Original SIN

A Cultural History

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INTRODUCTION

All religious beliefs prompt rejection. Souls are reincarnated? Ridiculous. The Bible is divinely inspired? Dangerous nonsense. Muhammad is the prophet of God? Poppycock. Jesus rose from the dead? Absurd. It is the common fate of doctrines to be dismissed; you'd almost think that's what they were made for. But not all beliefs are dismissed in the same way. Some get an airy wave of the hand; others, a thoughtful shake of the head, with pursed lips indicating a tinge of regret; still others, the stern wag of a hectoring finger. But of all the religious teachings I know, none—not even the belief that some people are eternally damned—generates as much hostility as the Christian doctrine we call "original sin."

It is one of the most "baleful" of ideas, says one modern scholar; it is "repulsive" and "revolting," says another. I have seen it variously described as an insult to the dignity of humanity, an insult to the grace and loving-kindness of God, and an insult to God and humankind alike. And many of those who are particularly angry about the doctrine of original sin are Christians. One of the great evangelists of the nineteenth century, Charles Finney, called the doctrine "subversive of the gospel, and repulsive to the human intelligence." A hundred years earlier an English minister, John Taylor of Norwich, had cried, "What a God must he be, who can curse his innocent creatures before they have a being! Is this thy God, O Christian?"

Yet for other Christians this teaching is utterly indispensable. Taylor's outburst prompted book-length retorts from two of the great pastoral and theological minds of that era, Jonathan Edwards and

John Wesley. Blaise Pascal believed that without this particular belief we lack any possibility of understanding ourselves. G. K. Chesterton affirmed it with equal insistence, adding the sardonic note that it is the only doctrine of the Christian faith that is empirically provable. The twentieth-century French Catholic writer George Bernanos wrote, paradoxically but sincerely, that "for men it is certainly more grave, or at least much more dangerous, to deny original sin than to deny God."

What *is* this belief that generates such passionate rejection and such equally passionate defense? We had best begin by saying what it is *not*.

It is not the first human sin. Many people believe that "original sin" refers somehow to Adam and Eve's eating of the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden. It's this association that produces countless metaphorical uses of the term, such as the oft-expressed idea that slavery is "America's original sin" or playwright Eric Bentley's claim that "over-complication is the original sin of the intelligentsia." Lord Henry, in Oscar Wilde's *Picture of Dorian Gray,* says, airily: "Humanity takes itself too seriously. It is the world's original sin. If the caveman had known how to laugh, history would have turned out differently." I could cite a hundred other examples. But even in these cases, varying though they are and more or less distant from the Christian doctrine we're concerned with here, there remains something worth looking into—something more than the idea of simple chronological priority.

Let's get at that something more through one more example, this one from a novel I read some years ago. What might it mean to say, as this novel does, that one man's original sin was the purchase of a house? Not that that purchase was his first mistake, or even his first big one, but rather that the transaction somehow set in motion a chain of unpleasant events that could not be arrested or reversed. One might think that what we have here is just a fancy way of say-

ing, "Everything started going wrong then"; but there are actually three further implications of the phrase that most readers will readily perceive. First, after the purchase of the house things *couldn't* have gone right. We also see that once the purchase was made there was no going back—selling the house either was impossible or wouldn't have helped. And finally, we realize that no one could have known in advance how disastrous the purchase of the house would turn out to be; the decision never seemed so consequential.

Once we add up the implications of this one writer's use of the phrase "original sin," we can see that its meaning would have been familiar to the ancient Greek tragedians, since it amounts to little more than the concept of fatal choice—a choice that sets in motion vast irresistible forces of retribution, what the Greeks named Nemesis. The statement "John's original sin was buying that house" occupies the same moral framework as "Oedipus's sin was murdering his father." Since Oedipus doesn't know that it's his father he kills, he can't imagine the full consequences of the act; there's no way to undo his deed, to get back to the life he was living before that moment at the crossroads; and the retribution he has called down upon himself is inevitable.

