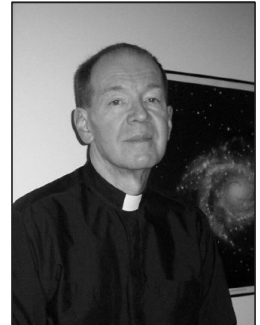




Roads to Paradise and Perdition: Christ, Evolution, and Original Sin

George L. Murphy

After sketching the theological context for discussion, the real problems connected with evolution and original sin are distinguished from superficial ones. Consideration is given to the relevant biblical material, the historical development of the ideas of original sin and original righteousness, and scientific knowledge about human evolution. The main emphasis of this paper is on a model of the beginning of sin in the human race and the conditions it gives rise to, a model that corresponds in broad outlines to the scientific picture of human origins and to some theological understandings of the first humans in the early church. We conclude with reflections on the relationship between death and human sin.



George L. Murphy

The Christological Context

Issues connected with original sin have convinced many people that Christianity and evolution are incompatible. There have been numerous discussions about this but the results have not been completely satisfactory, especially for those who feel that attention to the historical origin of sin is needed.¹ Thus a further attempt to deal with the issues seems justified.

This paper is offered as a constructive theological proposal that takes into account scientific realities. Only the most essential aspects of Scripture, the theological tradition, and scientific theories and observations can be included. I will assume that the general scientific picture of biological evolution is correct and that humanity came into being by God working through this process.² I also argue that some aspects of relevant biblical texts represent accommodation to the contexts of the biblical writers and are not essential to the theological message the Holy Spirit intends to communicate. More will be said about this in the appropriate place.

We must begin from the proper theological standpoint: God's revelation of his will for creation in Jesus Christ. Our questions should be dealt with in the context of a theology of the Crucified One.³

This may seem surprising because Christians have often understood the Incarnation only as God's "Plan B" to solve the problem of sin. God supposedly made a perfect world which was then marred by human sin, so that atonement was required to repair the damage. But this view makes the Incarnation contingent upon human sin. We find language that touches on our topic in the ancient liturgy of the Easter Vigil:

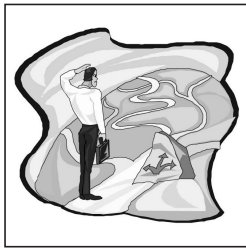
O necessary sin of Adam that is wiped away by the death of Christ!

O happy fault that was worthy to have so great a Redeemer!⁴

This is sometimes seen as a profound mystery but it amounts to a claim that by sinning, humanity *earned* an Incarnation which otherwise would not have happened!

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Evolution does require that we rethink traditional ideas about righteousness, sin, and salvation. ... In Romans, Paul develops an indictment of the human race as sinful and then presents Christ as God's solution to this problem in chapters 1-3 before mentioning Adam's sin in chapter 5.

The question of whether the Incarnation would have occurred had humanity not sinned has been debated for centuries. Some medieval theologians (including Aquinas) said "No" and others "Yes."⁵ Ephesians 1:10, which speaks of God's "plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him [Christ], things in heaven and things on earth,"⁶ favors the latter response. In modern times, Barth argued forcefully that the Incarnation is the purpose of creation.⁷

Here we take that view. God created a universe able to develop in such a way that intelligent life would come into being so that God could become Incarnate.⁸ Neither the world as a whole nor humanity would have been "perfect" initially. "Very good" in Gen. 1:31 does not mean that improvement was impossible. (Otherwise "be fruitful and multiply" would make no sense.) We will see that eastern Christianity has thought of humanity as created in an immature state and intended by God to develop further.

But was the *cross* part of God's purpose? When we reflect on the way in which humanity evolved, we will see that it is hard to imagine how it could have happened without sin coming into the picture. If this is so, if some alienation of creation from God was an inevitable (though not "necessary") aspect of the evolutionary process, we can see why, even before creation, God could have intended the cross as a way to reconcile to himself "all things" (Col. 1:20). 1 Peter 1:19-20 and Rev. 13:8 speak of Christ as the sacrificial lamb destined (respectively) before or from "the foundation of the world."⁹

There is some similarity between this view and supralapsarian Calvinism, in which God's decree of predestination precedes (in a logical, not temporal, sense) the decrees of creation and permission to fall.¹⁰ The emphasis, however, should be on God's election first of *Christ*, and then of others in Christ, of creation for the sake of this election.¹¹ Our knowledge of creation and the problems connected with sin are to be seen in light of the Incarnation, cross, and resurrection. In Bonhoeffer's words: "The world exists from the beginning in the sign of the resurrection of Christ from the dead."¹²

Our picture of creation is then not one of static perfection but of divine activity in the dynamic universe, which the physical and

biological sciences disclose to us. God intended time and history, and the final state of things will not be just a return to the initial state. In that consummation of history, there is indeed the tree of life (Rev. 22:2) but in the midst of a city, into which people have brought "the glory and the honor of the nations," everything good accomplished in human history.¹³

This has profound implications for our self-understanding. The standard of genuine humanity is not the biblical description of the first man and woman. If that were so, we would know almost nothing about what kind of persons we are to be. Even less is our standard to be whatever science tells us about some early members of the genus *Homo*. The exemplar of humanity, the true image of God (Col. 1:15), is Jesus Christ as he is proclaimed to us in Scripture, and God's purpose for all of us is to grow into maturity in him (Eph. 4:11-16).

