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What Does It Mean to Characterise Human-Induced Climate Change as Sinful?

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Abstract

This article reviews some recent attempts, particularly by Neil Messer and Ernst Conradie, to clarify the distinctive role of Christian sin-talk in the context of contemporary anthropogenic climate change. It is argued that, whereas we can learn from these contributions given their theological depth and soteriological focus, a more full-fledged retrieval of Protestant hamartiology is needed to raise awareness of our moral complicity in the current climate crisis and prompt us to shun and fight deep-seated patterns of behavior that contribute to it. In particular, I argue that the doctrine of sin should be 'freed' from its 20th century binding to Christology by restoring its classical connections with the divine law as the expression of God's universal will on the one hand and with the process of human sanctification on the other. In doing so, I draw on Jean Delumeau's research on the 'culpabilizing' and civilizing roles of Christian discourse on sin during the Middle Ages as well as on the various roles of the divine law as discerned in the16th century Heidelberg Catechism.

Keywords: Climate change; Hamartiology; Heidelberg Catechism; Motivational gap; Sanctification; Christian sin-talk

Introduction

It is widely acknowledged that, more than being just a technical challenge, in the current stage of history human-induced climate change is at heart a *moral* issue. It is not that as a result of certain technological and economic developments we have run into some unfortunate problems that we now have to fix. Rather, we have somehow transgressed boundaries that applied to human conduct, as a result of which the future of life on our planet is severely threatened. Climate change already disproportionately affects the lives of those who live in the world's poorest countries, whereas more affluent populations in the Northwest continue to profit from the economic mechanisms that drive it. Therefore, even if some would hesitate to see the current alterations in the Earth's climate as morally problematic given the fact that similar changes have been taking place throughout the planet's history, these serious social ramifications point to a collective moral failure. One does not have to be a religious believer to share this analysis. Yet, religious traditions harbour storehouses of notions, reflections, distinctions and practices on what is involved in moral wrong-doing and how such wrong-doing should be exposed and properly

addressed. In the Christian tradition, this storehouse is commonly referred to as the doctrine of sin. To be sure, sin is usually defined in religious terms – as a rupture in our relationship with God as our Creator – rather than in moral ones. But these religious terms include rather than exclude the moral domain. According to the Judeo-Christian tradition, the rupture of the divine-human relationship is caused precisely by our transgression of moral boundaries that were set by God, as a result of which we miss the mark.[1]

This raises the questions that I will address in this article: could the doctrine of sin (as part of theological anthropology) show its continuing relevance today, ideally even beyond the community of religious believers, by being brought to bear on the current ecological crises – most visibly represented by today's climate change?[2] And if so, how would – or should – this impact our attitudes vis-à-vis practices that precipitate climate change? In order to answer these questions, I'll first discuss two recent attempts to interconnect the doctrine of sin and contemporary human-induced climate change, by Neil Messer and Ernst Conradie respectively. I will argue that both attempts, like others in the field, are very instructive in helping to acknowledge and discern the many sins involved in contemporary ecological patterns of conduct. Yet, they seem less attuned to providing us with resources to actually change these patterns. In the next section, therefore, I will look into an historical example of the way in which the Christian doctrine of sin as a matter of fact *did* gradually change human communal patterns of behaviour. With this in mind, I revisit the doctrine of sin in its traditional Protestant form, using its treatment in the Heidelberg Catechism to sketch an additional way of bringing Christian sin-talk to bear on today's climate crisis. Finally, I end the article by summarising my conclusions.

Throughout the paper, I'll focus on contemporary climate change as one of today's most ominous ecological issues, but much of what I have to say will be equally applicable to other aspects of the ecological crisis that are closely intertwined with it and with each other, such as deforestation, the loss of biodiversity, the depletion of fossil fuels, the acidification of the oceans, et cetera (for these and other 'planetary boundaries', see the meanwhile classical paper of Steffen et al. 2015, where nine of such boundaries are distinguished).

Neil Messer on climate change and sin

In a recent piece on the significance of the doctrines of sin and salvation to the problem of climate change, Neil Messer starts out by dissociating the notions of sin and moral wrongdoing. Drawing on Alister McFadyen's well-known study on sin in relation to sexual abuse and the holocaust, he argues that sin must be understood as a theological category rather than from within "narrowly moral frames of reference" (Messer 2014:126; cf. McFadyen 2000:3–42). Due to its reference to our relationship with God, Christian sin-talk has an explanatory power of its own in "informing an understanding

[1] Indeed, the Hebrew and Greek terms for sin(ning) as used in the Bible literally refer to notions like transgressing boundaries and missing the mark, as biblical and theological dictionaries typically point out.

[2] In this paper I align with the majority of climate scientists that we are indeed facing climate change today and that this phenomenon is largely anthropogenic. Although the (scientific) majority does not have it right by default, and climate science research comes with degrees of uncertainty, I consider these claims to be well-established.

of human affairs and guiding action in response to human problems" (Messer 2014:126; cf. Messer 2007, where the contours and potential of this approach are more fully elaborated). Next, following Karl Barth, Messer reverses the traditional conceptual and theological order of sin and salvation, making salvation theologically primary to the knowledge of sin, because if we humans pretend to know what is wrong with us "prior to learning what God has done in and through Christ to meet that need" (126), we are guilty of pride. As a matter of fact, we cannot understand our sinful condition independent of God's gracious revelation in Christ. Taking God's revelation as a point of departure leads to the insight that right *worship* is at the heart of the matter, so that, rather than being identical to moral failure, sin in its basic form is idolatry, i.e. "the (…) refusal to direct our being and energies in joy, faith and worship to the triune God" (127). This fundamental distortion in our relationship with God then leads to further distortions and alienations in our relationships with our neighbours, ourselves, and the created world.

