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## Front Matter -- Quaker Religious Thought, no. 51

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# Quaker Religious Thought

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The purpose of the Quaker Theological Discussion Group is to explore the meaning and implications of our Quaker faith and religious experience through discussion and publication. This search for unity in the claim of truth upon us concerns both the content and the application of our faith.

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## *Editor's Page*

If this issue of *QRT* gives you a taste for "sin" — please don't! And don't despair if you think "perfection" in this life difficult. That's not as heretical as declaring it impossible!

On the other hand, if you are interested in more good reading that may help you fight your way through the "sin" question, I recommend Paul Ricoeur's *The Symbolism of Evil* (Harper & Row, 1967; Beacon paperback, 1969).

In the hope that you will find it useful, a brief summary of Part One follows. It deals with what Ricoeur calls the "primary symbols." These precede, and in a way underline, "myth," which is described as a kind of "secondary symbolism" articulated by narrative of a non-spatial, non-temporal nature.

Ricoeur takes the refinement of the consciousness of fault through several transmutations or transvaluations, beginning with "defilement," followed by "sin," and then "guilt." These symbols are "opaque," lacking the perfect transparency or preciseness of meaning found in algebraic or technical symbols. They translate, evoke, or suggest by enigma. And, where allegory represents a prolonged and developed interpretation, the symbols of fault have "analogical meanings which are spontaneously formed and immediately significant." Unlike the objective detachment required for a comparison, the symbol "makes us participate in the latent meaning . . . without our being able to master the similitude intellectually."

"Defilement," spoken of "under the symbol of a stain or blemish" is the "most primitive and least mythical" of the three primary symbols, yet it is already expressed in a highly figurative language. Defilement is "an act that involves an evil, an impurity, a fluid, a mysterious and harmful something that acts dynamically — that is to say, magically." Defilement is "a sort of filth [or 'uncleanness'] that harms by invisible properties, and works in the manner of a force in the field of our undividedly psychic and corporeal existence." It has an "irrational character which permits only an oblique approach," and it represents "a moment of consciousness that we have left behind . . . [an] archaic inventory of faults."

The Covenant is the matrix for "the dialogal situation at the heart of which [consciousness of] sin breaks forth." Sin is

not something the prophet "reflects" on, he "prophesies" against it. "The biblical discovery of sin does not reside in the measuring of faults by a code" nor is the "biblical 'message' to be sought in the direction of... elaboration of codes." Sin represents "something beyond enumeration" of faults, an "inner obedience of the heart." To ignore this is to "fall back into moralism." Furthermore, "the consciousness of sin, through the symbol of the Day of Yahweh... reveals its other pole: the Lord of History."

Surprisingly, "the Hebrew Bible does not have any abstract word to express sin, but a bundle of concrete abstractions:" (a) *chattat*, "missing the mark," (b) *awon*, "a tortuous road," neither of which has reference to the "motive of the act and the inner quality of the agent"; (c) a third root, *pesha*, which denotes "rebellion, revolt, stiff-neckedness"; (d) finally, *shayah*, which designates precisely "having gone astray," being lost, and "forecasts the modern symbols of alienation and dereliction."

The end of the chain of primary symbols is "guilt," the consciousness of which "constitutes a veritable revolution in the experience of evil." Defilement is no longer the reality, but the "evil use of liberty, felt as an internal diminution of the value of self." The most radical of possibilities in an accompanying demand for perfection "are suddenly reduced to the pure and simple alternative: God or nothing." The Covenant has been transformed by the prophets "from a simple juridical contract between Yahweh and his people into a personal accusation and adjuration... the individualization of imputation." And with this individualization of fault the idea arises that "guilt has degrees, whereas sin... is or is not."

It is significant also that "the OT has no abstract word for repentance, but the symbol of 'return'... return to God, freely chosen... always open... a slow and progressive process of salvation in which 'pardon' is not lacking."

In dealing with sin, St. Paul uses "the symbol of the enslaved body," a self-enslavement, an "obliterated freedom," in which the body is "a building from which the builder has withdrawn." Ultimately, seduction is an "auto-infection," a "yielding of myself to slavery and the reign over myself of the power of evil."

Yet "however radical evil may be, it cannot be as *primordial* as goodness" and it is "not symmetrical with the good," but "the staining, the darkening, the disfiguring of an innocence, a light, and a beauty that remain."

D. F.