Original Sin In Patristic Thought

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Introduction

It is virtually an axiom of historical theology that the doctrine of original sin, as we recognize it today, cannot be traced back beyond Augustine. Opinions differ as to how faithful the great doctor of the Church was to the teaching of his mentor, St. Paul, but it is generally agreed that after the completion of the New Testament there was a decline of interest in matters relating to sin and atonement. Not until the controversy aroused by Pelagius and his disciples did that interest reawaken, and then only partially, with results which no-one could have foreseen and which many would regard as basically unfaithful to the teaching of Scripture—certainly as that had traditionally been understood.

The situation is complicated by the fact that until Augustine directed his thoughts to the question, there was really no concentrated discussion of original sin in the Church. What evidence we have for the views of particular writers has to be picked up in passing, with the result that not infrequently the Fathers can be found to be contradicting themselves, or so it appears when their statements are lifted from their contexts. This obviously makes it very difficult to decide exactly what any particular writer thought about the issue, although there are recurring themes which help to give us some idea of the general drift of opinion.

To make matters more difficult still, there is little to suggest that in the pre-Augustinian intellectual climate the questions which we are accustomed to ask would have been understood. To have said, for example, that men are 'guilty of sin by nature' would have called forth a storm of protest, at least part of which would have stemmed from the fact that the meaning which we attach to such a phrase would not have been understood in the same way. It is necessary, therefore, if we are to understand patristic thought in this matter, to retrace our steps and consider the mental outlook which framed their universe of discourse before we tackle the precise question of original sin.

Common to all the Fathers was the conviction that mankind needed a Saviour who was Jesus Christ, the incarnate *Logos* of God. It was this belief, rather than any specific understanding of human sin, which set them apart from their contemporaries. Creation and redemption were to a large extent subsumed under the heading of Christology. Soteriology, central though it was to Christian thinking, did not exist as a distinct branch of

theology; everything that had to be said of the Saviour was said about his Person or about one or other of his two Natures. As the incarnate Christ was without sin, this aspect of the human condition tended to be left out. At best there was a strong awareness that Christ was the model man, who had come to lead us back from our unfortunate deviation and restore us to a new, true humanity. That he did this by the shedding of his blood was universally acknowledged, but the purpose of his sacrifice was generally held to be the giving of life, not the making of atonement for sin.

Closely connected with Christology was the patristic understanding of man as a composite of body and soul, or spirit. There were many variations on this theme, but certain salient features may be recorded as typical. First, there was a strong tendency to equate human nature with the flesh. In this scheme of things, the will of the flesh was equated with physical needs and desires, which the Fall of man had brought to life. But in addition to this, man also possessed the image and likeness of God, in which he was created. Usually these were distinguished from each other, often by equating them with man's soul and spirit, respectively. It was generally agreed that at the Fall the likeness had suffered more than the image, which still retained its essential characteristics of rationality and freewill, even if their use had been impaired in practice.

On the question of the origin of the soul-image, opinions varied widely. Some said that each individual soul was specifically created by God; others claimed that all human souls derived from Adam by the natural process of childbirth. Still others, like Augustine, were not at all sure about the soul's origin, and confessed ignorance on the subject. However, the difference between the creationists and the traducianists—as advocates of the rival theories are known—is not irrelevant to the question of original sin. For as Augustine quite clearly saw, the traducianist position is much more congenial to his doctrine than the creationist one is, and this is borne out by the evidence of the other Church Fathers.

The Sin of Adam and Eve

The Fathers were further agreed that sin had entered the human race because of the transgression of Adam, whom they all regarded as a historical figure even though they disagreed with each other about the precise relationship between our sins and his original act of disobedience. To understand the way in which patristic thinking developed, we must first consider what they regarded as the cause of Adam's fall, and then take a look at its effects, especially as they have a direct bearing on us.

