

Sin in Non-Religious Ears: A Mixed-Methods Study in Aotearoa NZ

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ABSTRACT

Following a review of relevant popular, scientific, philosophical and theological literature, participants in a wide survey of Non-Religious New Zealanders (NRNZs) along with participants in targeted interviews of NRNZs working in the field of neurology, were asked about their own views of sin and human nature, and their evaluation of what they understood to be mainstream Christian views on sin. The neurologists were asked an extra question about moral responsibility in light of neurological accounts of behavior, which was an issue arising from the literature. The neurologists interviewed denied that neurological explanation of behavior rendered the notion of moral responsibility unnecessary. The questionnaire for both the interviews and survey was primarily qualitative, though some questions were quantitative even though participants were allowed to answer in their own wording. The vertical content analysis of data collated from both the survey and interviews followed grounded theory and yielded identifiable categories and themes. An unplanned observation was that respondents self-identifying as 'atheist' had the highest strike-rate of sarcastic or condescending comments, which I've called 'jabs'. Concluding the essay are a few considerations for improved communication of the doctrine of sin, and recommendations for further research in this area.

RESEARCH AIMS

What do Non-Religious people in Aotearoa New Zealand (NRNZs) think about sin? Do they hear what we think we're saying when we talk about sin? What is we just asked them? According to Shannon & Weaver's well-established theory, communication is incomplete without a feedback loop.¹ So then, at the most immediate level, this piece of research is centrally a listening exercise which aims to complete this communicative loop: to simply discover what NRNZs think, both about the topic of sin and human nature, and about what they've heard from Christians about sin. At the level of application, the data, observations and conclusions will aid Christians in the task of communicating the Gospel in general, and the doctrine of sin in particular, within Aotearoa New Zealand. If we are to communicate well, we must listen well.

LITERATURE REVIEW

CULTURE, SOCIETY & LANGUAGE. Sin is still a shame; a shame to religiously obsess over, or a shame to miss out on! Globally, Dawkins calls the Christians focus on "sin sin sin sin sin sin" a "nasty little preoccupation to have dominating your

¹ Claude Elwood Shannon, *The Mathematical Theory of Communication* (University of Illinois, 1949).

life.”(Dawkins, 285)² Locally, a *NZ Herald* column this year teased readers to ‘Thank God for Deadly Sins.’³ ‘Sin-sational’ experiences and consumer products are “deliciously and enticingly ‘naughty’.”⁴

Western culture, including Aotearoa New Zealand, is religion-free, ‘secular’ and ‘spiritual’.⁵ The new cultural ‘spirituality’ is “practical and personal. It’s more about stress reduction than salvation, more therapeutic than theological. It’s about feeling good, not being good.”⁶ In New Zealand, “poets, artists and writers have become our ‘theologians’ as they express and articulate our identity and spirituality.”⁷

Derek Nelson helpfully notes that sin-talk is seen as pessimistic, arbitrary, inapplicable and judgmental.⁸ Instead of using the language of ‘sin’, people are corrected for, and expected to correct, their ‘misconduct’ or behaviour that is deemed ‘abusive’, ‘inappropriate’, or ‘unfair’.⁹ In a ‘narcissistic age’, writes Donald Capps, ‘depleted selves’ are not sinners, but victims of shame.¹⁰

At the level of preaching, some voices in the church have shifted with these trends. For American Episcopalian Bishop John Shelby Spong, humanity was not “created good only to fall into sin... We are... victimized by the unfinished nature of our humanity.”¹¹ Similarly, local Anglican Glynn Cardy denies that salvation is about “individual sins being ‘cleansed by the blood of Jesus’.”¹² According to Marsha Witten’s study of Southern Baptist and Presbyterian sermons, even among less ‘liberal’ church voices, sin is deflected, weakened and sympathised with.¹³ Mary Grey seeks a “common language” to talk of sin in a way that “rouse[s] our communal

² Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2008), 285.

³ Noelle McCarthy, “Thank God for Deadly Sins,” *New Zealand Herald*, March 15, 2008, sec. Opinion, n.p. [cited 30 May 2013]. Online:

http://www.nzherald.co.nz/opinion/news/article.cfm?c_id=466&objectid=10498270.

⁴ Chris J. Duthie-Jung, “Sin in a Secular World,” in *A Thinker’s Guide to Sin: Talking About Wrongdoing Today* (ed. Neil Darragh; Auckland, NZ: Accent Publications, 2010), 20.

⁵ Lloyd George Geering, *In Praise of the Secular* (St. Andrew’s Trust for the Study of Religion & Society, 2007), 45–54.

⁶ Cathrin Schaer, “The Modern Search for Spirituality,” *New Zealand Herald*, July 29, 2000, n.p. [cited 21 May 2013]. Online: http://www.nzherald.co.nz/cathrin-schaer/news/article.cfm?a_id=48&objectid=145956.

⁷ Paul Morris, “Who Are We? New Zealand Identities and Spirituality,” in *New Zealand Identities: Departures And Destinations* (ed. James Hou-fu Liu; Wellington, NZ: Victoria University Press, 2005), 251.

⁸ Derek R. Nelson, *Sin: A Guide for the Perplexed* (Continuum International Publishing Group, 2011), 3ff.

⁹ Neil Darragh, “The Problem with Talking About Sin Today,” in *A Thinker’s Guide to Sin: Talking About Wrongdoing Today* (ed. Neil Darragh; Auckland, NZ: Accent Publications, 2010), 16–17.

¹⁰ Donald Capps, *The Depleted Self: Sin in a Narcissistic Age* (Fortress Press, 1993), 71ff.

¹¹ John Shelby Spong, “Reforming Christology: He Did Not Die for My Sins!,” *Human Quest*, December 1999, 7.

¹² Glynn Cardy, “Sin in the City: a St. Matthew’s Perspective,” in *A Thinker’s Guide to Sin: Talking About Wrongdoing Today* (ed. Neil Darragh; Auckland, NZ: Accent Publications, 2010), 50.

¹³ Marsha G. Witten, “Preaching About Sin in Contemporary Protestantism,” *Theology Today* 50, no. 2 (1993): 243; Marsha G. Witten, *All Is Forgiven* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).

consciousness – already drowsy with the opiates of consumerism and hedonism – to some dimension of ultimacy in its language of right and wrong.”¹⁴

SECULARISATION, POLITICS & CRIME. The secularisation of language about sin in popular discourse is accompanied by the secularisation of laws about sin in political discourse. Voters “were rejecting previous constrictions on their personal behaviour and insisting on the legislators giving them the secular legislation they wanted.”¹⁵ Non-religious societies increasingly treated wrongdoing not as religious ‘sin’, but as moral ‘crime’.¹⁶ Sin is only “addressed as crime and its existence is very much in doubt in the secular society.”¹⁷ Globally and locally in New Zealand, secularisation has pushed religion into private life – particularly in the area of church-state relations.¹⁸

PSYCHOTHERAPY, SELF-ESTEEM & WELLBEING. Psychotherapeutic practice and language has been particularly critical of “organised religion” which has created “clients who feel depressed, guilty, inferior, or jealous”, and see themselves as “sinful or wicked persons rather than imperfect persons.”¹⁹ This fear that sin damages self-esteem, reflects the modern “belief in the innate goodness of the self or the actualizing tendency.”²⁰ Cooper describes some forms of modern psychotherapy as a new “religion of the hidden psyche” where “therapist-priest[s]” give salvific revelations of our “true person” cloaked in the “unconscious”.²¹ Christian psychiatrist, Karl Menninger has considered what a Christian approach to sin and guilt might be.²² Locally, Darragh offers a helpful distinction between ‘disabling’ guilt, which indeed does more harm than good, and ‘enabling’ guilt, which helps people progress toward wellbeing.²³

SCIENCE, PHILOSOPHY & HUMAN NATURE. Scientific accounts of human behaviour, from neurology, biochemistry and evolutionary sociology, are increasingly seen as

¹⁴ Mary Grey, “Falling into Freedom: Searching for New Interpretations of Sin in a Secular Society,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 47, no. 02 (1994): 224–225.

¹⁵ Kay Carmichael, *Sin and Forgiveness: New Responses in a Changing World* (Ashgate Publishing, Ltd., 2003), 55.

¹⁶ F.L. Cross and Elizabeth Livingstone, eds., “Sin,” *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 1515.

¹⁷ Mark Jones and Peter Johnstone, *History of Criminal Justice* (Elsevier, 2011), 138; Man Kei Ho, *Suffering, Obedience and the Origin of Sin* (Xulon Press, 2010), 18.

¹⁸ Rex J. Ahdar and John Stenhouse, eds., *God and Government: The New Zealand Experience* (University of Otago Press, 2000).

¹⁹ Paul A. Hauck, “RET and the Assertive Process,” in *Using Rational-Emotive Therapy Effectively: A Practitioner’s Guide* (ed. Michael E. Bernard; New York: Springer, 1991), 216.

²⁰ Terry D. Cooper, *Sin, Pride & Self-Acceptance: The Problem of Identity in Theology & Psychology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 14.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 23, emphasis in original.

²² Karl A Menninger, *Whatever Became of Sin?* (New York: Hawthorn Books, 1973).

²³ Darragh, “The Problem with Talking About Sin Today,” 16, emphasis in original.

providing a *full* account of human nature.²⁴ Both guilty feelings and the (supposedly) guilty behaviour preceding it have gone under the microscope. For example, human capacity for awareness, mind and metacognition “give rise to the human capacities for shame and guilt and make their forms so open to social construction.”²⁵ Neurological studies showing causal correlation between brain damage (specifically to frontal lobe) and decreased moral ability raise questions about moral responsibility.²⁶ There is even the question of whether or not with “more and more compelling mechanistic accounts of behavior, societies will come to view wrongdoers as mere ‘victims of neuronal circumstances’.”²⁷

Richard J. Coleman argues against the philosophical assumptions of an “empirical reductionism” that would claim a full account of human nature and behaviour simply because “neurological signals can be detected” in subjects feeling guilt or shame.²⁸ Likewise, for John Barry, the phrase ‘It’s only human nature isn’t it’, “serves to both explain and close any discussion”, assuming that human nature “just is”, and that “nothing that can be done to alter it.”²⁹

The assumptions at play behind these questions go back to Enlightenment thinking of which John Locke, and his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* is a key example. His suggestion that the human mind was “a *tabula rasa*, or blank slate” had huge implications for human nature.³⁰ Sin was possible, but as a result of “social and especially economic conditions”, and not due to being “born in original sin and into a fallen world.”³¹ Furthermore, it was assumed that “any tendency toward evil within us can be eliminated”, thus making the doctrine of original sin appear unnecessary.³² Locke’s notion of the *tabula rasa*, however, now finds itself up against modern evidence that an “identifiable portion of our behavior is genetically influenced.”³³

²⁴ Ron Vannelli, *Evolutionary Theory And Human Nature* (Springer, 2001), 91–93; See also Janet R. Richards, *Human Nature after Darwin: a Philosophical Introduction* (Routledge, 2000).

²⁵ Paul Gilbert, “Evolution, Social Roles, and the Differences in Shame and Guilt,” *Social Research* 70, no. 4 (2003): 1226.

²⁶ Warren S. Brown, “Neurobiological Embodiment of Spirituality and Soul,” in *From Cells to Souls - And Beyond: Changing Portraits of Human Nature* (ed. Malcolm A. Jeeves; Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2004), 60.

²⁷ Nita A. Farahany, “Law and Behavioral Morality,” in *Evolution and Morality* (ed. James E. Fleming and Sanford Levinson; New York: NYU Press, 2012), 130.

²⁸ Richard J. Coleman, *Eden’s Garden: Rethinking Sin and Evil in an Era of Scientific Promise* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007), 218, emphasis in original.

²⁹ John Barry, *Environment and Social Theory*. (Routledge, 1999), 193.

³⁰ Kenneth L. Campbell, *Western Civilization: A Global and Comparative Approach, Since 1600* (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2012), 70.

³¹ Charlotte Dormandy, “The Flowering of the Romantic Spirit,” in *Spirituality and the Secular Quest* (ed. Peter Higbie Van Ness; New York: Crossroad, 1996), 171, 193–4.

³² Cooper, *Sin, Pride & Self-Acceptance*, 45.

³³ Harald E. L. Prins, Bunny McBride, and Dana Walrath, *Cultural Anthropology.: The Human Challenge* (Belmont, California: Cengage Learning, 2010), 132.

SCRIPTURE & THEOLOGY. Sin is an essential theme of Scripture. It is “the crucial inner-worldly reality” shaping all Scripture.³⁴ Leave out sin, and “the gospel of grace becomes impertinent, unnecessary, and finally uninteresting.”³⁵

Scripture provides a wealth of sin imagery. It is a *weight* or *burden* to be carried, and a *debt* to be repaid.³⁶ It is Deviation, Rebellion, Burden of Guilt in the Old Testament; and in the New Testament, Deviation, Sinners, Debt and Absence of Righteousness.³⁷ It is idolatry.³⁸ It is the ‘culpable’ attacking (actively) or abandoning (passively) of ‘shalom’.³⁹ It is to try to be more than or less than human: “Authentic human existence involves living in and for the image of God while fully aware that one comes from the dust. When this polarity becomes imbalanced in either direction, one falls into sin.”⁴⁰

Christian theology seeks to hold in tension the external and internal factors behind human sin. However vulnerable human nature is, sin is not so ‘inevitable’ that we are ‘hard-wired’ toward it.⁴¹ Neither is the fault entirely on the ‘nurture’ side. Social pressures shape our behaviour, but we participate with and form habits that align with them.⁴² For Plantinga Jr, the ‘evil’ in nature (and human nature) is to be distinguished from sin, which he succinctly calls “*culpable evil*.”⁴³

Human nature is thus a mixed bag: ‘ruined’, but still at least partially bearing God’s image and glory.⁴⁴ ‘Common grace’, whilst not regenerating human nature “preserves and enhances” it.⁴⁵ For D.A. Carson, “every expression of human culture simultaneously discloses that we are made in God’s image and shows itself to be mis-shaped and corroded by human rebellion against God.”⁴⁶

³⁴ R.R. Reno, “The Doctrine of Sin,” ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005), 748–49.