Messer further unpacks this view along Barthian lines, specifying pride, sloth, and falsehood as the concrete expressions of our idolatry as these are disclosed to us in the mirror of Christ's priestly, kingly and prophetic office respectively (cf. Barth 1956:3–154). He then insightfully shows how these three basic forms of sin play a crucial role in mechanisms eliciting and reinforcing current anthropogenic climate change. First, taking refuge to *falsehood* (in fact, Barth's original German has the stronger term *Lüge*, meaning "lie") is a tempting and all-too-common response in the face of the overwhelming concerns that are bound up with the pace and threatening consequences of contemporary climate change. Such falsehood manifests itself in outright denial of the problem ("climate denialism"), in distortion of the scientific evidence, in the fabrication of alternative facts and fake news, et cetera.[3] Next to that, Messer points to psychological mechanisms such as self-deception and cognitive evasion of complex problems that we rather don't want to think about. The temptation to turn away from a realistic assessment of the climate crisis is strengthened by our intuitive unwillingness to do what we fear must be done, viz. give up our consumerist lifestyle in favour of the well-being of others, such as the next generations. It is here that moral corruption easily creeps in, and Messer suggests that the (generally acknowledged) failure of the 15th Conference of the Parties (COP15) in Copenhagen, 2009, constitutes a perfect example of such a mixture of moral and psychological defects (for a short overview of how this conference went "horrible wrong", see Maslin 2014:123–25; 123).

Next, once the egregiousness of the climate crisis *is* acknowledged, both other root sins distinguished by Barth may easily raise their heads: pride and sloth. *Pride* can take the form of a "misguided self-reliance" that expresses itself in "the conceit that technical, managerial or political solutions alone will save us from our predicament" (Messer 2014:135). Indeed, the intuitive belief that we will somehow be able to solve the ecological problems by our ingenuity (be it through "geo-engineering" or other means) may be entirely ill-founded, and therefore a sign of prideful over-confidence. As soon as we realise this, however, a gridlock emerges that easily leads to *sloth*. Once the hopeless entanglement of ecological and economic issues dawns on us, we run the risk of

[3] Needless to say, such phenomena have become even more prominent after the publication of Messer's article in 2014. For a secular response, see e.g. Oreskes 2019; for a Christian one, see Reeves 2021.

becoming indifferent and passive. In this connection Messer points to the "paralyzing despair" that may result from "the feeling that whatever we can do will never be enough, so there is no point even trying" (Messer 2014:133). Thus, unfounded optimism as issuing from human pride can quickly give way to inert pessimism that goes along with sloth – both of which are responses that only aggravate our human and planetary predicament.

Finally, shifting his attention from sin to salvation, Messer suggests two possible ways in which the good news of the gospel might make a difference to our *response* to climate change (Messer 2014:134–36). First, he points to the practice of *repentance* in Christian worship – a practice which makes it possible to overcome the sin of falsehood – i.e., our tendencies to look away in forms of denial and self-deception from our complicity in climate change. According to Messer (2014:135), "the theo-logic of repentance presupposes the saving love of God". For confessing one's sins in this way assumes that one already knows oneself as a reconciled sinner in the first place. Second, this same saving love of God provides us with the theological virtue of *hope*. Drawing on Bonhoeffer's distinction between the ultimate and the penultimate, Messer points to the reassuring awareness that human activities and capacities never belong to the sphere of the ultimate but always to that of the penultimate. This awareness makes it possible to overcome the sin of pride (i.e., the pretension that it belongs to our human tasks and capacities to save the world) on the one hand and that of sloth (i.e., the "paralyzing despair" that results from the intractability of the climate problem) on the other. Not having to save the world but being called to witness to God's saving love of the world, Christian communities can take the lead in "living a truly responsible life in the face of the challenge of climate change" (Messer 2014:137).

There is a lot to commend in Messer's explorations. First of all, he is charting relatively new territory. Even though he was not the first to connect the domains of ecology and hamartiology to each other – the concept of "ecological sin" was introduced to the world by the ecumenical patriarch Bartholomew I of Constantinople during a speech in Santa Barbara, California, in 1997 (Durante 2020:195) – standard doctrinal accounts of sin, even when they include explorations of so-called "structural sin", usually lack discussions of climate change or other anthropogenic ecological problems.[4] Second, the way in which Messer connects the sins of falsehood, pride and sloth as expressions of the primordial sin of idolatry to patterns of behaviour that drive the current climate crisis is to the point. It is revealing indeed to unmask the all too facile responses to anthropogenic climate change as expressions of human sinfulness. By assessing as sinful such common responses as compromising the facts, over-confidence in one's own powers, and inertia when it comes to taking action, it is made clear that these are not the only options but belong to those human attitudes that can, and should, be changed (Dutch theologian A.A. van Ruler famously pointed to the non-necessity of sin as one of its "sunny sides"; Van Ruler 2023:211–13). Finally, Messer's suggestion that the Christian practice of repentance and the Christian virtue of hope may operate as liberating forces

[4] This is even the case in as excellent an overview of Christian hamartiology as McCall (2019). In his discussion of structural sin (258–70), McCall helpfully elaborates on the example of the practice of mass incarceration in the US, including its racial and ethnic ramifications, but – in spite of *nature* figuring in the title of his book – does not mention ecological sins. The same applies to Johnson and Lauber (2016:417–32), where the chapter on structural sin also focuses on institutionalized forms of racism.

in opening up more appropriate ways of responding to climate change is valuable as well. For example, the utter despair that characterises some (not all) groups of climate activists could be brought back to proper proportions if this theological notion of hope came to colour their outlook. Christian groups that are inspired by this hope can indeed make a difference here (cf. Northcott 2020).