The first person to come up with a detailed explanation of Adam's sin was Irenaeus. He explained the Fall in terms of the limitations placed on Adam by virtue of his creation. Irenaeus distinguished quite carefully between Adam in his created state and the rest of the human race. To his mind, the first man had been created with a childlike mind and disposition, which God intended to bring to maturity during the course of his life on

earth. However, the creaturely status of Adam meant that he was separated from God by an infinite distance[1], which made him an easy prey to Satan's temptations. We thus find that for Irenaeus, there are three factors which combined to produce the fall of Adam. The first was his finitude, pure and simple. The second was his ignorance of God, which was the result of his profound separation from him. And the third was the Devil, who lost no time in seizing the opportunity which Adam's weakness presented.

What Irenaeus holds together in this way, subsequent writers tended to separate, by emphasizing one cause above the others. Thus we find for example, that Tertullian prefers to stress the view that Adam sinned because he was deceived by the Devil, and not because of his finitude or ignorance. On the other hand, Clement of Alexandria relegates the Devil to a secondary rôle, and puts the blame for Adam's sin on his ignorance. Unaware as he was of God's purpose for him, Adam chose to indulge in the pleasures of sexual intercourse before God was ready to allow him to, and thus Adam fell into sin. Finally, Origen went back behind these explanations, which to him seemed superficial, and put the blame for Adam's sin on his creaturely finitude.

Origen maintained, in the tradition of Platonism, that every human soul was originally created by God and given the choice, either to advance towards him or to fall away farther. With the single exception of the human soul of Christ, all souls preferred the latter option, though in differing degrees. Those with a weak desire to separate themselves from God became angels, those with a strong desire became demons, whilst those in the middle entered the material world and became men. Once in the body, however, the human soul could not help sinning, because that was an integral part of its make-up. Interestingly enough, it was Origen's doctrine of the pre-cosmic fall which enabled him to insist that all men are sinful by nature, whether or not they have committed actual sins. Not least important, Origen used this belief as a justification for infant baptism[2], which he regarded as necessary to take away the stain of sin, which was an integral part of every human soul.

Origen's views represented an extreme which was not followed by the mainstream of Greek theological opinion, which quickly reverted to a more Irenaean position. Nevertheless, the process by which Origen's views were rejected left its mark on the later tradition, which was inclined to connect the immortality of the soul to its basic goodness both on the ground that sin would entail death and on the ground that the soul's pre-incarnate sin is not taught in the Bible.

A rather different note was struck by Athanasius. Like Origen, he blamed the sin of Adam on the creatureliness of man, but instead of putting the responsibility on a pre-existent soul, Athanasius blamed it on the inherently corruptible clay out of which Adam's flesh had been made. For Athanasius, the soul and the Garden of Eden were both manifestations of God's grace towards man, which enabled him to rise above the animals

and live in an environment where his basic needs would not be permitted to interfere with his contemplation of God. Adam fell because he turned his gaze away from God and allowed himself to be distanced by the material world—by his body especially. For this reason he lost the grace of God and lapsed into the corruption which was inherent in his flesh.[3]

Later Greek writers generally followed Athanasius and improved on him when they could. The Cappadocian Fathers emphasized that Adam had sinned of his own freewill, though they are quick to insist that this freewill remained intact even after the fall. Gregory of Nyssa introduces a new note when he suggests that the subdivision of man into male and female was planned by God when he foresaw that Adam would sin. Gregory was by no means the first to link sin to sexuality, and all the Early Fathers stress that Satan used Eve as the means of tempting Adam. But whereas the earlier Fathers had usually pictured the first transgression as a joint act for which both were equally responsible, Gregory begins to move towards the view that Eve was more guilty than Adam.[4] From this time onwards, the importance of Eve as the cause of Adam's sin would grow until it developed into full-blown misogyny, though it is only fair to point out that that was an aberration. In general, mention of Eve's responsibility was tied to the exaltation of the Virgin Mary, and used to emphasize the greatness of the latter in the divine scheme of redemption.