But if that is all "original sin" means, then that's the oldest of news and has nothing specifically to do with Christianity. And it's certainly possible to read the story of Adam and Eve in this way: the First Couple ate the fruit not knowing how profound the consequences would be, not understanding that the price of their meal would be forced and permanent exile from the garden and then, eventually, death. Read in such a way, it's a disturbing story, perhaps—but not *that* disturbing. However, the doctrine of original sin, as it eventually developed, strikes deeper and challenges or even overturns our usual notions of moral responsibility. Original sin is not mere fatality, the God who oversees it is not the faceless Nemesis, and Adam and Eve do not buy death for themselves only.

In his letter to the Christians at Rome, St. Paul asserts that "sin came into the world through one man," Adam, "and death through sin." Insofar as Paul is saying that Adam brought death upon himself by his sin, he's not being controversial. But Adam is no Oedipus. After all, he was ordered not to eat the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil and explicitly warned that disobedience meant death. An Igbo proverb often quoted by the Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe says, "A man who brings ant-infested wood into his hut should not complain when lizards pay him a visit." Or, as a more familiar vernacular has it, "What goes around, comes around."

But Paul is not content to leave it at that. The whole of Romans 5:12 reads: "Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, *and so death spread to all men because all sinned*" (emphasis mine). That is, Adam's sin brought death not just to him, but to "all men"—to all of his descendants: all of us. When we all forfeit our lives because of what one man did at the beginning of human history, "What goes around, comes around" doesn't quite cover it. And do I not have every right to complain about the lizards if it was my first father who brought the ant-infested wood into the hut while I was minding my own business? St. Paul, it appears, does not think so, because earlier in his letter to the Roman Christians he says that those who sin are "without excuse"—which is rather cold of him, is it not?

That most controversial of the church fathers, Augustine of Hippo—with whom we will have much to do in the pages ahead—finds Paul's argument useful in trying to understand a curious passage from the Bible's first book. In Genesis, God makes a covenant with Abraham and explains that a "sign" of the covenant will be the practice of circumcision. But, he warns, "any uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin shall be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant." Now, Augustine freely admits, this is pretty strange, for the situation God describes to Abraham "is in no way the fault of the infant whose soul is said to

be about to perish. It is not he who has broken God's covenant, but his elders, who have not taken care to circumcise him." And yet the passage clearly says that the uncircumcised infant is the one who has broken God's covenant.

For Augustine this passage meant that "even infants are born sinners, not by their own act but because of their origin"—their origin being the primal fatherhood of Adam. And here we see what is meant by original sin, *peccatum originalis* in Augustine's Latin: sin that's already inside us, already dwelling in us at our origin, at our very conception. Circumcision and the covenant it represents are necessary, because Adam broke faith with God and left all his children amidst the brokenness by somehow managing to transmit to us an irresistible tendency to do just what he did. In another book Augustine writes, "When a man is born, he is already born with death, because he contracts sin from Adam"—*contracts* it, as though it were a disease. Which in a way it is, and in another way it isn't; the categories have a long history of interrelation, confusion, conflation, some of which we will explore. But for now, it's fair to say that most of us feel that sin afflicts like disease and that, like disease, it is easy to acquire and hard to get rid of.

Many of us would also agree that sin, like the more communicable diseases, transfers easily to other people; few of us have strong immunity to its ravages. But we would also agree that the affliction of disease is not moral in character. Although it is possible to act in such a way that one becomes more prone to illness, surely there is no sin in being ill. Disease, we tend to agree, *happens* to us; sin is what we *do*. Yet it is just this simple and familiar distinction that Augustine—drawing on the passages in Genesis and Romans—denies. In his account, an infant who has not "acted" and is "not at fault" has nevertheless, somehow, broken a covenant with God.

