

Original Sin Must Be Reviewed

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This paper provides an argument for why the doctrine of original sin must be reviewed, reformulated, or even discarded in its current form of expression. Since this paper was written four years ago, further advances in science and theology strengthen its arguments. This is a critical issue for the future of Christianity, because the doctrine is a foundation for much of Christianity's doctrine and liturgy.

This paper is for general reading and hence intentionally non-referenced. It is a response to requests from people involved in adult faith and life development.

INTRODUCTION

The reality of sin in the world is a mystery within the context of Christian beliefs about the presence of a loving God in creation and the nature of the human person. According to Genesis, a person is made in God's image and likeness: *So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them, male and female he created them* (Genesis 1:27). So why is there sin and evil in the world?

The theological doctrine of Original Sin seeks to name the moral flaw that is inherent in the human condition. We may call it the 'shadow' to use Jungian typology or, if we venture into science, 'chaos theory' or 'principle of indeterminacy' might capture the essence of understanding the mysterious element in human nature that moves people towards self-destructive behaviour and alienation from goodness. The reality of 'Original Sin' is a common theme in narratives of literature and movies. The doctrine of what Christians call 'Original Sin' resonates with the experience of moral degeneration as taught in Hinduism, Taoism and Buddhism.

Sin should not be viewed as a breakdown from a state of primordial innocence through the *mythos* describing the disobedience of Adam and Eve, but rather a perversion of what it means to be a fully human person. Sin has both personal and communal dimensions. Sin is a movement away from God's gracious love. Sin is disequilibrium and alienation from the core of our being, God. The pervading presence of sin in the world reflects the fragmentation of human's relationship with a loving God and our communal relationships. Communal sin erodes the implementation of the common good. Communal sin also diminishes the wellbeing of the integrity of creation.

The doctrine of original sin as developed and defined by the teaching church was an attempt to explain the mystery of the origins of sin, how sin is manifest in the world and how sin is transmitted from generation to generation. Early Christians sought answers to such questions as, 'If God is good, where does sin come from?' 'Why is there suffering in the world?' 'Why do we need Christ's redemptive mission to save us?' The doctrine of original sin seemed to offer answers to this dilemma of reconciling the mystery of sin within beliefs about the goodness of God in creation and the mission of Christ to lead us to union with the Father.

A relevant Christology must also include a contemporary understanding of sin. The transforming mission of Jesus assumes the reality of sin. The central theme in the teachings of Jesus was the reign of God, a vision of what could be integral to the 'wholeness' of God's presence in creation. The dominance of the atonement theme in Christology is now under scrutiny in theological circles. The doctrine of original sin was trying to express the mysterious reality of human moral flaws which reside within us, we who are created in God's image and likeness and yet prone to evil as well as good.

The official teaching of the church since the 5th century on original sin has less credibility in contemporary evolutionary consciousness and the science of religion.

It is time for the teaching church to face up to the hard questions about how the doctrine has been historically defined and be open to critique the historical rationale for such teachings and the story of its formulation. After acknowledging the story of the historical development of how the doctrine of original sin was formulated, the church must then courageously move to modify or even discard such teachings, at least in its current form. To fail to engage in this enterprise strains the credibility of believers.

The other option for the teaching church when doctrines lose their relevance in contemporary consciousness is for the historical formulation to be relegated to its rich theological heritage. History has many instances of this happening with theological teachings. For example, teachings about 'outside the church there is no salvation' now belong to a bygone era of such teachings.

PROBLEM OF LITERALISM AND MYTH IN FORMULATION OF A DOCTRINE

A problem with the actual formulation of the doctrine was confusing a symbolic or mythical expression about the origins of sin (*mythos*) in Genesis 3 with a pragmatic word explanation (*logos*) of sin. The process of defining the doctrine of original sin was fraught with difficulties once the symbolic nature and mystery of sin were articulated in a *logos* or pragmatic mode. Once the sacred myth about sin as *mythos* became a doctrinal formulation (*logos*) the teaching church became entangled in a doctrinal web of issues such as how sin is inherited and transmitted, baptism as necessary for salvation, the nature of human beings, devotions such as the Immaculate Conception, limbo, the mission of Jesus as the Christ, and so on.

There is a deep religious truth about the reality of individual and communal sin embedded in the doctrine as currently stated, but its truth is obscured by the actual wording of the official teaching of original sin. Surely no one would deny the prevalence of evil and disorder in the human condition – just watch the nightly news on TV and look around us to the mayhem of racism, domestic violence, injustice and war!