The Real Issues

"If there was no historical Adam and no historical Fall, the need for a savior disappears. The structure of Christianity collapses." Such claims about the implications of evolution are sometimes made both by Christians who reject evolution and by evolutionists who reject Christianity, people who may agree on little else.¹⁴ An honest person supposedly must reject either evolution or Christianity.

Evolution does require that we rethink traditional ideas about righteousness, sin, and salvation but the argument just sketched fails. It can be disposed of quickly as a preliminary to more adequate considerations.

The Christian claim is that a savior is needed because all people are sinners. It is that simple. *Why* all people are sinners is an important question but an answer to it is not required in order to recognize the need for salvation. None of the gospels uses the story in Genesis 3 to speak of Christ's significance. In Romans, Paul develops an indictment of the human race as sinful and then presents Christ as God's solution to this problem in chapters 1-3 before mentioning Adam's sin in chapter 5.

In support of this claim, we may cite Jonathan Edwards. In the eighteenth century, he was unaware of modern evolutionary

theories and read Genesis 3 as history. Yet the first chapter of his defense of the doctrine of original sin is "The Evidence of Original Sin from What Appears in Fact of the Sinfulness of Mankind."¹⁵ In proclaiming the Christian message to people who have not heard it, we do not begin by trying to convince them that there was a sin of the first humans in which they were involved. The basic law-gospel message is instead, "You are a sinner and Christ is your savior."

The crucial distinction here is between the idea of an "original sin" which took place at the beginning of human history and that of a "sin of origin" which affects all human beings from their beginnings and from which they cannot free themselves.¹⁶ The need for a savior is dependent upon the latter belief but not upon the former.

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Sin is an existential reality. Each of us is a sinner and we share a common sinful condition. Modern theologians have tried to keep this point in view without reading Genesis 3 as a historical narrative,¹⁷ and some are explicit about getting rid of Adam and Eve.¹⁸ I agree that Genesis 2-3 should not be read as history. Adam and Eve are theological representations of all humans, and I will not try to locate the first parents of the human race in the paleontological record. But this does not mean that the question of sin's origin is unimportant.

If Adam and Eve represent *all* humans, then they represent also the *first* humans. And if humanity has been sinful from the time that it came into being, without doing anything to *become* sinful, sin would be part of human nature itself. This would mean that in an important sense God was the creator of sin. To avoid this conclusion, we must use biblical texts about creation and sin for guidance in trying to understand how the first human sin might have had a role in bringing about a sinful condition as part of the evolutionary process.

Original sin is sometimes called the most empirically obvious Christian doctrine, but this is misleading. Sin has to do first with our relationship with God. It is obvious that everyone does bad things, but only revelation tells us that everyone is alienated from God and acts contrary to God's will. Discussions of sin from the standpoint of behavioral or social sciences do not in themselves get to the root of the problem.

The traditional western concept of original sin has not been accepted by all Christians. Variants of the doctrine developed by Augustine in the fifth century have been affirmed in all parts of the western church but have not gone unchallenged. The idea that all people are affected by, and actually guilty of, the sin of an ancestor seems irrational and unjust to many Christians. But precisely because original sin was controversial before Darwin and Wallace came on the scene, we need to be careful not to allow evolution to be just an excuse for jettisoning a doctrine which people dislike for other reasons.

The idea that the sin of the first humans resulted in a sinful state of their descendants raises the question of how this condition is transmitted from one generation to another. A contrast is often drawn between Augustine's belief that people are unable to avoid sinning because of a condition inherited from Adam and that of Pelagius, in which people have the freedom to avoid sin but are influenced by a sinful environment, including the example of Adam. But we will see that posing the question as a choice between heredity and environment presents a false dichotomy.

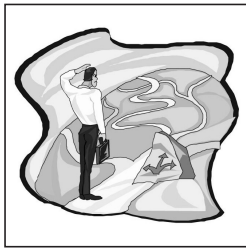
The views of the eastern church about the original human condition and the problem of sin differ significantly from Augustine's. The Orthodox tradition needs to be heard in this area, and provides some guidance for our reflections here.

Though the issue we deal with is usually referred to as "original sin," we will see that the most serious challenge that evolution offers is to "original *righteousness*," the idea that the first humans were created in a "state of integrity" in which they were sinless and could remain so. Such a picture is very difficult to reconcile with what is known of evolution, and thus needs fresh consideration.

