

A Response to "Saving a Wretch Like Me: How do sin and hope figure in current UU theology?"

by our Fabled and Fabulous Colleague Reverend Hollis Huston
Ohio River Group November 2015
Reverend Sharon Dittmar

Dear Hollis,

First of all, such an honor to provide a response to such a heartfelt paper.

Second, you my friend, are already "saved" even in the context of your troubled White Privilege, because as we teach our children "Everyone is important," even people born white and privileged. Though I admit that I have a much easier time listening to the ones such as you who can reflect on this unwarranted privilege and consider "sin" coupled with grace and atonement, more hopeful than "privilege" which stands alone, stays alone, and never changes.

Third, I enjoy your premise, "Current doesn't mean historical. Current means right now, in a moment whose emergency is not yet described in history or codified in reading lists. The current has no scripture, is still in flux." We are making this up as we go along and figuring it out as we go which is why it is so hard, painful, and embarrassing. For those of us awake, as you are, we stand naked in all our racist vulnerability.

And how bold to name racism for the sin that it is. Individual acts of injustice, inequality, oppression and exclusion are sinful. I would even go farther and refer to racism as "evil" because it is systematic wrongdoing even more than just individual wrongdoing. Racism is a system of injustice, inequality, oppression and exclusion.

And finally, I think that Cornel West, our 2015 Ware Lecturer, would find you palatable, you who can admit to your inner White Supremacist and that is probably the best benediction any of us with this condition can aspire towards. Honesty. Authenticity. Humility. And if we are lucky, some solidarity.

I like the word "sin," because it is honest and relevant. I do not find it Calvinistically depressing, but rather the first step in reconciliation, an acknowledgment of my personal wrongdoing and its relationship to other people. To me "sin" is personal wrong doing and as such I "sin" all the time,

whether I was born into a system of wrong doing (evil) or make mistakes (sin). I share "collective responsibility" for systems of evil and my role in them.

I came to this understanding in seminary through the writing of Dorothee Solle. Sollee was a child in Germany during the Holocaust, and as an adult liberation theologian and feminist, struggled with anti-Semitism, history and wrongdoing in order to redefine "sin" and "evil" in relevant and meaningful ways.

In her essay "The Understanding of Sin" she writes about going to the Netherlands as a young woman and discovering that people did not want to talk to her because she was German and their relatives were killed by Nazis. In response to this experience she came to understand

While I had not 'done' anything - I was too young - nevertheless these others had a right to turn their backs on me and not speak to me because by language, culture and heritage I belonged to a human society which lived in a complex of guilt. I cannot get myself out of this; it just is the case. And this piece of objectivity is part of of the concept of sin. Sin is certainly also my decision, my free will, my 'no' to God, but it is also the destiny into which I was born. I am entangled in it through my parents, my teachers and my tradition. Even those born later cannot avoid this reality, and while it is inappropriate to speak of collective guilt, the sense of a collective responsibility for guilt is necessary. I am also responsible for the house which I did not build but in which I live.

Solle's understanding of the role and responsibility of modern German citizens is one I find meaningful when I consider the sin and evil of racism in the United States. "I am also responsible for the house which I did not build but in which I live." Collective guilt is not useful and in fact it is paralyzing, but collective responsibility is a useful frame that helps hold the paradox of being born into a system that I wish to dismantle, that I find flawed, unfair, and cruel, and yet also benefiting from the system due to an accident of birth, fair skin.

As you write though "When we [Unitarian Unviersalists] speak of sin it is generally to ban the word. People join our church, writes Abhi Janamanchi, 'to

be part of a religion that calls no one a sinner.' A sinner is by definition someone who sins; so if we call no one a sinner then we are committed to the idea that no one sins."

The idea that no one sins is a useless notion, akin to if I cover my eyes nothing bad has happened because I can't see it happening.

You are correct though that many of our visitors and members flee to us from the misuses of sin more common among our Orthodox brethren. Orthodox ideas about sin are literal (follow the Ten Commandments) and notoriously skirt deeply concerning issues like domestic violence, child abuse, and hate crimes. Orthodox ideas of sin lack logical rigor and too often vulnerable humans pay the price.

But people like their truths easy so Orthodox ideas of sin dominate the public square, because they can be explained with a checklist. Orthodox interpretations of sin and evil don't hold great meaning for me, nor for most of our members. But liberal definitions of sin (lack of love) and liberationist definitions of sin (injustice, self-denial) do hold meaning for me. They are the basis of my personal definitions of sin and evil.

Unfortunately, most of our congregants can't hold these ideas long enough to wonder about them and play with them. In the words of James A. Morone "for better and for worse - we remain Puritans all." Even our Unitarian Universalist members desperately trying to flee the legacy of Calvinism are trapped in its coil, so we have thrown out the baby (sin) with the bathwater (moral rigidity and illogical checklists) in an attempt to free ourselves. In so doing we have lost language to explore, bear, and act upon collective responsibility.

"Even at our most virtuous we are compromised. . . we walk in blinders of work with the brass mittens of, White Privilege." Yes and Yes, and that historical parsonage that you lived in really is rotten and slanting and it still has beauty and possibility as do you and I, as privileged and White as we are. And so we are sinners and there is hope for us to live into love, dismantle injustice, and honor ourselves. We have committed personal wrong doing. Even more we were born into evil - a system of wrongdoing, racism. But there is beauty, and possibility, hope still.