³⁵ Cornelius Plantinga, *Not the Way It’s Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin* (Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995), 199.

³⁶ Gary A. Anderson, *Sin: A History* (YALE University Press, 2010), 16ff, 27ff.

³⁷ Nelson, *Sin*, 18–31.

³⁸ Alistair McFadyen, *Bound to Sin: Abuse, Holocaust and the Christian Doctrine of Sin* (Cambridge University Press, 2000), 125.

³⁹ Plantinga, *Not the Way It’s Supposed to Be*, 197.

⁴⁰ Mark E. Biddle, *Missing the Mark: Sin And Its Consequences in Biblical Theology* (Abingdon Press, 2005), 75.

⁴¹ Cooper, *Sin, Pride & Self-Acceptance*, 38, 158.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 84–85; James K. A. Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom (Cultural Liturgies): How Worship Works* (Baker Books, 2013), 140–41.

⁴³ Cornelius Plantinga, *Engaging God’s World: A Christian Vision of Faith, Learning, and Living* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2002), 51; See also Plantinga, *Not the Way It’s Supposed to Be*, 18ff.

⁴⁴ Mark R. Talbot, “Learning from the Ruined Image: Moral Anthropology after the Fall,” in *Personal Identity in Theological Perspective* (ed. Richard Lints, Michael S. Horton, and Mark R. Talbot; Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2006), 176–77.

⁴⁵ Plantinga, *Engaging God’s World*, 58.

⁴⁶ D. A. Carson, *Christ and Culture Revisited* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2012), 49.

RESEARCH SAMPLE

The target sample for my study was Non-Religious New Zealanders (NRNZs), and specifically (as was indicated in research invitations) those with little or no experience within Christianity. New Zealanders were targeted simply due to it being a local study. The scope of this study not sufficient to achieve a representative sampling of NRNZs, but the number of responses and diversity of respondents was sufficient to achieve a body of data giving rise to identifiable themes and categories.

As for the 'Non-Religious' identifier, there were several factors at work. First, a sample of those who were merely non-Christian, was too broad, as other religions have understandings of sin that are at least somewhat continuous with Christianity, so 'Non-Religious' was preferred. The requirement to have little or no experience within Christianity was added to maintain as much of an 'outsider' perspective as possible. Neurologists were chosen for the interviews due to the point of interest with regard to the relevance of the notion of moral responsibility in the shadow of neurological accounts of human behaviour. One additional question was asked of them, and in hindsight it could have been useful to include this question in the survey as well.

DATA COLLECTION METHODS

The central research instrument designed for this project was a simple questionnaire (see Appendices section) for use both in the survey and the interviews. Both in survey and interview form, questions a), 1 and 2 lean toward a quantitative approach, but because they allow for non-prescribed responses, they are not entirely so. The remainder of the questionnaire is qualitative, thus making this a mixed-methods study.⁴⁷

The wide survey was implemented using an online survey form. A pilot test of the survey proved useful and in addition to catching two typographical errors, led to changing one of the questions to allow a paragraph-long response. Making use of what is called snowballing, I posted a link to the survey twice on Facebook and emailed two personal friends, in both cases inviting any that qualify to fill it out, and also requesting their help in promoting the survey to any contacts they have that might qualify. The category of NRNZ was not quite a 'hidden population', but the requirement for 'little or no experience within Christianity' meant that snowball sampling was inevitable to find my contacts.⁴⁸ As planned, I closed the survey when the number of respondents exceeded thirty. The survey was 'live' from 22 July to 23 August.

⁴⁷ John W. Creswell, *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches* (SAGE, 2003).

⁴⁸ Rowland Atkinson and John Flint, "Snowball Sampling," in *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Social Science Research Methods* (ed. Michael S. Lewis-Beck, Alan E. Bryman, and Tim Futing Liao; SAGE, 2004), 1044.

Finding participants for the targeted interviews proved difficult. I looked for contact emails of neurologists at two universities in Auckland on their respective websites. I had hoped that I'd get more expressions of interest if I gave the estimated length of the interview (15 minutes) as well as offering a *koha* (donation) in the form of a \$10 café voucher. Out of 35 direct emails, I received expressions of interest from just three, one of which ended up unable to participate. In addition to general business of these neurologists, an additional factor seemed to be the topic. One participant commented that they were initially intimidated by the prospect of discussing sin. So the number of interviews was low at just two, but at least I could compare the results.

DATA ANALYSIS METHODS

I first combined the correlating responses for each question in the interviews and the survey into a single document, and then sorted the responses into themes and categories. As expected according to grounded theory, the process of reading and re-reading, coding and categorising the data, led to categories that naturally arose from the data itself, even though this process is necessarily an interpretive one.⁴⁹ The process of working first with the quantitative and then qualitative data roughly followed what is called Sequential Explanatory Strategy.⁵⁰ I also shared my categorisations with three qualified contacts, which confirmed the categories, and also provided helpful discussion of the limited scope of the project.

Despite the invitations and the introduction to the survey clearly spelling out the boundaries of my sample, the survey was filled out by one Christian (worldview descriptor was 'Jesus', accompanied by responses clearly reflecting Christian faith), one whose responses were littered with profanity and abuse and thus clearly 'junk data', and another who had very significant experience in Church for their entire upbringing. Bracketing or discarding data must only be done when there are clear reasons to do so, which I had, as all of these were outside my targeted sample.⁵¹

The process of data analysis also led me to another observation of the data that prompted me to do a statistical analysis.⁵² Several of the survey responses were supplemented by sarcastic, condescending or otherwise blunt remarks which I have called 'jabs'.⁵³ A general 'jab-rate' for the whole survey was determined, and then compared to the different 'jab-rates' for four statistically significant groupings. I then scanned the responses for cases where the respondent added a remark that was

⁴⁹ Willig Carla, *Introducing Qualitative Research In Psychology* (McGraw-Hill International, 2013), 70.

⁵⁰ Creswell, *Research Design*, 215.

⁵¹ See discussion in Johnny Saldana, *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers* (SAGE, 2012), 16ff.

⁵² David J. Harding and Kristin S. Seefeldt, "Mixed Methods and Causal Analysis," in *Handbook of Causal Analysis for Social Research* (ed. Stephen L. Morgan; Springer, 2013), 106.

⁵³ Surveys and interviews are likely to have different 'jab-rates', due to surveys being less personal, so the interview responses were not included in this analysis.

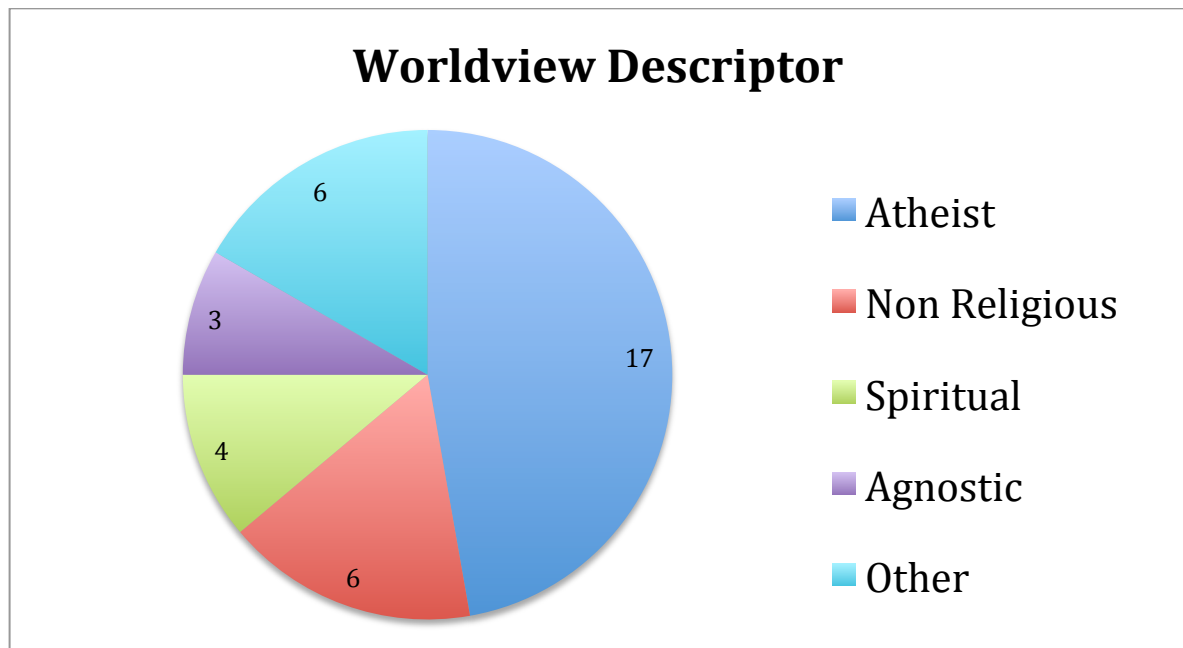
deliberately or otherwise unnecessarily kind or positive, which I called a 'compliment'; and of which I found only one, which unfortunately was too low to be statistically significant.

FINDINGS

As stated above, some questions leaned heavily in the quantitative direction, and the results from these will be presented below in charts with accompanying comments. Category listings along with representative examples will show the results from the qualitative questions.

Question a) Worldview Descriptor

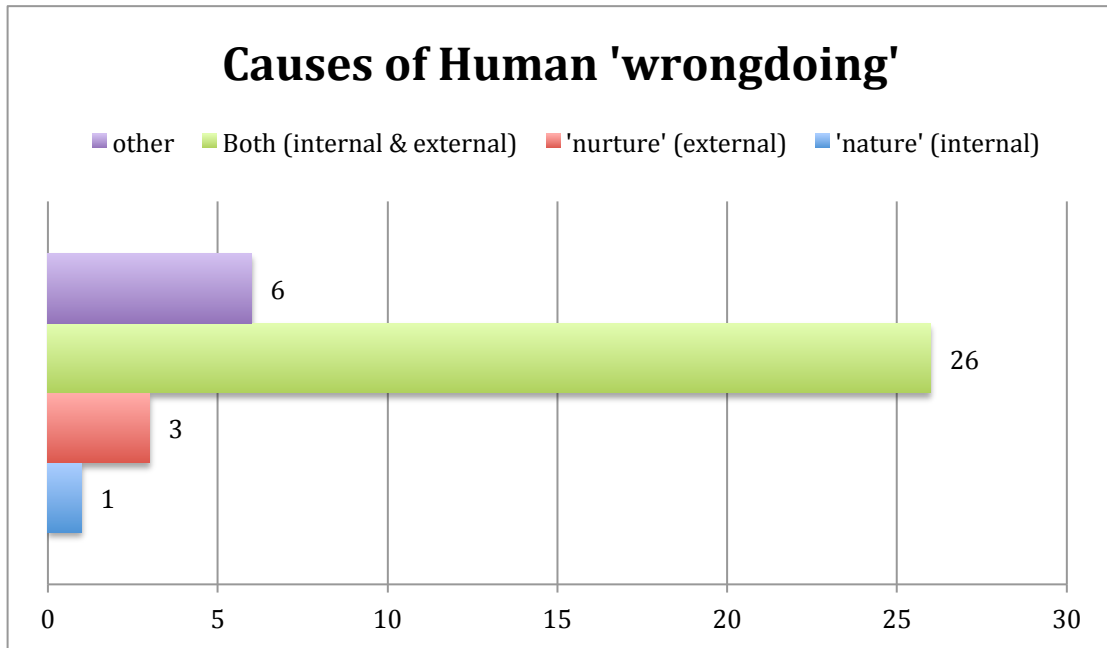
Of the 36 survey and interview respondents who qualified for the study, 17 (by far the largest category) self-identified as 'atheist'; including one 'anti-theist', one 'atheist with spiritual envy', and one 'agnostic atheist'. Some in the 'other' category (i.e. 'humanist' and 'skeptic' and 'realist') could possibly affirm some form of atheism as well. Since those identifying as 'non-religious' in Aotearoa New Zealand include everyone from atheists to agnostics, spiritual and spiritualists, Wiccan and a host of others (including some Christians opposed to 'organised religion'), I was hoping that my sample would at least avoid being dominated by one group. My project could not be of a scale sufficient to achieve a cross-section of the diversity among those identifying as 'non-religious', but I was pleased that four groupings (atheist, non-religious, spiritual, and agnostic) emerged.⁵⁴



⁵⁴ The label 'non-religious' was always going to be both an umbrella term for all participants, as well as a specific self-descriptor for some.