Yet, Messer's account also raises some questions. First, it is telling that, although Messer started out subscribing to Barth's principled reversal of the theological order of sin and salvation, he in fact proceeds in the traditional way by first dealing with sin and only then discussing salvation. Apparently, his theological decision to approach the doctrine of sin from the perspective of salvation – particularly the work of Christ – could not be sustained in actual practice. Indeed, we usually find ourselves talking first about sin and only then about how we are saved from it. As we will see in a moment, this is not just a pragmatic point but one that bears theological weight. Barth reversed the traditional order of law and gospel in response to its abuse by theologians with Nazi sympathies (Van der Kooi and Van den Brink 2017:313), but it is not obvious that we should follow him all the way by endorsing this reversal. To be sure, from a Christian perspective it is "only through the story of the cross of Christ we see the utter depth and seriousness of our sin" (Willimon 2005:x; cf. Van der Kooi and Van den Brink 2017:309–13; McCall 2019:22). This does not imply, however, that the knowledge of sin is fully derivative from the knowledge of salvation. In fact, this view is not only at odds with classical Christian teaching but also implausible from an empirical point of view. If it is only "in the light of God's saving work in the incarnation, life, death and resurrection of Christ that we come to know ourselves as sinners" (Messer 2014:126), it seems that we must become Christians in order to know what is structurally wrong with us. Yet, witness to our thorough-going depravity can be found in all kinds of religious and non-religious traditions. Even when we rightly define sin as first of all a distortion of our relationship with the triune God (i.e., as a matter of idolatry; cf. Fowl 2019; Cavanaugh 2024), the concept of sin remains intrinsically connected to moral evils that are much more widely perceived as such. Thus, it seems that one need not necessarily be a Christian in order to acknowledge that moral wrongdoing is indeed sinful in the sense of making us guilty.

Second, without belittling the profound ways in which our patterns of behaviour can be shaped and reshaped by recurring liturgical practices, we might be a bit skeptical about the actual influence of the weekly practice of repentance in worship services on our ecological patterns of behaviour. We all know how easily such practices can become empty rituals, cursory and at times even a bit cumbersome interruptions of the flow of our daily lives which we have almost forgotten about when leaving the church hall. In this connection, Lauren Winner has helpfully exposed some of the particular sins and damaging effects that easily come with beloved (and recommendable) Christian practices (Winner 2018). Similarly, without denying the vital importance of facing the climate crisis from the vantage point of the virtue of hope (as based in the promises of God), this perspective can be over-emphasised and abused for false assurance and complacency in the actual fight against ecological destruction. Sin, to be sure, is like a virus that sneaks in in all sorts of unexpected ways and places (for a rich and compelling account of this, see Plantinga 1995). So do the practice of repentance and the virtue of hope really belong to "the most important things that the church can offer a world facing

climate change" (Messer 2014:136)? Or are there other, perhaps more robust, contributions that the church and its theology might provide?

The older Christian tradition comes to our aid here in that it assumes a shared human consciousness of good and evil which undergirds a common human accountability for immoral behaviour (for a contemporary retrieval of this tradition, see Van Drunen 2014). Since God is the Creator of all humans, God lays a claim on our loyalty – and humans typically sense that they do not live up to that claim. In response to the question "How do you come to know your misery?", the 16th century Heidelberg Catechism unambiguously states: "The law of God tells me" – and traditionally this law was not seen as limited to the Ten Commandments (or its summary in the love commandment) but as including the natural law (*lex naturalis*) that is known to the gentiles (see esp. Rom.2:15). Thus, at least to some degree the knowledge of sin is universal. As we have explained elsewhere (Van der Kooi and Van den Brink 2017:313): "every human being has a fundamental awareness of God and his will. Sin is a transgression of God-given commandments, and these commandments may be known, as far as their origin and content are concerned, from the law of nature (e.g., everyone has an innate sense that murder is wrong)". Using another classical distinction, we may say that as a result of general revelation it is universally known from human experience, and today also from disciplines like social and moral psychology, that we are prone to committing evil and thus incurring guilt, whereas the depth dimension of this evil as sin against a loving God can only be known from the perspective of special revelation that found its epitome in the Christ event (cf. McCall 2019:27).