Biblical Background

Detailed exegesis is not possible here but serious theology must begin with Scripture. The most important texts that we need to consider are Genesis 3 and the ways in which Paul uses this story. But the chapters of Genesis which follow the story of the first sin are also significant.

Genesis 3 is about humans distrusting and disobeying God. They do not believe what God has said and transgress God's command.¹⁹ The story is not, first of all, about



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the sins of one human against another. Sin is, as we noted, a *theological* concept. The First Commandment comes first. Paul makes the same point in Rom. 1:18-32. The sins listed in verses 24-31, such as sexual immorality, murder, and deceit, are consequences of the refusal to honor God described in verses 21-23.

This sin against God does result in fractured relationships of people with one another and with the world. The man blames the woman, who blames the serpent. Sin casts a shadow on childbearing and a curse on the ground. In the following chapters, the situation worsens with Cain's murder of Abel, Lamech's cry for unlimited vengeance, the universal corruption that provokes the Flood, and the Tower of Babel. There is not so much a single abrupt "fall" in Genesis 3 as there is a process of falling in chapters 3-11.

The sin of the first humans is connected with their death: "You are dust, and to dust you shall return" (Gen. 3:19). We will deal with the issue of mortality in our final section.

But is it true that this first sin is passed on, or imputed, to all descendants of Adam? The early chapters of Genesis and, indeed, the whole Old Testament say nothing of that. There is no indication that the writer of Genesis 3 thought of that story as a causal factor in the general sinfulness of humanity.

A general sinfulness is, however, in view. In Gen. 8:21, after the rest of humanity has been destroyed and only Noah's family remains, God observes that "the inclination of the human heart is evil from youth." Psalm 51:5 and Job 14:1-4 suggest that this general sinfulness affects every person from the beginning of life.

It is not clear that the writer of Genesis 2-3 thought of "the man" and "the woman" as historical persons. The point in Genesis at which *'adham* becomes a proper name, "Adam," is debated.²⁰ Adam as the first man is listed in genealogies (Gen. 5:1-5 and 1 Chron. 1:1) and may be referred to in Hos. 6:7.²¹ But the fact that Adam is never mentioned in the Old Testament's recitations of God's acts in history suggests that Israel in that period did not see him as a historical figure.²² By the time of Christ, however, Jews were understanding Adam and Eve as historical and their sin as the

cause of later human misery. Paul's statements about Adam are to be read in that context. Care, however, is needed against excesses of both "conservative" and "liberal" interpretation.

On one hand, the fact that Judaism of the time, and Paul himself, thought of Adam as a historical figure does not mean that we must. We have a similar situation in Genesis. It speaks of the sky as a "dome" (1:6) and the part of the world known to the writer as "the whole earth," in contrast to what we have learned from more accurate modern astronomy and geography. As Seely has argued, citing Calvin, there is accommodation to cultural context in such matters which are inessential to the text's theological message.²³ This can be seen as condescension by the Holy Spirit who inspired the biblical writers, a type of divine self-limitation which a theology of the cross leads us to expect. This was not just a matter of authors using elementary language to describe things that were unknown to their contemporaries. There is no reason to think, for example, that the writer of Genesis 1 knew about the big bang but chose to speak in terms of ancient near eastern cosmology.

We can understand Paul's references to Adam as a historical individual as similar accommodation. In Rom. 5:12-21, Paul's purpose is to state the importance of Christ for the human problems of sin and death, not to give information about the early history of humanity.²⁴

On the other hand, the claim that Adam is not a historical individual in the modern sense does not mean that Paul is talking *only* about the existential situation of all people, or that the origin of sin is not in view in the text. In verse 12, he speaks of sin coming into the world, not as something simply given in creation. The spread of death is due to the fact that "all have sinned." Yet there is some difference between the sin of "all" and the primordial sin, for Paul refers to "those whose sins were not like the transgression of Adam" (5:14). The first sin had causal efficacy: "By the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners" (5:19).

Paul apparently saw more in Genesis 3 than the author of that text intended, but it would be inept even on the level of secular literature to say that he was wrong to do so.

We do not say that Goethe “misunderstood” the Faust story because he reversed its meaning from earlier versions. And if we take the idea of inspiration of Scripture seriously, it is not hard to believe that Paul could have been led to a deeper understanding than that of the earlier biblical author.

Let us also note Eph. 2:3. While it says nothing about an original sin of the first humans, the statement that before faith in Christ all people are “by nature children of wrath” affirms what has come to be called sin of origin.

Doctrines of Original Sin and Original Righteousness

Original sin did not become a contentious topic among Christians until the fifth century.²⁵ The issue came to a head in debates between Augustine of Hippo and the British monk Pelagius and their supporters.²⁶ Their disagreement was not first about the sin of Adam but over the extent to which human beings could do God’s will without saving grace. Augustine insisted that without such grace no one is able to trust and obey God properly — that all are sinners from the beginning of life. One of his main arguments was that the church baptized infants, like adults, “for the forgiveness of sins” (in the words of the Nicene Creed), a practice that would make no sense if infants were not in some sense sinners.²⁷ Pelagius had a more optimistic view of unaided human powers. Augustine explained the sinfulness of all people by tracing their condition to Adam, “in whom all sinned” according to a Latin translation of Rom. 5:12. For Pelagius, on the other hand, Adam essentially set a bad example that we may or may not follow.

