

The Seven Deadly Sins

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THE doctrine of the *peccata capitalia* can be traced back as far as Serapion, who was Bishop of Thmuis in the Nile Delta in the middle of the IVth century. Having given the number of the deadly sins as eight, he enumerated only seven, and on being asked about the eighth¹ he said that it was the elementary condition of the soul under the influence of sin, the condition symbolized by the captivity of the Israelites in Egypt, whereas the seven specified sins correspond to the seven nations of Canaan against whom the Israelites had to fight in order to gain the Promised Land.

At first thought it seems more fitting that the deadly sins should be eight in number than that they should be seven. Five signifies the human microcosm, and eight has a "mortal" effect upon five, for the number obtained by their multiplication is forty, which in many diverse traditions is the number of death. Moreover in astrology, of the twelve houses which make up the full circle of the heavens, it is the eighth which signifies death; and in this connection we may remember that the eighth sign of the Zodiac is *Scorpio*, whose hieroglyph, the letter M with a barbed final stroke, is doubly symbolic of death, by reason of the sting in its tail and because the letter itself stands for *mors*.

Seven, on the other hand, like one, is an essentially divine number; between them, as between *Alpha* and *Omega*, is enacted the whole drama of existence. One signifies the Creator, two the Spirit,² three Heaven, four earth and five man whose place is as a quintessence at the center of the four elements, the four directions of space, and the four seasons of the year, which characterize the earthly state. Six, that is, 5 + 1, is the human microcosm with the addition of the transcendent faculty, represented outwardly by the Tree of Life and by Jacob's Ladder, in virtue of which man is the representative of God on earth. Six is thus the number of primordial man, as yet unfallen and still in the state in which he was created on the sixth day, the Mediator³ between Heaven and earth. Six may also be considered as 4 + 2, that is, the four directions of space penetrated by the Spirit with its "vertical" dimension of height and of depth; and if to these six directions, which measure out the whole of Existence, we add the Center from which they proceed and to which they return, we have the number seven. "And God blessed the seventh day, and sanctified it, because that in it He had rested from all His work".

Seven thus signifies repose in the Divine Center. From that point of view it is the symbol of Absolute Finality,⁴ precluding as it were the very existence of eight and the subsequent series of numbers, and appearing in this world as a Divine seal upon earthly things, as in the number of the days of the week, the planets, the Sacraments of the Church and many other septenaries the mention of which would take us too far from our subject. But despite these considerations— or rather because of them—there is as we shall see a deep reason why the deadly sins should be seven in number, and why they should also be eight.

A feature which seems to be common to all religions is the concept of anger as a sin grave

enough to cause damnation, side by side with the concept of what is called "holy anger", exemplified in Christianity by Christ's driving out the merchants from the Temple. Analogously, although the term "holy avarice" is not used, could it not be said that a miser is a caricature of an ascetic, and in rare cases perhaps even potentially an ascetic? The traditional representation of a miser as a half-starved man dressed in rags and carrying a bag of gold would have an altogether different meaning if the gold were to be taken symbolically and not literally. Some misers have been known to endure what would be described, in the case of a Saint, as "heroic deprivations". But since "acts are according to intentions", the two "poverties" are as remote from each other as Hell is from Heaven. None the less, it is not difficult to imagine—and indeed one feels that it must have actually happened more than once—that a great spiritual Master might take a miser and turn him into a Saint; and the word "turn" is used here advisedly, for the avarice would need to be completely re-orientated. Thinking along parallel lines, could not something analogous be said of the sin of lechery, for example? In connection with another deadly sin, we may remember the words of the Decalogue: "I the Lord thy God am a jealous God". Not that "jealous", as used here, is a synonym of "envious", but the two may be said to have a common root, namely the refusal to accept that another should have or be given something which one feels should come to oneself. Similarly, as regards the worst sin of all, it is significant that in Islam one of the ninety-nine Divine Names is "the Proud". Nor can we plead a distinction here as between the French *fier* and *orgueilleux*, for the Qur'an applies exactly the same word to God as to Pharaoh. In this, as in the other cases, the explanation is simply: *corruptio optimi pessima*, the best, when corrupted, becomes the worst.⁵

But what is this "best" which, when corrupted, becomes deadly sin, and how does it come to be corrupted? This question has been touched on in what I have written elsewhere, though not in connection with what is normally called sin. The following quotation is none the less relevant: "The soul is of this world, whereas the Spirit is not; but since there was at first a relative continuity between soul and Spirit there is a certain part of the psychic substance—that which lies at the soul's uppermost boundary—which is in one sense not of this world since its function is to receive from the Intellect the light of the Spirit. In another sense it is of this world because its function is to transmit that light to the other faculties of the soul and also because, with the veiling of the Intellect⁶ and the sealing of the boundary between the two worlds, it was left on the soul's side of the barrier".⁷