It may be clear why this is relevant in the context of our discussion of human-induced climate change. If it were only from a Christian perspective that one could come to know and understand human ecological misbehaviour as implicating guilt, the single contribution Christians could make would be an appeal to conversion.[5] If, on the other hand, there is a shared understanding that contemporary climate change, in so far as it is human-induced, must be treated as morally reprehensible, that provides a basis for listening to each other and learning from each other across religious boundaries, as it might also provide a basis for common action. The appeal to natural law both enables and justifies such an endeavour and might grant Christians an entry-point for a public retrieval of its doctrine of sin in the context of climate change. Thus, the question now becomes: is such a more public retrieval of the notion of sin possible – one that convincingly brings it to bear on the contemporary climate crisis in ways that go beyond pointing to the liturgy and other Christian particularities?

Ernst Conradie on sin and climate change

No one has gone to such great lengths in exploring the potentials of the Christian doctrine of sin to illuminate and stimulate the current debate on climate change as South African theologian Ernst Conradie. Over the past couple of years, Conradie has not only published two monographs and numerous papers on the topic, but has also launched a collaborative research project, involving a considerable number of peers and post-docs

[5] This might be coupled with a Christian retreat from the world in order to form an ecologically pure community, as advocated in Wagenfuhr (2020:161-77). Traditionally, this "Benedictine option" has been associated with Anabaptism.

in his quest (see his own retrospective overview in Conradie 2020b; and cf. for some of his subsequent work on the topic Conradie 2022 and Conradie 2025, esp. 10–13, 17–19). It is not possible to appropriately summarise Conradie's wide-ranging and multi-layered explorations in a few lines – in fact, the reception of Conradie's prolific oeuvre has yet to start – so I will limit myself to rendering some of his main insights and conclusions.

Conradie's project is explicitly aimed at a public retrieval (or "redemption", as he calls it in a tongue-in-cheek manner) of Christian sin-talk. Conradie thinks that such a retrieval is needed mostly, but not exclusively, because of the ecological destruction (and in particular human-induced climate change) that threatens the future of our planet. In his first monograph on sin in an ecological context he intends "to help clear some obstacles that tend to thwart a retrieval of Christian sin-talk in the public sphere" (Conradie 2017:229). Conradie singles out for special examination and discussion five of these obstacles, among which cultural resistance against sin-talk and the lack of scientific plausibility of the notion of a primordial Fall in light of evolutionary theory seem to be the most formidable ones. As to the latter, Conradie does not want to simply "drop the Fall" (which would be the easy way out here), since he is convinced of the basic correctness of Augustine's view that the root cause of what is wrong with the world is to be situated not in nature but in the perversion of the human will, which somehow must have taken place in history.[6] Though he does not deal lightly with this and each of the other obstacles, Conradie suggests ways in which they can be overcome. His hope is that Christian theologians are permitted a place "in interdisciplinary teams working on social diagnostics" (Conradie 2017:229). Indeed, "the core intuition of this proposal is that Christian discourse on sin may contribute to this collaborative task" (Conradie 2017:xii). Conradie is keen to point out that facile references to sin can never replace the painstaking work done by natural and social scientists as well as activists, political observers and others who investigate what exactly is going wrong. Yet, the Christian tradition contains "a sophisticated set of conceptual tools (used for pastoral, prophetic and ethical purposes)" that may be put to use here (Conradie 2020c:385). Conradie particularly aims at what he calls "theological redescription" (Conradie 2017:24 and passim). That is, speaking of sin does not add another dimension or layer to social reality but *redescribes* this reality from the specific perspective that is proper to theology.

What light then does the concept of sin from this perspective shed on ecological destruction in general and climate change in particular? One of the provisional answers to this question that Conradie suggests, is that it provides us with "the language of ultimacy":

> I suggest that the category of sin at best emerges only from an ultimate perspective. It redescribes what has ultimately gone wrong in the world – in such a way that this covers the pervasive impact of sin (…). In the context of ecological destruction, Christians would want to confess that the rotten "fruits" that are so evident around us, have deep "roots" in multiple forms of alienation (…). Christians would surmise that these forms of alienation are best understood, again ultimately, in terms of a

[6] Conradie is disputing Christopher Southgate here, who tends to consider natural rather than human (social) evil as the root cause of what is wrong with the world. See Conradie (2018), in response to Southgate (2018).

> broken relationship with the triune God, that is, their way of naming (not resolving) the ultimate mystery of cosmic and evolutionary history (Conradie 2017:232).

Indeed, Christian sin-talk is inevitably linked with talk about God as the ultimate mystery of the world (cf. Jüngel 1983).

More can (and should) be said about the way in which Conradie elaborates on the functions of sin-talk in the context of the climate crisis, but the above suffices to briefly compare Conradie's input with that of Neil Messer. When doing so, we observe both interesting similarities and differences. Both Messer and Conradie clearly adhere to a distinctly theological account of sin, as, first and foremost, a fundamental rupture in our relationship with the triune God. Although Conradie is interested in seeking common ground with secular scholars and analysts of the current ecological predicament, more so than Messer, this does not lead him to water down or conceal his Christian (and more particularly Augustinian and Reformed) theological convictions. Also, just like Messer, Conradie goes to great lengths to discern the very specific and concrete sins (or sinful attitudes) that lie at the basis of current climate change. He not only mentions falsehood, pride, and sloth in this connection (as Messer does), but in his diagnosis also points to the pernicious – though often hidden – roles of other "deadly sins" such as greed, consumerism, domination, structural violence and distorting ideologies (e.g., the ideology of unlimited economic growth). Thus, a more encompassing and fine-grained analysis of the situation emerges.

