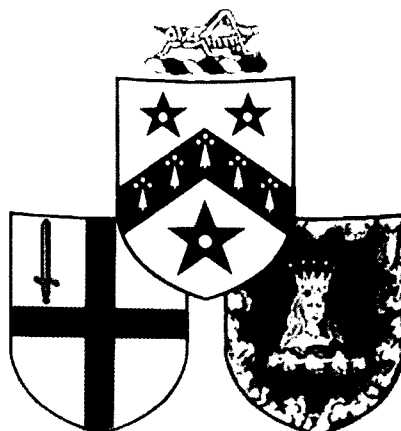


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**THE MYTHS OF CHRISTIANITY**

Lecture 2

**THE MYTH OF ORIGINAL SIN**

by

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# The Myth of Original Sin

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One Sunday night when I was a young priest I came home from evensong, had my supper and was reading the newspaper when the phone rang. It was a ward sister at a local hospital, asking if I would go to the hospital immediately, because parishioners of mine were in need of pastoral ministrations. I hastened over to the hospital and found a man I knew slightly who informed me that his wife had just given birth to premature triplets who were not expected to live out the night and would I please baptise them. This kind of ceremony is called emergency baptism and I agreed to do it immediately. I was taken to the room where the three tiny scraps of life were lying in incubators and I asked for a cup of water. Then I reached into the containers where they lay and marked each child's head with water and baptised all three of them 'In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit', according to the ancient formula. They all died a few hours later.

What I had done was an act of pastoral care for the parents of the tiny babies and it did, indeed, provide them with a certain bleak comfort. I had responded to the request of the parents out of care for them, but behind the practice of emergency baptism there lies one of the most unsympathetic of the Christian doctrines. It is the doctrine that the unbaptised go to hell after death, hence the need to administer baptism without preparation in situations of imminent death. The doctrine was later slightly modified in the case of babies who, though they were born guilty of original sin like everyone else, had not had time to commit any actual sins, so they had their sentences commuted to eternity in the *limbo puerorum*, a suburb of hell, from the Latin *limbus* for edge or border. Voltaire claims that limbo was invented by Peter Chrysologos in the fifth century as a sort of mitigated hell for babies who died before baptism, 'and where resided the patriarchs before the descent of Jesus Christ into hell; so that the view that Jesus Christ descended to limbo and not into hell has prevailed since then'.<sup>1</sup> Thinking about the fate of unbaptised babies in the Christian tradition is the cleanest way to tackle the doctrine of original sin, because it saves us from getting mixed up with the doctrine of punishment for sins committed rather than inherited, actual sin as contrasted with original sin. There is a certain moral logic in the notion of punishment after death for sins actually committed in life and most of the great religions have versions of it. Buddhism and Hinduism see it more as a process of impersonal consequences rather than as the personally imposed punishment by God we find in the Christian tradition, but there is a certain logic in either approach: what you sow you reap, acts have consequences. In the doctrine of punishment after death by God there may be more than a trace of the resentment that Nietzsche despised in the Christian tradition, the hatred of the weak for the strong and their longing to get even with them, even if they had to wait for the afterlife in which to do so. There may also be an instinctive sense of justice of the sort expressed in the parable of Dives and Lazarus. In that parable, versions of which are found in various religious traditions, the rich man implores Abraham for a little comfort and is refused it, because he'd already used up his comfort account: 'He called out, 'Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am in agony in these flames.' But Abraham said, 'Child, remember that during your lifetime you received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in agony.'<sup>2</sup> Even if we do not believe in the morality of eternal punishment for temporal crimes, we can follow the reasoning that leads to the concept of the afterlife as a place where the inequalities of this life are evened out and balanced up. Many of our most ancient stories are based on this deep longing for justice and for wrongs to be righted and villains to be punished, and since it does not seem to happen in this life in any balanced or systematic way, it is easy to understand how the human imagination projected

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<sup>1</sup> Voltaire, *Philosophical Dictionary*, Penguin Books, London 1972, p.61

<sup>2</sup> Luke 16:24,25

the final reckoning on to the afterlife. Whatever we make of this kind of thing ourselves, it is easy to understand its moral logic and even to admire its effectiveness as a deterrent to wickedness.

