

sins, cultural and real, LeGrand Baker

One of the greatest powers in any culture is the authority to define what is—and what is not—sin. Those who have that power use it to obtain money, property and political influence. In a righteous society, the money is used to build temples and to bless the poor. The Book of Mormon says “priestcraft” is one’s using the power to define sin as a source of one’s own self-aggrandizement. It is often so that people will give honors and a great deal of money to anyone who can convincingly teach them that their favorite vices are not sins—or else that are ways to divert the consequence of sin without repentance—or else that there is no such thing as sin, so there can be no such thing as eternal punishment.

There are two kinds of sin, cultural sins and real sins. Cultural sins are the ones that are defined by those who define sin, and often the greater punishment is attached to committing them. An example of a cultural sin is that people were burned at the stake for reading the Bible. Real sins are the kind that cankers one’s soul. An example of real sin is that those who accused their neighbors of reading the Bible were usually the same people who got their neighbor’s property when the burning had ended. It was legally endorsed murder to get gain. property after they were burned. In apostate religions there is almost always greater punishment for cultural sins than for real sins.

The religions/political struggle over who could define and enforce the punishment for sin was at the very root of the Protestant Reformation. In our time, it is the most important question in American politics. The conflict is between the Christian right who are eager to define everyone else’s sins and the Liberal left, many of whom insist there is no such thing as religiously sin. And, as has always been so, they each seek to use the powers of government to enforce their beliefs.

The Book of Mormon says nothing about cultural sin. Rather, it clearly differentiates between good and evil—real sin and real virtue. Because that is true, the book’s message it is equally relevant to every person in every culture, in every part of the world.

The definition of sin is the dominate, undergirding characteristic of every culture. Those who preside at a temple or other place of worship define, and provide continuity and stability to their culture. That is why, when prophets attempt to encroach on the doctrines of an apostate religion, they are often met with all the opposition both church and state can inflict upon them. That is also why, in a righteous society, the teaching that radiate from the temple can create Zion

As far as I can tell, one does not have to experience sin, but one does have to be exposed to the consequences of sin. That can happen in a variety of ways.

The normal designations of sins are sins of commission and sins of omission. This works, of course, but the generalizations seem to me to me to be too big to be useful.

It seems to me that sins of commission can be further subdivided into three areas.

- 1) Premeditated acts with the intent of hurting someone else.
- 2) Premeditated acts with the intent of gratify one's own desires.
- 3) Acts that are designed to control another person. (Hamlet's "I am cruel only to be kind." I suspect some of the most egregious sins are the "good" things one does, justified on the grounds that he is wiser than the person he is trying to "help.")
- 4) Foolish, but otherwise unpremeditated acts that cause sorrow.