Though not entirely absent, the influence of Barth is less palpable in Conradie's hamartiological explorations than in those of Messer. As a result, the former exhibits more openness to bring the Christian doctrinal heritage in constructive conversation with secular accounts of the causes of contemporary climate change. Conradie sharply discerns the need for a communal approach to what is a global problem: "Since climate change is by definition a global problem, it cannot be resolved by interest groups working independently" (Conradie 2020c:385). Indeed, his attitude as a theologian towards the secular sciences is characterised by an impressive combination of modesty and humility on the one hand and proper confidence on the other. Conradie is strongly aware of the ambiguous roles of Christian churches and theologies in relation to past and present manifestations of structural evil, and frequently exposes these roles (see, e.g., already Conradie 2008: esp. 85–97). Yet at the same time, he is convinced of the unabated relevance of the Christian tradition as a treasure trove of insights and wisdom that may help us address today's global problems, of which climate change is not the least. The notion of "theological redescription" neatly captures both sides of this coin: it does justice to what has already been diagnosed by others (without belittling this), and yet it suggests that a theological depth dimension should be applied to see the full scope of what has gone wrong.

Having said that, however, just like Messer's, Conradie's contributions seem to be characterised by what one might call a fear of morality. By this I mean that the theological nature of the doctrine of sin (as rooted in God's special revelation) is emphasised to such a degree that its connections with common human notions of morality, and especially with the natural moral law, are to some extent obscured from view. Just like Messer, Conradie holds that the knowledge of sin is only imparted to us by God's special revelation in Jesus Christ, so that "a recognition of guilt before God

only becomes possible through an encounter with God's forgiving love" (Conradie 2020a:20; cf. Conradie 2017:xiv). Since *in* this revelation our sins are already taken away from us because of Christ's saving work, and since *apart from it* it does not make sense to try to convince people of sin, there seems to be no place for confronting one another with the guilt we contract by ecologically damaging patterns of behaviour. Has the impact of Western individualism and the concomitant fear of moralising and interference in another's personal sphere become so dominant that we rather want to abstain from moral judgements when it comes to climate change? If so, this is *historically* out of sync with the Christian tradition and *systematically* unhelpful in that it blocks a more compelling deployment of the doctrine of sin in relation to contemporary human-caused climate change. In the next two sections, I will unpack each of these claims in turn.

The "culpabilising" role of the doctrine of sin in shaping Western Christianity

Attempts to make people feel guilty about their carbon footprint or over-consumption are often met with skepticism and disapproval. It has become cliché to reject such attempts as unduly moralising: we should not be judgmental, since each individual should follow his or her own conscience when deciding whether or not to eat meat, to take the plane instead of the train when traveling between states, to buy tons of cheap clothes that one does not need, et cetera. Some would see such a response as part of a wider development in which morally ambiguous behaviour is no longer considered as culpable but as part of the human condition. If anything, the social and natural sciences have taught us to what extent human misbehaviour is conditioned by one's upbringing, one's social environment, one's genes and the evolutionary forces that drive our conduct on a subconscious level. In light of all this, who are we to judge others?

Yet, it cannot be upheld across the board that notions of sin have gradually been losing their grip on human consciousness in late modern societies. For whereas quite a number of moral misbehaviours (or at least patterns of behaviour that used to be perceived as such) are indeed taken less seriously today, new 'sins' have been and are being recognised and publicly condemned. As the recent me-too movement and the ensuing 'cancel culture' have shown, in specific cases we are even less prepared than in the past to shy away from being judgmental, moralising and even being punitive towards each other (and often for good reasons). Thus, the usual complaint that society is becoming more and more immoral has to be nuanced. In fact, its moral sensibilities seem to be changing over time; in some areas, they even increase. Apparently, we still believe that in some situations blaming others (even when we are not personally affected by their behaviour) can be functional and justified. Often this concerns forms of behaviour with regard to which previous generations used to be less scrupulous – think for example of animal abuse. We have also become more sensitive than in the past to the gruesome and massive forms of suffering involved in systemic evils like slavery. Thus, it seems that the oft-repeated expression of dismay in the title of American psychiatrist Karl Menninger's book *Whatever became of sin?* – "And certainly no one talks about sin!" (Menninger 1973:228) – cannot be fully substantiated. Even when the word is not always used, sin-talk (or what might be 'redescribed' as such) has not at all vanished from the (post)modern consciousness.

In fact, in such instances of increased moral sensitivity ancient Christian patterns of morally influencing the public domain are continued. One of the most incisive ways in

which Christianity shaped the European mind from the Middle Ages onwards has been labelled by historians as "culpabilization". By studying many medieval and early modern sermons, hymnals, books, pamphlets, diaries, legal cases, and papal bulls, the French historian Jean Delumeau (1923–2020) has laid bare the manifold ways in which the church instilled its notion of sin, along with fear for the consequences of sin, into the general consciousness (cf. Delumeau 1990, which in its original French edition – Delumeau 1983 – formed the middle part of a trilogy). The many vivid depictions of the Last Judgement on the tympans of medieval cathedrals and churches were but one expression of these incessant efforts. The penitential books of the same period with their sophisticated divisions of sins and sub-sins, all of them related to specific punishments and ways to offer satisfaction, were another. Arguably, as a result of their efforts, Western civilisation as we now know it gradually took shape.