The western church accepted the views of Augustine, although with some modifications. The definitive statement of this is the canons of the Synod of Orange in AD 529.²⁸ What is meant by “the doctrine of original sin” is usually some version of Augustine’s teaching: All people (Christ excepted) receive the consequences of Adam’s sin and are born not only with a tendency to sin but actually as sinners. Different parts of the Christian tradition have, however, modified this view in various ways, and some Christians, from the fifth century to today, have simply opposed Augustine’s idea. The idea that all people are “born sinful” is unpleasant, and especially since the Enlightenment, many people have held a more positive view of the human condition. They have rejected the idea of original sin, and while they may appeal to evolution to support their position, their basic reason for opposing the doctrine may be different.

A strong statement of original sin in the Augustinian tradition is in Article II of the 1530 Augsburg Confession.

Furthermore, it is taught among us that since the fall of Adam, all human beings who are born in the natural way are conceived and born in sin. This means

that from birth they are full of evil lust and inclination and cannot by nature possess true fear of God and true faith in God. Moreover, this same innate disease and original sin is truly sin and condemns to God’s eternal wrath all who are not in turn born again through baptism and the Holy Spirit.²⁹

This is a dark picture of the human condition but not so dark that original sin becomes identified with fallen human nature, making the devil in effect the creator of unredeemed humanity. The later (1580) Formula of Concord, while taking a determined stand against Pelagianism, made that point.³⁰

The counterpart of “original sin” in classical theology is “original righteousness.” Humanity was supposed to be created without sin and able to avoid sin. ... [T]he Bible says nothing about ... perfection.

The discussion of original sin is incomplete if we have nothing with which to contrast it. If sin is a defect or distortion, what is it a defect in or a distortion of? The counterpart of “original sin” in classical theology is “original righteousness.” Humanity was supposed to be created *without* sin and able to avoid sin. Abraham Calovius defined the original condition of humanity according to this view.

It is called a state of integrity, because man in it was upright and uncorrupt (Eccl. 7:29) in intellect, will, the corporeal affections and endowments, and in all things was perfect. They call it also the state of *innocence*, because he was innocent and holy, free from sin and pollution.³¹

In this state, humanity had “true fear of God and true faith in God.” As Calovius’ statement shows, the idea was often elaborated in such a way that Adam and Eve were pictured as perfect in all respects, with physical and mental abilities far beyond those of later people, in addition to possessing complete trust in their creator. Representative of such views is South’s “An Aristotle was but the rubbish of an Adam.”³²

These speculations have exacerbated the apparent conflict between Christianity and evolution. This is unfortunate and unnecessary because the Bible says nothing



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about such perfection.³³ Genesis 1–3 does not state that the first humans were intellectually brilliant or had amazing physical powers. Even their ability to trust in God does not mean that they were skilled theologians.

In the traditions of the Eastern Church, we find a picture of early humanity different from that of the west, and more in line with a developmental picture. The second-century apologist Theophilus of Antioch explained the prohibition of the tree of knowledge by saying: “Adam, being yet an infant in age, was on this account as yet unable to receive knowledge worthily.”³⁴ According to Irenaeus: “The man was a young child, not yet having a perfect deliberation” and “It was necessary for him to reach full-development by growing in this way.”³⁵ While for Augustine and the western church, the perfection of humanity was actually realized in Paradise before the entry of sin, for Irenaeus and much of the eastern tradition, humanity was created with the potential to grow toward perfection. God gave humanity the ability to progress, with divine grace, toward full union with God.³⁶

Human Origins

Our assumption that God has created humanity through the processes of evolution needs to be fleshed out to some extent. While we need not try to pin down exactly when or where humanity came into being, there are aspects of the scientific picture that need to be taken into account.

The theological proposal to be made here does not depend on the number of hominids to be considered the first humans or on when they came into being. But it does seem unlikely that the present human race can be traced to a single male-female pair. As one example of the difficulty this idea faces, development of the present diversity of alleles of human histocompatibility genes from such a pair would require between five and ten million years.³⁷ Unless we want to consider “Adam and Eve” the biological ancestors of all hominids, and perhaps even pongids, we must rule this out.

There is scientific debate today about how the first modern humans arose. Did a relatively small group emigrate from Africa recently and replace older *Homo* populations? Or did modern humans develop in different

locations, with interbreeding between different populations to avoid speciation. The “Out of Africa” theory has greater similarity to a literal reading of Genesis than does the “Regional Continuity” theory, but the theological model suggested in the next section can be applied to both.

