



## A Feminist Reconstruction of the Doctrine of Sin: A Sociology of Religion Perspective

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**Abstract.** The doctrine of sin occupies a central place in Christian theology, yet its historical formulations have often been shaped by androcentric assumptions that obscure or marginalise women's experiences. This paper undertakes a feminist reconstruction of the doctrine of sin, critically examining how traditional interpretations have perpetuated hierarchical structures and legitimised gender oppression. Drawing on feminist theological discourse, hermeneutical strategies, and socio-ethical critique, the study redefines sin not merely as personal moral transgression but as a complex reality manifested in systemic injustice, relational disintegration, and institutionalised violence—particularly against women. By interrogating patriarchal readings of scripture and doctrine, this work demonstrates how feminist perspectives unveil sin as both individual and structural, exposing complicity in sustaining oppressive power dynamics. The reconstructed doctrine proposed here affirms the lived realities of women, reorients the understanding of sin towards liberation and justice, and contributes to a more holistic theological anthropology. In doing so, it advances a framework in which resistance to domination and the pursuit of mutuality become integral dimensions of Christian discipleship. This study examines the concept of sin within Christian theology through a feminist lens, challenging traditional interpretations that have often reinforced patriarchal structures and marginalized women's experiences. By engaging with classical theologians and feminist scholars, this paper reconstructs sin as both personal and structural, emphasizing injustice, oppression, and broken relationships. The study proposes a liberative understanding of sin that prioritizes injustice, equality and the full humanity of all persons.

**Keywords:** Sin, Oppression, Patriarchy, Gender Justice, Christian Theology.

### 1. Introduction

Sin is one of the most enduring and contested categories in Christian theology. From the early Church fathers through the Reformers and into contemporary theology, sin has been described as humanity's rebellion against God, the distortion of creation's harmony, and the root of alienation between persons and communities (Johnson, 1982).

Yet the doctrine of sin as traditionally formulated has often reflected androcentric assumptions, universalising male experience while minimizing or misrepresenting the lived realities of women. The result has been a theological framework that, rather than liberating, has frequently reinforced patriarchal domination, legitimized gender inequality, and perpetuated the silencing of women's voices within both church and society (Townes et al., 2006)

The meaning of human evil or Sin can only be fully grasped in terms of the true purpose of human existence. We have been created by God for himself, and in nothing short of the possession of God will the desire of our immortal souls find their ultimate satisfaction. But the possession of God is so utterly beyond the capacity of our created human nature that such a glorious goal would be unthinkable without a special grace from God which would transform it into a super-nature, making us God-like so that we could become sharers in his divinity (Daly, 1973). We know that this indeed is our true destiny, for the real Son of God became man, so that men could become sons of God by adoption (Heyword, 1999). He deigned to become sharers in our humanity, so that we could become sharers of his divinity. And this is effected by the Sacrament of baptism, which enables us to partake of the fruits of the redemption (Johnson, 1982).

Feminist theology emerges as a critical and reconstructive lens through which to revisit the

doctrine of Sin. Rather than reducing sin to personal moral failure, feminist thought insists on attending to the structural, relational, and systemic dimensions of brokenness that affect women disproportionately. Issues such as sexism, gender-based violence, economic exploitation, and cultural erasure are not merely "social problems" but theological realities that unveil Sin in its most concrete and devastating forms (Plaskow, 1983). By interrogating patriarchal interpretations of scripture and tradition, feminist theology exposes how theological constructions of Sin can themselves participate in Sin, sustaining cycles of domination and exclusion (Pagels, 1978).

This study therefore seeks to reconstruct the doctrine of Sin from a feminist view. It argues that any credible theology of sin must affirm women's full humanity, account for the complexity of relational and systemic oppression, and reorient the conversation toward liberation and justice. Reconstructing sin in this way not only broadens theological anthropology but also deepens Christian discipleship by calling both women and men to resist domination and embody communities of equality, mutuality and healing (Pagels, 1978).

## 2. We are all Sinners

Humanity, in its entirety, bears the mark of sin (Genesis 3). Both men and women share equally in this condition, for as Scripture testifies: "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us" (1 John 1:8). Sin is therefore a universal reality, not confined to any particular gender. However, in many contemporary contexts, women are often disproportionately portrayed as the embodiment of SIN while men are subtly or openly exonerated (Augustine). This distorted perception is deeply rooted in patriarchal cultural and social systems that fail to recognize the shared sinful condition of all humanity.