Coming from a strict Roman Catholic environment himself, Delumeau condemned this process of culpabilisation as a form of dire theological manipulation in the interest of ecclesial power control. Yet, although such collective power abuse – an often-overlooked sin of its own (but see Cornwall 2025) – definitely played a role, it is not difficult to come to a more nuanced assessment of what actually happened (for some historical qualifications of Delumeau's rather harsh criticism, see Powis 1992). For in its struggle with the naturalistic background of Germanic culture, the church had little choice but to operate in such a strongly moralising way. After all, if its gospel message of divine grace was to make sense, it should be clear that we belong to God as our Creator in the first place, that we thwart God's purposes in many ways, and that we are therefore in need of forgiveness and grace. Thus, teaching and preaching about sin had a clear theological function. In the wake of that, however, it also had an important *cultural* significance, fostering a more or less civilised climate with reduced levels of public violence, the emergence of a relatively reliable legal system, and other civilising developments of which we still take advantage today. In this way, the church's "confession mirrors" (*Beichtspiegel*) and other efforts to enhance the awareness of good and evil led to a more sustainable society.

I suggest that contemporary societies – especially in Europe and the global Northwest – may need a similar enhancement of the moral awareness of good and bad *ecological* practices. Once again, a sustainable future for our societies is at stake. Although stigmatisation of people is often ineffective, the me-too debate has shown that some form of "blaming and shaming" can be helpful in reducing the communal levels of negligent, egotistic, short-sighted and otherwise simply bad conduct (cf. Braithwaite 2000 for this distinction between "re-integrative shaming" and stigmatisation). Presumably, if we came to consider traveling by plane instead of by train to be, in specific cases, as morally dubious as stealing money, this would probably have some positive effect on our collective greenhouse gas emissions. Of course, the Christian doctrine of sin cannot and should not be instrumentalised for goals that just happen to further socially desirable patterns of behaviour. Religious belief is by definition "without ulterior motive" (cf. the discussion in Van der Borght 2006). But what if some of our traditional patterns of behaviour actually have become sinful, since as we have now gradually come to know they jeopardise the survival of our planet? What if "the earth is the LORD's and all that is in it" (Ps. 24:1)? Aren't unsustainable patterns of behaviour in that case morally

reprehensible precisely because they affect our relationship with God? Shouldn't our theology of sin therefore have a direct bearing here on our moral views and behaviours?

In what follows, we will draw on classical Protestant theological sources in order to formulate a more robust answer to our lead question than we have found thus far. Although Protestant theologians radically reshaped late-medieval patterns of thinking on salvation as something we could earn ourselves, prioritising the saving grace of God, this did not mean that they took the divine calling to fight our sins in the process of sanctification less seriously. Some of them, such as John Calvin in his *Institutes* (III 7), considered self-denial on behalf of God and fellow human beings as "the sum of the Christian life" (McNeill 1960:689). Taking up an earlier tradition, Calvin used the word 'mortification' (that is, the process of dying to sin) as indicating the first part of Christian repentance and spiritual renewal, next to "vivification", or the development of a delight in what is good, as its second part (*Institutes* III 3). What would such concepts mean if we applied them to our attitude vis-à-vis climate change and other ecological challenges of our time?

Sanctification and the motivational gap: towards an ecological Puritanism

In the year before he died, the Polish sociologist and philosopher Zygmunt Bauman (1925–2017) poignantly described the gap that is lurking between our consciousness and our conscience vis-à-vis patterns of behaviour that have an impact on climate change and other forms of ecological destruction:

> We may recently have talked and written more than before about the dangers that threaten the sustainability of our planet, and so also about the prospects of our collective survival. But our conduct … did not match the words – however many of us were addressed and at whatever level of power and influence they were pronounced; this also, in itself, is a manifestation of the liquidity of evil. Our collective consciousness must yet – so it seems – cover a lot of distance in order to reach our collective conscience, and through it beget an adequate collective action. We may talk and think differently from how we did a few decades ago, but our way of daily life, and our hierarchy of preferences in particular, have hardly twitched … (Bauman and Donskis 2016:49, as quoted by Conradie 2017:13).

Indeed, whereas up until the recent past ignorance may have stood in the way, we are now at the stage in which the four leprous men outside Samaria found themselves after they had feasted on the abundant wealth with which they were surrounded by coincidence. All of a sudden, they realised: "What we are doing is wrong" (2 Kings 7:9) – and they took appropriate action. How do we today bridge the gap between consciousness and conscience, and the one between conscience and behaviour – also known as the 'motivational gap' (Peeters et al. 2015)?

Theological contributions like those of Messer and Conradie insightfully apply the doctrine of sin to the pressing issue of climate change. But the question is whether they tap into this doctrine's full potential to motivate us to change our ambiguous patterns of behaviour. Their strictly theological grounding of the concept of sin may easily obscure or at least relativise sin's connection with concrete moral behaviour. In order to move beyond this, it seems important that we 'free' the knowledge of sin from its strict

Barthian binding to the salvific work of Christ (allegedly, it is only in this light that sin can be discerned) and highlight its connections with divine law (as the universal expression of God's Fatherly will) on the one hand and with human sanctification (as worked by the Spirit) on the other.[7] Perhaps these two wings are needed to fly, i.e. to let the doctrine of sin do its proper work.[8]

First, if it is indeed the case that sinful ecological patterns of behaviour transgress God's law and go against God's will, should we not as a matter of fact abstain from them? And why should the church not preach such a straightforward message? We may be reminded here of Menninger's incisive call to the clergy:

> We know that the principal leadership in the morality realm should be the clergy's but they seem to minimize their great traditional and historical opportunity to preach, to prophesy, to speak out … An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure, indeed, and there is a lot of prevention to be done for large numbers of people who hunger and thirst after direction towards righteousness. Clergymen have a golden opportunity to prevent some of the accumulated misapprehensions, guilt, aggressive action, and other roots of later … suffering … How? Preach! Tell it like it is. Say it from the pulpit. Cry it from the housetops (Menninger 1973:228).