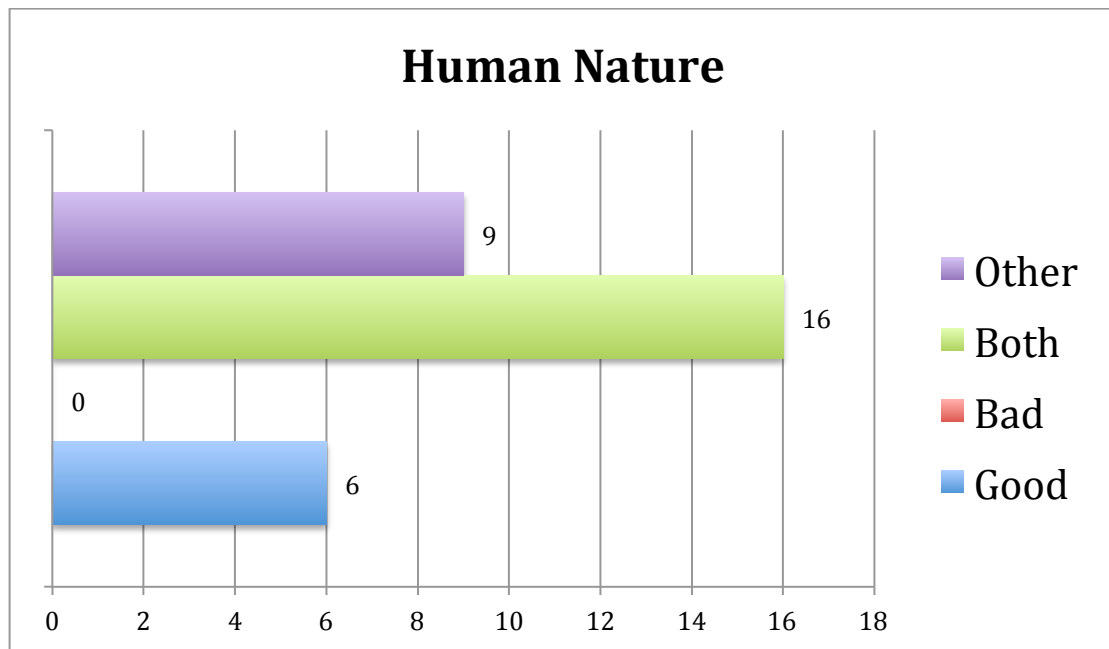
Question 1. Human 'wrongdoing' is caused by:

The overwhelming majority response of both survey and interview participants (72%) was that both 'nature' and 'nurture' (internal and external factors) were causative for human 'wrongdoing'. Just four respondents chose a side (3 'nurture'; 1 'nature'), while six opted to respond in their own words, for which there were no common themes.



Question 2. Human nature is...

At 16, the 'both' (good and bad) response was the clear winner for this question, however the responses were more evenly spread than the previous question. Among the nine responses in the 'other' category, seven either said 'neither' (or words to that effect), and two said that human nature 'just is', both of which are an implicit or explicit negation that human nature can or should be valued qualitatively.



Question 3. Who/What most shaped your answers to Questions 1 & 2?

The most common category of sources given was 'studies' ranging from personal interest to university level. The topic of study primarily being scientific.⁵⁵ Examples include:

- My studies in political studies, sociology, philosophy etc.
- years studying ethics, religion and philosophy
- Studies in biology and animal behaviour
- many academic articles
- having a biology [sic]
- knowing about epigenetics
- neurology
- Human development 101 text book
- psychology to 300 level at university
- Ethics degree (particularly the Nicomachean Ethics & virtue ethics)
- wide reading in popular psychology and economics
- a degree in philosophy
- studying politics
- political views
- All the judgments I have ever read
- Marxism
- science
- biology teacher

The next most common theme was reference to either personal or life 'experience' or 'observations'. Examples include:

- Personal experience.
- experiences through out the world and being immersed in diverse cultures
- My experience with people of other cultures
- time...

⁵⁵ This highlights the authority given to rationality and science.

- observations over the years.
- World events.
- history.
- observation and real contemplation... looking at the people around you with compassion

Several referenced their own individual thinking or reflection. Examples include:

- Formed my own opinion
- own thinking
- myself
- (not so) common sense.
- My own personal reflection on the issues
- thinking about how socioeconomic situations effect our upbringing and personality,
- what you think on these things
- thinking about neuroscience and free will.

Another common reference was to family influence (5) and friends or community (5). Examples include:

- grandparents,
- parents,
- upbringing in household of freethinking humanists w/ strong focus on civic duty
- family.
- people around you
- my friends,
- All the musicians I ever played with
- All the people in the village I lived in Bali

Nine respondents named specific writers, sometimes supplying book titles, with six naming just a few, and three supplying significantly longer lists. An improvement to this question would have been to limit the number of sources to three or five.

Repeated authors were Christopher Hitchens (4), Richard Dawkins (3), Sam Harris (3), Carl Sagan (2), Laurence [sic] Krauss (2) and Neil DeGrasse Tyson (2). Other examples include:

- Peter Joseph (and The Zeitgeist Movement)
- Terry Pratchett
- J.R.R. Tolkien
- Daniel Dennett
- A.C.Grayling
- Peter Singer
- R.Carrier (Good and Sense without God)
- S.Hawkings (A Brief History of Time)
- Bart Ehrman ("God's Problem: How the Bible Fails to Answer Our Most Important Question -- Why We Suffer")
- Barbara Arrowsmith-Young "The woman who changed her brain"
- Norman Doidge "The brain that changes itself"
- Moheb Costandi "50 ideas you really need to know: The human brain"
- Kant (Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals)
- Hume (Treatise)
- Foucault (History of Sexuality pt 1 - Discipline and Punishment)
- Augustin Fuentes ("Race, monogamy, and other lies they told you: busting myths about human nature")

Finally, in the 'miscellaneous' category,, responses included two films, internet videos, radio and various forms of language.

Question 4. From a neurological perspective, is human behavior so mechanistically accounted for that we should dispense with the concept of moral responsibility?

This question was designed exclusively for the neurologists. Both answered with a negative response. Interviewee #1 qualified the 'no' by discussing the relation between explanations of behaviour and moral responsibility, saying they are *"two different things"*, but they are *"not completely separate."* Being *"mentally delayed"* may indeed affect *"concepts of what's good what's wrong"*, but this would not be the case for *"a normal person capable of thinking capable of putting things together."*

For interviewee #2, *"a sense of moral responsibility to yourself and to the people around you"* is essential to being *"a worthwhile human being."* They then commented at length about the limits of our ability to explain. They celebrated human ability to uncover mechanisms and processes *"to the level of the cell, to the level of the protein, to the level of the gene,"* but denied that this enables us to *"perfectly predict what's going to happen, or how a system will behave, or how a person will behave, or what their choices will be."* Mechanistic understanding does not take away *"the sense of wonder... chance... free will and control... certainly not the sense of responsibility."* The brain itself cannot be used *"to fully know your brain... To fully know something you have to be outside of it, and you're never going to be outside of your brain and your mind"*. For them, science in general and neurology in particular is *"not just for the sake of unpacking all the mechanism and somehow destroying some of the mystery... I think there's always going to be something mysterious."*

Question 5. How would you define the basic/general/mainstream Christian view of Sin?

Many stated the Christian view of Sin with reference to the Bible, the 'will of God', what 'God says' or what is immoral or wrong. Examples include:

- What the bible defines as sin, or an interpretation of what the bible says it is
- An action or thought undertaken by a human that is either specifically forbidden by their God as written in the Bible, or an action or thought undertaken which goes against the present human understanding of what this God approves.
- Doing what the bible tells you not to do...
- specific "rules" in the bible that should never be broken and are punishable by God.
- Based on the bible, particularly the Ten Commandments...
- ...contrary to their imaginary God's "Will"... The Ten Commandments are a rough guide.
- Things that wrong others OR are wrong according to god
- ...that 'sin' are moral wrongs that we commit, which are against god.
- Any act/deed/thought deemed wrong by God

- One sins when one disobeys the rule of God, which leads to a straining of one's relationship to God and possibly one's separation of God

Respondents made relatively consistent reference to notions of being 'born' a sinner (often adding their disapproval). For example:

- ...humans are born bad and are "sinners"
- something that all humans possess due to Adam's "original sin";
- ...that even a new born baby is a sinner.
- That's [sic] all people are sinful and therefore bad.
- We are all born sinners, from original sin due to what happened in the garden of Eden. This has made man an imperfect creation...
- ...thinking we're born bad... everybody has the chance to make mistake [sic] and do make mistake [sic].
- Original sin is supposedly Eve taking from the tree of knowledge and we as humans inherit this sin
- some intrinsic, inescapable state of 'dirtiness', inherited at birth.

There were several references to understandings about how sin relates to what is necessary (belief in or forgiveness by Christ) to be saved or go to heaven instead of hell:

- People who die with unforgiven sins are sent to hell.
- Purity is needed to enter heaven.
- A person is best to die not knowing about God and best to die as a child because Christians teach they are automatically forgiven. Others that have heard of Christian teaching and reject it remain sinners in eternity.
- ...and that is... the sort of behaviour that would keep us out of heaven after death.
- ...profess our love for Him... in order to gain entry into the Kingdom of Heaven...
- ...condemned to seek salvation through Christ [sic]. Essentially it is a celestial [sic] dictatorship with God on the throne and we are told to heal ourselves through Christ [sic]

Several went beyond (or skipped) the task of describing what they think Christians believe, and supplied evaluative comments:

- Fearmongering.
- ...can lead to deleterious effects on one's own person, be it being consumed by selfishness, hatred, anger, a sense of hopelessness, and despair.
- ...all of these have proven unhelpful in explaining just what was wrong exactly with what people deemed as sinful.
- Horrifying. The concept of an eternal punishment is disproportionate to even the most terrible crimes. The notion of pride being the worst sin as it is wanting to compete with God is problematic. The notion that we are inherently sinful and sins can only be absolved through God takes away any personal agency for a person's actions and binds them to their beliefs. The notion of being born with sin is disgusting.
- Just a bias [sic] view of right and wrong based on a specific view and some, for instance some of the things they preach as sinful don't inherently seem sinful to me,
- Flawed. It fails on so many levels.
- Sin is a useless term. I would do away with the term and use words that actually describe what is 'wrong' or needs correcting in something/someone.
- ...have a little to do with personal decisions that I feel are inconsequential i.e. pre-marital sex, personal decisions that should be personal i.e. abortion/contraception, and a lot to do with the failure to do good, the failure to help those in need, the failure to look after our environment, apathy, hypocrisy, greed etc etc

Several took opportunity to include comments about inconsistency of interpretation and hypocrisy:

- the 7 deadly sins, being gay... but not any of the other sins outlined in the bible that whatever particular Christian I happen to be talking to doesn't agree with... those "don't count" for whatever reason.
- ...extremely varied. There is no one 'Christian' understanding of anything.
- Sin is a term open to interpretation which means that it has been flung around to people who need help, not another label under which often leaves them feeling powerless.
- Sin seems to be time dependent and relevant to the prevailing ideals at any one time, even Christian views of sin seem to have evolved

There were a few quite specific 'sins' that were listed

- aka gays
- being gay
- sex outside of marriage.
- inter-racial couples... that someone was left-handed... to fall pregnant out of wedlock etc.

There were a few comments about the how sin is a heuristic tool or axiom, which is shaped by societal influences, and in turn plays out within society:

- Influenced by culture, a useful way of founding society & creating a community.
- Used as an axiom for living life. Neither good nor bad, but contributes positively to a stable society.
- ...a really important way to help them decide which side of an issue they're on... a heuristic. a mental shortcut... a tool, ...to help navigate what is an increasingly complex world... a tool for understanding... arriving at a place.
- Some of their ideas also come from wise words, psalms and the saying attributed to Jesus (which are really the conventional wisdom of the time, but still interesting in many ways).

Three responses described sin using general terms about 'wrong' or 'immoral' behavior:

- Sin is when you do something that Christians consider "Wrong"
- Being immoral or doing wrong to man
- The spiritual consequence attached to a person for doing acts which are immoral.

Question 6a. Among what you've heard from Christians about sin, what seems best?

Many participants, the largest category by far, stated that they couldn't think of any examples, thus implying that everything they've ever heard from a Christian about sin was bad; and one commenting that they had not had any real conversations with any Christians about sin. It is of course impossible to know how hard they tried:

- n/a (x3)
- I don't think I've ever heard anything I liked, agreed with, or respected with regards to 'sin'.
- this has never happened. (me hearing it)
- Nothing springs to mind sorry.
- I cannot think of anything that did not also contradict their other stated beliefs
- Nothing comes to mind i'm afraid. Sin always just led to the devil which was never a good thing. Sin was something that needed to be 'prayed' out of you - again, this never worked

either as it was a shallow means to solve a deeper issue that was wrongly labelled and understood.

- Nothing
- I haven't heard anything good said about sin
- Nothing. It is really hard to answer this question and I have read the bible. I don't have instant recall of everything that has ever been said to me, but the general gist: Sin is our moral sense
- I have yet to hear anything good from the Christian point of view about sin in general.
- Nothing comes to mind ... except perhaps ""It's not for me to judge."" (But they are, of course.) I cannot respect people who are superstitious. I do like some of them, but it is impossible to talk to them about their superstitions they are so dependent on their feeling of superiority. Sad. I feel sorry for xtians.