It is important to recognize, however, that the creatures described by the biblical term ‘*adham*, “human being,” cannot automatically be equated with the species *Homo sapiens* or with “anatomically modern humans.” The first humans in a theological sense were hominids in whom reason, self-awareness, and communication had developed to an extent that it was somehow possible for them to be aware of God’s address to them. They could have known, at least dimly, God’s will for them. From this point on, I use the term “human” to refer to humans in the theological sense defined here.

In any case, humanity came into being through an evolutionary process in which natural selection was at least a major factor. Our ancestors would have been members of their species who were most successful in competition with others for food, breeding opportunities, protection from predators, and other survival needs, by fair means or foul.

The latter phrase does not apply to creatures who are not moral agents with knowledge of “fair” and “foul.” Our prehuman ancestors cannot be called “immoral,” let alone “sinful,” because they killed, deceived, were sexually promiscuous, and did other things that would be sinful for their human descendants. But when the first humans, as we have defined them, came into being, they would have had strong propensities for the same types of behavior. When they began to become aware that such actions were contrary to God’s will, these creatures would have been moral agents for whom such acts were sinful. But because of their inherited tendencies, it would have been difficult for them to avoid those acts.

These implications of natural selection are theoretical, but we need not rely on theory alone. Studies of our primate relatives have found that they behave in ways consistent with what natural selection leads us to expect.³⁸ Humanity did not develop through a bloodthirsty “war of all against all.” There are many examples of cooperative behavior

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among other primates. But natural selection presents a serious challenge to the idea that the first humans lived in a sinless state of integrity for any period of time. It is not hard to believe that creatures who evolved through natural selection could have sinned. It is harder to make sense of the idea that the first humans were created in a condition of original righteousness in which they had a real possibility of *not* sinning.

Lost in the Woods

How could a sin committed by the first humans result in a condition in which all later humans are sinners from the beginning of their lives? This condition has sometimes been called “hereditary sin” (*Erbsünde*), but it need not be understood as “genetic” in the sense that it is coded for by DNA. We know of conditions which are “hereditary”—inherited from a parent—but not “genetic,” such as fetal alcohol syndrome. That condition is “environmental,” being caused by conditions of the uterine environment which are due to the mother’s consumption of alcohol.

Let us imagine the first group of hominids—it is not necessary here to decide how large that group may have been, or where or when they lived—who had evolved to the point of self-awareness and linguistic ability.³⁹ We regard the evolutionary course by which this condition was reached as one in which God was continually at work through natural processes as secondary causes.⁴⁰ These humans have developed abilities to reason and communicate, and are able in some way to receive and, at least faintly, understand God’s Word, to trust in that Word, and to know and obey God’s will for them. We do not know in what way the expression of God’s will may have come to them, or what command may have corresponded to the prohibition of the tree of knowledge in Genesis. It might have concerned the way in which people should live together, but about that we can only speculate.

These first humans are at the beginning of a road along which God wants to lead them and their descendants to full maturity and complete fellowship with God. In principle, they can follow that road, but it will not be easy. They have inherited traits which enabled their ancestors to survive and to pass on their genes. And those traits, as we saw, will predispose them toward selfish behavior and away from the kind of community—with God, one another, and creation—which God intends for them. Such behavior is not “hardwired” into them, but tendencies toward it are very strong. They can refuse to trust and can disobey what they know, however faintly, is God’s will for them.

History indicates that this is what happened. We may note first the evidence for religious ideas in burials, cave art, and perhaps even earlier artifacts.⁴¹ Some people may take such signs of “spirituality” as a positive feature of early humanity, but spirituality itself is ambiguous. The

basic human problem, as Paul describes it in Rom. 1:18–31, is not that people are atheists but that they worship creatures rather than the Creator. Primitive religions may well be a sign of estrangement from the true God. And it is all too obvious that humanity has been involved in conflict from its beginnings.

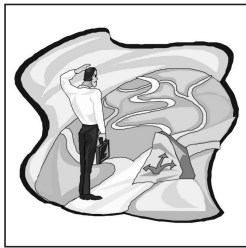
The biblical story indicates that this is an accurate *theological* description of what happened. The first humans took a wrong road, one “that leads to destruction” (Matt. 7:13), away from the goal that God intended. They and their descendants were soon alienated from God. Humanity was lost in the woods and darkness had fallen.

The previous paragraph is not an attempt to read the early chapters of Genesis as history. Purely secular history shows us that humanity has generally not known or worshiped the God of Israel and has been involved in conflict from its beginning. What the biblical story does is to provide a theological understanding of that history.

These first humans are at the beginning of a road [that] they can follow ..., but it will not be easy. They have inherited traits which ... will predispose them toward selfish behavior and away from the kind of community ... which God intends for them.