In religious teachings when *mythos* becomes *logos* or literalism, religious truths are lost. The bane of literalism has been and still is now a major impediment in communicating the gospel and teachings of the church. When the sacred myth about the mystery of evil in humanity was subverted into a literalist mode such as the doctrine of original sin, the doctrine became untenable in its literal expression as is evident in the exposition below.

The doctrine of original sin, defined by the Council of Orange (529) was repeated in many Christian creeds and confessions of faith such as:

- Lutheran: Augsburg, 1530;
- Roman Catholic, Council of Trent 1563-64;
- Reformed: Second Helvetic Confession 1566; Westminster Confession 1646;
- Anglican: Thirty Nine Articles, 1563; and
- Methodism: Articles of Religion 1784.

The Reformers, especially Calvin, saw the 'sin' of Adam and Eve had rendered humanity as a mass of sin (*massa peccati*) and therefore incapable of doing anything to attain salvation, utterly dependent on God's saving grace.

The current formulation of original sin specifies that each person is born in inherited sin which is passed down to each generation because of the sin of Adam and Eve.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church states: *The account of the fall in Genesis 3 uses figurative language, but affirms a primeval event, a deed that took place at the beginning of the history of man. Revelation gives us the certainty of faith that the whole of the human history is marked by the original fault freely committed by our first parents* (n.390).

There is general agreement among scholars that the doctrine of original sin is a creation of St Augustine (354-430). The Western church adopted Augustine's explanation about sin and defined it as official teaching. Eastern Christianity and the Orthodox Church did not accept Augustine's explanation of inherited sin or the mode of its transmission.

PROPOSING A RATIONALE FOR THE DISCARDING OF THE DOCTRINE OF ORIGINAL SIN OR MODIFYING ITS FORMULATION AS CURRENTLY DEFINED

The doctrine of original sin, as currently formulated and understood by Christians is in urgent need of reform, reformulation or even discarded. The following themes provide a rationale for discarding or modifying the doctrine as currently stated:

1. The doctrine contradicts human experience and common sense. Every parent knows that when their child is born, the child is born with a nature which has the propensity to choose good or evil, altruism or selfishness. Why highlight 'born in sin' instead of being born in a state of moral ambivalence?
2. Neuroscience confirms parental intuition about their child's moral nature. Brain research shows that the brain enables us to make morally good and morally bad choices. By nature, humans are disposed towards co-operation and sharing as well as selfishness. A holistic anthropology of the human person rejects any notion of inherited moral disability.
3. The doctrine as stated does not incorporate the proven insights of modern science, quantum physics, genetics and palaeontology about the evolution of the human person and insights from the social sciences about the nature of the human person.

4. The doctrine does not situate the mystery of sin within the inherent chaos of the evolutionary emergence of dynamic life, death and evolution in every phase of creation. Communal sin creates disorder and disrupts the integrity of the earth community.

5. The language of 'original sin' is flawed. The word 'sin' implies culpability. A newborn child is not morally culpable of sin.

6. Neither the scriptures, nor church teachings in the first 400 years, Orthodox Christianity, Judaism or Islam support the notion of an original sin inherited by each individual person.

7. The doctrine owes its origins to St Augustine (397) and was based on a mis-translation of the text and a faulty exegesis of the text. Augustine used an old faulty Latin translation of Romans 5:12. The Greek text was, 'since when all have sinned'. Augustine and his contemporaries translated that statement 'In Adam' indicating that, because of Adam's sin, everyone inherits the first (original) sin. According to Augustine, Adam's semen allowed this purported moral flaw to be passed on to every living person (traducian). The Council of Trent went further and taught that Adam's sin was transmitted by propagation, that is, by intercourse. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (n 404) taught that Adam and Eve's sin affected human nature which had been deprived of the original innocence of Adam and Eve. Adam and Eve are non-historical people. Sin is not mentioned in the bible until Genesis Chapter 4 (v 7) not in Chapter 3.

In the words of Toews, according to Augustine:

All human beings subsequent to Adam, except for the few elect to salvation by God's grace and mercy, were condemned to eternal hell for a sin they committed pre-natally in Adam's genitals. The biblical basis for Augustine's theology of original sin was a mistranslation and mis-exegesis of Romans 5:12 (85).

8. The theological and cultural context for Augustine's formulation of the doctrine of original sin which became official teachings of the church in the late 4th century is a complex one involving such factors as Augustine's early background in Manichaeism, his dispute with the monk Pelagius who advocated a much more positive view of human nature, Augustine's growing personal pessimism as he aged, especially his negative views on sexuality, the cultural impact of invading barbarian tribes overwhelming the Roman Empire's borders, the harsh moral theological climate of Carthage (where Augustine grew up) concerning the depravity of the human condition and the influence of the writings of Ambrosiaster and Ambrose, Augustine's mentor.