Several recalled statements which broadly reflected that not sinning is better for society:

- I agree that it can help shape morals and a good society eg. not to lie.
- If sins as put forward by god were abided by, the world would e a better place.
- people should try to do good and not do anything bad
- Four or so of the Ten commandments, while not applicable in every situation, are good guides in the day to day world. However, there is nothing unique about the Christian view on wrong doing that is not found in any of the other faiths or in secular Humanism.
- "What do you think the world should like? what would you change? Well then, shouldn't the church be at the forefront of any social change? This is what the bible says - hey look, it actually calls you to do something - It calls for sacrifice, oh look it calls you to love marginalised people, oh look it calls for you to be visible out there in the world Now here are some ways to kick this thing off"
- Someone I know talks about the hypocrisy of sin in the Christian faith at large, that sin is really when you are not being a good person rather than the dogma of Christianity.
- ...there's a big red flag over being deceitful and dishonest.
- If you're stealing, you're actually keeping something away from somebody else

Some recalled statements along the lines of hating the act not the one doing it:

- probably over done and cliché but I like the phrase "love the sinner, hate the sin"
- A real christian hates sin, not the person who commits the sinful act. (This was in the context of homosexuality)

The second commandment (or 'golden rule') was recalled by some:

- Treat others as you yourself would like to be treated. But you need to better define 'sin'.
- Not sure but I always agreed with the sentiment not to do anything to others that you're not happy to have done to yourself
- Do unto others as you would have them do unto you (thats about all I know)

Several said that forgiveness of sin was the best thing about sin:

- That if sin exists, then there's a way to not let it affect you. And that way is faith in Jesus Christ.
- That God's an equal opportunity forgiver.
- Sin can be forgiven and forgotten.
- That we should forgive people for their wrong doings and 'turn the other cheek' so to speak.

Three of the responses recalled statements that seem to have come from Christians who have a more 'liberal' perspective on sin, seeing it as 'dangerous' or illusory:

- that 'sin' is a dangerous concept and a worrying way to frame human wrongs.
- It doesn't exist.
- It imposes moral boundaries

Two responses had to do with the universality of sin, which signals that for these participants it wouldn't be good to think that some are sinless and only some sin:

- We all sin
- Along the lines of "everyone sins as we aren't pure but trying to live life without sin"

Question 6b. From Where/Who did you hear this?

The most common response by far was various kinds of 'friends' or associates:

- A christian friend of mine
- ...one friend... who's a proper Christian
- friends,
- Flatmate
- A friend who is involved in the church and environmental activism

Several cited sources public written/video sources:

- Websites,
- books
- Video/documentary
- Media etc etc
- Charles Dickens
- Mark Twain.
- serious writers

Several cited pastors, church or a church service or meeting

- A Pastor.
- preachers.
- church while growing up,
- Youth meeting

Five referred to general experience in society or with Christians:

- general society.
- Almost every Christian I have ever spoken to.

Two cited parents:

- parents,
- My father.

Two responses were from quite specific sources:

- kindergarten
- Protestants

Finally, there were several who put 'not applicable' or said they could not remember, and one who had never talked about the topic:

- I cant remember

- I never had a decent conversation with anyone about these topics
- N/A

Question 7a. Among what you've heard from Christians about sin, what seems worst?

There were no less than fifteen references to 'hell', with nearly half (7) of these accompanied by the word 'fire' or 'burn': Examples include:

- Do this or don't do that otherwise you'll burn in hell.
- That if sin exists, then only a certain amount of people can remove it from their lives while the rest of us are condemned to suffer the consequences.
- Eternal hell. Frankly there is nothing more ridiculous than eternal hell. ...God will forgive a pedophile but he will send to eternal hell the local doctor who is not Christian!!!
- Any reference to Hell. I don't understand how Christians think an all loving, all powerful God would allow eternal torture in any circumstances. It seems obvious to me that infinite punishment for finite sins will be disproportionate in all instances.
- ...people who sin deserve to go to hell and burn for eternity.
- Unrepentant sinners will go to hell - we'll see ... Fear underpins it all. Sad. But it sells!
- If you sin and don't repent you will go to hell (I think its threatening and scares little kids into following their religion unquestioningly)
- That failure to receive forgiveness from Jesus/God will condemn a person to hell-fire for all eternity. I don't think it gets much worse than that. Since your place of birth and the religion of your parents is the vast determiner of religious affiliation, already the vast majority of us are all going to hell. Lovely.
- Sinners should burn in hell for eternity - I find it insane that an infinite torturous punishment would be handed out for a finite sin by an all-knowing, all-loving god.

There were several references to homosexuality, with some specifically referring to gay marriage.⁵⁶ Examples include:

- That homosexuality is a sin.
- That being gay is a sin
- gay marriage as a sin, and the consequences of legalizing it.
- those who have sex with people of the same sex...
- e.g. gay marriage
- same sex relationships... I don't see their lives as sinful. I think they're some of the most beautiful, fine, upstanding human beings who contribute so much to the people around them. I just can't believe that their life is wrong, because their life looks right to me, you know. ...you're making them sound like such an evil human being, and I know them, and they're not.

Several raised various other sexuality issues:

- Some of the more antiquated things like not having sex before marriage... There is no logical reason not to have sex before marriage other than tradition. Or not to go out with someone non-christian...
- where women are accused of Sinning for being "slutty"
- sins that don't hurt anyone e.g. gay marriage, abortion, contraception
- some of the concepts of sin around sexuality I find quite challenging and unhelpful.

Four respondents mentioned the notion of being born sinful:

⁵⁶ It is likely that these responses were strengthened in tone or number by the recent attention to gay marriage in New Zealand.

- We are all sinners from birth. Like a beetroot stained white shirt.
- We are sinful by nature ie: born into sin
- that humans are born by nature sinful
- I basically don't believe we all born with sin...
- That were are all full of sin

One person cited an example of sin being seen as the causes for bad things to happen to the person sinning:

- Using assumed sins to justify revenge or 'bad' things happening to them such as car crashes, deaths, cancer (big allegations around Christopher Hitchens getting cancer because he had spoken against God.)

Three referenced statements about needing to accept, be forgiven by or believe in Jesus:

- the only way to redemption is through accepting Jesus Christ as lord and savior
- That failure to receive forgiveness from Jesus/God will condemn a person to hell-fire for all eternity.
- Something along the lines of failing to believe in Christ is a sin, and those who don't will go to hell.

There were some who objected to unchanging, objective and unquestionable standards:

- The idea that any particular action will always draw a condemnation outside of circumstance or as some kind of universal moral code, I find harmful... I find that objectionable and ethically untenable, [sic] to hold that morality must be absolute or some kind of inherent truth devoid of circumstance. I find that objectionable. [sic]
- There are inherent and ever present definitions of good and bad in the universe.
- That I can't question the christian [sic] definition of sin, because God is beyond human nature and can't be judged by human standards

Several responses critiqued Christian (or thought-to-be-Christian) views that seemed unfair or immoral to the participant:

- That God simply does not forgive his children, when we are expected to do the same to each other, even though this may infringe on their free will, like when they don't want to be forgiven, thus negating his all-loving nature, even though he allows things to interfere with our choice options all the time, like natural disasters, and the fact that we are limited in our potentialities by him making us in a particular image.
- That we can be forgiven for sin's [sic] by a third party (Jesus), not the person we have wronged... The vicarious redemption offered by the Christian faith gives individuals a loop hole to act in the most indefensible manner and then have their obligations and accountability removed from them.
- that we should care about moral wrongs because sinning is against god, rather than because of the wrong itself (against other people, against ourselves, against the environment etc).
- It's intrinsic to particular people based on essential characteristics of an individual, for example race or gender. This is not a view that is unique to Christians or even to religious people however.
- If a person does something bad, they are a bad person.

One response focused on not Christian statements of sin or sins, but rather Christian mistreatment of those they see as having sinned:

- ...people say the worst thing about other people who were deemed [sic] sinning. Regardless of the 'hate the sin, not the sinner' line, you could see that people changed their behaviour towards the sinner anyway.

Three responses were (over) general negative:

- I shouldn't [sic] have done that.
- never have
- Anything

One respondent commented about Christians who knowingly sin and continue to do the same thing:

- ...people just thinking they know this a bad thing to do, but they do it anyway, and... and like they done it they just go to church and it seems fine again... and then they feel all relieved... and next time... they do it again.

Question 7b. From Where/Who did you hear this?

As with the sources of the 'best' things heard about sin, so also with the 'worst'. By far the most common were personal contacts such as friends, acquaintances, classmates, neighbours, & family:

- Friends, a lot of them, modern, lovely, wonderful people.
- friends,
- Christina [sic] friends of mine have said things like that
- A friends [sic] at high school
- Christian family members.
- pro life group at university
- a pastor's son.
- acquaintances
- Christians in person
- Every christian
- My next door neighbour growing up
- Flatmate

Several cited Preachers or comments made in a church or Christian meeting:

- Preacher from church when I was young.
- preachers.
- Pastor
- minister at the Dutch reform church in New Lynn on Christmas Day.
- Church
- meeting
- catholicism

Several referenced public or general sources:

- Youtube, websites
- internet/TV etc.
- General Christian media
- literature etc
- Christian books,
- Christian and atheist literature.
- 'voices in the media' (interview #2)
- 'books and movies' (interview #1)

- seminars
- Everywhere!
- all over the place.

Two specifically referenced proselytizers or door-knockers:

- Proselytisers on the street,
- People who come knocking on my door with Good News.

One cited the Bible:

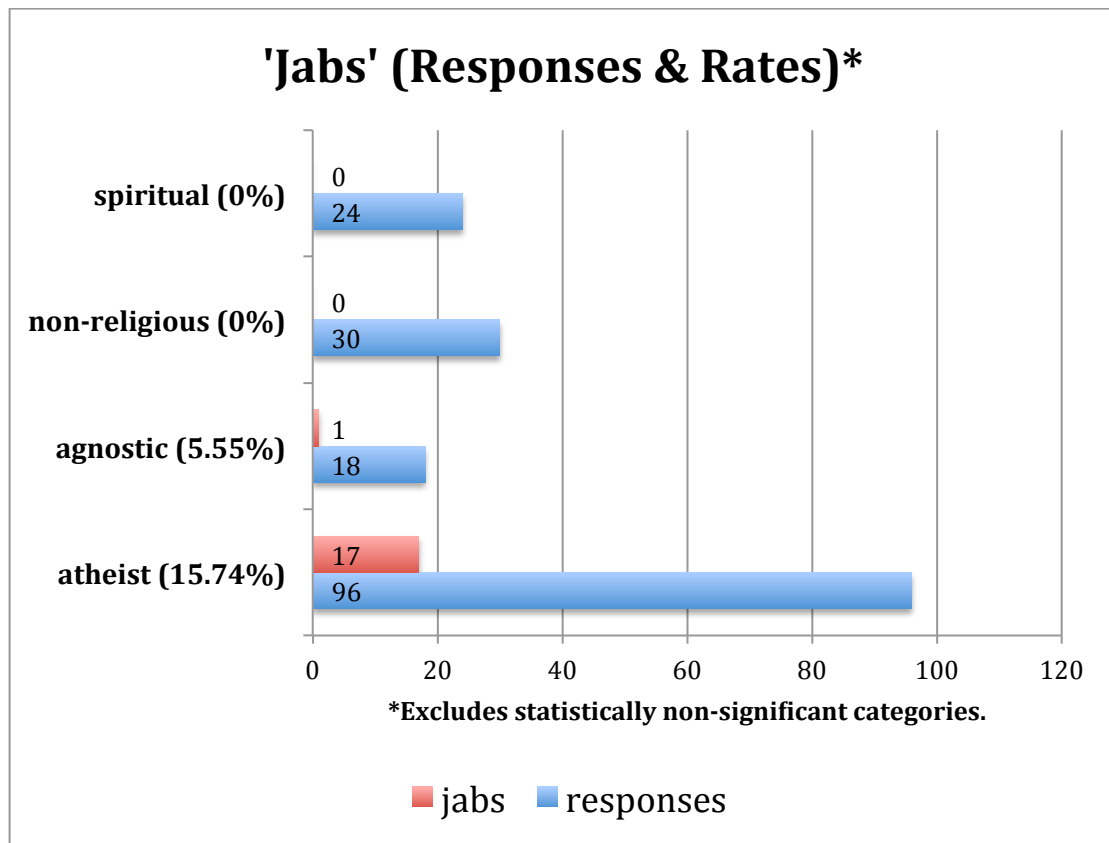
- The bible.

One respondent (who appears to have misunderstood the question) cited their “own opinion” as the place or person where they heard the worst thing about sin from a Christian:

- My own opinion based on how i live my life.

‘Jabs’: A Quantitative Valuation of Respondent Tone

As discussed above, of the 216 responses where a significantly sarcastic or dismissive comment we are calling a ‘jab’ would be possible, there were 22 jabs, thus making the general ‘jab-rate’ 10.2%. The four statistically significant categories were atheist, non-religious, spiritual and agnostic (six respondents gave unique worldview descriptors). That 77% of total jabs were from atheists was due to almost half of the respondents being atheists, so a ‘jab-rate’ for each of the categories was calculated, with atheists still clearly the most frequent ‘jabbers’. The scan for compliments yielded just one out of 216, which was also from an atheist.



DISCUSSION

Here I will consider various points of relevance between the findings outlined above and the Christian task of communication of the Doctrine of Sin. I will frame them in terms of resonance, rejection, restatement and relationship.