Transposing this call to the current situation, perhaps preachers as well as laypersons should not shy away from publicly denouncing our human complicity in climate change as a form of sinful behaviour that should be abandoned. This would be in line with the *usus elenchticus* that the Reformers ascribed to the law, i.e., its culpabilising role in unmasking our sinfulness (cf. Hendrix 2004, 52–53, pointing out how Luther resisted the urge of some to drop this function).

Second, the Heidelberg Catechism returns more extensively to the law in its section on sanctification, in the third one of its three parts. Even though this section on "gratitude" clearly goes beyond the category of sin, especially the part on the Ten Commandments (Lord's Day 34–44), it serves as a mirror in the light of which all sorts of concrete sins are disclosed. In line with the magisterial Reformers, it distinguished a third use of the law (*tertius usus legis*) next to its elenctic and civil roles, viz. its abiding normative function (Bierma 2013:108), also called its educational use (on the three uses of the law – civil, theological/elenctic and educational – as "a staple of Protestant dogma", see Witte 2020:261–83, 270). Even though this third section on "gratitude" is particularly aimed at Christians who are involved in the process of sanctification, it is intriguing to hear the strong language it uses in this connection.

Q & A 89
Q. What is the dying-away of the old self?
A. To be genuinely sorry for sin and more and more to hate and run away from it.

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[7] This is not to suggest that these links are denied by Messer and Conradie; yet they tend to remain underexplored in their work.

[8] I owe the insightful comparison of the structure of the Creed with that of a bird having two wings to Noordmans (1934:17-18).

Q & A 90
Q. What is the rising-to-life of the new self?
A. Wholehearted joy in God through Christ and a love and delight to live according to the will of God
by doing every kind of good work.
(Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 33; CRC/RCA 2013:102)

Now what would it mean to *run away* from ecologically unsustainable patterns of behaviour, and to be genuinely sorry for them? Arguably, answering this question would bring us into the realm of Christian ethics, and here matters tend to become complicated. This is not just because of remaining uncertainties in climate science, e.g. on the attribution of mean surface temperature increases to external natural next to human causes (cf. Petersen 2023:198–208). It is also because there clearly is a sliding scale here from more to less ecologically (un)sustainable practices. Indeed, the Heidelberg Catechism already acknowledges that there are many shades of sin between tiny nasty thoughts on the one hand and actual violations of moral law on the other. In line with the Sermon on the Mount, however, it condemns everything that comes short of the morally good life, including cursory thoughts that come to mind and inclinations towards sinful behaviour. It stipulates that "not even the slightest desire or thought contrary to any one of God's commandments should ever arise in our hearts" (Q&A 113; CRC/RCA 2013:111). The detailed way in which the Ten Commandments are elaborated on in Lord's Day 34–44 continues the tradition of the medieval *Beichtspiegel* (see Bierma 2013:103–108 for some historical-theological analysis). Applying this to the current climate crisis, this may mean that we should not even *think of* flying to the Canary Islands just for the fun of spending some time there. Even when we are not completely certain whether certain activities do indeed contribute to global warming, it would be best to abstain from them. Puritans of all ages solved such certainty-issues by staying on the safe side. Perhaps in our situation we need a new Puritanism – this time ecological.

When I was a pastor, a woman in my first congregation once came to me for pastoral advice. She suffered a lot of physical pain, and she had been told that acupuncture might bring her relief. She was not sure, though, whether such a treatment was in accordance with her Christian convictions. "Could you perhaps tell me whether this is okay?", she therefore asked me, "for I rather don't want to do anything which is against the will of God". I still remember it because of the plain sincerity with which she said it. She was definitely prepared to continue bearing her sufferings if acupuncture was morally dubious from a faith perspective, because that would implicate her in sinning against God. What if Christians today were to approach their pastors with similar questions regarding their carbon footprint? From the spirituality of the Heidelberg Catechism and the later pietist and Puritan strands of Christianity which followed on it, that would not at all be strange. It would highlight that the doctrine of sin is as much about orthopraxy as about orthodoxy. And, using Zygmunt Bauman's language, it would show a sincere desire to bridge the gap between consciousness and conscience. Indeed, one might list and answer a whole series of such sustainability questions using the style of a catechism (as has been insightfully done by Janse 2024).