What is extraordinary in the story of the development of doctrine of original sin is that, historically speaking, the necessary critique of Augustine's doctrine of original sin by theologians and the official church in Western Christianity has been significantly lacking. Possibly one of the reasons for the failure to seriously critique Augustine's formulation was influenced by the high esteem of Augustine held by theologians. Augustine's writings enjoyed a 'halo' aura throughout the centuries. In addition, theologians in official theology teaching roles were, and are now, reluctant to openly insist that the church must now move beyond the doctrine of original sin as currently formulated. Those teaching in Catholic institutions are bound by the Mandatum of 2001

(Canon 812) to uphold teachings of the magisterium. Theologians and the magisterium itself need to allow the doctrine as currently defined to be revised within the evolving story of theological thinking.

By linking the doctrine of original sin with the mission of Christ as a redemptive action, the church painted itself into a theological corner about the consistency and veracity of its teachings. According to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*:

The church knows very well that we cannot tamper with the revelation of original sin without undermining the mystery of Christ (n 389).

We now acknowledge that we do not need to uphold the teachings on original sin to affirm the mission of Jesus as the Christ for 'life in abundance' (John 10:10) and 'wholeness in God' for humanity and creation.

9. The doctrine of original sin tended to divert the focus of the sacrament of baptism away from initiation into the Christian community to 'washing away original sin'. Hence there was an evolution of teachings about limbo, a place where unbaptised children went to after death. Baptism was considered necessary for salvation. Until recently in Catholic culture, dying babies were sometimes baptised by Catholic nurses to save them going to limbo! Furthermore, because, for much of church history, baptism was considered necessary for salvation, such a teaching consigned the vast majority of the human race to hell. The theologian Karl Rahner tried to solve the problem by proposing that non-Christians were 'anonymous Christians', a designation which understandably offended those not of the Christian faith. What does the doctrine say about the moral integrity of the billions of people who are not Christian? Does the doctrine of original sin as currently defined suggest that only through the power of the ministries of the church can a person be saved?

10. The doctrine of original sin fostered a negative anthropology. According to the doctrine, we begin life in a state of moral disability because of inherited sin. As a consequence to this teaching, humans are inclined to concupiscence or an inclination to sin. Much of Christian spirituality was devoted to 'saving one's soul', combating sin and generally propagating a gloomy spirituality. Why do we begin the Mass with, 'Let us call to mind our sins?' Why not, 'Let us reflect on our relations with God, the many blessings of our lives and also let us call to mind our sins?' Some years ago in my own prayer, I modified the traditional Jesus Prayer, 'Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the living God, have mercy on me a sinner' to 'Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the living God, have mercy on me, blest and broken'. Why is my humanity designated only as 'a sinner'? As recently as the Second Vatican Council, this orientation towards sin is evident. In the document, *Gaudium et Spes* we read, 'What is known to us through God's revelation is consonant with our experience. Looking into our hearts, we also find ourselves with a leaning towards evil' (no 13). Why not also add, 'leaning towards good?'

11. The belief that original sin was transmitted from generation to generation by the act of intercourse in marriage is an indictment of the holiness of the physical act of sexuality. Sexual relationships in marriage express a God-given procreative energy for the propagation of the human race and expressions of intimacy in relationships.

12. All the great religious traditions teach about the universal nature of sin. However no religious tradition except Christianity, espouses teachings about inherited sin from a previous state of innocence. In the Upanishads (Hindu sayings), the divine light is clouded by sin. The major theme in Hinduism is the relationships between Brahman, the divine spiritual force in the universe and the individual soul. Sin impedes this relationship. In Buddhism, the Noble Eightfold Path enunciated by the Buddha, proposes a way of life for followers to eliminate suffering by living a virtuous life. The teachings of Confucius emphasised harmonious living with nature and fellow beings. Morality was concerned with integrity in social relations. The Golden Rule of Confucius was, *What I do not wish others to do to me, that also I wish not to do to them*. Sin is a breakdown in virtuous living.

A WAY FORWARD FOR CHRISTOLOGY AND THEOLOGY OF SIN

The mystery of sin in humanity and world is best described as a sacred myth. The religious truth of sin is to be told in symbolic mythical language rather than the language of *logos*. We need to express religious truths in mythical language because our literalism can never capture the depth and expanse of the divine mystery. Any endeavour to explain the mystery of sin in literal or a *logos* mode renders the mystery of sin unintelligible to contemporary consciousness and modern science. However, one hastens to add that the reality of sin in such forms as domestic violence, disparity of wealth, theft, persecution, planetary vandalism and racism are to be named, confronted and graced into a *metanoia* of conversion and reconciliation.