Firstly, there are several areas where NRNZs hear and **resonate** with what Christians say about sin. It is not insignificant that the overwhelming majority had a personal view that wrongdoing was caused by both internal/external factors, meaning that most do *not* simply push wrongdoing onto external causes. Likewise, few NRNZs believe that human nature is wholly 'good', meaning there is openness at least in some that we are not simply good victims of bad circumstances. And a third point of resonance would be that basic societal no-nos, the Golden Rule and even the 10 commandments are seen in a positive light by at least some NRNZs.

Secondly, there is clearly a strong **rejection** of other elements of the doctrine. The general number and specific rates of 'jabs' can be a signal that some reject the doctrine in whole or in part with such emotion that discussion may prove unfruitful. However, sin is a permanent element in the Church's view of reality and in its message to the world, even if there may be debate within the Church about the specific content or extent of this element. To take sin out of our message is to compromise the integrity of the message itself.

Thirdly, it is apparent that this difference in style, content, tone and wording of the doctrine requires us to continually work at **restating** the doctrine. There was

consistent reaction to – or rejection of – statements that were at the extreme of the Christian spectrum of belief. These extreme statements should be avoided. For example, it is a distortion of the gospel (as well as poor communication) to try to make the message about human sin sound either harder (to provoke a response from fear) or softer (to provoke a response from relevance) than it is. So also with views on human nature: no human is so devoid of common grace that they are without worth, dignity and rights; and no human is so ‘good’ that their sin has not affected their relationship with God, others, self and the created order. Statements about ultimate human destiny also need to be framed carefully. The Christian conviction that Jesus is the sole source and means of salvation does not necessitate statements that sound as though the final destiny of every single person can be known.

Fourthly and finally, the results evidenced the importance of **relationships** between Christians and NRNZs. It is not insignificant that the top category of sources for both the positively and negatively viewed statements were personal: friends, family, acquaintances, flatmates or other contacts. Along with the other responses, this reminds the Church of its instruction to be wise in its conduct toward outsiders. At the very least, this means being less quick to speak and more quick to listen. The lengthy answers supplied by some, as well as the willingness of all respondents to participate in the research could indicate a simple desire to be heard. As for when we do speak, whether it be ‘personal’, ‘public’, in the ‘pulpit’ or even part of explicit ‘proselytisation’, great care needs to be taken in terms of both what we say and just as importantly how we say it. Failure to take this care can result in rejection of merely a) incompetent theology or b) an intolerable communicator; both of which fail to properly communicate the doctrine and thus for it to be properly received or rejected.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research projects could improve upon and probe further than this simple and limited study. In terms of scope, more resources and personnel could achieve a representative sample of Aotearoa New Zealand. In terms of depth, a semi-structured rather than structured interview format would enable researchers to probe to find the beliefs and values behind the answers given. A survey could also achieve better depth with more and more specific questions.

CONCLUSION

This study was primarily a listening exercise, and whilst it was not representative of all NRNZs, it probes deep enough into the population to discern identifiable categories of both resonance and rejection, and offers some basic and clear points of implication for communication between Christians and NRNZs; most notably to make the most of our restatements of the doctrine and of our

relationships with NRNZs. Though unpopular, unfashionable and for some untenable, sin, or a suitable synonym, is still an intelligible concept in our world, and more than that is an essential component of the Christian message, which doggedly insists that we are not all that we were meant to be or can be through the grace and transformation found in the gospel of Christ.

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APPENDICES

Questionnaire for Interviews & Survey

a) Worldview/Spirituality/'Religion' Descriptor

Part 1 - Your Views Concerning 'Sin'

1. The causes of human 'wrongdoing' are:

a) inside, b) outside humans c) both d) your own response

2. Human nature is

a) 'good', b) 'bad', c) both, d) your own response

3. Who/What, do you think, has most shaped your answers to Questions 1 & 2?

4. (NB: this question was for the interviews only.) From a neurological perspective, is human behavior so mechanistically accounted for that we should dispense with the concept of moral responsibility?

Part 2 - Your Views of Christian Views Concerning 'Sin'

5. How would you define the basic/general/mainstream Christian view of Sin?

6a. Among what you've heard from Christians about sin, what seems best?

6b. From Where/Who did you hear this?

7a. Among what you've heard from Christians about sin, what seems worst?

7b. From Where/Who did you hear this?

Full Survey Data

Worldview Descriptor

Agnostic

agnostic

agnostic

technically agnostic

All of the above (although Post Structuralist if we must name such things)

Antitheist

atheist

atheist

Atheist

atheist with spiritual envy

athiest

ex-religious

Homo sapien

Humanism

Non religious

Non-religious

non-religious

non-religious I guess, kinda taosit too

Realist

Skeptic

spiritual
Spiritual

undecided

Human 'wrongdoing' is caused by...

both (mixture of internal & external)

desire and greed

both (mixture of internal & external)

Wrongdoing falls under either mental illness, psychopathy, poorly aligned incentives, or from a divisive ideology or a mix of these

both (mixture of internal & external)

both (mixture of internal & external)

both (mixture of internal & external)

both (mixture of internal & external)

both (mixture of internal & external)

Wrongdoing is ones own opinion

both (mixture of internal & external)

both (mixture of internal & external)

nurture' (external causes)

both (mixture of internal & external)

both (mixture of internal & external)

The definitions of wrong, not the acts themselves

It is caused by erring away from the set customs and norms of the time that one has previously claimed fidelity too, be it for economic, political, cultural reasons that intersect with ones own conception of oneself and the social role one must perform based on their relation to the existing social order

Both and situational

both (mixture of internal & external)

both (mixture of internal & external)

Distinctions of definition, external and internal being inseparably the same thing

both (mixture of internal & external)

both (mixture of internal & external)

both (mixture of internal & external)

nurture' (external causes)

both (mixture of internal & external)

nurture' (external causes)

both (mixture of internal & external)

both (mixture of internal & external)

both (mixture of internal & external)

both (mixture of internal & external)

both (mixture of internal & external)

both (mixture of internal & external)

both (mixture of internal & external)

both (mixture of internal & external)

Human nature is...

both

Morality is subjective

both

Neutral. Humans classify actions as either good or bad based on the potential for well-being in a community or personally

A cultural construct - neither

both

both

Human nature just is. I don't believe in a Good vs Bad binary.

Human nature is dependant on each individual. There's no mass status quo when you look deep enough. We are all born with genes that can determine our nature depending on environment and experiences. Certain genes can be expressed or not, depending on circumstances. Behaviour can be learnt and unlearned- and how these are put into different contexts determines if they're deemed good or not. To understand human nature, you have to understand what it means to be human and how we can be affected biologically, psychologically, genetically, mentally etc. Understanding the various ways we are affected by these aspects, will help people see that branding human nature as inherently good or bad is too simplistic and unhelpful in understanding and helping people.

good

both

both

good

both

both

Neither good nor bad.

Neither

both

biological causes

both

end of story, I think it is neither good nor bad in any a priori sence or even in any relative sense.

both

Natural

both

good

both

good

good

good

Just is

a poor choice of words for describing what is really human behavior.

Non existent. Humans have 'natures' that are flexible and non-deterministic - to separate it from what is commonly talked about in the media as 'human nature'.

both

both

both

My views in the previous 2 questions were shaped by...

Observations.

God is not Great by C.Hitchens
Good and Sense without God by R.Carrier
Wisdom of Insecurity by A.Watts
A Brief History of Time by S.Hawkings
God's Debris by S.Adams
Pale Blue Dot by C.Sagan
The Queer Universe [lecture] by R.Dawkins
The Universe from Nothing [lecture] L.Kraus
Cosmos TV Series by C.Sagan "

Myself, my grandparents, parents and probably both ways by both catholic and lutheran church communities in Germany, Human evolution, neurology, psychology, A.C.Grayling, Sam Harris, Peter Singer, Simon Blackburn, Steve Novella, George Hrab, Neil Tyson

Just what I've thought about over the course of my lifetime. There hasn't been a particular book that has helped me come to this.

were shaped by... our experiences as we journey through life and we see how human nature can so very quickly change due to positive and / or negative experiences. My favorite author Kahlil Gibran wrote a book: The Prophet... in this book he speaks of Good and Evil - A google search would bring up his comments on this... "for what is evil but good tortured by it's own hunger and thirst..." I read this some 20 years ago and I have a strong interest in why humans turn bad etc... I believe that ALL humans are capable of good and evil and it is the circumstances we face (internal and external) that shape who we are... I believe none of us are exempt from being evil - and life will determine that for us. I believe we are born neutral - neither good nor bad...

Nothing too specific, my studies of history and current events. Humans are capable of great acts of kindness and great acts of cruelty often committed by the same person. I think good and bad are subjective and it is reductive to try to attribute human nature to one or the other.

I come from a heavily religious family and culture. I was a devout Christian, I excelled in national scripture exams, many times coming first or second. However most of my journey away from faith stemmed from years of having a curious mind about how the Bible was actually the word of God (is it Actually or more written by others on behalf of God at which point you do wonder whether they were writing on behalf of God or not...). It is from years of frustration at why things just didn't marry up - there were (to simplify things) good people I knew who weren't Christian and bad people i knew who were. I didn't share the disdain others had about gay people and gay marriage, i knew there was something wrong, that they didn't choose to be gay but that they had to be born that way. There were tsunamis and natural disasters that wiped people off the face of the earth and then Christians saying it was God's will or that God will give them a place in heaven. My burning question was why such things had to happen in the first place. I wondered why the miracles in the Bible stopped happening in modern times - i put it down to that God wants us to have faith. But somehow it was unfair to me. There were people committing suicide, suffering from cancer and other diseases. I took Philosophy in university and still my faith was there,

but i was much more open-minded though still very defensive about Christianity. Then eventually, after putting my thoughts in an email one day to a friend, I realised that i was trying to bridge too many gaps and that it was what it was - a gap, a rather large one and no matter what I did, i could always reconnect that gap to God, shrug and say, well that's God's will. The problem was though that the gap was much larger than my will to close it and that the most humane thing i could do was recognise it, acknowledge it and with so much fear and sadness, accept that the world and that is wrong with it simply can Not be the world that God created for us and exists in. So I had to find out - what kind of world do we live in? How did we come to be in this world? That was when i decided to find out. I began with the following books:

- ""God's Problem: How the Bible Fails to Answer Our Most Important Question - Why We Suffer"" - Bart Ehrman (he is also an ex-Christian)

- ""Whose Word Is It?"" - Bart Ehrman

Loved Bart Ehrman's books.

- ""The selfish gene"" - Richard Dawkins

Loved 'Selfish Gene' - title is misleading but the explanations are clear and well thought out for someone new to understanding science.

- ""God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything""

Harsh for me as just coming out of Christianity, but worth a read. Hitchens was a brilliant thinker/writer.

Other books I've read that have been significant:

- ""The wonderbox"" Roman Krznaric

- ""The happiness advantage"" Shawn Achor (check out his Ted Talk)

- ""The woman who changed her brain"" Barbara Arrowsmith-Young

- ""The brain that changes itself"" Norman Doidge

- ""In search of memory"" Eric Kandel

- ""The how of happiness"" Sonja Lyubomirsky (not a 'self help book' but a scientific analysis of happiness - sounds vague but it's quite fascinating)

- ""The myths of happiness"" Sonja Lyubomirsky

- ""Thinking fast and slow"" Daniel Kahneman (still reading but very interesting)

- ""Quiet: The power of introverts"" Susan Cain (good note on the actual nature of 20% of humans - introversion)

Currently reading:

- ""50 ideas you really need to know: The human brain"" - Moheb Costandi

What i enjoy about these books plus many, many video links on the internet (try - Big Think channel on YouTube) as well as many academic articles I've read is that all the questions I had as a Christian that only partially got answered now has been answered and has also inspired more questions but at least I have a means now and the tools now to set out answering them. I don't rely on a supernatural being anymore to help me understand as that never fully happened for me in all honesty. I don't feel anger towards God for the injustices on earth, I feel at peace and much joy in living in the one life we've been given and pursuing truth in everything around me.

Formed my own opinion based on how the government chooses what to show us on the news to sway/force our views on each situation of their choice.

Human development 101 text book. But mostly life experience my life and experiences through out the world and being immersed in diverse cultures

Marxism

Personal experience. No specific resources as its a view I have come to on my own.

My personal opinion

Moral philosophy, experience, (not so) common sense.

My studies in political studies, sociology, philosophy etc.

Not entirely sure, some is influenced by science.

sam harris, free will, biology teacher, parents,

Family upbringing, life experience etc.

To distinguish anyone particular one, I think would be to render them meaningless, but if one must

The language I write

The language I speak

The language I think

John Coltrane - A Love Supreme and Meditations

Liberation Orchestra - Ballad of the Fallen

Dave Holland - Conference of the Birds

God of Small Things - Arundhuti Roy

Langston Hughes - The Dream (I think that is what it is called) and probably City

All the people I have ever known

All the musicians I ever played with

All the people in the village I lived in Bali

My experience with people of other cultures

Derrida - lots of stuff everything I have read

Barthes - lots of stuff, although Death of the Author was particularly important for me

Sartre - Being and Nothingness in particular

Kant - Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals

Hume - Treatise

Foucault - History of Sexuality pt 1 - Discipline and Punishment

Saussure - I have only read a little bit and I can't remember what it was off the top of my head

Learning Formal Logic (various textbooks I suppose)

Edward Said - Orientalism

All the judgments I have ever read - It matters little which ones, they but confirm my world view

Tough to say. I've spent years studying ethics, religion and philosophy from innumerable sources. I've developed a perspective that evil or wrongdoing pretty much all boils down to one thing - the forcing of one person's (or organisation's) will upon another. All evil is a limitation or removal of self determination by external forces. I can't tell who or where I got this from.

