

Sin? I'm Against It.



REV. DR. MICHAEL TINO
*Lead Ministry Team,
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There is a famous joke about early-20th century U.S. President Calvin Coolidge, who was known as a person of few words. One day, it is said, Silent Cal, as he was known, went to church and his wife Grace stayed home. When he got home, Grace asked him what the sermon had been about. "Sin," replied Cal. "What did the preacher have to say about it." Grace asked. Cal paused, sighed, and replied, "He was against it."

Theologians for millennia have disagreed about the nature of sin, and whether and how sins are ultimately reconciled. Some have declared that, thanks to the great harm done to people perceived as committing sins in the name of religious judgment, it is not even a useful concept.

I believe that having a moral code is useful, and that looking at our actions through the lens of that moral code is a worthwhile exercise. I also believe that we, as Unitarian Universalists, need to be careful not to make "sin" into a permanent mark against someone. Sin is not a useful concept if it is used to make people into the dehumanized "other."

James Luther Adams, a famous 20th century Unitarian/UU theologian once wrote, using the unfortunately

gendered language of his time, "It cannot be denied that religious liberalism has neglected these aspects of human nature in its zeal to proclaim the spark of divinity in man. We may call these tendencies by any name we wish, but we do not escape their destructive influence by a conspiracy of silence concerning them. Certainly, the practice of shunning the word 'sin' because 'it makes one feel gloomy and pious' has little more justification than the use of the ostrich method in other areas of life."

I agree with Adams.

So what is a Unitarian Universalist theology of sin?

Many Christians define sin as that which separates us from God. This, of course, asks humans to pretend that we know what it is that God wants, and we know the danger that thoughts like that have wrought in humanity. I believe that sin is defined as a separation in relationship as well, just not necessarily our relationship with a divine.

Once again, I turn to Adams, who declared that Unitarian Universalists "deny the immaculate conception of virtue and affirm the necessity of social incarnation." What does this mean? Virtue—and its opposite, sin—are defined by relationships. There is

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Quest

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*"I am not a saint,
unless you think
of a saint as
a sinner who
keeps on trying."*

NELSON MANDELA

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SIN & ATONEMENT

How do you relate to the idea of sin, and/or the idea of atonement?

JACOB

CLF member, incarcerated in AK

I do not find evidence to support the existence of original sin, and find it hard to believe that we all pay for one person's actions. I do find that if you relate sin to the idea of karma within the Buddhist and Hindu traditions, it becomes more legitimate and likely. We pay for our actions either in this life or the next, and through our actions we can burn off good or bad past karma quickly. Ultimately, we have shaped what we are dealing with and as such have to handle it, whether by ourselves or with the help of others. ■



PHOTO BY ANNE NYGÅRD ON UNSPLASH

ADAM SCOTT LYTLE

CLF member, incarcerated in WV

I am writing as a 31 year old inmate, who got locked up at the age of 19 and sentences to 15 years to life.

Sin is not nails in our feet, driven into the floorboards. As individuals or groups we make choices, we make mistakes, and we even commit sins

for personal reasons, some wrong and some for the right causes. God understands that, justified or not, "sin" will be "sin."

"Atonement" is a strong word. It has throughout history been utilized in so many different ways, from the most gruesome torture to a loving embrace to get people to "atone," which means to make amends.

I believe that to atone means to be at peace, and to know that change will happen, to realize right from wrong and push toward what is right, no matter what evil stands in the way. It is also to gain intelligence and be happy knowing what you have discovered.

Life is short in general, be as happy as you can be and embrace your peace! ■

CHRISTOPHER

CLF member, incarcerated in WV

How do I relate to the idea of sin and/or atonement? Because I'm a Christian who trusts in God's words, sin is very real for me, and there is a very long history with sin and I'm tempted to get into it, but I'm pressed for time because I see parole for my first time in 2037 and I gotta get ready, so I'll try to keep this short.

I relate to sin like this: I know what the difference is between doing right and doing wrong. Because of who I put my faith and trust in, to intentionally do wrong against a person, an animal, the earth, or property, first and foremost I've committed sin according to Christian scripture. Sin is an intentionally wrongful act. That is how I relate to sin, in a nutshell.

I believe most people, and not surprisingly most Christians as well, do not understand what atonement is. Atonement is an Old Testament word for a blood sacrifice from a pure animal for forgiveness and cleansing. It was the temporary practice until Jesus was able to sacrifice His pure blood on the cross. Fast forward to today, and now God's forgiveness can be had simply by asking through prayer.