According to Catholic doctrine, even after baptism, *fomes peccati*—the inclination of sin remains within the soul, a reminder of humanity's wounded nature resulting from original sin and its susceptibility to actual sins (Congar, 2004). To single out women as the exclusive bearer of sin as we see in some cultures is not only theologically inaccurate but also a grave injustice that undermines the universal scope of divine grace offered through Christ (Ratzinger, 2004). Such tendency blinds humanity to divine realities and diminishes the redemptive work of Christ, who came for all sinners without distinction. However, to single out women as the sole bearers of sin is not only unjust but a profound distortion of moral responsibility. Such a claim imposes a disproportionate burden on women,

absolving others of accountability and reinforcing structures of inequality. In any society that aspires to justice, fairness must be grounded in the recognition of shared human agency and fallibility. Moreover, to isolate women as uniquely culpable is therefore both ethically indefensible and socially corrosive. An idea that ought to be firmly rejected in any culture committed to truth, dignity, and equality.

The Vatican Council further illuminated this truth by affirming that the human condition is marked by an inner division: "man is split within himself." Thus, every human life—whether male or female, individual or collective—is characterized by a dramatic struggle between good and evil, light and darkness. Recognizing this "shared struggle" is essential for a proper theological anthropology of sin and remains faithful to the inclusive scope of salvation (Ratzinger, 2004).

### 2.1 The Bible, Church, Sin, and Women

Scholarly engagement with the Bible, particularly from Feminist perspectives, has highlighted the complex ways in which women are represented in scripture and within the life of the church. Certain Gospel narratives have raised questions regarding their fairness towards women. For instance, in the account of the feeding of the five thousand, the text explicitly mentions the number of men but makes little or no reference to women and children (Schussler, 1983). This omission has been interpreted as reflecting the patriarchal context of ancient Jewish society, in which women were often rendered less visible in public records. Such a literary choice invites reflection on how cultural norms shaped the recording of biblical events and how these narratives continue to be read within the church today (Phyllis, 1984).

Similarly, the story of the woman caught in adultery (John 8:1-11) illustrates a pattern in which women are more prominently associated with sin. While the woman is brought forward for judgement, the man involved is not mentioned. This imbalance suggests the influence of social and legal conventions of the time, which often treated men and women differently in matters of morality. Although Jesus' response in the passage emphasizes compassion and challenges the accusers' self-righteousness, the initial framing of the event raises important questions about gender treatment in biblical narratives (Letty, 1974).

These examples underscore broader concerns regarding the perception of women in relation to sin and moral accountability. They do not necessarily imply that women are more sinful than men, but they

reflect cultural and historical contexts in which gender roles influenced how stories were recorded and transmitted (Letty, 1974). Contemporary scholarship, particularly within feminist theology, continues to explore these tensions with the aim of fostering more balanced interpretations that acknowledge both the historical background of the texts and their enduring theological significance.

### 3. Fundamentalists' Projection of Evil onto Eve and Women

The narrative of the talking serpent in Genesis, when read through literalist and fundamentalist interpretations, has often served as a symbolic projection of male anxieties and shadow attributes onto both God and women (Pagels, 1978). This approach reflects a form of psychological and theological transference, wherein male vindictiveness and suspicion are externalized upon the divine and subsequently upon the female gender (Tertullian, 1994).

The *imago Dei*, which affirms that both man and woman are created in the image and likeness of God, has historically been distorted. Instead of mutual equality, men arrogated divine likeness exclusively to themselves while denying its fullness in women. This distortion is well exemplified in the writings of Augustine and Tertullian. Augustine argued that God created the male first, and the female from his side, as a symbolic indicator of superiority and subordination, an interpretation that justified hierarchical gender roles both physically and socially (Augustine, 1991).

Such theological reasoning, rooted in patriarchal exegesis, continues to shape Christian thought and ecclesiastical structures. The notions of women's inferiority and heightened susceptibility to sin, derived from Eve's role in the fall, remains deeply embedded in Christian consciousness and institutional practice, even into the late twentieth century (Fiorenza, 1983). On the other hand, Eve's role in the fall of Adam is unmistakable; yet, it is equally evident that Adam, as a moral agent, had the capacity and responsibility to exercise self-control and resist her persuasion. To lay the entire blame at Eve's feet is therefore unjust. Adam could have asserted his autonomy and upheld his conviction by refusing that invitation. The failure, then, is not hers alone, but a shared lapse in judgment and responsibility.

The result has been a persistent reinforcement of women's subordination, perpetuated by Church authorities who maintain these doctrinal positions despite the liberative message of the Christ event

(Ruether, 1983). Thus, the projection of evil onto Eve and women, institutionalized through theology and culture, reveals not only a misinterpretation of the scripture but also a longstanding mechanism of patriarchal control within Christianity.