"Studies in evolution and behaviour - of children, and non-human animals.

Films such as the Shawshank Redemption. My thoughts have not been shaped by the Bible, which is in my opinion not about science or about the science of human nature. It has many interesting themes, but more political than moral (or even religious). It is a collection of ancient books and we are fortunate to have an outstanding work of literature in the King James version (sadly, not very popular with many churchgoers, who want a "message").

My views are just underpinned by having a biology and believing in our genes being important determinants but also knowing about epigenetics (environment changing gene expression) and how strong culture is on influencing people's behavior. I can't quote any books specifically but my views are shaped on assimilation of various study as well as observations over the years.

Past experience. World events. For example I would argue that even people who commit murder etc are not bad people, but a product of their experiences. Personal experience, Studies in biology and animal behaviour. These this view has been shaped by fair to many sources to contribute it to any one or even a handful.

Personal experience. I feel that people are inherently good because we are capable of feeling guilt. Societal pressures (making money/classism) are catalysts for wrongdoing.

My experience of life. I've been raised around christianity but never identified as one. No books have had a major influence on this. I studied psychology to 300 level at university.

Ethics degree (particularly the Nicomachean Ethics and a subscription to virtue ethics), experience with others, political views

My own personal reflection on the issues and observation of people.

In order of influence (off the top of my head): Carl Sagan, Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, Brian Cox, Peter Joseph (and The Zeitgeist Movement), Neil DeGrasse Tyson, Laurence Krauss, Christopher Hitchens, Michio Kaku, Daniel Dennett; Also Fantasy authors' and their writing: Terry Goodkind, Raymond E. Feist, Robert Jordan, Terry Pratchett, Douglas Adams, J.R.R. Tolkien, Frank Herbert

Augustin Fuentes, "Race, monogamy, and other lies they told you: busting myths about human nature" - He actually visited Auckland University and gave that talk, its uploaded here:

<http://www.auckland.ac.nz/uoahome/about/perspectives/public-lectures/agustin-fuentes>. Judith Littleton - Anthropology Dept, Siobhan Mattison - Anthropology Dept, Nick Malone - Anthropology Dept

Everything humans do is a mixture of internal and external factors... humans show a vast range of behaviours, both good and bad. that is assuming we agree on good and bad.

Watching documentaries (beyond the dark lands), reading nonfiction books, studying politics, thinking about how socioeconomic situations effect our upbringing and personality, thinking about neuroscience and free will.

Kurt Vonnegut, an upbringing in a household of freethinking humanists with a strong focus on civic duty, wide reading in popular psychology and economics, a

degree in philosophy, love, rock and roll, drugs, the darkness on the edge of town, music, my friends, the sea, history.

The Christian understanding of Sin is...

"Fearmongering. But you need to better define 'sin'."

Unjust wrong doings as commanded in the bible that can be forgiven by asking the Christian God for forgiveness. Pureness is needed to enter heaven.

What the bible defines as sin, or an interpretation of what the bible says it is An action or thought undertaken by a human that is either specifically forbidden by their God as written in the Bible, or an action or thought undertaken which goes against the present human understanding of what this God approves.

Influenced by culture, a useful way of founding society & creating a community.

The basis of human nature. Christians believe that humans are born bad and are "sinners" and can only be "good" by accepting Jesus Christ into their life etc.

I'm not sure but I think it is taught that even a new born baby is a sinner. And no matter how a person lives, Christians consider them sinners. A person is best to die not knowing about God and best to die as a child because Christians teach they are automatically forgiven. Others that have heard of Christian teaching and reject it remain sinners in eternity. That's my understanding.

Horrifying. The concept of an eternal punishment is disproportionate to even the most terrible crimes. The notion of pride being the worst sin as it is wanting to compete with God is problematic. The notion that we are inherently sinful and sins can only be absolved through God takes away any personal agency for a persons actions and binds them to their beliefs. The notion of being born with sin is disgusting.

Flawed. It fails on so many levels. Sin is a term open to interpretation which means that it has been flung around to people who need help, not another label under which often leaves them feeling powerless. Sin is a useless term. In the past, it was a sin for inter-racial couples to be together, it was the devil's work that someone was left-handed, it's a sin to fall pregnant out of wedlock etc ... all of these have proven unhelpful in explaining just What was wrong exactly with what people deemed as sinful. I would do away with the term and use words that actually describe what is 'wrong' or needs correcting in something/someone.

Sin is when you do something that Christians consider "Wrong"

Behaviour or state of mind that separates us from god and his will for our lives.

Being immoral or doing wrong to man

What God says is wrong

Going against the will of God.

Doing what the bible tells you not to do...

Used as an axiom for living life. Neither good nor bad, but contributes positively to a stable society.

One sins when one disobeys the rule of God, which leads to a straining of one's relationship to God and possibly one's separation of God, which can lead to deleterious effects on ones own person, be it being consumed by selfishness, hatred, anger, a sense of hopelessness, and despair.

Thats all people are sinful and therefor bad.

specific "rules" in the bible that should never be broken and are punishable by God.

It is inherent in all and must be overcome through devotion to God

The spiritual consequence attached to a person for doing acts which are immoral.

Disobeying God's will, the 7 deadly sins, being gay... but not any of the other sins outlined in the bible that whatever particular Christian I happen to be talking to doesn't agree with... those "don't count" for whatever reason.

Anything that is currently considered by fundamentalists of various stripes to be behaviour contrary to their imaginary God's "Will", and that is, for the purpose of scaring the naïve into religion, the sort of behaviour that would keep us out of heaven after death. The Ten Commandments are a rough guide. Some of their ideas also come from wise words, psalms and the saying attributed to Jesus (which are really the conventional wisdom of the time, but still interesting in many ways).

Just a bias view of right and wrong based on a specific view and some, for instance some of the things they preach as sinful don't inherently seem sinful to me, for example sex outside of marriage. Sin seems to be time dependent and relevant to the prevailing ideals at any one time, even Christian views of c=sin seem to have evolved

"Christian sin is an act against God / the teachings in the bible.

Some denominations allow sin to be forgiven (Catholic etc).

People who die with unforgiven sins are sent to hell.

Depends on denomination as to its seriousness"

We are all born sinners, from original sin due to what happened in the garden of Eden. This has made man an imperfect creation and we commit further sins/wrongs when we act against God's will/laws. Including when we even think about committing an act because we have already done the act in our hearts.

have a little to do with personal decisions that I feel are inconsequential ie pre-marital sex, personal decisions that should be personal ie abortion/contraception, and a lot to do with the failure to do good, the failure to help those in need, the failure to look after our environment, apathy, hypocrisy, greed etc etc

Things that wrong others OR are wrong according to god aka gays that 'sin' are moral wrongs that we commit, which are against god.

Something regarded as morally wrong through the eyes of god

Any act/deed/thought deemed wrong by God, and something that all humans possess due to Adam's "original sin"; ultimately condemning us having to consistently beg God/Jesus for forgiveness, as well as profess our love for Him (them?) in order to gain entry into the Kingdom of Heaven (or some such nonsense).

Original sin is supposedly Eve taking from the tree of knowledge and we as humans inherit this sin and are thus condemned to seek salvation through christ. Essentially it is a celestial dictatorship with god on the throne and we are told to heal ourselves through christ and also that we are evil for wanting knowledge (very telling).

some intrinsic, inescapable state of 'dirtiness', inherited at birth.

Based on the bible, particularly the Ten Commandments. A word I only associate with Christianity.

extremely varied. There is no one 'Christian' understanding of anything.

The BEST thing I've ever heard a Christian say about 'Sin' is...

"Treat others as you yourself would like to be treated." But you need to better define 'sin'.

That we should forgive people for their wrong doings and 'turn the other cheek' so to speak.

Not sure but I always agreed with the sentiment not to do anything to others that you're not happy to have done to yourself

That if sin exists, then there's a way to not let it affect you. And that way is faith in Jesus Christ.

Nothing springs to mind sorry.

I agree that it can help shape morals and a good society eg. not to lie.

Sin can be forgiven and forgotten.

I cannot think of anything that did not also contradict their other stated beliefs

Nothing comes to mind i'm afraid. Sin always just led to the devil which was never a good thing. Sin was something that needed to be 'prayed' out of you - again, this never worked either as it was a shallow means to solve a deeper issue that was wrongly labelled and understood.

It was fun.

We all sin

Don't do it

Nothing

Along the lines of ""everyone sins as we aren't pure but trying to live life without sin"".

Do unto others as you would have them do unto you (thats about all I know)

If sins as put forward by god were abided by, the world would e a better place.

That God's an equal opportunity forgiver.

I haven't heard anything good said about sin

people should try to do good and not do anything bad

n/a

"It is really hard to answer this question and I have read the bible. I don't have instant recall of everything that has ever been said to me, but the general gist: Sin is our moral sense"

Nothing.

"Nothing comes to mind ...

except perhaps ""It's not for me to judge."" (But they are, of course.)

I cannot respect people who are superstitious. I do like some of them, but it is impossible to talk to them about their superstitions they are so dependent on their feeling of superiority. Sad. I feel sorry for xtians. "

Someone I know talks about the hypocrisy of sin in the Christian faith at large, that sin is really when you are not being a good person rather than the dogma of Christianity.

It imposes moral boundaries

I have yet to hear anything good from the Christian point of view about sin in general. Four or so of the Ten commandments, while not applicable in every situation, are good guides in the day to day world. However, there is nothing unique about the Christian view on wrong doing that is not found in any of the other faiths or in secular Humanism.

""What do you think the world should like? what would you change? Well then, shouldn't the church be at the forefront of any social change? This is what the bible says - hey look, it actually calls you to do something - It calls for sacrifice, oh

look it calls you to love marginalised people, oh look it calls for you to be visible out there in the world

Now here are some ways to kick this thing off""

n/a

that 'sin' is a dangerous concept and a worrying way to frame human wrongs. probably over done and cliché but I like the phrase "love the sinner, hate the sin" I don't think I've ever heard anything I liked, agreed with, or respected with regards to 'sin'.

A real christian hates sin, not the person who commits the sinful act. (This was in the context of homosexuality)

this has never happened. (me hearing it)

N/A

It doesn't exist.

The person/place I heard the above view from was...

Can't remember... Sorry.

Websites, going to church while growing up, parents, general society.

For the first time probably in kindergarten

My father.

NA

Christian friends and my general understanding of the topic.

A Pastor.

See above

Church

In person. Friends..

Preacher, friends, books

Generalisation

No-one

I think it was a friend a long time ago but it stuck.

I cant remember

Youth meeting

Protestants, specifically Evangelical Christians.

As above

religious friend

n/a

A christian friend of mine

N/a

"I do have ideas from Charles Dickens and other writers, such a Mark Twain. In fact, most serious writers are interested in this subject, and depict hypocrisy and arrogance on the part of xtians.

But I also know people whom I like and admire who are not xtians. I like them often for their insight and honesty and kindness. xtians can also be nice, of course, but it is difficult for them to be honest as they are tied to dogma. To overcome this, they meet constantly to reassure each other that they are right because their (narrow) interpretation of the Bible makes them think so. They think they own the Bible and assume they understand it. This has done great damage to the appreciation of the Bible. Many people go on about what they read in the surviving parts we have, and they are mainly reacting to the narrowest of narrow xtian interpretations."

A friend

Flatmate

Almost every Christian I have ever spoken to.

A friend who is involved in the church and environmental activism on what he speaks about with the youth group he runs.

n/a

friend

Media etc etc

Not Applicable.

Video of some sort, perhaps a documentary, Im unsure

n/a

N/A

Several religious people I have known. Including preachers.

The WORST thing I've ever heard a Christian say about 'Sin' is...

Do this or don't do that otherwise you'll burn in hell.

Using assumed sins to justify revenge or 'bad' things happening to them such as car crashes, deaths, cancer (big allegations around Christopher Hitchens getting cancer because he had spoken against God.)

"Some of the more antiquated things like not having sex before marriage which actually causes a lot of unhappiness in the lives of young kiwis I know. There is no logical reason not to have sex before marriage other than tradition. Or not to go out with someone non-christian. That has caused personal issues before"

That if sin exists, then only a certain amount of people can remove it from their lives while the rest of us are condemned to suffer the consequences.

We are all sinners from birth. Like a beetroot stained white shirt.

That homosexuality is a sin.

"Eternal hell. Frankly there is nothing more ridiculous than eternal hell. If God forgives sin then why not forgive the sin of the rejection of the bible. Worst thing I ever heard: 1. That God will forgive a pedophile but he will send to eternal hell the local doctor who is not Christian!!! It pissed me off so much that I never did get over it!

2. Second worse thing I ever heard: I was called a tool of satan when I was 16 years old!!! I never got over that either."

Any reference to Hell. I don't understand how Christians think an all loving, all powerful God would allow eternal torture in any circumstances. It seems obvious to me that infinite punishment for finite sins will be disproportionate in all instances.

It was never a good thing. There was no 'worst' sin, though people often treated various 'sinful' acts in varying ways. I've never heard anyone say the Worst thing about sin, I've only heard people say the worst thing about other people who were deemed sinning. Regardless of the 'hate the sin, not the sinner' line, you could see that people changed their behaviour towards the sinner anyway.