It is only when we come to the Latin writers of the fourth-century that we meet with a theory of Adam's fall which we can recognize as typical of the later Western tradition. Hilary, Ambrose and the anonymous Ambrosiaster alike gave the highest honour to Adam in his created state, differing in this respect hardly at all from their Greek counterparts. But when we come to consider the question of why Adam fell, we meet with quite a new suggestion. Ambrose writes: 'Adam wanted to claim something which did not belong to him, *viz.* equality with the Creator'.[5] In saying this, Ambrose made the root cause of Adam's fall the sin of *pride*, to which the Ambrosiaster added the observation that Adam imagined that he could become God.[6] He even said that Adam made the Devil God, and so placed himself in Satan's power.[7]

This new idea, which apparently originated with Ambrose, goes far beyond the views which were typical of the Eastern Church, because for the first time it indicated that the *locus* and responsibility for Adam's sin was internal. In saying this, Ambrose was harking back to the teaching of Jesus, when he said that the evil a man does comes from within,[8] and applying it to the sin of Adam. Earlier conceptions had unfailingly placed the burden for man's sin on external factors beyond his control, even when they allowed for Adam's misuse of his freewill. Ambrose however, stated quite plainly that Adam was himself responsible for his act of disobedience, which could not even be blamed on the Devil, despite his tempting activity. The internalization of sin represents an advance in thinking about man which in the mind of Augustine would lead to a doctrine of original

sin both deeper than and fundamentally different from, that of the mainstream of Greek theology.

The Entail of Sin

When we turn from the cause of Adam's sin to its effects, we find somewhat less diversity among the Fathers. They all believed that Adam was punished by being expelled from Paradise and made subject to death. In addition, they all agreed that his punishment extends to the entire human race, for whom death is now an inescapable fact. In the light of this broad agreement, it matters little whether Adam was created mortal or immortal, since either way, death became a reality for him after the Fall.

More important for patristic teaching is the way in which the Fathers thought about Adam's natural constitution. To them he was composed of flesh and soul, to which spirit was sometimes added. Furthermore, the soul was equated with the image and likeness of God, in which man was created. As a result of the fall, this image was severely damaged, though there is disagreement as to precisely how this occurred. For most of the Fathers, it seems that the image was wounded, or diseased or otherwise impaired, though in most cases this apparently happened by the soul's loss of its likeness to God. The language of the Fathers is not always clear, but certainly as time went on they came to think of the image and likeness of God as two separate realities. This enabled them to account for man's fall from grace, which was his likeness to God, without obliging them to say that his rational faculty and freewill were also lost, since they belonged to the image.

This led to the belief, fully articulated in Athanasius and the later Greek Fathers, but present to some degree in Origen as well, according to which fallen man continues to possess the ability to choose the good and to will to do it. The snag is that he is hampered in this desire by the lusts of the flesh, on which the Devil continues to play. Physical death is therefore both a curse and a necessary release from corruption. In the final resurrection, Christians will rise with new spiritual bodies in which they will enjoy the full communion with God which was originally intended for Adam, whilst others will remain as disembodied souls in a shadowy world of non-being.

The difference between the immortal soul of the Christian and that of the non-Christian is that the former is cleansed in this life by the sacramental washing of baptism and by the continuing participation in the Eucharist, where bread was later described as the drug of immortality. The necessity of baptism was stressed, though there were important differences of application tied to differences over the precise relationship between the soul and the body. For Platonists, like Origen, baptism was a cleansing of the soul and could not affect the body which was bound to perish, and so it was imperative to baptize as many people as possible, including newly-born infants. But for a Stoic like Tertullian, for whom body and soul were

inseparably one, there could be no separate cleansing. Baptism must cleanse the flesh together with the soul, which meant that it could not be administered safely until the lusts of the flesh had been subdued. Death would still occur, but the resurrection of the same body and soul was guaranteed.