The question of the highest part of the soul brings us back to the number eight, but this time to its positive significance. Guénon, in his article on the symbolism of the octagon,⁸ mentions that in sacred architecture an octagonal structure often serves as support for a dome, thus marking the transition from the square foundation to the circular summit, that is, from the terrestrial number four to the celestial number nine. In other words, eight denotes the highest part of the intermediary region between earth and Heaven or, microcosmically, between body and Spirit; and the octagon supporting the dome is particularly relevant here as a symbol of that "best" part of the psychic substance which is the vehicle of spiritual light symbolized by the dome itself. This octagon has in fact a triple symbolism, for not only is it a vehicle of the dome but also, by being immediately adjacent to it, it expresses the nearness to Heaven of the psychic elements in question, and by being itself almost circular in form it expresses their all but spiritual nature. Moreover eight is the number of the winds, which signify the inspirations that it is the function of these elements to receive. They are none the less "on the soul's side of the barrier", and not only has the devil access to them but it is here above all that he intervenes,⁹ for he can do no far reaching harm to a human soul unless he can first pervert one or more of its highest

elements which otherwise, continuing to fulfill their intuitive function, will remain like vigilant sentinels, ever ready to give the alert. It was certainly not to any of man's lower faculties that Satan's original temptation was addressed, but rather to those which constitute man's leanings towards the next world, his hopes of immortality, his longings for the untransitory. This is brought out clearly in the Quranic account of the Fall:

Then Satan whispered unto him,¹⁰ and said: "O Adam, shall I show thee the Tree of Immortality and a kingdom that fadeth not away?"¹¹

Let us quote also the following comment on this:

"All his deception of mankind throughout the ages is summed up in the above verse; he ceaselessly promises to show man the Tree of Immortality, gradually reducing by this means the highest and most central faculties into the outer part of the soul so that he may imprison them there in attachment to the counterfeit objects which he has forged for their perception. It is the presence here of these perverted faculties, either in discontent that they can never find real satisfaction or finally in a state of atrophy in that they are never put to their proper use, which causes all the disorder and obstruction in the soul of the fallen man".¹²

To take particular examples, as it were in the margin of this commentary, it could be said that the sin of gluttony is caused by the erring presence, in the outer or lower part of the soul, that part which is nearest the senses, of a perverted psychic element whose rightful place is at the threshold¹³ of Heaven, and whose normal function is to represent, for the individual in question, what might be termed a sense of the Infinite. True to its nature, it looks for Infinite satisfaction in the domain of the finite. Similarly, if a psychic element representing the sense of the Infinite in its aspect of Divine Love and Beauty should "fall" into the sexual domain, it can change normal desire into insatiability—whence the sin¹⁴ of lechery.

On the other hand, the "static" or "contractive" sins of sloth and avarice can be traced to a perverted sense of Eternity. The one is the attempt to realize Eternal Peace in a domain which is divinely willed to be in a state of movement and vicissitude. The other is the attempt to keep Eternally that which is, by its very nature, ephemeral; it is also the blindness of attributing to "treasure upon earth" the Absolute value that belongs only to "treasure in Heaven".

Eternity and Infinity are as it were the dimensions of the Absolute, and the perverted sense of the Absolute, either directly, or through one or other of these dimensions, may be said to lie at the root of all deadly sin. It is the "reverberation" of the Absolute, however remotely, which alone can account for the monstrousness of the semi-insane exaggerations in question.

The sin of anger presupposes as much lack of sense of proportion as avarice does, though in an altogether different mode: either could be described as the "absolute" effect of a relative cause. But avarice is the deification of a material object, whereas anger, like the sins of envy and pride, implies a certain deification of the ego, its endowment with rights which belong only to the Absolute, that is, to the Supreme Self. But at the summit of the soul of the Saint there are necessarily elements of sublime "thunder" and "lightning", just as there are necessarily elements which may be said to participate in the Divine Jealousy inasmuch as they "begrudge", through their discernment, the attribution of any Absolute value to other than the Self. Similarly, having realized the answer to the question "Who am I?"¹⁵ the Saint cannot fail to participate in the Divine Pride, which will be reflected in the outer part of the soul, not as the sin of pride, but as the virtue of dignity and sometimes even of majesty.

The intuitive part of the psychic substance, the part through which the soul may be said to have the sense of the Absolute, the Infinite and the Eternal, can only be fully operative if all its elements are in their rightful place. The soul of the Saint is perfect order and harmony; fallen souls are in a state of disorder which varies incalculably from individual to individual but which is caused, as we have seen, by the psychic substance's being turned literally "inside-out" or, which amounts to the same, "upside-down". Needless to say, it is possible that part of the higher or more central substance should remain relatively unfallen. Otherwise there could be no initial other-worldly aspirations, no novices for the spiritual path.

