Chapter 1
THE CONCEPT OF SIN: THE CHRISTIAN VIEW

The entire Christian philosophy/theology derives from the Bible, which consists of sixty-six books and is divided into 'The Old Testament' and 'The New Testament'. The Old Testament is a compendium of myths, historical records and Hagiography (writings by individuals) which were collected by Hebrew priests and scholars and which enshrine the view that obedience or disobedience to God's laws shapes humanity's destiny. Some parts of the Old Testament are indeed very ancient and were composed about 1100 BC; some belong to the period of the Babylonian exile (586-538 BC); some books like Esther and Daniel were written during the 100's BC. Certain passages in the Old Testament have typological significance in that they foreshadow by using prefigurative symbols the advent of Christ and the events in his life. The Old Testament is the history of a people's relation with God and it is, in the annals of the world, the only such story. The unique feature of the Old Testament, which gives it universal validity, is the conception that there is only one God, that he is a God of righteousness and that he is also the God of all the world. He despises even prayer unless it is offered in the proper spirit. This is emphasised by
Jesus Christ later in the New Testament. He condemns any activity, including prayer that does not have a spirit behind it.

The doctrine of creation, as depicted in the Old Testament, affirms a divine purpose for man. The doctrine of fall expresses the conflict between man's will and the divine purpose. Christian doctrines presuppose and illustrate the fundamental doctrine that man's chief end is to know God.¹ The Christian conception of man is that man has been made in the image of God. God's reality is central to Christian doctrine. He is the beginning and the end of all things. The central fact in all Christian history is the redeeming activity of God. This leads to the fact of Resurrection. J. S. Whale in his book, Christian Doctrine, published in 1941, speaks about Resurrection as follows: "Here is the mightiest of the mighty acts of God, foreign to the common experience of man, inscrutable to all his science, astounding to believer and non-believer alike."² This is the key to the Christian doctrine of history.

The emergence of Christianity as a religion begins only after the incarnation of God as Jesus Christ. Christ is what God means by 'man' as also what man means by 'God'. He unites the two qualities of Godhead and manhood. In
his divine nature he is eternal. Yet he is also truly man. If he had not shared our nature, he couldn’t have accomplished the work of redemption. This is an ancient belief. Theodoret of Cyrus (A.D. 393-458) in The Dialogues, which was first transcribed in A.D. 444, points out that Christ has two natures, the divine and the human. These natures are not mingled or confounded but are united in a personal or hypostatic union, so that Christ is but one person. He is both God and man.

The activities and the formation of the ideological aspects of Christianity have only a comparatively short history of about two thousand years. The real philosophical and theological aspects of Christianity are derived from the New Testament. The Old Testament is basically the history of the Jews and consists of detailed descriptions regarding the Kings, their regimes, the notable clans, their heads and also the system of judiciary prevailing during the time. The first book, Genesis deals with the origin of the universe, the earth and all the living beings in it. Saint Athanasius emphasised that the universe was created “out of non-existence absolute and utter.” The Old Testament records how God took constant care of the chosen race by giving them, from time to time, prophets to teach them and kings to lead them.
When we examine the idea of sin as depicted in the Bible, we can see that the Old Testament concept of sin is basically different from the New Testament one. In the Old Testament we see the idea that man's natural mortality is in abeyance so long as he remains centred upon God. God's divine warning that "in the day that ye do eat, ye shall surely die" was ignored by Adam and Eve through the temptation of the devil. This idea of 'death' is central to Iris Murdoch's philosophy. She mentions that only the 'death' of the self would enable a person to see and understand reality and the 'otherness' of the others. So contemplation of God turns into contemplation of evil, and man comes under the inevitable result of sin, i.e. death. As a consequence, man loses the clarity of consciousness, the strength of confidence and the divinity. Hence, Adam who has sinned, hides away from God in Paradise. It may be noted in this connection that Graham Greene emphasizes his loss of divinity as the immediate aftermath of sin, but this will be discussed in detail, later in this dissertation. In the Old Testament it is not (for the clan heads and kings and even ordinary men) sin to keep a number of wives and concubines and also to wage wars in which men are cruelly murdered and their assets looted. We also see that the God-selected clans were given the Holy Sanction to commit murder and looting.
Several of the Old Testament characters are 'sinful' men and women in terms of the New Testament moral vision, but these sinful people seem to enjoy divine sanction.

God had foreordained the Israelites as his chosen people and he gave them a mighty leader—Moses. It was the mission of Moses to lead the Israelites from Egyptian captivity into Canaan, the Promised Land. During the course of this great exodus, which lasted forty years, God gave them the Ten Commandments. Moses received the stone tablets bearing the commandments at Sinai.