To be sure, when applying this approach to the current climate crisis we encounter a serious stumbling block in that this crisis confronts us with *structural* or *systemic* sin: its

evils are endemic to the very fabric of our life world, so that it is virtually impossible to fully escape from them. For example, refraining from all activities that might possibly contribute to climate change or other forms of ecological degradation would at some point lead people to poverty; in particular, it might push many who belong to the world's most vulnerable people into despair and starvation. Thus, there is no easy way to avoid one's complicity in these sinful structures that have emerged over time. Traditional Christian accounts of sin like that of the Heidelberg Catechism have rightly been criticised for focusing almost exclusively on personal sins and sinning, thus obscuring from view the many ways we are constrained by systemic or structural evils (cf. Conradie 2017:122). Indeed, there are supra-personal powers that alienate us from each other, from creation and from God. Biblical passages and notions that highlight them have been helpfully retrieved in twentieth century theology (see e.g. Wink 1999). Accordingly, we should take the sheer complexity of the climate crisis into account.

This means that the economic, financial and political regimes that undergird global unsustainable policies and practices must be critically addressed. Theological anthropology should not just focus on individuals, isolating them from the wider contexts in which they are embedded and that constrain their lives, but include these structural factors and forces in its analysis. It is part of the perversity of sin that even with the best intentions individuals and communities are unable to withdraw from the systems that continue to shape our desires and spread ecological degradation (Conradie 2020c:390). As Hilda Koster argues: 'Moral renewal, then, most go beyond attempts at personal righteousness; it requires collective action and systemic change to reshape the structures of power and justice' (Koster 2025:219). Even systemic sin can be overcome in the long run, as the abolition of institutionalised slavery and Apartheid have shown, provided that individuals start or join groups that advocate structural political and economic change in a coordinated way (Johnson 2003). This does not mean, however, that individual action is futile (as Johnson 2003:85 concedes). Indeed, as Cynthia Moe-Lobeda points out in her study of structural sin, structural change does not come about without individual action. It is precisely 'the complicity and silent acquiescence of those [individuals] who fail to take responsibility for it' (Moe-Lobeda 2013:72) that perpetuate structurally unjust systems. Drawing on her Lutheran background, Moe-Lobeda argues in response to this that divine grace installs in humans a critical moral vision, whereas Koster proposes an "integral" approach to ecological liberation, "address[ing] systemic realities alongside personal transformation" (Koster 2024:221).

It is at this point that we are reminded of contributions like those of Messer, Conradie, and others who emphasise the priority of ethos over ethics (as John Zizioulas puts it; Chryssavgis and Asproulis 2021:50–2). Since we cannot develop a full-blown rule-based environmental ethics, let alone live up to it, we need a basic attitude, or a way of life, that fuels resistance against the mechanisms that drive climate change and other forms of ecological degradation. In focusing on the doctrine of sin, we are dwelling in the realm of theological anthropology, where the fundamental question is what kind of human beings we are and should be. Here theology can indeed make a distinctive contribution to the climate debate, by pointing to the possibility of personal transformation that results from reorienting our lives towards God's purposes, inspired by the gospel of God's forgiveness and mercy (a process traditionally called 'conversion'). Recently quite some literature has been published in the field of environmental psychology, and it is helpful

indeed to know how emotions like fear, hope, anger and guilt influence attitudes with regard to climate change (e.g. Feldman and Hart 2017; Kleres and Wettergren 2017; Kelsey 2025). A theological contribution goes beyond that by focusing on the underlying question of what sort of beings we were created to be and how we are redeemed to indeed become such beings. More superficial approaches that focus exclusively on human behaviour will probably remain ineffective – that is the point rightly made by authors like Messer and Conradie. At the same time, we need the two wings of traditional talk about the law – its elenctic (culpabilising) and educational functions – to become convinced of the seriousness of ecological sins and to learn to combat them in actual practice. It is helpful in this connection that they point us to our personal responsibility without suggesting that we have to save the world.[9]

In this way, we may retrieve wisdom and guidance from earlier Christian sources and traditions for addressing the contemporary challenge of human-induced climate change. As the Protestant Reformers had learned from the tradition that preceded them, it is through the moral law – which tells us what we should and should not do – that we receive insight in our sinful condition. This moral law is in a rudimentary way given in human conscience, but it is clarified, reinforced and made explicit by God's commandments as recorded in Scripture. Today, we may consider that science informs the classical culpabilising role of the law by showing us the disastrous consequences of our consumerist lifestyle for the future of our planet. In other words, science shows us that human-induced climate change is sinful in that it is a culmination point of all sorts of traditional sins. Given our deep-seated unwillingness to give up this lifestyle, it seems that we cannot do with less than a concrete conversion from sin, fuelled by a profound desire to become the sort of persons that we are meant to be.

Conclusion

Combining the insights that were retrieved above, the following conclusions can be drawn, in line with the threefold structure (misery – salvation – gratitude) of the Heidelberg Catechism.

1. Our human involvement in climate change goes against the universal law of God and is contrary to God's will. It belongs to the sins that make us guilty before God and elicit God's wrath.
2. The good news of the gospel is that Christ died for the sins of the world, and when we hear and believe that news we may, with great relief, be fully assured that our sinful involvement in consumerist patterns of behaviour that contribute to today's climate change, have been forgiven and done away with by Christ's atoning work.
3. Thankful for their salvation, as part of their future-oriented life Christians come to hate all sinful behaviours that lead to climate change and do what they can to avoid participating in them. In the vivid language of the Catechism: they *flee* such behaviours as much as they can.

[9] *Pace* Wagenfuhr 2020, who, talking of the risk that God's plundered creation will eventually perish, argues that we should "do whatever it takes to prevent this" (187).

All of this, it seems, is implied in characterising human-induced climate change as sinful.[10]

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