However, not everyone believes this way, so another way of relating to sin and atonement for me is this: when I intentionally say or do something harmful to any mentioned above, I know that I've done wrong.

I have done wrong to a lot of people in my lifetime, and even though

I pray for forgiveness for which I receive every time, I know I still need to try and make things right with whoever I did wrong to. I have to start by asking for their forgiveness, but there is no guarantee that they will give it. If they do forgive me, I still need to try and repair anything else I may have harmed in order to complete my atonement to that person. It is the right thing to do. If someone damaged something of mine and I forgave that person, I still expect that person to try and make any repairs necessary to complete their atonement to me.

That is how I relate to atonement — but with God, I believe that He just wants us to ask, and it will be given. ■

ASHER

CLF member, incarcerated in AK

In "Christian Apologetic Universalism's Scriptural Exegesis" (CAUSE), a book by Jon Neil Herd, it briefly states that sin's definition is to miss the mark.

I would further illustrate that it is to miss the mark of moral perfection in-

wardly, and to miss the mark of eternal life and zero suffering outwardly. Everyone of us can achieve this, and it can be accomplished through atonement, which means that we make amends for our ancestors by adherence to the truths we see all around us every day. We can achieve it by striving toward perfection inwardly, and by striving towards our many just causes outwardly.

The Bible speaks of Jesus Christ in this fashion. As a Unitarian Universalist, I believe that I should have hope in God, because Unitarian means one God and Universalist means for all people. Inasmuch as we have differences of doctrinal ideas, we may all come to agree under our many banners of faith. That is awesome! And it pushes me onward to discover the deep mysterious truth. ■

Brothers of Healing

MAVERIK STORM

CLF member, incarcerated in OR

"Brothers of Healing" is an original song written by CLF member Maverik Storm. Maverik wrote this about the piece:

"I hope this can be an anthem for those who are healing, who know brokenness, and those who are committed to advocating for change. I hope that if

this song reaches the hearts, minds, and voices of those who hear it and sing it, that they'll share it. It is an anthem to be shared."

Brothers of Healing

1

We'll sing side by side, jus - tice at our core. We'll

5

fight for truth and lib - er - ty, dig - ni - ty re - stored. We're

9

more than the crimes* we bear, broth - ers* of heal - ing. We'll

13

sing for change 'til all un - der - stand. We'll

*"crimes" could be substituted with "sins"

*"brothers" could be substituted with "sisters" or "humans" or "singers"

Sin, continued from page 1

no such thing as goodness or evil in and of themselves—both are defined by the effects of our actions. The effects of our actions on other people as well as on the interdependent web of existence of which we are a part.

Sin is what separates us from one another.

Sin defines people as “other.” It makes them invisible when they are right here in front of us. Sin silences. Sin abuses. Sin gaslights. Sin knowingly harms another and then blames them for overreacting to that harm. Sin creates systems of oppression that target people for who they are, and makes those systems of oppression replicate themselves again and again.

My colleague the Rev. Molly Housh Gordon draws upon womanist theologians in her understanding of sin. She writes, “I have come to think of sin as an ethic of domination that desecrates particular lives as well as perpetuating sinful systems. Drawing upon the work of womanist theologians like Emilie Townes and Delores Williams, I conceive of sin as the exercise of control over another in a way that objectifies, or, in Williams’s words, ‘invisibilizes’ others and our connection to them. This domination destroys difference—tearing the fabric of the web of life.”

Gordon continues, “Sin is the acts of domination and annihilation that re-



PHOTO BY JESSICA FADEL ON UNSPLASH

sult in part from our illusions of separateness. Our sin is every moment that we forget or violate our relationships within the web of interconnection that binds together all creatures and our world.”

Sin is what separates us from one another. It is what breaks relationships. It is the point at which one stops listening, the point at which one stops caring. It is the point at which we believe another to be irredeemable.

And sin is something we all must grapple with. We all do it. And we all must seek redemption for it when it occurs. It might not be a permanent mark on our souls, but it certainly is a permanent part of life as we know it, since none of us is perfect.

If someone asks you what your minister had to say about sin, you can tell them I’m against it. ■

The Strength of Community



NOMINATING COMMITTEE
*Church of the Larger
Fellowship*

The Church of the Larger Fellowship (CLF) is a great community of communities made up of people connected and committed to reminding each other that we are more together, that we can take turns at the resistance, that cultivating and growing communal joy is part of what helps us stay stronger and focused on the collective liberation and transformation of all.