Thus the written laws on which Christian philosophy/theology is based, had their beginning at Mount Sinai. The Jews were taught that anybody who violated any of the commandments, directly or indirectly, in any manner, would be violating the rules set by God and that the violation of God-set commandments would amount to sin and would invite the wrath of God. The Ten Commandments were interpreted after the Israelites settled at Canaan and they came to form the rules of Israel. It is the creation of the rules and commandments that brought the idea of sin into existence. If there are no commandments and rules there would not be anything to be violated and no action would have been considered sin.
Sin and evil are often used interchangeably and are considered synonymous. There are both natural evil and social evil. Social evil and sin are directly related while natural evil and sin are indirectly related. Sin and evil are equally related only when one views the total community, although the equivalence may not be evident in the case of the individual. Thus, the commandments and rules are the basis on which the basic Christian idea of sin is formed. When man committed sin God took three decisions according to the Bible: (1) death should occur in consequence of sin (Divine judgement); (2) there should be a renewal of man's being (to restore the divine image); and (3) the knowledge of God should be taught throughout the world. Christians believe that the incarnation of Christ is directly related to it. The invisible, universal truth became visibly centred in his personal concreteness. The omnipresent word had thus become incarnate as Saint Athanasius says in The Incarnation of the Word of God.

With the incarnation of Jesus Christ, the concept of sin took a more definite form. After the resurrection of Jesus Christ, the rules and commandments lost the importance which they had in the OT dispensation and their place was occupied by the teachings of Jesus Christ. All Christian believers came to believe that the
violation of the teachings of Christ constituted a sin. Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834) in his book *The Christian Faith*, says that sin is a hindrance of the power of the spirit by man's sensuous nature.⁸ The original perfection of man is to be seen in Christ rather than in Adam. Sin arises as there is unequal development of will and insight.

Christian moral theory must face the inevitable problem of sin. Sin involves wilful decision and causes disruption in the relationship between man and God. It occurs as idolatry or self-love; often this self-love is unconscious and takes the form of loyalty to false Gods, which is really serving the self while supposedly serving others. [This idea of the 'self' is highlighted in the works of Murdoch as causing the maximum of hindrance in the spiritual growth of man.] The will remains the source or origin of sin.

With the coming of Christ the iron rule of "an eye for an eye" gave way to the most liberal and saintly idea, "But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also."⁹ The New Testament highlighted a God of mercy; the barbaric justice of stoning a prostitute to death was utterly exposed by Christ's injunction that only those who have not sinned might cast the first stone. The
idea of God's mercifulness and his love for men was conveyed by the teachings of Christ. Christians believe that Christ came to liberate mankind from the clutches of sin. Albrecht Ritschl in *The Christian Doctrine of Justification and Reconciliation*, says that sin is forgivable except in the hypothetical case of resolutely conscious defiance of God's will—a defiance which is a sin against the Holy Spirit. Sin and guilt vitiate the divine-human relationship. So they are to be removed by justification and reconciliation. "Justification means that God accepts the sinner in spite of his guilt. Reconciliation means a new life in fellowship with God and in relation to one's fellowmen."

The sins of the redeemed do not obstruct spiritual life. But the sins of the unredeemed are habitual and contagious and they vitiate God-consciousness. But even among the unredeemed there is a faint shadow of the good. Christ's redemptive activity consists in the fact that he brings believers into the power of his God-consciousness, and he may thus be understood in terms of the three offices of prophet, priest and king. Through his suffering, punishment is abolished, for in fellowship with him evil is no longer felt as punishment. Thus, even the picture and shape and characteristics of a God of wrath were changed into a God of love, mercy and forgiveness.
The New Testament shows a way to humanity to be free from the heavy burden of sin in their mind and consciousness. For God is there to forgive and he forgives because he loves man. Hence the basic difference in the depiction of God in the Old Testament and the New Testament is that while in the Old Testament man lives for God, in the New Testament God lives for man and as a result of the new ideologies spread by Christ, humanity, as a whole, has the opportunity of liberation and the idea of pleasing God by serving men obtains prime importance.