This thought takes us far indeed from the Greek tragedians' picture of fatal choice—and from the way that the phrase "original sin"

is used in many of the examples cited earlier. That infant described in Genesis 17 has not made a choice. Moreover, although for the man who bought a house he shouldn't have bought or the woman who overcomplicated an issue, there was a time before the affliction, this cannot be said for that uncircumcised boy; he emerges stained from his mother's womb and remains stained unless rescued by whatever mysterious transaction the ritual removal of his penis's foreskin represents. This is the ultimate "preexisting condition," one that can be neither averted nor ignored.

It is, obviously, a belief that violates our most basic notions of justice. No wonder John Taylor of Norwich exclaimed, "What a God must he be, who can curse his innocent creatures before they have a being!" And yet the individual components of the idea are utterly familiar. Everyone knows that some people are born with a malady of some kind: a birth defect resulting from the mistransmission of genetic information, say, or a disorder (HIV, hepatitis) passed from mother to child through the umbilical cord. And we acknowledge that some social circumstances make certain sins all but inevitable. I don't see how I, as a white Southerner raised in the 1960s and 1970s, could have avoided some taint of racism, yet I don't think I should use that upbringing to declare myself innocent. Most of us are also comfortable with talk of "the human condition"—general circumstances shared by everyone, if nothing else "the thousand natural shocks that flesh is heir to." So we comprehend inherited affliction, collective and inherited responsibility, universally shared circumstances. It is the *joining* of these ideas that strains our minds. We struggle to hold together a model of human sinfulness that is universal rather than local, in which we inherit sin rather than choose it, and in which, nevertheless, we are fully, terrifyingly responsible for our condition.

So why would anyone hold to such a strange and, frankly, rather depressing idea? To answer that, we must—well, we must traverse the next three hundred pages or so. But for a capsule answer, you could

do worse than invoke Chesterton's comment about the empirical evidence for original sin. Any moderately perceptive and reasonably honest observer of humanity has to acknowledge that we are remarkably prone to doing bad things—and, more disturbingly, things we *acknowledge* to be wrong. And when we add to this calculus the deeds we insist are justified even when the unanimous testimony of our friends and neighbors condemns us—well, the picture is anything but pretty. These are the most truistic of truisms, of course, and I can't imagine that anyone would deny them, but they raise questions, do they not? *Unde hoc malum?* is how it was put long ago: Where does this wrongdoing come from? What is its wellspring, the source of its ongoing prevalence and power? The doctrine of original sin is, if nothing else, an intellectually serious attempt to answer such questions.

It's hard to imagine a more consequential puzzle or one that infiltrates more facets of human experience. I came to the topic when writing a long essay about Jean-Jacques Rousseau—about whom more, much more, later—and discovered that, at almost the same time that Rousseau was declaring the natural innocence of children and articulating a whole philosophy of education based on that innocence, the English preacher John Wesley was preaching sermons on the education of children founded on a belief in the innate and ineradicable corruption of human nature. And it turns out, not surprisingly, that an educational system based on Wesley's beliefs about children differs dramatically from one based on Rousseau's commitments. So, our beliefs about why we so invariably go astray have the most wide-ranging of consequences.

Though many people still echo Rousseau's rhapsodies about the natural innocence of children, his ideas have lost much of their influence. Partly this stems from serious research into child psychology—almost all of which has shown that the psyches of children are lamentably like those of adults—and partly from an increasingly

universal skepticism about all things human that is the natural and reasonable response to that foulest of human centuries, the twentieth. As the poet and critic Randall Jarrell once wrote, with a terrifying wryness, "Most of us know, now, that Rousseau was wrong: that man, when you knock his chains off, sets up the death camps. Soon we shall know everything the eighteenth century didn't know, and nothing it did, and it will be hard to live with us." Well, it *is* hard to live with us, hard for us to live with ourselves, because we feel that we have left Christianity and its "baleful," "repulsive" doctrines behind. But we have also left Rousseau's naïveté behind, so where the hell are we? That is, *what* are "we"? What remains of a sense of shared humanity? Do we believe in it anymore? And if so, in what do we ground that belief?