People do wrong every day and the systems of evil revolve around us. And we need a way to say this and reflect on this and make personal changes about this when possible so that we are not buried under the weight of collective

wrong-doing, and if we keep it secret, lies. This is the "anthropological pessimism of Protestantism" described by Sollee. This is the paralysis of action, change, and meaning. But liberal and liberationist notions of sin, evil, and collective responsibility, can help us avoid this paralysis by leading us into honesty and the potential for change. There is hope in liberal and liberationist sin.

I won't bore you with a list of my White Privilege. Like you my list is obscenely long, and you are so wise to note "I cannot renounce my privilege, because my very renunciation becomes my exercise of it." There we have it. Rachel Dolazel can choose to pass as African American, and that says so very, very much about her power as a white woman.

So as Unitarian Universalists who mistakenly deleted the word "sin," we fumble with adequate words, but not because we lack a word of judgement. We fumble with adequate words because we lack words of collective responsibility that can lead to atonement and reconciliation.

Saying that I am a sinner reclaims my role as a someone with the ability to make change. To offer my "no" to racism when and where I find it (especially within myself). When I know and say that I am a White Supremacist I have the ability to begin reconciliation with our broken world and my broken part in it. I can then choose to turn away from the brokenness and atone, make a new start.

So as you state, "White Privilege' is the name under which we punish ourselves for the dungeon into which we were born." I suggest we ditch the punishment which is far too close to the paralyzing feelings of helplessness and despair that Sollee describes. Some people with White Privilege ignore it and others are paralyzed by it because it is not hopeful. Neither of these responses improves the collective good.

My White Guilt has not improved anyone's life (including my own) or changed the trajectory of systematic racism. When I talk to my African American colleagues about white guilt they just eye-roll. It does nothing for them or to dismantle racist systems. In case I did not state this clearly enough, "White guilt improves nothing." It is useful as a gateway to cultural competency and awareness, but in terms of a final resting place it is useless.

"We live in a fallen world . . . We ourselves are fallen in the fallen world. Do we deserve to be good?" Yes we do and yes we are and I have no answer about

anyone deserving to be good, but I know that it is possible to attempt to be good, to atone for sin (personal wrong-doing) and that it will take a lot of hard work and a huge dose of progressive embarrassment which just might be great. If I could wave a magic wand I would make conversation about wrongdoing and mistakes common place and normal so that we could learn from them, make better choices, and move on.

Most of us who self-identify with being white and sit in this room today (that is not all of us) had a moment when we realized we were white (as opposed to millions of other people not in this room and/or not wanting to ever consider their "whiteness"). That was one dose of awakening and then others followed, many of them embarrassing. For myself this included saying "Chop, chop" at a staff meeting and assuming a child who looked Hispanic had Hispanic parents, and in an effort to fit in, using some form of whitish blackTV vernacular that I hope to never repeat in public or private again. You get the picture. Addressing racism and making positive change is full of embarrassing, "naked" moments of self-revelation, discovery, recovery, and understanding.

The hope is in what I/we can do. I can tell you the truth so you can tell the truth. I can name personal racist mistakes so I can learn and you can be comfortable doing the same. I can apologize to those I may have offended. I can think of something different/better to do in the future. I can name the white, German, Scottish, Welsh ancestry that makes up my racial and cultural identity. I can learn about racial, cultural, and ethnic similarities and differences and I can name and respect them. I can take the Idi assessment to learn where I am on the cultural competency inventory. I can leave my comfort zone and find colleagues and friends who are not always like me in every way. I can encourage the congregation I serve to do the same things. I can work in solidarity in the field of mass incarceration and struggle with what I find there. I can follow grass roots activists and play a supporting role instead of trying to lead because I was born with white privilege. I can teach my son about collective responsibility.

And I will live in an unresolved paradox of racism for as long as I live. Did you catch that? Racism is ugly and enormous. I minister in a neighborhood that struggles with poverty and official neglect. Driving to lunch with a colleague this week I saw him staring at neglected local development. When we got out of the car he said "My oh my, if I let it this could make me so angry. To be black is to know that no one cares about you. I have lived with this all my life."

The good news of liberal and liberationist sin is that it comes with the possibility

of personal and collective change, and this is hopeful. We do live in a "house deformed by the weight of history" but it does not always need to remain this way. I once said to a parishioner that "race was the wound that would not heal." He corrected me and said "Race is the wound that has not yet healed." Given that Hensley was raised a black Jamaican in the United States and served active duty in our segregated army in Europe during WWII, that both his legs were broken when run over by a jeep, that he survived Jim Crow and the Civil Rights movement when he returned, well, I had to defer to his greater wisdom and arc of life. Race is the wound that has not yet healed. For this reason, "sin," with all its potential, is a much more hopeful word than "privilege."

Sources

1. James A. Morone, *Hellfire Nation: The Politics of Sin in American History* (2003).
2. Dorothee Solle, "The Understanding of Sin" in *Thinking About God: An Introduction to Theology*, (1990).
3. Cornel West, "Ware Lecture," Unitarian Universalist General Assembly (2015).