During his entire life, St. Augustine was concerned with the problem of evil, which he constantly tried to come to grips with. He held the view that evil is necessary for the harmony and goodness of the whole creation. The evils present in the society are necessary to prevent the greater evil that would otherwise take their place. He categorises evil into two—the evil that man does, sin (peccatum) and the evil that man suffers, punishment (poena). Saint Augustine says, "if sin is the evil that man does then surely man is the cause of evil, i.e. if man is to do the evil that he does, then man and not God is the cause of evil." The evil that man suffers is therefore the result of his freedom. Even the suffering of children is a method of God to chastise and purify the elders. Erasmus in his tract on, 'Free Will' (1524)
expressed his belief in the faculty of human will to choose or reject the words or works of God to lead to or lead away from salvation, i.e. to choose or refuse the Gospel and the Law. Martin Luther replying to Erasmus says that man's salvation is beyond any power that he has; it depends solely upon the will of God. Man can deviate from the path of sin but can reach saintliness only by the spirit of God. So man has no free will, he is either in the bondage of the will of God or the will of Satan. Only by the power of God can he will not to sin and to embrace the Law and the Gospel. The Biblical expression, "I desire not the death of a sinner" holds forth a message of mercy to the sinner. Such mercy is received by those who are touched by the law and thus know their sin. Luther says that God desires man to be saved but that he doesn't change every human will and this can be explained only by the incomprehensible nature of God. Even Judas' betrayal of Christ was foreknown and decreed by God to take place. God alone can draw a sinner unto Himself. He alone can justify a sinner.

Those ideas and actions, which were considered sin in the Old Testament time, become no more sin in the new dispensation of Jesus Christ. We see Christ beating those who had turned the Church of Jerusalem into a market place. Here inflicting wounds on others is not considered
a sin, since it is a means of saving the church from being defiled by merchants and business people. When the Pharisees cite the rule that nobody shall do anything on the Sabbath day, Christ provides theoretical basis to the new philosophy by proclaiming that good deeds can be done at any time. It is not only not a sin but also a saintly deed. He cures many people of their ailments. When the Pharisees criticise his deeds, he points out that Sabbath is for man and man is not for Sabbath. So, the spirit of Godliness, combined with humanitarianism, emerges out as the new principle of saintliness in Christianity. In certain aspects Christ adopted a very liberal attitude. But in certain other aspects he takes a stringent view as when he shows his hostility towards and is openly critical of hypocrites and deceitful people with a dual personality. Even the prayer of such people is condemned by Him. This blend of humanitarianism and Godliness is well brought out in the Epistles of John. In the First Epistle of John (1, 4), he says, “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”

In short, Christ shows that all that makes the soul pleasing to its Divine Creator should take precedence over all that is merely pleasing to one's fellowmen. Gerard Groote (1340-1384) prescribes self-abnegation as
the best way of making one's soul pleasing to the creator. He says:

Had you but once penetrated deep into the heart of the sweet Jesus and tasted only a little of his burning love, you would not be anxious about your own weal or woe; but you would rather rejoice when humiliation comes upon you, for the love of Jesus makes a man despise himself.14

The Bible on which Christianity itself is based, is very clear on the evolution and the development of the concept of saintliness and sin. The new idea of sin, which has emerged out of the teachings of Christ, has become the balance on which sin and saintliness are weighed. Many interpretations have emerged from time to time and through centuries by holymen, theologians, kings and literary experts. Peter Abelard (1079-1142), in his book Know Thyself which was transcribed in the twelfth century, refuted the view set by Saint Augustine about man's sinful state due to the fall of Adam.15 Another theologian, Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758) also in his theological work, The Great Christian Doctrine of Original Sin Defended, published in 1758, rejects the traditional way of defending the imputation of Adam's sin to mankind and asserts that men sin because of their "constituted
oneness with Adam, a oneness which is dependent upon God's continual creation, each individual through time is one with Adam. Abelard says that we escape damnation by exercising our own will in good works. We sin when we consent to the suggestions of our weaknesses. The moral world in the novels of the three authors discussed in this dissertation broadly conforms to this vision of sin and evil. The general view is that our evil will is to be subjugated to the divine will. Acts committed through ignorance or under force are not sins. There are both spiritual sins, proceeding from imperfections of the mind and carnal sins, coming from the weaknesses of the flesh. It is the intention that decides whether an act is a sin or not. Even the crucifiers of Christ could not have sinned as they acted according to their conscience. Their sin is of action, not of the will and so less grievous. The penitence of a sinner saves him from eternal damnation because it proceeds from love of God.