### 4. Patriarchal and Neo-Modernist Misconceptions about Sin

In contemporary theological debates, the concept of Sin has become a contested subject, particularly in relation to gender. The patriarchal system, both within and outside the Christian Church, has historically employed the category of sin in ways that disproportionately implicate women. From Eve's portrayal in the Genesis narrative to the persistent association of women with temptation and moral weakness, patriarchal theology has often constructed sin as a gendered reality (Townes, 2006). This tendency has fostered an organized ideological campaign that subtly seeks to retain patriarchal dominance while simultaneously downplaying the broader theological implications of sin (Trible, 1984). While it may be argued that men's tendency to shift blame solely onto women reflects a deeper pattern of irresponsibility, this paper contends that culpability must be understood as mutual rather than unilateral. The narrative of blame, when disproportionately placed on women, reveals not only amoral imbalance but also a cultural habit of evasion, one that absolves men of accountability while reinforcing gendered stereotypes.

This tendency mirrors a broader social disposition in which failure is feminized and success is masculinized; when outcomes are negative, responsibility is projected onto women; when outcomes are favourable, men readily claim the credit. Such pattern is not merely unjust, it distorts moral reasoning, undermines relational integrity, and perpetuates an unequal framework of judgment. A more critical and ethically grounded perspective demands that both men and women be held accountable as not a burden to be displaced but a shared obligation that reflects the complexity of human action and choice. Only through this balance lens can justice be meaningfully pursued within both theological reflection and social reality.

The result is a distortion of Christian teaching that either trivializes the seriousness of sin or confines it within a framework that reinforces male privilege. At the same time, neo-modernist currents in theology and philosophy have introduced errors that seek to abolish the notion of sin altogether, replacing it with secular categories of social dysfunction, psychological

imbalance, or cultural conditioning. While such perspectives aim to modernize theology, they often fail to account for the depth of the Christian doctrine of sin as a rupture in humanity's relationship with God (Johnson, 1982). Feminist theologians argue that both patriarchal misrepresentations and neo-modernist reductions of sin are inadequate, as they ignore the lived realities of women and the structural injustices perpetuated by sin in society (Jones, 2000).

From a feminist theological perspective, sin must be understood as a universal condition that affects all humanity equally, without being weaponized against women. Scholars such as Rosemary Radford Ruether emphasized that patriarchal theology has historically obscured the systemic dimensions of sin, particularly in relation to sexism, oppression, and exploitation (Radford, 1983). Similarly, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza argues for a liberationist reading of sin that highlights its structural and communal dimensions rather than reducing it to individual moral failures or gendered blame (Schüssler, 1983). Feminist theology thus reclaims the doctrine of sin by shifting the discourse from patriarchal control to a holistic vision of human fallenness, which calls for liberation, justice, and reconciliation.

Reconsidering Moral Conscience Beyond the Gendered Attribution of Sin to Women

The persistent portrayal of women as the sole perpetrators of sin and evil reflects a serious crisis of moral conscience within thought and practice. When those in positions of authority lose sight of the universality of sin and the universality of God's mercy, they risk distorting the moral vision of the faith (Valerie, 1960). Such views imply that only women are in need of divine forgiveness, while men are presumed exempt from sin; a perspective that is both theologically incomplete and ethically problematic (Valerie, 1960). Much of the discourse that associates sin primarily with women appears disconnected from the light of divine revelation, shaped instead by pride and cultural prejudice (McCabe, MH, 2003). This distortion blinds the conscience and undermines the Christians understanding of sin as a reality shared by all humanity (McCabe, MH, 2003). In the twenty-first century, continuing to label women as the primary agents of sin is not only unjust but also contrary to the very heart of the Christian message, which calls all believers to repentance and renewal. True moral conscience must remain rooted in the awareness of real good and evil, inseparable from divine truth and the universality of God's mercy. Without such grounding, conscience risks authorizing false judgements that perpetuate gendered injustice (Berry, 1954). A renewed recognition is needed: women are

not simply "sinners" to be blamed but equal partners with men in the journey of faith and the pursuit of eternal destiny. Therefore, the reduction of women to the sole perpetrators of sin reflects a crisis of moral conscience within Christianity, distorting the universality of sin and undermining the shared call of all humanity to God's mercy. To view women as the primary source of sin is a theologically flawed and morally unjust position; true Christian conscience must recognize both men and women as equal participants in sin and in God's redemptive mercy.