It is also possible that the fallen elements should have become more or less dormant, and this appears to be most often the case. Otherwise the world would be full of deadly sinners, whereas in fact it is still full of people who are, by modern standards, relatively "innocent"—at any rate there are enough to foster the illusion of human progress from generation to generation.

It is particularly ironical that the notion of sincerity—or rather the word, for it is scarcely more than that—should loom so large in twentieth century complacency, for sincerity is just what modern man most lacks. The often heard words, "sincerity is all that matters" express, if duly weighed, a profound truth; but it is nearly always forgotten that sincerity cannot be assessed without reference to what one is sincere about. In other words, the quality of the subjective reaction is inextricably dependent on the quality of the object. To take particular examples, it is really no less than a contradiction in terms to speak of a "sincere humanist", or a "sincere communist", if the word sincere is to retain its sense of "total dedication". Enthusiasm, everyone now knows, is no guarantee that the subject is sincere. This century, especially in its second half, witnesses without respite the most violent orgies of enthusiasm, and as often as not the object is so worthless that the "enthusiast" can be no more than a small fraction of a soul, a fraction that has, perhaps momentarily, declared itself independent of reason, memory and other basic faculties. Such cases may not be too dangerous in themselves, but they are alarmingly symptomatic of a wide-spread disintegration. To revert to the less paroxysmal but much more chronic and therefore more dangerous enthusiasms of the humanist and the communist, we have only to consider what man is to see that neither humanism nor communism has anything whatsoever to offer to the higher reaches of the human soul. If such an enthusiasm is none the less able to gain a lifelong grip of any given individual, it can only do so without the assent of his higher psychic elements; and the negative presence of these elements in his soul, whether they be dormant or atrophied, precludes all question of sincerity. It may be objected that in some cases the elements in question are perverted without being dormant, and that the soul can be something of a chaos but none the less "all there", and therefore sincere; and there can be no doubt, as regards the two enthusiasms in question, that they are only able to gain their formidable impetus by drawing, to a considerable extent, on the soul's latent treasuries of idle and unused spiritual fervor. But such thefts can never be total; perversion is always fragmentary. Fervor is, in its highest sense, no less than the thirst for the Absolute, the Infinite and the Eternal; and there can be no common measure between the psychic vehicles of this fervor, when in their rightful place at the summit of a normal soul, and a mere fraction of them that has been perverted and dangerously bottled up as part of an enthusiasm for some finite and ephemeral object.

Only religious orthodoxy at its fullest, that is, when endowed with the full range of its third dimension of mysticism, is large enough to engage the whole psychic substance of man and coordinate it into a sincerity worthy of the name. The Truth is Indivisible Totality and demands of man that he shall be no less than one undivided whole; and it is a criterion of orthodoxy that it

should stake a claim in every element of our being.

But how does mysticism bring about the inverse of *corruptio optimi pessima*—that inverse which is referred to in the words "the stone which the builders rejected is become the head of the corner" and "Joy shall be in Heaven over one sinner that repenteth more than over ninety and nine just persons which need no repentance"? The first phase of the spiritual alchemy of repentance is what is called "the descent into Hell", and here lies the deepest meaning of Dante's *Inferno*. The same "descent" is also the theme of some of Shakespeare's maturer plays, and in this connection we may quote the following:

"In order to reverse the process of the Fall by which part of man's soul came under the domination of the devil it is necessary first of all to regain consciousness of the lost psychic elements which lie in dormant or semi-dormant perversion in the nethermost depths of the soul. Thus it is that in some traditional stories the descent into Hell is represented by a journey into the depths of the earth in search of hidden treasure: the lost psychic elements are symbolized by precious stones which have been stolen and hidden by diabolically cunning dwarfs ...

"The modern development of psycho-analysis makes it necessary to explain that this first phase of the mystic path is radically different from any psycho-analytical descent into the subconscious. Psycho-analysis is largely a case of the blind leading the blind, for it is simply one soul working upon another without the help of any transcendent power. But initiation, followed up by the devotional and ascetic practices implicit in it, opens the door to contact with the perfecting and unifying power of the Spirit whose presence demands that the psychic substance shall become once again a single whole. The more or less scattered elements of this substance are thus compelled to come together; and some of them come in anger, from dark and remote hiding-places, with the infernal powers still attached to them.

From this point of view it is truer to say that Hell rises than that the mystic descends; and the result of this rising is a battle, with the soul as battlefield.