I shouldnt have done that.

We are sinful by nature ie: born into sin and the only way to redemption. Is through accepting Jesus Christ as lord and saviour

never have

Anything

Calling non Christian's sinners and that they will all burn in hell.

I heard a Christian say "if you dont go to church then you will not go to heaven, only hell"

There are inherent and ever present definitions of good and bad in the universe. That God simply does not forgive his children, when we are expected to do the same to each other, even though this may infringe on their free will, like when they don't want to be forgiven, thus negating his all-loving nature, even though he allows things to interfere with our choice options all the time, like natural disasters, and the fact that we are limited in our potentialities by him making us in a particular image.

That were are all full of sin

people who sin deserve to go to hell and burn for eternity.

If a person does something bad, they are a bad person.

"Frankly the idea of sin. I could pick a lot of examples, but anytime some one discusses sin. The idea that any particular action will always draw a condemnation outside of circumstance or as some kind of universal moral code, I find harmful.

Let me give you an idea of what I mean.

Say divorce is a Sin, Jesus says so for example (or pre marital sex). My problem is this casts sin and therefore morality in terms of absolutes. If you do this action then you have sinned. I find that objectionable and ethically untenable, to hold that morality must be absolute or some kind of inherent truth devoid of circumstance. I find that objectionable. It is hard then to draw anything as more objectionable than another, but if you had me pick stuff where women are accused of Sinning for being ""slutty"" or those who have sex with people of the same sex (assuming gender is binary, which it isn't). Those two views seem particularly bad within the context which I perceive them, since I think they uphold bad ethical values. "

That I can't question the christian definition of sin, because God is beyond human nature and can't be judged by human standards

Unrepentant sinners will go to hell - we'll see ... Fear underpins it all. Sad. But it sells!

That being gay is a sin and you will burn in hell

If you sin and don't repent you will go to hell (I think its threatening and scares little kids into following their religion unquestioningly)

"That we can be forgiven for sin's by a third party (Jesus), not the person we have wronged. Personally I believe that for someone to truly be forgiven then the parties that they have wronged must forgive them, the wrong they have committed must be set right (if that is even possible returning the goods they stole, fixing the damage etc) and they themselves must come to terms with their wrong doing and never do it again. The vicarious redemption offered by the Christian faith gives individuals a loop hole to act in the most indefensible manner and then have their obligations and accountability removed from them."

Something along the lines of failing to believe in Christ is a sin, and those who don't will go to hell.

sins that don't hurt anyone e.g. gay marriage, abortion, contraception

that we should care about moral wrongs because sinning is against god, rather than because of the wrong itself (against other people, against ourselves, against the environment etc).

Generally things the westboro baptist church says, homosexuality is a sin, sinners burn in hell, thank god for dead soldiers etc. Utterly disgusting

That failure to receive forgiveness from Jesus/God will condemn a person to hell-fire for all eternity. I don't think it gets much worse than that. Since your place of birth and the religion of your parents is the vast determiner of religious affiliation, already the vast majority of us are all going to hell. Lovely.

Sinners should burn in hell for eternity - I find it insane that an infinite torturous punishment would be handed out for a finite sin by an all-knowing, all-loving god.

that humans are born by nature sinful

Things that Christians classify as sins, and their consequences. For example, gay marriage as a sin, and the consequences of legalizing it.

It's intrinsic to particular people based on essential characteristics of an individual, for example race or gender. This is not a view that is unique to Christians or even to religious people however.

The person/place I heard the above view from was...

The bible.

Youtube, websites

Friends, a lot of them, modern, lovely, wonderful people.

No particular name or place available, but this is a common thought pattern in particular Christian circles.

Preacher from church when I was young.

Everywhere! Christians in person and on the internet/TV etc.

1. Religious friend 2. Pastor

Many places: friends, preachers, literature etc

Church

My own opinion based on how i live my life.

Preachers, friends, Christian books, seminars

haven't

Every christian

The minister at the Dutch reform church in New Lynn on Christmas Day.

From a preacher at school

Student at university

Christian and atheist literature.

Someone at Auckland Uni

religious classmate

Friend

Christina friends of mine have said things like that

A friends at high school - a pastor's son.

Proselytisers on the street, acquaintances (whom I drop if they waste my time with useless ""debate"".) People who come knocking on my door with Good News. What a laugh! I often feel xtians are only interested in getting some narrow message across.

My next door neighbour growing up

Flatmate

Almost every Christian I have ever spoken to. Mate of KJ's so if you want to talk about any of this in more detail if I have not been clear enough feel free to contact me.

Christian family members.

pro life group at university

meeting

I think this one is self explanatory.

Heard it first from friends at school, and then ultimately all over the place. I learned about (and loosely believed in) heaven and hell (and even "God") without ever being a Christian or even knowing what religion was when I was a young child. As soon as my brain developed enough to ask questions I stopped believing, and have ultimately been an atheist ever since.

Preacher in a documentary

catholicism

General Christian media

Several religious people I have known. Including preachers.

Raw Interview Transcripts

Interview #1

SINterview #1 Transcript

Q1. Whenever a human being does behavior that would be called wrongdoing or sin (broadly), what are the causes of that and is it... primarily I'm wanting to know if you think that those causes are inside the person or outside, or perhaps both, or neither – something else – your own response. So umm that's the first question is it caused from...

I think that is both. Um.. I believe everybody born quite pure, and we learn to make mist... you know, behaving badly. Um.. The bad behavior is because the environment. For example, people using drugs... this is ... we did not born to want to use drugs, but because the environment we're living in, um and we have the weakness to resist this kind of behavior – and this understanding.. this is because of environment... And at the same time, not everybody go along with the bad behavior because of the environment – some realize it is something bad... not going to follow this kind of behavior but others doesn't. So that's because individual difference, and because how much they understand... you know... was the wrong and know right from wrong – so I think it's both...

So environment, from outside the person

Yes.

And also one's reaction, one's response to environment

That's right

Through education and their strength or weakness - ability to resist

Exactly and decide what's acceptable or not acceptable

OK thank you.

Q2. The next question is about human nature – your own views of human nature. Um.. So are humans, as they start out, are humans purely good, purely bad, both, or neither – your own response in your own words.

To start with, we're purely good... Yeah. Um... Yes.

OK – that's simple.

Yep.

Q3. And um, question three is about the answers you've just given to the first two questions. What teachers, speakers, scholars, experts, uh, friends, family or what people or publications have influenced those views that you just gave me to questions one and two – would you say?

Um.. family. Um.. public as well? Yeah? Um... teachers in a way... yeah.

Ok. Any specific books, or anything um... in particular ... a key lecture or anything that might stick out?

*No, I don't think you can pinpoint it to one thing. I think it would be like family growing up. How your parents your grandparents behavior... and how people around you... the principle they are taking... and come to be ... um... and the public like the whole society how people... You know, you listen to the radio, you read the books, you... those kind of things... People express their opinions, and they express their opinions they say what's wrong, what's right. So you learn from that... Also the chance for you to see what **you** think on these things, and what happen particularly. You know, that's... I think there's a gradual process.*

Yeah.. Very helpful. The fourth question is particularly related to your work within the broad field of neurology.

Yeah

Q4. So from a neurological perspective, is human behavior so mechanistically accounted for and described, that we should dispense with the concept of moral responsibility?

Answer is no.

Anything further... you're free to elaborate or just leave it there?

Um... the neurology is a structure of how things function.. Um... or... There's no... I think the two different things. Yeah, for me. You know like... um... I don't know how to explain it really.

So what I hear you saying – and I invite you to confirm if I'm hearing you correctly... What I'm hearing you saying is that neurological observation and moral responsibility are two separate...

They are not completely separate... IF someone you have mentally... you're mentally delayed, whatever, you're probably not... also affecting your concepts of what's good what's wrong the principles the moral you know this kind of thing, so you can't expect everybody But if you a normal person capable of thinking capable of putting things together, um... Yeah, I think probably... whether they are completely separate... they still not completely separate...

Separate but related?

Yes, yes. Yes.

So one doesn't control the other

No.

OK. That's helpful. Those are the views I'm looking for.

Q5. Part two is to get your understanding of how Christians view sin. OK? So the first question is quite simple. Um... How would you describe or define the basic, general or mainstream view of sin from the perspective of Christians. Based on what you've heard or read.

In general, I have to say I don't think I have had a good understanding uh... to make any comment on this. But if I just stretch out, see let's think about what probably is... thinking we're born bad or something.. Yeah?

OK.

And so everybody um... Everybody tend to make everybody has the chance to make mistake and do make mistake and.... Yeah?

OK. That's good. Yep.

Q6a. So the next 2 questions are each in two parts. From everything you've heard about sin from Christians, what would seem the... the best that you agreed with the most, or thought was the most had the most worth to it... um... made the most sense...

Say that again?

From everything you've heard about sin from Christians, what was the best that you agreed with the most, or made the most sense...

I never been church. (laughs) I have... I don't have um... much conversation with... about God and this... this... practice... Christians... Umm I probably don't know.

Q6b. So if you would have heard about those things, I guess it would have been friends and family, or public again? That's the second part of the question – where would you be getting these good statements about sin from?

I have to say I never had a decent conversation with anyone about these topics.

That is significant for my research.

Yeah.

OK. OK.

The environment I work, home... No, I haven't. (laughs)

OK. That's fine.

Q7a. So the last question from everything you've heard from Christians about sin, what seems the be... the worst. What makes no sense, you actually don't agree, you don't like... um...

I basically don't believe we all born with sin... you know... you know we ahh... so like if I, you know, I read some books and see movies and that's probably where I see those side of umm religion... so Christian. And, sometimes I feel people doing something in the and the bad behavior and then just confess and seems fine again.

OK.

So it's just like umm... you know I did watch some movies and see people just thinking they know this a bad thing to do, but they do it anyway, and... and like they done it they just go to church and it seems fine again, and come up to church and then they feel all relieved and um... and next time things happen and they do it again.

So if I can clarify what I'm hearing... is that you don't agree that all humans are born with sin...

No...

...and you also struggle with confession of sin and just continuing to do something wrong

Yeah

OK. That's simple and clear. And you said the second part is where you got those views from maybe books and movies

Books and movies... yeah...

OK well that's all the questions I have for you and I want to thank you again for your time.

No problem.

Interview #2

SINterview #2 Transcript

Q1. Question one... and I'm trying deliberately not to put my language on you, so whether you use the term sin or wrongdoing or a word you might use; the causes of human wrongdoing or sin are, in your view are they inside the human being, outside the human being, internal, external, both, neither, or your own response

I think they're both. I think people respond to the things going on around them. I think fundamentally, that's what we do. Umm, we're responsive creatures. And we respond... our responses are shaped by our own personal experiences, but also our family our social culture and the context in which we live, and that's hugely different from one person to the next, even in the same country and culture, and so you know how we choose to act sometimes we make really poor choices that we regret, sometimes we make poor choices that we don't regret because we still think they're the right ones, but they're poor for other reasons or others see them as bad choices... So yeah, it comes down to that interaction between umm... who you are, what you want, what's driving you, and the context in which you're living and the context in which you have to make those decisions. But at the end of the day I still think they are... they are still choices. You do have a great deal of control over what's happening around you and how you get where you want to be in life. Does that get you anywhere near what you wanted?

Yes, there was the first word response, both, and then the explanation... which was very helpful. Great, that's a very suitable response.

Dig if you need more. (laughs)

It's a semi-structured interview, so I have freedom to clarify and dig a bit...

Q2. Question 2 is umm... human nature... or whatever terms we use. The nature of human beings is... Are we in our nature, good, bad, both, neither your own response...

Yeah, I think it's probably neither? Because I think we're born pretty, pretty blank, pretty impressionable, and I think the person we become depends again on how we're built. I think a lot of a lot of our predispositions towards responding one way or another do come down to the way our brains our built. I'm a neuroscientist, so naturally I'm going to think a lot about it in those terms, so I think the way our

brains are built and formed... and that depends on our genes, it depends on what happened to us in the womb, it depends on what happened to us in those early years, and so... I think we're all born umm blameless, put it that way... um... and we have (sorry) we have umm inborn tendencies almost personality traits, if you like, um... and those interact then with what happens around us, and the way we're taught to behave, so you know the modeling that you have from your friends and your family, and your peers and your culture. You know, impact a lot on which of your traits are punished and which of your traits are rewarded as you grow up.

Again, very helpful, the first word was neither, and then you extrapolated with some helpful thoughts there. um, question three is sort of ahh relates to the first two. So, who or what, you know it could be books it could be lectures, it could be YouTube videos, it could be journal articles, or whatever, or all of the above. What has shaped, or who has shaped your responses to the first two questions...

Oh, right, where did that come from? Umm... it's probably time... just being on the planet long enough...

Experience

...to get some experience. And learn to become self aware, so look at yourself and realize why you are the way you are and why some things are really hard for you and some things aren't; and also looking at the people around you with compassion? I think that comes with maturity as well – being able to look at people and umm... yeah, have the sense of compassion for their situation, and you learn a lot that way as well, you know you form your views about what is... why are people the way they are, and why do they behave the way they do. I think you can get there through a lot of awareness of yourself and of them. And observation and real contemplation, you know. To not dismiss things, people or their behavior because you don't understand it or don't agree with it, umm, but really taking the time to think about it and put yourself in their shoes and try and understand how did this person get to this point? And umm whenever it's a really great point, you know, like How on earth did they build such an incredibly successful and happy life as far as I can see? or how did they get it just so horrible wrong? And just their life's turned into a horrible disaster! (laughs) Even they would admit that, you know things are just not going well. And then you've got everything in between, so I think you know my views on you know where this interaction between how we're built and then the world we grow up in... I think that comes from, yeah just my own experience and watching others, but doing it with a great deal of compassion and a desire to understand. Yeah.

