to me that this is precisely what Mockingbird has been doing for the past 10 years. This is the vision, that clues to these truths about ourselves—about the laws we live under and about the destructive forces of our egos and also about the hope that comes from beyond—are everywhere, if only you have eyes to see them. They're in movies and comic books, in the latest insights from the social sciences, in the careers of Brian Wilson and Axl Rose, and in the eternal insights of great art.

What I'm saying is that if you are reading this magazine, then you have, perhaps without realizing it, been part of a catechumenate. Mockingbird is in fact a quiet but powerful school of instruction for understanding Christianity in a modern cultural context where it is normally encountered as a shock and a puzzlement.

But. No one really believes this lost doctrine unless it first becomes personal, not even if they have all the right language and categories. You can't think your way into a belief in sin, not really. This is what Luther meant in that quote I gave you earlier about sin being an experience, not a speculation. There is no effective catechesis unless it is your own life, your real life, that is being engaged.

And your own real life is, I believe, one that takes shape under a condition called sin. It is our own bias against flourishing, our own cognitively hardwired self-absorption, and our own broken brains and bodies that work, with grim inevitability, to cause so much suffering. It is these experiences that enable us to understand this Christian religion of ours, in this late modern age, and in every age.

It is only in our sickness that we recognize the Physician.

It is our sin that makes Christ intelligible to us. ✎