The Christian doctrine of original sin and its remedy lacks this kind of moral dimension, because it reduces the matter to the application of a ceremony that wipes out the balance sheet of sin, whether original, actual or both, simply by virtue of its enactment. This was one reason why baptism was abused in the early Church among those who wanted the best of both worlds, this one and the next. Voltaire gives a mordant example of the abuse: 'This sacrament was abused in the first centuries of Christianity; nothing was so common as to await the final agony in order to receive baptism. The example of the emperor Constantine is pretty good proof of that. This is how he reasoned: baptism purifies everything; I can therefore kill my wife, my son and all my relations; after which I shall have myself baptised and I shall go to heaven; and in fact that is just what he did'.<sup>3</sup>

The specifically Christian element in the ancient drama of human folly and frailty, therefore, seems to have two ethically dubious elements, one of which is the doctrine of original sin itself and the other the claim that, by the application of a particular ceremony, the debt inherited by the plaintiff can be converted to credit in the divine balance sheet. Both of these elements seem to reduce the resolution of the human drama to a mental act, the holding of a particular opinion, followed by a ceremony that is automatically, if mystically, efficacious. This is not a phenomenon that is confined to Christianity, but there it has created a specific kind of mentalism called dogmatism, which is the belief that holding right ideas in our head can save us from damnation, just as holding wrong ones can condemn us to it. As Montaigne would have put it, this is rating our conjectures very highly indeed. How did it all come about?

Well, we cannot blame the story of the tempting of Adam and Eve in the Hebrew scriptures, because the doctrine of original sin and consequent congenital guilt is not found there, as we will discover when we read chapter 3 of Genesis:

[3:1] Now the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal that the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God say, 'You shall not eat from any tree in the garden'?" [2] The woman said to the serpent, "We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; [3] but God said, 'You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, nor shall you touch it, or you shall die.'" [4] But the serpent said to the woman, "You will not die; [5] for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." [6] So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate. [7] Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves.

[8] They heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden. [9] But the Lord God called to the man, and said to him, "Where are you?" [10] He said, "I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself." [11] He said, "Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?" [12] The man said, "The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit from the tree, and I ate." [13] Then the Lord God said to the woman, "What is this that you have done?" The woman said, "The serpent tricked me, and I ate."

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<sup>3</sup> Voltaire. *ibid.* p.60

[14] The Lord God said to the serpent,

"Because you have done this,  
cursed are you among all animals  
and among all wild creatures;  
upon your belly you shall go,  
and dust you shall eat  
all the days of your life.

[15] I will put enmity between you and the woman,  
and between your offspring and hers;  
he will strike your head,  
and you will strike his heel."

[16] To the woman he said,  
"I will greatly increase your pangs in childbearing;  
in pain you shall bring forth children,  
yet your desire shall be for your husband,  
and he shall rule over you."

[17] And to the man he said,  
"Because you have listened to the voice of your wife,  
and have eaten of the tree  
about which I commanded you,  
'You shall not eat of it,'  
cursed is the ground because of you;  
in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life;

[18] thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you;  
and you shall eat the plants of the field.

[19] By the sweat of your face  
you shall eat bread  
until you return to the ground,  
for out of it you were taken;  
you are dust,  
and to dust you shall return."

[20] The man named his wife Eve, because she was the mother of all living. [21] And the Lord God made garments of skins for the man and for his wife, and clothed them.

[22] Then the Lord God said, "See, the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil; and now, he might reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life, and eat, and live forever"-- [23] therefore the Lord God sent him forth from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from which he was taken. [24] He drove out the man; and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim, and a sword flaming and turning to guard the way to the tree of life.

