The Pope on Evolution

When Pope John Paul II sent a message about evolution to the Pontifical Academy of Sciences on October 22, 1996, it was the first time that a papal document clearly endorsed evolution as “more than a hypothesis,” stating that “the convergence, neither sought nor provoked, of the results of work that was conducted independently is in itself a significant argument in favor of this theory” (#4, Origins, December 5, 1996, 414–16). The pontiff hastened to add that materialist and reductionist theories of evolution were not acceptable and that the spiritual soul of all humans is “immediately” created by God.

Grace, Concupiscence, and Original Sin

The most recent official Catholic statement about grace is found in the Joint Declaration on Justification signed by Cardinal Edward Cassidy and the head of the Lutheran World Federation on October 31, 1999: “Together we confess: By grace alone [italics mine], in faith in Christ’s saving work and not because of any merit on our part, are we accepted by God and receive the Holy Spirit, who renews our hearts while equipping and calling us to good works” (#15, Origins, July 16, 1998, 120–27). On concupiscence: [After baptism] “there does, however, remain in the person an inclination (concupiscence) which comes from sin and presses toward sin . . . and . . . this inclination does not correspond to God’s original design for humanity. . . .” (#30). Three points seem to be essential: (a) all humans need grace in order to be accepted by God, (b) their hearts must be renewed, and (c) they are still subject to concupiscence, an inclination toward sin.

Genesis 2–3 Not Historical

Spurred on by Pope Pius XII’s 1943 encyclical Divino Afflante Spiritu and Vatican II’s Dei Verbum, urging them to be aware of literary forms in ancient literature, exegetes have come to see that the first eleven chapters of Genesis are not historical, but serve as a sort of theological prologue to the story of Abraham and the

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patriarchs. Comparison with the Babylonian *Enuma Elish*, the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, and especially the *Epic of Atrahasis*, shows many common literary motifs and allows us to conclude that the story of Adam and Eve is a mythical narrative used by the sacred writer to answer basic questions about life, especially human sinfulness. Where did sin come from? Not from God, but from the misuse of human freedom. Genesis 2–3 is a tale set in primordial time, time before time, “once upon a time.” It is parabolic in nature, and does not tell us what happened on a particular occasion, but rather what happens always and everywhere, the human condition.

**Evil Inclination or Yetzer Hara’**

Jews do not have a doctrine of original sin. Instead, they have the concept of an “evil inclination,” *yetzer hara’,* which, like concupiscence, is a human tendency to sin. The expression is found in Genesis 6:5, the “evil desire” of the heart that led to the Flood, and again in Genesis 8:21, God’s declaration that he would not cause another Flood because “the desires of the human heart are evil from the start.” The Hebrew Bible is, however, acutely aware that no one is without sin: 1 Kings 8:46, Ecclesiastes 7:20, Proverbs 20:9, and elsewhere.

**Romans 5**

St. Paul’s remarks in Romans 5:12-21 are the real seeds of the doctrine of original sin in Christianity. He contrasts the figure of Adam, the “first man,” who led us into sinfulness, with Christ, the “last Adam,” who freed us from sin by his death on the cross. Although much was made of this text by St. Augustine, exegetes today point out that the historical reality of Adam is here *presupposed*, as it was by most people until the recent discovery of evolution, and not *taught*. What is taught is universal human sinfulness and salvation through Christ. Adam is representative of all human beings, and Jesus is the source of grace, salvation, and justification for all.

**The Greek Fathers**

In describing the task of Christ, the Greek Fathers generally emphasized the Incarnation, his becoming human so that humans might become divine, that is, that we might become elevated through grace to be in communion with God. As noted above, this is still the teaching of the Church today.