Helpful. Good. Um The fourth question is the most neurologically related...

Oh good! Yay! (claps & laughs)

So I'll just read it as I've got it...

And see what happens... (laughs)

So from a neurological perspective, is human behavior so mechanistically accounted for and described, that we should dispense altogether with the concept of moral responsibility?

Oh!! Wow, that's huge. Let me just stop and think about that for a second. I don't think... no matter how we think the brain works or how behavior works.. we can never dispense with the idea of moral responsibility. I think it's central to... to how... how we'd like the world to work. Yeah... I don't think you can be a... a worthwhile human being without having a sense of moral responsibility to yourself and to the people around you. So I think it doesn't matter how much we think we know or understand um... there's always going to be a place for that sense of moral as you say moral responsibility. Um... but getting back to the first part of the question, the mechanistic a mechanistic view of how we why and how we do things... I think that the fun thing for me is... There's a couple points here. One is that um... just because something's mechanistic, doesn't mean it's entirely predictable. Right? So you can understand things in terms of their mechanism and process extremely well, to the level of the cell, to the level of the protein, to the level of the gene, you know this is what people are doing in neuroscience. It's rid.... I was going to say it's ridiculous, and I don't mean that in a bad way I mean it's just it's just amazing! It is amazing. Um... However I think we're always a little bit more than the sum of our parts, and so just because you can understand everything to that level, doesn't mean you can perfectly predict what's going to happen, or how a system will behave, or how a person will behave, or what their choices will be. So I don't think understanding things mechanistically takes away from the sense of wonder? Or the sense of chance... or the sense of umm free will and control.. Certainly not the sense of responsibility. My... one thing that got me into neuroscience... I always sort of liked it, but in my second year of uni, I was in psychology lecture and I actually know this lecturer now, because she's now a colleague at this university, and I don't think she remembers ever saying this in her class, which just goes to show be careful what you say cause it might make a huge impression and you might never even know what you just said and how much it impacted on someone, but she quoted a guy called Emerson Pugh(?) and he said if the human brain was so simple that we could understand it, we'd be so simple that we couldn't. And his point is a really good one and I love it – I just totally love it. It just totally motivates me as a neuroscientist. It just reminds us that, look, you can't use your brain to fully know your brain. OK? You can't do that. To fully know something you have to be outside of it, and you're never going to be outside of your brain and your mind, and so you're never going to fully fully comprehend your own brain and your own mind and exactly how it works to the, you know, nth degree, to that tiny detail. So I like that, you know, that doesn't... that might sound demotivating, it might sound like Oh gosh, well, you're never really going to understand it, so why are you bothering to try, you know you're never going to get there it's an unattainable goal. How are you motivated by an unattainable goal? Um, but I'm still motivated. I think something that's you know, a wonderful thing and the more we know the more we realize we don't know, and I just think it's a you know it's a beautiful wondrous thing to... to spend your life interested in and thinking about and trying to use that knowledge to help people. I think that's the second bit, you know, it's not just for the sake of unpacking all the mechanism and somehow destroying some of the mystery... Which I don't think we can, I think

there's always going to be something mysterious. But if we can use knowledge we generate to help people who are struggling, then that is a really good thing. I think that's a great way to spend your life. I don't know quite how we got here? Where did we start? Oh yeah, the mechanis.... (laughs) Yeah, there's still a place for moral responsibility. Absolutely. Yeah. Is the short answer. And I think you can see why I both appreciate studying things at a mechanistic level, but I understand the limitations of doing so. We're never really going to get there, and I'm at peace with that. That's OK with me.

OK. That's excellent. I really appreciate some of the detail you gave.

That's quite a complete answer. I hope that's alright! (laughs)

Both the simple response, no, we shouldn't dispense...

No never...

And heaps of really good detail about that, so I really appreciate that...

Good.

Thank you. So... Part two!

Oh yay! (laughs)

Your understanding of how Christians view sin. So how would you, if you had to sort of like state what Christians believe about sin, um... how would you define that or state that...

Gosh, that's quite a hard question, coz I'm speaking without a lot of knowledge, so I apologise in advance if some of it sounds ridiculously naïve (laughs). Um... but yep, OK, so my opinion, umm I think... this is not what I think about sin, this is what I think Christian people think about sin. So that's a really important distinction and I think that's a heck of a lot harder for me so let me just pause on that for a second.

That's fine, take a few moments...

Ummm... my perception is that Christian people see sin... the construct of sin... as being a really important way to help them decide which side of an issue they're on. Right, so where do I stand with respect to 'x'? Whatever 'x' is, I think the construct of sin helps people... to ... quite quickly evaluate where do I stand with respect to this. And we'd call that in science... well you probably know the word, a heuristic. So it's like a mental shortcut. Umm... there's nothing wrong with that, we all use mental shortcuts all the time, so that's not a criticism. Um, it's just a way to quite quickly get to a point to where I know personally where I stand in relation to this umm person, event, issue, or perspective thing in the future. So that's how I see it. It's a tool, in some respects to help navigate what is an increasingly complex world. And even though I see it as a bit of a shortcut, I'm sure that people who apply that construct of sin... (??) it's not a shortcut, I'm sure that for some situations it

requires a great deal of contemplation and consultation to really understand where do I stand, where does my faith ask me to stand in relation to this issue. So it's not as simple as I just made it sound. But I do think it's a tool for understanding... arriving at a place.

Helpful. Again, very helpful, thank you. The next question has two parts. Part a is; from everything you've heard a Christian say about sin or write about sin, or whatever, communicate about sin, what to you has seemed the most OK that might be on to something there, that makes some sense, that's... what seems best, and part two is where and who and from whom did you hear that...

OK, crumbs... OK, so the bits of that construct that really resonate with me, that mean something to me... um are... I think... it's... I think being deceitful... is... is wrong. I think it's really important to be honest, and genuine and to be sincere, and so I guess I'm focusing on the opposite, but you know I think that's what it tells me there's a big red flag over being deceitful and dishonest. And so that really resonates with me, and I can't pin that down to a specific person, time or place as to why I think that's a sin for people of a Christian faith, and why I think that's important to me as well... Um.. I guess it's something I grew up with, you know it's something that just... has stuck with me... um.. but I can see that it is part of um, Christian thinking and Christian faith as well, so I'm assuming it's a sin to be dishonest? That's right isn't it? (laughs) Don't put words in my mouth but I think it's a sin to be dishonest. I think Christian people would see that as a sin, and I agree with that. Umm so yep, I think that's an important one. Um, and I think dishonestly extends to things like theft. Yep, so I think that's another... I think that comes in the same package that's dishonest. Um.. as is... oh, I thought of a good word for it... dishonesty, theft, and um.. well... I want to use the word unfairness. And to me that sort of packages up in the same way, yeah. Coz I think it's dishonest to be unfair in your dealings with other people. Yeah. It's just a bit like stealing. If you're stealing. You're actually keeping something away from somebody else, and that's not fair. So I think that all packages up for me quite nicely. And I don't know the correct um terms for it in terms of... but I think... does that make sense?

Yeah, I know exactly what you're talking about...

Good! Okay.. I don't! (laughs) I don't have the right words for it.

And the who and where of... You've heard Christians say that about sin and you know... and you sort of... would it be friends and contacts that also shared those views about dishonesty being wrong?

Yeah, I really only have had one friends who's a... who's a proper Christian; and by a proper Christian I mean goes to church and actually committed properly. Didn't just grow up in it and drift away. Is now a proper Christian. And umm... I just love her to bits. She's so much fun. And yeah, when we talk, you know, she's... oh yeah, gosh she's had home rough times at times in life; and I just know one of the things that really upsets her is that when people are really dishonest in their dealings and you know she expects people to be straightforward and... and... and yeah... just transparent and in their dealings with her and it really upsets her when they're not,

so I take it from that that you know honestly is a really important umm.. really important concept for her, and I agree with that. I can really share her indignation when people are behaving just so poorly, so unfairly. Yeah. I feel the same way in my own life, so we've got tons in common. Yeah.

Very helpful. Very helpful. Um... Next question, last question also two parts. Just the converse of that question, so everything you heard about Christians say about sin, what seems the worst, you're like, I just don't get that, or whatever it might be, and again the who and where... what Christian voices or authors you...

Yeah, it's a pity that umm, you know I can think of lots of recent examples. IT's a pity that... I think it's a great shame that when Christian people make it into the media it's usually for the wrong reasons. I just think that's such a pity, because... it's... For people who aren't Christians you can get a really lopsided view of people who are? And I blame it on the media, coz they're just hideous, let's face it. Umm, so I think... One of the things I really struggle with is... when you see people on the news who are claiming to be you know representing Christian people, which always makes me worry, um... and they spout off about issues around sexuality I think that's probably... that's a really broad topic, so whether it's umm sex before marriage, or same sex relationships, umm, you know those are the ones that kind of,

Touchstones...

(sighs), I just kind of back away from all of that because... it's such a cliché, but like some of my best friends are gay. They really are, and I don't... I don't see their lives as sinful. I think they're some of the most beautiful, fine, upstanding human beings who contribute so much to the people around them. And they just... they don't... they don't cause any trouble.. I mean, they just get on and live their lives and just want to be able to live their lives and love the person they love... it's really simple stuff, and they just want to do their work and help people just like the rest of us. And so when I see people in the media just you know, getting really upset about this and being quite vocal and mean? Like really degrading and quite vicious about it, it just upsets me... coz I know people like that, and they're nothing like what you say. And it just... I just can't believe that their life is wrong, because their life looks right to me, you know. They're doing so much good in the world; how can this be.. how can they be such a bad per... like you're making them sound like such an evil human being, and I know them, and they're not. So I find that upsetting. Yeah, I find I feel quite defensive of my friends who feel they're being attacked by people who you know... and I understand that that's not representative of all people who are Christians, you know, and that's annoying as well, and I'm sure it annoys some people who are Christians. It's like you don't really speak for me necessarily. So I think I find that quite hard the concept of some of the concepts of sin around sexuality I find quite challenging and unhelpful. Especially when they are put forward in the media in such a... such a blinkered, inflexible, you know, quite vicious way that denies everything else about the person they're talking about, you know? They just focus in one this one thing, and they can't see the rest of that person like I can. Yeah. So I'm not going to name names (laughs). But you get the idea.

So voices in the media...

Voices in the media, yeah.

So you hear them say this and you're like "ugh" ..

I do, it just turns me off completely, and it's a pity because I think, umm, it would be easy for people to misjudge umm... Christianity in general on the basis of some of those really... really obstreperous sort of voices that come forward, yeah. I think that's a shame.

Well, I think that takes us to the end of the interview.

Cool! Right!

(Interview) Info Sheet & Consent Forms

Consent Form

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH PROJECT

This consent form will be held for a period of no more than six years, in secure storage.

Research Project: Sin in Secular Ears: A Qualitative Study of how Non-Religious New Zealanders view and hear the Doctrine of Sin – reviewing Data from Targeted Semi-Structured Interviews and a Wide Survey

Researcher: Dale Campbell

I hereby confirm that I have been given and understand an explanation of this research project. I have had an opportunity to ask questions and have them answered. I also understand that I may withdraw myself, or any information that I have given, without reason, up until the 1st September 2013.

I agree to take part in this research, and I agree to having the interviews with Dale Campbell recorded for the purposes of his research.

Signed:

Name: (Please print clearly)

Date:

Participant Information Sheet

Research Project: Sin in Secular Ears: A Qualitative Study of how Non-Religious New Zealanders view and hear the Doctrine of Sin – reviewing Data from Targeted Semi-Structured Interviews and a Wide Survey

Researcher: Dale Campbell

Dear _____,

Thank you for being willing to consider assisting me in this research.

As I outlined in our phone/email conversation, I am a student in the Master of Applied Theology program at Carey Baptist College. I am conducting this research for the purpose of gaining more accurate understanding of how non-religious New Zealanders understand 'sin' or 'wrongdoing' themselves and particularly what they think about the Christian doctrine of Sin as far as they understand it or have heard it from Christians. I believe my research will help aid communication between Christians and non-religious New Zealanders.

I invite you to participate in this research. If you agree to participate, your involvement would require an interview of about fifteen to twenty minutes' duration, at a time and place of your choosing. The interview will be recorded and I may need to contact you to check the transcript, and if you wish to see the transcript I can send it to you.

I wish to stress that both your participation in the research and the information you offer is voluntary and can be withdrawn at any time, without reason, up until the 1st September 2013.

All information provided in the interview will be confidential and information that could potentially identify you or your institution will not be included in the thesis. My own observations from the review of the data may be distributed through various channels and possibly in future academic publications, but all names or person-specific data will be kept strictly confidential.

If you are happy to be a participant in this research and/or have any queries concerning it, please contact me (details listed below).

Thank you for the time you have already given me.

Kind regards

Dale Campbell

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This research has been approved by the Carey Baptist College Research Ethics Committee. If you have any concerns about the conduct of this research, you may contact the Dean of Studies at Carey on 09 526 6595, or email peter.hart@carey.ac.nz