Whatever we make of this ancient narrative, it says nothing about the transmission to humanity of Adam's guilt and it is interpreted by Jewish scholars as an allegory of the human condition, not a historic event. It is a myth, not a factual account of a real event. St Paul seems to have been the first person in the Christian tradition to treat it as a historic event from which conclusions could be drawn and consequences measured. His account comes in his Letter to the Romans, chapter 5:

[12] Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death came through sin, and so death spread to all because all have sinned--

[17] If, because of the one man's trespass, death exercised dominion through that one, much more surely will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness exercise dominion in life through the one man, Jesus Christ.

[18] Therefore just as one man's trespass led to condemnation for all, so one man's act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all. [19] For just as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous'.

In this passage Paul emphasises that death was the punishment for Adam's sin, the implication being that if he had not sinned Adam would not have died. It is possible, of course, to read the idea of original sin and inherited guilt into Paul's words, but it is not as clearly stated there as it was later by Augustine of Hippo, who is usually credited with the invention of the fully developed idea of original sin. However, Peter Brown, the greatest contemporary interpreter of August, has pointed out that 'The idea that some ancient sin lay behind the misery of the human condition was shared by pagans and Christians in Late Antiquity'. He tells us that Augustine had met the idea in his early life as a Catholic and he goes on to quote him and to add his own comment: " 'The Ancient Sin: nothing is more obviously part of our preaching of Christianity; yet nothing is more impenetrable to the understanding'...while many Catholics in Africa and Italy already believed that the 'first sin' of Adam had somehow been inherited by his descendants, Augustine will tell them precisely where they should look in themselves for abiding traces of this first sin.

With the fatal ease of a man who believes that he can explain a complex phenomenon, simply by reducing it to its historical origins, Augustine will remind his congregation of the exact circumstances of the Fall of Adam and Eve. When they had disobeyed God by eating the forbidden fruit, they had been 'ashamed': they had covered their genitals with fig leaves. That was enough for Augustine: '*Ecce unde*'. That's the place! That's the place from which the first sin is passed on'. This shame at the uncontrollable stirring of the genitals was the fitting punishment of the crime of disobedience. Nothing if not circumstantial, Augustine will drive his point home by suddenly appealing to his congregation's sense of shame at night emissions...Thus at one stroke, Augustine will draw the boundary between the positive and negative elements in human nature along a line dividing the conscious, rational mind from the one 'great force' that escaped its control"<sup>4</sup>, sex.

If we refuse to treat these ancient myths as the record of historical events, we can use our imagination to guess at how they came to be. The elements in the story of the Fall are clearly Death, Toil and Shame, and the myth clearly sets out to offer an explanatory narrative for these overpowering human experiences. Augustine's isolation of sexual shame as the main element in the Fall narrative is interestingly echoed in one of Freud's guesses, where he wonders whether shame and sexual embarrassment enter the human psyche when *homo sapiens* assumed the vertical posture and exposed its genitalia.<sup>5</sup> Another mythical guess about the mysteries of human sexuality is found in Plato's *Symposium*, in Aristophanes famous myth, which is worth listening to in full.

'The starting point is for you to understand human nature and what has happened to it. You see, our nature wasn't originally the same as it is now: it has changed. Firstly, there used to be three human genders, not just two - male and female - as there are nowadays. There was also a third, which was a combination of both the other two. Its name has survived, but the gender itself has died out. In those days there was a distinct type of androgynous person, not just the word, though like the word the gender combined male and female;

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<sup>4</sup> Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, Faber and Faber, London, 1967, pp.388,389.

<sup>5</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Civilisation, Society and Religion*, Penguin. London 1991. p.289.

nowadays, however, only the word remains, and that counts as an insult'.<sup>6</sup> Aristophanes' myth is a long one, but it is clearly intended to explain the varieties of sexual longing. The key element in the myth is the decision by Zeus and the other gods to divide the human creatures into two halves, because of their dangerous challenge to divine power. Thereafter they will have to spend much of their energy trying to complete themselves by finding and joining up with their other half. Here's how he sees it working out.