This image of “taking the wrong road,” like that of “the Fall,” is a metaphor for the human condition, not a historical narrative. But the picture of gradual departure from the course God intended is, as we noted earlier, one which the early chapters of Genesis convey. It is important to emphasize that it is not the condition of being on a journey, of being in process, which is itself sinful. Being participants in the evolutionary process means being God’s creatures, which is good. The problem of sin is not that we are on a road, but that we are on a *wrong* road.

Humanity can be understood as a “symbiosis” of genes and culture.⁴² Both are good, in that they help to transmit to each person the essence of what we consider human. But both can also contribute to deviation from God’s intention for humanity. Our genetic makeup, conditioned by natural selection, gives us powerful tendencies toward



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selfish behavior. The cultures in which we are conceived, born, and live exacerbate those tendencies in various ways. We are born as members of a tribe that is lost in the woods.

To say that there is a genetic component of original sin does not mean that there is a “gene for sin.” Whether an action is sinful generally depends on the context in which it takes place as well as the action itself. And contrary to the “gene myth” which says that all our properties and behaviors are determined by DNA,⁴³ genes give us, at most, tendencies for certain behaviors.

To say that there is a cultural component of original sin means that sin is in part a result of our environment, an effect of “nurture” as well as “nature.”⁴⁴ This differs from the naive view attributed to Pelagius, that Adam simply provides a bad example for us. The effects of our environment can be far more pervasive than that, as the analogy of fetal alcohol syndrome suggests. They are not things that we freely choose to accept or reject, but influences that we take in “with our mother’s milk.”

The universality of sin thus means more than that all people happen to sin. There is a solidarity in sin,⁴⁵ so that people make up a “sinful mass” in the classic phrase. More modern language speaks of “structures of sin” such as racism and the culture of abortion in human societies. A person born in a racist society is not predestined to be a racist, but it will be very “natural” to become one. None of this, of course, means that individual sin is unimportant, or can be blamed entirely on society.

The word commonly used in the New Testament for sin, *hamartia*, means literally “missing the mark.” It can designate specific sinful acts but in Paul and John it refers to “the sinful quality of life and the state of alienation from God.”⁴⁶ A person who starts in the wrong place will have missed the mark even before he or she begins. Thus our sin of origin truly is sin. As Tillich put it: “Before sin is an act, it is a state.”⁴⁷

Neither strict Augustinians nor determined Pelagians will be satisfied with this formulation. Unregenerate people are not compelled to sin but all people are sinners and would need saving grace even if they could theoretically avoid “actual sins.” This

approach preserves the essence of what the western church has insisted upon without the use of theories about human history and the transmission of sin, which are now seen to be untenable.

If the human problem is as we have described it, salvation means being put on the right road. It is a renewal of creation, not as a return to a perfect primordial state but as a reorientation of creation to its proper goal. God begins this process with the call of Abram. Throughout Israel’s history (e.g., Joel 2:13), people are called to “return” to God.

Finally God himself comes to share in the human condition, inviting and enabling people to follow him. The work of Christ is re-creation, and anyone in Christ is a new creation (2 Cor. 5:17). Part of this process is life in the Christian community, a culture of those called to follow Christ. But because this community exists in the real world, it never provides a perfect context in which the effects of sin are completely overcome. The state of integrity is an eschatological prospect.

Sin and Mortality

I have kept till last the issue that is most troublesome for some people, mortality and “death before the Fall.” An evolutionary picture implies that creatures died for aeons before humanity and sin appeared, and natural selection means that death is even a component of the evolutionary process. For some Christians, that is sufficient reason not only to reject evolution but also to insist on a young earth.

It must be said bluntly that this extreme view has no basis in either theology or science. Biblical texts that connect sin and death, Gen. 3:19, Rom. 5:12–21 and 1 Cor. 15:21–22, refer to humanity and there is no reason to insist that they have other animals in view. The scientific evidence for the dying of animals before the advent of humanity is, of course, overwhelming. In the last analysis, the rejection of “death before the Fall” rests on the belief that God created an originally perfect world in which all destructive processes were absent. I argued at the beginning of this paper that there is no reason to hold that view. Those who believe that God was

Our genetic makeup, conditioned by natural selection, gives us powerful tendencies toward selfish behavior. The cultures in which we are conceived, born, and live exacerbate those tendencies in various ways.

willing himself to enter into death to bring creation to fulfillment will have less trouble with the idea that God made a world in which creatures would die.

There is no scientific reason to distinguish between humanity and other animals as far as biological death is concerned. And while "In the day that you eat of it you shall surely die" (Gen. 2:17, NKJV) is spoken to the human, this verse should not be understood literally. In the *day* that the man and woman eat, they *do not* die. Christians have long seen that the threat must refer first to spiritual death as a result of separation from God.

This tree [of life], mentioned briefly at the beginning of the Bible, reappears at the very end. ... [It] is a historical object, one that reverses conventional expectations about immortality. The tree of life is the cross of Christ.

