

THE ACKNOWLEDGED REALITY OF SIN

Poets and philosophers often become very eloquent in their description of the nobility of human beings, or the spirit they can show, of the quality approaching the divine displayed in their greatest works of art, and music, and building, and medicine, and literature- and all-conquering science. The Greek poet Sophocles says at the beginning of one of his choruses in the *Antigone*: "Wonders there are many, but not one of them is as wonderful as the human being."

But people generally know very well that this divine creature is also very much of a devil. When the Bible says: "*None is righteous, no not one; no one understands, no one seeks for God. All have turned aside, together they have gone wrong: no one does good, not even one* (Romans 3: 10-12), well, everyone agrees. What person of history with a fair name (including Jesus) have biographers not debunked? You could not declare in company that either Mr X or Miss Y was really a good person without being immediately contradicted by somebody. The point is, we know ourselves so well that we cannot permit anyone to get away with a good reputation. We just don't believe that a good person exists; there are bound to be feet of clay around. Imperfection and sin- and even serious vice are there waiting to be revealed and brought to general knowledge. Revelation of evil in supposedly good people has happened so often that we are confirmed in our opinion of the wickedness of humankind.

It is often stated by theologians that the thought of human corruption is something accepted only by Christian people, that the greatness of evil and wickedness in the human race can be grasped and accepted only through the action of the converting Spirit of God. But I know from personal encounter that there are downright enemies of the Christian faith who have no trouble at all with the thought of a general human wickedness. They know the world, they know history, they know the human race and all the evil it has wrought in the past, and the atrocities it continues to perpetrate in the present, and they have no doubt at all that the human race is at bottom bad, corrupt, rotten, and that all human supposed-virtues are really only vices in disguise. There are plenty of people around who believe all this of specific nations or races of people on every continent of our globe. Psychoanalysis is a good example of how the human person is often seen in this world: a seething mass of instinctive, selfish passions kept in control with great difficulty. Even what looks like a virtue is only an unacceptable desire in an acceptable form.

[From H Hamann, *On Being a Christian*, Adelaide: Lutheran Publishing House, 1989, pages 27-32, slightly adapted]