## 5. Venial Sin

In Catholic theology, sin is understood as an offense against God's love and law. The church makes a fundamental distinction between Mortal Sin and Venial Sin. According to the Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC 1854-1864), Venial Sin does not destroy the divine life of grace in the soul as mortal sin does, but it nevertheless weakens charity, obstructs the soul's progress in virtue, and predisposes the individual to fall into graver faults (Hardon, 1980). Venial sin may arise either from lesser violations of God's law or from serious matters committed without full knowledge or deliberate consent (Hardon, 1980). The church emphasis that venial sin, while "lesser", should not be treated as insignificant (Karl, 1992). It damages a person's relationship with God and others, even though it does not sever communion with God entirely. Through prayer, acts of charity, reception of the Eucharist, and sacraments, Venial sins are forgiven, though the sacrament of reconciliation remains a privilege means of healing (Karl, 1992). Some theologians argue that any sin, regardless of degree, is fundamentally an affront to God's holiness, hence "Sin is sin" (Joseph, 2004). However, the Catholic tradition maintains the distinctions in order to preserve both the seriousness of mortal sin and the reality that, while real sins, do not constitute a total rupture of one's covenant with God (Thomas Aquinas). In summary, venial sin in Catholic tradition is best understood not as "Small sin" in a trivial sense but as a real moral failing that wounds rather than breaks the life of grace (Thomas Aquinas). Its danger lies in spiritual complacency: unchecked venial sin can dispose the soul towards graver offences, underscoring the need for continued conversion.

### 5.1 The Church's View on Mortal Sin

In Catholic doctrine, Mortal Sin is the gravest category of sin. According to the Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC 1855-1861), mortal sin "destroys charity in the heart of man by a grave violation of God's law; it turns man away from God, who is his

ultimate end and beatitude" (CCC 1857). The effects of mortal sin are profound: It serves the life of sanctifying grace, places the soul in a state of spiritual death, and if unrepented, leads to eternal separation from God (hell). Unlike Venial Sin, which wounds the soul, mortal sin ruptures the covenantal relationship between the sinner and God. The Church stresses that repentance through the Sacrament of Reconciliation is necessary for restoration (Joseph, 2004).

## 6. Scholarly Perspectives

**St. Augustine (354–430):** Augustine regarded mortal sin as a willful turning away from God toward created goods. He highlighted the element of pride (Superbia) as the root of grave sin, emphasizing the sinner's conscious rejection of divine order (Confessions, City of God).

**Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274):** In the *Summa Theologica* (1-11, Q.88), Aquinas distinguishes between mortal and venial sin in relation to charity. For him, mortal sin is incompatible with charity because it directs the will against God as the ultimate end. He viewed mortal sin as "spiritual death," parallel to how bodily death occurs when the soul is separated from the body.

**Council of Trent (1545–1563):** The Council reinforced the traditional teaching by condemning the notion that all sins are equal. It taught that mortal sins must be confessed individually in the Sacrament of Penance, underscoring their serious rupture of divine friendship.

**Contemporary Debate:** Some modern theologians note that while the distinction between mortal and venial sin is doctrinal, there remains a pastoral Challenge: Many believers underestimate Venial Sin as "minor," while others overemphasize mortal sin in a legalistic sense (Servais, 1987). Scholars such as Germain Grisez and Servais Pinckaers call for understanding mortal sin within the broader framework of freedom, responsibility, and growth in virtue, rather than as isolated legal infractions (Grisez, 1983).

The Church teaches that mortal sin is a grave rupture of the human-divine relationship, requiring conscious choice and serious matter. While tradition firmly distinguishes mortal sin from venial sin, scholars across history—from Augustine and Aquinas to Rahner and Ratzinger—stress that mortal sin is ultimately about the heart's orientation toward or away from God. Thus, it is not merely a "legal" concept but

a theological reality concerning human freedom, grace, and eternal destiny (Grisez, 1983).

## 7. Conclusion

Sin is a universal reality that transcends gender distinctions. Scripture makes it clear that "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). To reduce the burden of sin to women alone is a distortion of the Genesis narrative, where both Adam and Eve participated in disobedience (Genesis 3:6-7).

Moreover, Paul underscores that "through one man sin entered the world" (Romans 5:12), showing that men, too, bear responsibility. The persistence of patriarchal thought that blames women as the sole originators of sin not only contradicts biblical teaching but also blinds humanity to the necessity of collective repentance. True reconciliation with God demands humility, the acknowledgement of shared guilt, and dependence on divine mercy.

In truth, sin is not the burden of one gender but the condition of all humanity. To single out women as the origin of sin is not only a distortion of Scripture but also a denial of the shared responsibility that both men and women carry before God.

The refusal to admit this truth often springs from pride, which binds the heart to repentance and the need for divine mercy. Genuine repentance requires humility; the acknowledgement that every human being, regardless of gender, is fallen and in need of God's grace. Clinging to patriarchal notions that stigmatize women as the sole creators of sin undermines the Gospel message of universal accountability and universal salvation. Therefore, men and women alike must see themselves as equal participants in sin and in redemption, called not to accuse one another but to walk together in humility, repentance, and the transforming mercy of God.

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