The Septuagint translated the Hebrew *moth tamuth* by *thanatō apothaneisthe*, "dying you shall die," which suggested to Athanasius that the penalty for humanity's departure from its proper path was "not dying merely, but also abiding ever in the corruption of death." Without sin, the first humans would have experienced death as a physical process but not as corruption and separation from God.⁴⁸ (The point is not that the Septuagint is correct here but that a prominent church father understood humanity's original condition to include biological mortality.)

Paul does say that all die "in Adam" (1 Cor. 15:22) but there are at least two ways to understand that. We need not think that human death, merely as a biological phenomenon, is a result of sin. Sin makes death fearful because of the final separation from God that it implies, the "second death" of Rev. 20:14. Again Athanasius's view is rather different from the idea of original immortality in the western tradition.⁴⁹

James Barr has pointed out that the story of Genesis 3 can best be read as one not of lost immortality but of a lost *chance* for immortality.⁵⁰ Humanity is "dust" and, in the natural course of things, returns to dust. After the first humans sin, they are kept from the tree of life (3:22) and thus cannot "live forever."

This tree, mentioned briefly at the beginning of the Bible, reappears at the very end. In Rev. 22:2, the tree of life is found not in a garden but in the middle of a city in which "death will be no more" (Rev. 21:4). Immortality is not something that humanity once had and forfeited but an eschatological hope. Yet the tree of life is a historical object, one that reverses conventional expectations about immortality. The tree of life is the cross of Christ.⁵¹ ✪

Notes

- ¹Discussions that have been helpful in the present work include: Christophe Boureux and Christoph Theobald, eds., *Original Sin: A Code of Fallibility* (London: SCM, 2004); Robin Collins, "Evolution and Original Sin," in *Perspectives on an Evolving Creation*, ed. Keith B. Miller (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2003), chap. 20; Philip Hefner, *The Human Factor* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1993); Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man 1* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1964); Juan Luis Segundo, *Evolution and Guilt* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1974); Stephanus Trooster, *Evolution and the Doctrine of Original Sin* (New York: Newman Press, 1968); Tatha Wiley, *Original Sin: Origins, Developments, Contemporary Meanings* (New York: Paulist, 2002); Patricia A. Williams, *Doing without Adam and Eve: Sociobiology and Original Sin* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2001).
- ²The essays in Miller, *Perspectives on an Evolving Creation*, provide background for this position.
- ³This paper is part of the research program set out in George L. Murphy, *The Cosmos in the Light of the Cross* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2003).
- ⁴This translation of the Latin is from *Lutheran Book of Worship: Minister's Desk Edition* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 1978), 145.
- ⁵See, e.g., *The Summa Theologica of Saint Thomas Aquinas*, Third Part, Q.I. Art.3 (Chicago, IL: *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 1952), vol. II, 704 and references there.
- ⁶Unless otherwise indicated, biblical quotations are from the NRSV.
- ⁷E.g., Karl Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline* (New York: Harper & Row, 1959), 58.
- ⁸George L. Murphy, "The Incarnation as a Theanthropic Principle," *Word & World* XIII (1993): 256, and *The Cosmos in the Light of the Cross*, chap. 12.
- ⁹G. B. Caird, *The Revelation of St. John the Divine* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 168 argues for the translation "the Lamb slaughtered from the foundation of the world" (cf. KJV and NRSV margin) in Rev. 13:8.
- ¹⁰Heinrich Heppe, *Reformed Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1977), 146-9.
- ¹¹Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II.2 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1957).
- ¹²Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, in *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works 3* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1998), 34.
- ¹³Caird, *The Revelation of St. John the Divine*, 279-80.
- ¹⁴For such arguments against Christianity, see, e.g., H. G. Wells, *The Outline of History - Being a Plain History of Life and Mankind*, 4th ed. (London: Cassell & Co., 1926), 616 or "Evolution or Genesis" by Louis W. Cable at <http://home.inu.net/skeptic/genev.htm>. Typical uses to attack evolution can be found in Ken Ham, *The Lie: Evolution* (El Cajon, CA: Master Books, 1987), 73 and Wilbert H. Rusch, Sr., *Origins: What is at Stake?* (Terre Haute, IN: Creation Research Society Books, 1991), 25-6.
- ¹⁵Jonathan Edwards, *The Great Christian Doctrine of Original Sin Defended*, in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards 3*, ed. Clyde A. Holbrook (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1970).
- ¹⁶Formally *peccatum originale originans*, "original sin as originating," and *peccatum originale originatum*, "original sin originated." See, e.g., Wiley, *Original Sin*, 5.
- ¹⁷See the references in endnote 1.
- ¹⁸E.g., Williams, *Doing without Adam and Eve*.

Article

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¹⁹Martin Luther, "Lectures on Genesis," in *Luther's Works* 1 (St. Louis, MO: Concordia, 1958), 146-7.

²⁰*The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, s.v. "Adam." The word may be a proper name in Gen. 2:20, 3:17, 3:21 and 4:1. NRSV reads "the man" in all those places with "Adam" in the margin for the first three, while NIV reads "the man" in the first instance and "Adam" in the others.