Rather than hitching the mission of Jesus as the Christ to the chariot of restoring us into God's favour after the purported 'sin' of Adam and Eve, the mission of Jesus as the Christ may be better understood within the framework of *theosis* or deification. The *mythos* of Genesis 3 is about humans making choices and the consequences of such choices, especially choices which seek to displace God as the centre of our being (4-5). The first mention of sin in the bible is Genesis 4:7.

Through the lens of *theosis* or deification the mission of Jesus as the Christ may be viewed as bringing humans into wholeness and 'abundance of life' (John 10:10) as 'partakers of the divine life' (2 Peter 1:4). In the process of *theosis*, humans are led into union with God. Jesus said to Philip, '*Whoever has seen me has seen the Father...Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me*' (John 14: 9-10). Irenaeus of Lyon (d 202) captured the essence of *theosis* when he wrote, 'God became what we are in order that we may become what he himself is'.

For a Christian, Christ is the dynamic energy of the creative Spirit bringing all creation into a unification with God the creator (Colossians 1:15). Christ is the exemplar par excellence of the process of *theosis*. Christ is the icon of *theosis*. The mission of Christ is to bring each person and creation into 'wholeness' ('salvation'). Jesus as the Christ came into the world to lead all creation in loving evolutionary energy towards the wonder of being 'created in the image and likeness of God' (Gen1:27). The 'oneness' theme of harmony within all creation is very much a feature of modern evolutionary science, especially in the connectivity of quantum physics. The Eden myth is an enduring myth in virtually every ancient culture, reflecting a deep universal consciousness for all things living in

interdependent wholeness. As humans we cannot separate the doctrine of original sin from the energy patterns that ebb and flow through the whole universe. Our cosmic parents are the exploding stars. Doctrines such as original sin which teach about our humanity are always intertwined with beliefs about the Incarnation and our identity within an unfinished universe.

What will happen to the formulation of the doctrine of original sin in the official teachings of the church?

Teachings which are no longer relevant or appropriate in their current articulation are quietly put aside and the core truths of the doctrine are reformulated. The *sensus fidelium* or 'lived experience of the faithful' energises an evolution in how various church teachings are understood. Throughout the centuries, teachings such as 'outside the church there is no salvation', limbo, Immaculate Conception, the necessity of baptism for salvation and so on simply drop off the table of the corpus of official church teachings.

In a rapidly changing world, Christians need to be both 'seekers' and 'dwellers' (Charles Taylor in *A Secular Age*, 2007). 'Dwellers' desire to hold the essence of the tradition without any modifications while 'Seekers' venture where the Spirit is leading humankind in the light of modern science and evolving world consciousness.

The imperative to re-examine and modify the official teachings of the church on original sin is not some miniature theological issue but deeply touches into the heart of Christian revelation, especially Christian anthropology, Christ's mission of transformation, the nature of sin, forgiveness and reconciliation. For the credibility of the church's evangelising mission, the issue of the doctrinal formulation of original sin must be urgently addressed. The ancient Christian dictum, *fides quaerens intellectum* ('faith seeks understanding') is honoured when we open ourselves to a Spirit discernment to lead us to express faith beliefs about the mystery of sin in our human condition, the revelation of God in Jesus as the Christ and our responses to transforming grace through Christ towards a 'wholeness' within an unfolding universe.

The doctrine of original sin taught that we are born separated from God instead of being born into the graced embrace of God.

We are born in grace. We are not born in sin.

Let us celebrate the joy and blessings of our humanity, we who live within the web of life in creation!

Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?

1 Corinthians 3:16

For further reading:

Toews, J. E. (2013). *The Story of Original Sin*. Pickwick Publications. Eugene, OR 97401.

McFarland, I. A. *In Adam's Fall: A Meditation on the Christian Doctrine of Original Sin* Wiley-Blackwell. Chichester, West Sussex. A John Wiley & Sons Ltd Publications, 2010.

Wiley, T. *Original Sin: Origins, Developments, Contemporary Meanings*. Paulist Press, New York, 2002.

About the author

Kevin Treston lives in Brisbane Australia. He has been involved in ministry for over 60 years and worked in many countries. He graduated BA (Hons), MA (Hons), MEd, PhD (Notre Dame USA), post-doctoral studies in Loyola (Chicago), the Catholic University of America (Washington), Boston College, Visiting Scholar (Boston College) and was a member of the Association of Practical Theology Oceania (APTO). He was awarded an Order of Australia medal (OAM) for services to Catholic Education and Certificate of Appreciation for Outstanding Contribution to Marist Education Australia. He has authored more than 20 books in the field of adult faith education.