'Any men who are offcuts from the combined gender - the androgynous one - are attracted to women, and therefore most adulterers come from this group; the equivalent women are attracted to men and tend to become adulteresses. Any women who are offcuts from the female gender aren't particularly interested in men; they incline more towards women, and therefore female homosexuality comes from this group. And any men who are offcuts from the male gender go for males'.<sup>7</sup>

It is interesting to speculate about what might have become of the Christian attitude to sexuality if the Church had borrowed its myths from Greek rather than Hebrew tradition, as it did in the third and fourth with many of its philosophical and theological ideas. Christian fundamentalists today would be pointing to the inerrant book of Aristophanes to explain its passionate support for gay and lesbian rights which were being threatened by revisionist liberals who refused to accept the historical validity of the speeches in the Symposium.

Apart from trying to offer an explanation for the great human themes of sexuality and death, the ancient myths of humanity try to account for human misery by narratives of catastrophe and fall from an original Eden. This is still a powerful theme, even today, and there are always books being produced by nostalgic scholars describing how wonderful Britain or, more specifically, England was in the past before it was overrun by foreigners and contemporary values. As the blind poet Borges reminded us, all our paradises are lost paradises, places of contentment we destroyed by our own folly and greed. And all of this is true enough, because we go on doing it to ourselves. Narratives of the fall, dystopias, are probably more frequent in human history than narratives of paradise, utopias, because we do go on messing up our own home. The latest fall narrative is global warming and consumer greed. Our own insatiable desires have the pyrrhic effect of destroying our own happiness. It is the oldest story in the book, because it is the most constant of the human experiences. And it is even possible to find contemporary meaning in the notion of original sin, of passing on some kind of taint. That is certainly what Philip Larkin thought, though he was hardly a cheery optimist about humanity.

'They fuck you up, your mum and dad;  
They do not mean to, but they do.  
They fill you with the faults they had,  
And add some extra just for you.

But they were fucked up in their turn  
By fools in old time hats and coats,  
Who half the time were sappy stern,  
And half at one another's throats.

Man hands on misery to man;  
It deepens like a coastal shelf.  
Get out as quickly as you can,  
And don't have any kids yourself'.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Plato, *Symposium*, Oxford World Classics, 1994, p.25.

<sup>7</sup> *ibid.* p.28

<sup>8</sup> Philip Larkin, *'This be the day'*, Collected Poems.

The difference today in our myths of fall is that they come from science, which is the great narrative of our time. And the very language of fall has been replaced by the language of struggle and ascent. There never was an Eden, a perfect and innocent human state, with fully formed humans who knew no sin. Our mythic narrative today is just as epic and exciting, but it is a sort of reverse catastrophe, the emergence of consciousness from a violent and literally exploding universe. It might go something like this. There is a famous French aphorism: 'To know all is to forgive all'. The idea behind the saying is that humans are largely determined by circumstances beyond their control and that if we could see all the factors that have led to a particular event in a person's life we would fully understand and fully forgive. The philosophical term for this point of view is 'determinism'. It holds that we are not really the free creatures we think we are. We are made, determined, programmed by factors that are beyond our control. Most of us would agree with this point of view to some extent. We would acknowledge, for instance, that if you are a young man reared by a single mother living in poverty in a housing estate you are more likely to get a lousy education, more likely to get in trouble with the law, more likely to be unemployed, more likely to be have bad health, more likely to die young than if you were born to middle class professional parents who sent you to a private school. We may not be full-blooded determinists, but experience teaches us that external circumstances have a lot to do with how our life works out. One of the oldest debates in politics is over just how important external circumstances are in making us what we are and what the role of private choice is. One of the most interminable discussions in political theory is whether systems make people or people make systems; whether, in order to change people, you have to change the system, or whether, in order to change the system, you have to change people. What I want to register is the fact that human beings are made what they are by millions of facts they are not in control of; and if we want to understand ourselves we have to go deep and wide into our past. To understand ourselves today, we have to have some knowledge of where we have come from.