For many scholars and thinkers, especially in the fields we call the humanities, the only thing we all have in common is that we don't have anything *naturally* or *inevitably* in common. The human condition, such as it is, is to be "socially constructed," to be formed wholly by our environments. "Socialization goes all the way down," as the philosopher Richard Rorty used to say. But this view leaves unanswered, and usually unasked, the question of why the social construction of selves is so limited in its range, so unimaginatively and repetitively attached to making us cruel and selfish. Which is why some adherents of this position insist that some societies *have* found ways to construct selves that are uniformly generous and kind—and why they respond with fierce repudiation to any contrary evidence. The classic case study of this phenomenon involves the work of the anthropologist Napoleon Chagnon among the Yanomamo people of the Amazon basin. When Chagnon discovered and reported on the various forms of aggression in Yanomamo culture, he was scorned as a pariah by many of his anthropological colleagues, for whom the natural innocence of the Yanomamo had become an article of faith.

For scholars outside the humanities—the cognitive scientist Steven Pinker, for example—this social-constructionist "denial of human nature" is absurd, largely because it ignores the biological determinants of human behavior, and a common genetic inheritance is something that we all certainly share. Yet although Pinker and like-minded scholars feel they can account pretty well for the prevalence of selfishness and even violence across all human cultures, they have more trouble explaining why we remain uneasy, even guilt-stricken, about our most common tendencies—why *selfish* and *violent* are pejorative terms for us.

In short, some of us have trouble explaining, or even making sense of, common human behavior; others have trouble understanding our common *responses* to that behavior. Yet we all stand here looking back on a century of unparalleled cruelty, dotted with names—Hitler, Stalin, Mao, Pol Pot—that instantly call to mind the worst that human beings are capable of doing to one another. And we could with equal justice mark that century (as well as the one recently commenced) for its cruelty to the natural world, though we lack specific names to associate with *that* foul work. We have never had more need to explain ourselves to ourselves, but we manifestly lack the resources to do so. It may be (I think it is) a propitious moment for reconsidering that curious concept called *peccatum originalis,* the belief that we arrive in this world predisposed to wrongdoing—that this world is a vale of tears because we made it that and, somehow, couldn't have made it anything else.

Again and again the literature and culture of the West have returned to this doctrine, worrying over it, loathing it, rejecting it—only to call it back in times of great crisis or great misery. (It was in the bowels of the Soviet Gulag that Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn came to believe in it.) It repeatedly infiltrates our culture, provoking always the strongest of responses. We cannot make sense of it and yet cannot kill it. The task of this book is to explore the provocation of this

single strange idea—a provocation that is located in its combination of repulsiveness and explanatory power. Perhaps no one has understood this better than Blaise Pascal, who wrote in his *Pensées:* "What could be more contrary to the rules of our miserable justice than the eternal damnation of a child, incapable of will, for an act in which he seems to have had so little part that it was actually committed 6,000 years before he existed? Certainly nothing jolts us more rudely than this doctrine, and yet but for this mystery, the most incomprehensible of all, we remain incomprehensible to ourselves."

What follows is an *exemplary* history—so-called not because it embodies excellence that other historians would do well to imitate, but because it makes its case through examples. An exhaustive and systematic cultural history of original sin would probably be impossible; it would surely be undesirable. Though there is a good deal of exposition in the chapters that follow, most of it emphasizes narratives about people, people who engage in a serious and thought-provoking way with the idea of original sin—whether by embracing it, rejecting it, or wrestling with the possibility of it. From my accounts of these people the arc of a story emerges. It is a generally accurate story, I believe, but to tell the *whole* story in a historically responsible way is beyond me and, I think, beyond anyone.

It is also a specifically *cultural* history, not a history of theological ideas. Though theology comes regularly into my narrative—how could it not?—I have tried throughout to write for readers who have little interest in theology. My concern is with the ways in which belief or disbelief in original sin plays itself out in a great variety of cultural forms, from poetry to movies, from psychoanalysis to the rearing of children. But these are all aspects of culture upon which theology impinges. As well it should.