"At the outset of the path the perverted psychic elements are more or less dormant and remote from the center of consciousness. They must first of all be woken, and then redeemed, for they cannot be purified in their sleep; and it is when they wake in a state of raging perversion that there is always the risk that they will overpower the whole soul".¹⁶

Here lies the great danger of the spiritual path, and this is why esoterism has always been kept more or less secret, for it is incomparably better not to set out at all than to follow the path for a certain distance and then abandon it. In fact, it would be no doubt true to say that no man runs the risk of becoming a personification of one or more of the deadly sins so much as does an initiate who breaks his pact.

The "battlefield" is only one aspect of the spiritual alchemy. There is also the power of persuasion. The Spirit, vehicled by the rites, may be said to address the soul's fallen elements with exactly the same message as that which originally seduced them; but this time the message is true, and a true message is infinitely more powerful than a false one: *O Adam, shall I show thee the Tree of Immortality and a Kingdom that fadeth not away?* By the implacable rhythmic regularity of the performance of rites which is an essential feature of the spiritual path, this promise of the Transcendent is as it were "drummed" ceaselessly into the soul; and since the elements chiefly concerned, those which were made for nothing but the Transcendent, are merely being asked to conform to their true nature, this promise is bound to prove, sooner or later,

irresistible—whence the exaltation, by Spiritual Masters in all ages and in all religions, of the virtues of perseverance, patience and reliance.

(Original editorial inclusions that followed the essay:)

Look at this painted image, wounded and swollen, sickly and full of lust, in which there is no permanence. This wasted form is a nest of disease and very frail: it is full of putrid matter and perishes. Death is the end of life. What delight is there for him who sees these grey bones scattered like gourds in autumn?

Here is a citadel of bones plastered with flesh and blood, and manned by old age and death, self-will and enmity.

The Dhammapada.

¹ One cannot help recalling the words of the Apocalypse: And the beast that was and is not, even he is the eighth and is of the seven, and goeth into perdition (XVII, 11).

² That is, according to the Islamic conception, as the summit and synthesis of all creation, opening on to the Uncreated and therefore possessing, implicitly but not explicitly, the Uncreated Aspect which is none other than the Third Person of the Christian Trinity. According to the Shaikh al-'Alawī, in his treatise on the symbolism of the letters of the alphabet, the letter Bā' which has the numerical value of two, is a symbol of the Spirit (See Martin Lings, *A Sufi Saint of the Twentieth Century*, ch. VII, Allen and Unwin, 1971).

³ In Arabic the letter wāw and in Hebrew the letter vāv both have the numerical value of six, and each constitutes in its respective language the word for "and", that is, the linguistic "mediator" par excellence.

⁴ Needless to say, from another point of view it represents only a relative finality, the seventh Heaven being the highest of the planetary spheres but not the highest of the Heavens all told. Nine is, strictly speaking, the most "celestial" of all numbers (see *Old Lithuanian Songs*, in this journal, Winter, 1969, pp. 8-9).

⁵ This explains not only the sevenfold nature of the deadly sins, but also the satanic septenaries in the Apocalypse which are as it were shadows cast by their angelic opposites.

⁶ At the Fall.

⁷ *Ancient Beliefs and Modern Superstitions*, p. 40.

⁸ *Symboles de la Science Sacrée*, ch. XLII.

⁹ As for example when he succeeds in drawing Moses and Joshua away from the very brink of the Waters of Life (Qur'ān, XVIII, 61-63).

¹⁰ The Qur'ān here represents Satan as tempting Adam not through Eve but directly, and in other passages he addresses them both together.

¹¹ XX, 120.

¹² Abū Bakr Sirāj ad-Dīn, *The Book of Certainty*, p. 42 (Samuel Weiser, New York, 1970). See also pp. 35-39.

¹³ It is this threshold which is, as we have seen, symbolized by the number eight, whereas the elements in question are seven in virtue of the Divine imprint upon them. That the deadly sins constitute a true septenary is shown by their correspondence to the seven planets. Taking them in their traditional order, superbia (pride) corresponds to the Sun, avaritia (avarice) to Saturn, luxuria (lechery) to Venus, invidia (envy) to Mercury, gula (gluttony) to Jupiter, ira (anger) to Mars, accidia (sloth) to the Moon.

¹⁴ By "sin" here and throughout, it is not individual acts in themselves that are meant but the encirclement of the soul by a whole series of acts and its consequent imprisonment in a deep-rooted tendency.

¹⁵ The reference is to the methodic question which formed the basis of the teaching of Sri Ramana Maharshi.

¹⁶ Martin Lings, *Shakespeare in the Light of Sacred Art*, pp. 51-52 (Allen and Unwin).