The eschatological view is that man should be always mindful of his mortality and of the fact that his salvation depends on whether he accepts the gospel proffered or rejects it. Overcoming the forces of sin through deliberate effort and attaining God's grace are the ends for which man was created.
The idea of sin which is enunciated in the religious scriptures of Hinduism is fairly well-defined. Here also we find a gradual change in the attitude and approach towards the idea of sin. How man can transform his sinful self and become a totally new individual is illustrated by the story of Valmiki, who eschews his evil Nishada self and turns to the path of righteousness. The Hindu insistence on chastity can be seen in the epic Ramayana in which King Rama goes to the extent of giving up his beloved wife Sita to clear the doubts of his subjects. The readiness with which Sri Rama obeys the will of his father shows the great store the Hindu scriptures set by the virtue of obedience.

The Bhagavad Gita truly epitomises the Indian thought giving us the clarion call to fight the battle of life with the heavenly weapons of love, dedication, honesty, truth and renunciation rather than with the weapons of lust, greed, avarice, enmity and other foolish idiosyncrasies which are the products of sin and evil. The noble teachings mainly come in the dialogues between Krishna and Arjuna in the battlefield of Kurukshetra. The Gita has been acclaimed by Emerson as a 'trans-national book' which was capable of injecting a spiritual renaissance in the whole world. While the wages of sin are death (damnation) according to Christianity, the Karma
philosophy of Hinduism prescribes rebirth as its wages. Swami Krishnananda in his book The Philosophy of Religion, expresses the following view about Karma:

Man is part and parcel of the universe. So egoistic individuality is not permissible to man. This egoism acts like a toxin against the healthy assertion of the universe. His existence as an isolated individual is against the operating law. Thus it is that Nature kicks him back, and this repercussion is the law of 'Karma'. Due to freshly formed desires in the subsequent incarnation, 'Karma' accumulates itself repeatedly. This continues until the rise of knowledge. So if rebirth doesn't happen by the arrival of knowledge, salvation is attained in eternal life.18

Arthur L. Herman says that the idea of redemption in Christian thought doesn't find a parallel in Hinduism. Here we are given the doctrine of 'rebirth' or 'transmigration' to solve the problem of evil. The sins of man or any being are visited upon the same soul in the coming life also. Herman feels this doctrine solves the problem of evil and sin to the maximum extent. This justifies superhuman, subhuman and human evil and
suffering. Though many saints like Saint Augustine have probed into the depths of this problem, the satisfactory answer, the author feels, is found in the 'Rebirth Theory'. In short, suffering for the sake of others is the basic principle of all the religions including Christianity and Hinduism. Christian mystics, as well as their non-Christian predecessors in ancient India and elsewhere, have not hesitated to declare that by love, by the willing loss of self, we realise our true nature and become partakers of the being of God. The ego may be said to represent a stage in a spiritual process. By breaking out of its shell we can be born again, into a boundless freedom. That is the doctrine implied in all mystical philosophy. This sort of love and attainment of 'freedom' is a continuously recurring subject in the three authors dealt with in this dissertation. It is interesting to find out the manner in which they have tried to expostulate this topic in their characteristic way.

The diverse impulses which are at war in man (sometimes, for fun; Blake calls them God and the Devil) can be brought into ultimate accord by the spirit of God, whose whole gospel, where it differs from that of earlier teachers, is of love and the forgiveness of sins.
The theological/philosophical concepts are interpreted and understood by various writers to various extents and depths. The influence of this concept can be made out from the literary works of such persons and the extent and depth of such influence are also a product of the social conditions in which such authors lived. So the evolution can be discerned in the literature of the different ages as well as in the series of books written by the same authors. This depends on the understanding they have received and evolved, regarding the religious teachings, saintliness and sin, eternal life and bliss.
Notes


5 The Bible, Gen. 2:17.

6 Saint Athanasius 84.

7 The Bible, Exod. 20:1-17.


9 The Bible, Matt. 5:39.


11 Ritschl 760.


13 The Bondage of the Will is Martin Luther’s answer to Erasmus’ Diatribe on Free Will (1524). Luther accuses Erasmus of inconsistently holding that our will is both active and passive in the acquisition of eternal
salvation. Erasmus held that it is irreligious and idle speculation to seek to determine the role of will in matters pertaining to salvation. Luther on the contrary, argues that it is both possible and important to discover the role of free will and its relation to the grace of God ("The Bondage of the Will," Masterpieces of Christian Literature 347-48).

Luther's "Bondage of the Will" which is an extreme but consistent answer to Erasmus' faith in the freedom of the human will is an important contribution to Autustinian tradition within Protestant thought (p. 350).


15 Peter Abelard, "Know Thyself," Masterpieces of Christian Literature 213.


17 Dr. S. D. Sharma, Thematic Dichotomy in Indian English Indology and Culture (Berailly: Prakash Book Depot, 1985) 159.