²¹In the latter case, Adam may be a place name, as in Josh. 3:16. Cf. Hans Walter Wolff, *Hosea* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1974), 105 and 121.

²²Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1-11: A Commentary* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 1984), 276.

²³Paul H. Seely, "The Date of the Tower of Babel and Some Theological Implications," *Westminster Theological Journal* 63 (2001): 15, especially section VIII.

²⁴Karl Barth, *Christ and Adam: Man and Humanity in Romans* 5 (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1956).

²⁵Wiley, *Original Sin*, Part I, sketches the history. An older work, F. R. Tennant, *The Sources of the Doctrines of the Fall and Original Sin* (1903; reprint, New York: Schocken, 1968) provides a more detailed discussion.

²⁶Augustine's anti-Pelagian writings are in *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* V, First Series (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1971). For Pelagius, see B. R. Rees, *The Letters of Pelagius and His Followers* (Woodbridge, UK: Boydell, 1991).

²⁷The traditional doctrine of original sin says not just that babies will become sinners at a certain age, but that they are sinful. It is inconsistent for those who oppose infant baptism to use that traditional doctrine as an argument against evolution.

²⁸Available at www.reformed.org/documents/canons_of_orange.html.

²⁹Article II of the German text of the Augsburg Confession in Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, eds., *The Book of Concord* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2000), 36-8. (As the translators note, the German word rendered "original sin" here is *Erbsünde*, literally "hereditary sin.")

³⁰Formula of Concord, Article I of the Epitome and of the Solid Declaration in Kolb and Wengert, *The Book of Concord*, 487-91 and 531-42.

³¹Heinrich Schmid, *The Doctrinal Theology of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, 3d ed., revised (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 1961), 220.

³²Quoted in Arthur S. Peake, *Christianity: Its Nature and Truth* (London: Duckworth, 1908), 116.

³³There is such a picture of the primordial human in Ezek. 28:11-19 but it is used as "broken myth" to describe the king of Tyre's fate.

³⁴Theophilus of Antioch, "Theophilus to Autolytus," in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* II (reprint, Grand Rapids, MN: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1979), 104.

³⁵St. Irenaeus of Lyons, *On the Apostolic Preaching* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary, 1997), 47.

³⁶Timothy Ware, *The Orthodox Church* (Baltimore, MD: Penguin, 1963), 224-5.

³⁷David Wilcox, "Finding Adam: The Genetics of Human Origins," in Miller, *Perspectives on an Evolving Creation*, 250-2. Glenn R. Morton does date the biblical Adam over five million years ago. See, e.g., his *Adam, Apes and Anthropology* (Dallas, TX: DMD Publishing, 1997).

³⁸E.g., Richard Leakey and Roger Lewin, *Origins Reconsidered* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), chap. 16. Chapters 14 and 15 of Carl Sagan and Ann Druyan, *Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors* (New York: Random House, 1992), including the imaginative "first person" chimpanzee reflections on pp. 259-64 are worth consideration.

³⁹For brief expressions of the ideas developed here, see George L. Murphy, *The Trademark of God* (Wilton, CT: Morehouse-Barlow, 1986), chap. 8 and "Christology, Evolution, and the Cross," in Miller, *Perspectives on an Evolving Creation*, chap. 16. The approach of Collins, "Evolution and Original Sin," in Miller, *Perspectives on an Evolving Creation*, has similarities with the one taken here.

⁴⁰Murphy, *The Cosmos in the Light of the Cross*, chapters 6 and 8.

⁴¹Glenn R. Morton, at <http://home.entouch.net/dmd/religion.htm>, interprets a structure at Bilzingsleben dating to 425,000 BP as religious.

⁴²Hefner, *The Human Factor*, esp. 28-31. He attributes the idea to Ralph Wendell Burhoe.

⁴³Ted Peters, *Playing God? Genetic Determinism and Human Freedom* (New York: Routledge, 1997).

⁴⁴Though it is pre-Darwinian, the discussion in Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1928 translation of the 1830 edition) is of interest here.

⁴⁵Cf. Trooster, *Evolution and the Doctrine of Original Sin*.

⁴⁶*The Interpreters Dictionary of the Bible*, s.v. "Sin, sinners."

⁴⁷Paul Tillich, "You Are Accepted," in *The Shaking of the Foundations* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1948), 155.

⁴⁸Athanasius, "On the Incarnation of the Word," in *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church* IV, Second Series (reprint, Grand Rapids, MN: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1978), 38. See also p. lxxi of the *Prolegomena* by Archibald Robertson.

⁴⁹Athanasius, "On the Incarnation of the Word," 21.1, 47.

⁵⁰James Barr, *The Garden of Eden and the Hope of Immortality* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1992).

⁵¹Gordon W. Lathrop, *Holy Ground: A Liturgical Cosmology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2003), 220-4.

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