**St. Augustine**

The Pelagians taught that humans could work out their own salvation by using free will. If they sinned, they simply followed the bad example of Adam, the first sinner, but there was no deleterious influence on them from without which would urge them to sin. This teaching contradicted Augustine’s personal experience and understanding of the Bible, and he coined the Latin expression *peccatum originale* (“original sin”) to emphasize the full effects of Adam’s sin on all humanity. He quoted Romans 5:12 in its Latin form, which stated that sin came into the world with Adam, “in whom” (*in quo*) all have sinned. How did they sin? Adam committed the *originating* original sin, and all others are under the guilt of that same sin, *originated* original sin, through propagation. The result of original sin is loss of grace, death, and concupiscence, an abiding inclination to turn from God. Sexual desire is part of it, but it goes beyond that. Humans are a *massa damnata* and deserve to be cast into hell. Were it not for the saving grace of Christ, communicated through faith and baptism, they would be. Under Augustine’s influence, the Pelagians were condemned by the Council of Orange in A.D. 529.
The Council of Trent

Over a thousand years later, in 1546, the Council of Trent essentially repeated what the Council of Orange had said. Trent published five canons pertaining to original sin. Most important among them is canon 3, that the sin of Adam is communicated to all “by propagation and not by imitation” and can be taken away only by “the one mediator, our Lord Jesus Christ,” through the sacrament of baptism, also baptism of desire, in voto. Canon 5 decreed that “concupiscence or the tendency to sin remains in the baptized,” but can be overcome by those who resist courageously through the grace of Christ.

Contemporary Theologians

Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, S.J., taught that original sin is the sum total of false starts and failures of the evolutionary process, especially at the human level. It is the negative side of evolution. Christ, the Omega Point, brings redemption. Baptism is necessary to attain salvation, for “each new soul wakening into life is integrally contaminated by the totalized influence of all transgressions, past, present, and still to come, which by statistical necessity are inevitably spread throughout the human whole as it proceeds towards sanctification” (de Chardin, 1971, 196–97).

A similar approach to the universality of sin is through existential theology. “To be” is “to-be-in-a-situation,” and thus each one is intrinsically affected by that situation. Both Karl Rahner, S.J., and Piet Schoonenberg taught that original sin is constituted not by a catastrophic sin of the first humans, but rather by the innumerable personal sins of all humanity throughout history, taken as a collectivity. This sin touches each one existentially, through his or her being situated in the world. Schoonenberg gives the example of psychological and moral deformation of a child through its sinful environment, e.g., racism, long before the child has a chance to make a free decision. Such deformation could then be said to have affected it “by propagation, not by imitation,” thus re-interpreting the famous expression of the councils of Orange and Trent. All still need the grace of Christ to be saved.

Latest Trend—Sociobiology

The roots of human behavior are found in pre-human activity, which is primarily survival of oneself and of one’s genes. There is much competition in an atmosphere of the survival of the fittest, but also cooperation, especially of animals living in society, to preserve genes at least within the group. Yet when humans evolve, they are faced not only with their biological heritage but also with a cultural one, and the two are often at odds with one another. If one’s biological tendency is to fight, flee, or cooperate in a limited way, culture might demand that one might even need to sacrifice oneself for others who are not members of the family or tribe.

A number of sociobiologists believe they can explain the sense of guilt expressed in the myth of Genesis 2–3 by contrasting the tendency of one’s biological make-up with the needs of society. Tensions arising between biological and cultural evolution are the sources of “original sin” according to Donald T. Campbell, Ralph Wendel Burhoe, Philip Hefner, Patricia A. Williams, and many others.

Daryl Domning prefers to speak of “original selfishness” instead of “original sin,” and traces its origins to the first atom, or at least to the first bacterium. Humans encounter it truly “by propagation,” just by being born into an evolutionary world. Yet through the example and grace of Christ they are called to transcend such selfishness, and to include others, even the whole world, in their love.
Similarly Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki sees original sin in the tendency towards violence, which characterizes humans due to their previous evolution. They are called, however, to create a community of well-being, which can be accomplished only through interdependence and the divine power of forgiveness. They need the grace of Christ so that through empathy, memory, and imagination they may bring evolution to the next step, well-being characterized by God’s truth, love, and beauty.

**Conclusion**

The story of the Fall of Adam and Eve retains its importance for the Christian imagination. Yet its teaching must take cognizance of evolution. The tendency of the human heart continues to be in a negative direction, towards that which is selfish, proud, alienating, unloving, brutal, whatever the explanation. We see its effects every day in the news and in our examinations of conscience. At the same time we are called to live lives of love, goodness, happiness, sharing, compassion for the whole world. Whether “original sin” or “original selfishness,” this continues to be a mystery of human existence and its need for the liberating and transforming example and grace of Christ.

**References**