We humans have only been around in the universe for a comparatively short period of time. The universe was born in violence, in what physicists call the big bang. Wherever it came from, it is a story of power exploding and expanding through space. Most of it seems to have been inert or lifeless till about three and a half billion years ago when the first self-replicating molecules came along and life began. On and on it goes, this amazing force of life. That's what makes these nature programmes on TV so fascinating, as we look in on the great food chain that nature is, as we watch all the breeding and hunting and searching for food and building nests and stalking prey that is played out endlessly on our planet. Look out on any tranquil country scene on a summer's day and you might be deceived into illusions of peace and calm; in fact underneath it all life is killing and munching and swarming and breeding and dying. And it is that ability to look at what is happening, out there or in here, that is characteristic of our species, the human animal, or the *moral* animal, as the new science of evolutionary psychology defines us. In us the life-force has become conscious and we have started watching ourselves doing the things that come naturally or instinctively in the animal kingdom. We are thinking about ourselves, and that process of self-study is one of the most characteristic things about us. When you know you are being watched, you get self-conscious and uncomfortable. Well, we are being watched all the time by ourselves, and it is the resulting self-consciousness that is one of our glories, as well as one of the sources of our pain and anguish.

Aspects of living that would pose little difficulty in a species that had not developed consciousness, create major issues for us, as all the fall myths amply indicate. Sex is still the obvious example, but our explanatory myths are different today. One school of evolutionary psychologists claims that the problem for the human male is that his DNA has programmed him to be a self-replicating animal, a seed-scattering machine without conscience; but this urge is in conflict with his consciousness, his self-awareness, because he can recognise that simply operating like a gene-propulsion machine can be

damaging to others as well as to himself. Sex is not the only instinct that gets complicated by human development; violence and cruelty are also in there, programmed into us before the dawn of consciousness. So we are creatures who are in conflict with ourselves, *moral* animals, creatures in whom the life-force has started observing itself.

I have compressed millions of years of emergent consciousness into a few paragraphs there, but I hope the point I am making is understandable enough. Human consciousness and the emergence of our moral sense move us away from the purely instinctive, the unconscious and unreflective natural response, to what we might call an *intentional* approach to life. The narrative of our day is not about having fallen from a perfect state, but about the endless search for a perfect state somewhere in the future. Our myth is not about having fallen from a past perfection, but about the possibility of achieving a future perfection, and it characterises everything we do, from the search for the perfect kitchen to the quest for the perfect orgasm. That's why IKEA flourishes and it's why we produce sex manuals on spicing up our sex life. That is why we encourage boys to sublimate their anger and aggression and be aware of the needs of others - whereas our instinctive hard-wiring accorded great survival value to the very impulses that have become so problematic for us today. Indeed, one major critical account of the undoubted male crisis of our time locates its cause right at this point, at what is called the feminisation of culture and the consequent discounting and disapproval of the purely masculine virtues of raw sexuality and aggression. I saw a little piece in the papers the other day about the male craze for body-building. The point that was being made was that it is difficult for men nowadays to know what the distinctive male role is, but they do know that they have a distinctive musculature, so they develop that to the point of exaggeration. They call this 'the Adonis complex', and there's more than a touch of it in the Kevin Spacey role in the Oscar winning film, 'American Beauty' where, just as his life starts falling apart he starts to build up his body.

Culture critics have a field day with this sort of stuff, but the point behind it all is that, as conscious animals, we are a problem to ourselves, as our myths amply illustrate. We will go on producing myths, ways of explaining ourselves to ourselves but, like everything else about us, they are in constant transition and we must not fundamentalise any of them. In spite of what the Christian doctrine of original sin claims, we are not guilty simply by virtue of having been born as children to parents who fell from perfection. Nevertheless, the myth is still eloquent and instructive not because it describes an ancient catastrophe, but because it expresses permanent human realities.

© Professor Richard Holloway



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