One of the tasks of the CLF Nominating Committee is to help our community leadership stay fresh and strong. The CLF Nominating Committee knows that the lead ministry team and staff of our church need the energy and joy and enthusiasm of leaders to co-create our future. Does CLF help you grow your joy and keep your eyes on the prize? Would you like to join leadership teams to continue to work for liberation and transformation at church?

The CLF Nominating Committee is seeking individuals who are actively involved in our congregation to assist how we engage in ministry, leadership, and governance together. Specifically, we are looking for individuals to serve on the CLF Nominating Committee who are committed to matching peoples' gifts with opportunities to contribute and who understand



PHOTO BY EWA STEPKOWSKA ON UNSPLASH

the role of Nominating in widening the circle of care and leadership.

We are also seeking individuals to serve on the Church of the Larger Fellowship (CLF) Board who are deeply rooted in Unitarian Universalism. The CLF Board and Nominating Committee are explicitly seeking ways to incorporate CLF members with personal or familial experience with incarceration, as we continue the journey of involving incarcerated and recently incarcerated members in leadership opportunities.

Please watch for two opportunities in January 2024 to join a Town Hall meeting. We will chat primarily about CLF Board and Nominating Committee volunteer leadership opportunities. However, there will be opportunities to hear about the broad band spectrum of leadership! This is for the interested and the curious! The only invitation will be an invitation to additional conversation. Representatives from the CLF Board, Nominating Committee and Staff will be on hand to share their experiences and answer your questions. This will be an inter-

esting time to explore the ways you might contribute to CLF. And I am sure we will also have fun together.

Please let us know if you or someone you know is interested in this way of investing in our community. Email nominating@clfu.org with the subject "Board/Committee Interest" and let us know if you would like to learn more about leadership opportunities at CLF, or if you think someone in your circles would be an excellent person to recruit.

If you do not have access to email, and are interested in CLF leadership, please mail a letter expressing your interest to the CLF Nominating Committee, 24 Farnsworth St, Boston, MA 02210. If you do not have access to Zoom, please let us know and we will arrange an alternate way to explore your interest.

— **The CLF Nominating Committee Members:** *Debra Gray Boyd, Julica Hermann de la Fuente (CLF Board liaison to the Nominating Committee), Michele Grove, and Tie Resendiz*

Quest Themes

All CLF members (incarcerated and free world members) are welcome to submit reflections on upcoming Quest themes, original poetry and artwork. If you have access to the internet, you can email your submissions to CLF Publications Coordinator, Rose Gallogly, at rgallogly@clfuu.org. Submissions can also be mailed to us at CLF UU, 24 Farnsworth Street, Boston, Massachusetts 02210. Here are the next few Quest themes:

Approx. Due Date	Quest Monthly Theme	Response Question
December 1, 2023	January 2024 - Love	What does it mean to center the value of love?
January 1, 2024	February 2024 - Interdependence	How do you relate to and honor interdependence?
February 1, 2024	March 2024 - Pluralism	What does it mean to be pluralistic in our beliefs?
March 1, 2024	April 2024 - Transformation	How do we remain open to change and transformation?
April 1, 2024	May 2024 - Equity	What does it mean to value equity? How does it look?
May 1, 2024	June 2024 - Generosity	How does it feel to be generous?
June 1, 2024	July/August 2024 - Justice	What does justice look and feel like in our communities?

IMPORTANT NOTICE

Due to recent budget constraints, including reduction in contributions and rising print/mailling costs, we've had to reassess the printing and mailing of Quest issues. We've made the difficult decision not to print/mail the October and December 2023 and March 2024 Quest issues. Instead, these issues will only be available online at clfuu.org/quest.

We know many CLF members are not able to access Quest online. For our incarcerated members, we have chosen the October, December, and March issues because these are months you will receive other CLF mailings such as the Worthy Now newsletter and holiday messages. For free-world CLF members we recommend using your local library, or if you cannot access the internet at all please contact us at the address below.

We hope to return to print/mailling Quest every month in the future, as contributions increase and our budget allows. If you have any questions, concerns, or comments about this change, please use the back of this page to write to us at CLF UU, 24 Farnsworth St., Boston MA 02210 or clf@clfuu.org.

Aisha Hauser, MSW, CRE-ML, Christina Rivera, Rev. Dr. Michael Tino, and the CLFUU Board of Directors



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