To understand patristic anthropology it is particularly important to realize that most of the Fathers believed that the concept of the will could be applied in a double sense. There was the will of the flesh, which we would call its lust. This was fallen and sinful. But there was also the will of the soul which remained free, and which struggled against the will of the flesh. Freewill, as a property of the soul, was universally regarded by the Fathers as necessary, both to protect the responsible agency of fallen man and to ensure that his salvation did not involve a denial of his humanity.

The Transmission of Sin

It is when we move from the effects of Adam's sin to the question of its transmission to the human race that major differences among the Fathers once more begin to surface. Here, more than anywhere, the debate between traducianists and creationists becomes theologically divisive. For a straightforward traducianist like Tertullian, there is no problem; sin is transmitted, along with the soul, from one generation to the next. Sexual intercourse is the obvious channel for this transmission, but although Tertullian did not recommend it, he did not lay any special blame on it either. For him, after all, the stain of sin on the soul was just as important as the corruption of the flesh, so that he could not easily regard sexual intercourse as a diversion of the soul from the higher things to which it would otherwise naturally tend.

At the opposite end of the spectrum, Origen found it almost impossible to allow for any transmission of sin at all, since each individual soul had fallen before entering the world. In his mind, the story of Adam was paradigmatic of what happens to us all, but little more. Very occasionally, especially in his commentary on Romans, there is a suggestion that we may have sinned in Adam's loins, because of our mystical solidarity with him as the head of our race, but the Latin translation which we possess was probably modified by Rufinus, the translator, in the interests of later orthodoxy, and cannot be regarded as a safe guide to his thought.

But in spite of such extremes, it can be said that by the fourth century a consensus had emerged which followed neither Tertullian nor Origen. In essence it was closest to the teaching of Irenaeus, who said that our physical descent from Adam implied a mystical union with him. He even went as far as to suggest that we share in Adam's guilt, because in him we caused offence to God.[9] But although this sounds remarkably Augustinian, the concept of the mystical union must not be lost sight of. It is probable that Irenaeus believed that we inherited death in Adam just as we have since inherited life in Christ, but we cannot be held responsible for the

former any more than we can be held responsible for the latter. The essence of our inheritance from Adam is that we have lost the gift of life,[10] so that death now passes by descent to the entire human race.

This belief naturally had serious consequences for later Christian teaching about sexual intercourse. As a lust of the flesh it was bad enough, though not necessarily culpable, since the flesh could do nothing but follow the dictates of its own nature. But to add to that the fact that it was also the means by which death was transmitted within the created order brought an extra dimension of culpability to those who indulged in the act. This is the view of Athanasius[11] and from him it gradually spread to the Church as a whole.

The Inheritance of Guilt

Closely tied to the question of the transmission of sin is the further issue of the inheritance of Adam's guilt, and here the Fathers were almost unanimous in repudiating what would later become the Augustinian position. In their minds, guilt could only be attached to actual sins, and almost all of them rejected the idea that newly-born babies were guilty in this sense. Nevertheless, babies were not exempt from the inheritance of death, and it was for this reason that they had to be baptized. Indeed, one of the most curious aspects of the baptismal teaching of the Greek Fathers is that the baptism of infants was the gift of life, whereas the baptism of adults was for the remission of sins. Their failure to find an adequate explanation for baptism which could cover infants and adults alike is one reason why Augustine broke with their teaching, and preferred to extend the significance of adult baptism to infants as well.

It is only when we turn to Latin theology in the period immediately before Augustine that we begin to find a concept of inherited guilt similar to his. Ambrose presses his own solidarity with Adam to the point of confessing his own guilt for Adam's sin and in this he is followed by the Ambrosiaster. It is probable, though not certain, that Roman notions of justice lay behind their thinking. If death, the punishment for sin, was the inheritance of all men, logic would suggest that the guilt must also be inherited, since only the guilty would be punished by God.

The Ambrosiaster is especially noteworthy because he was the first to use the faulty, Old Latin translation of Romans 5:12, on which Augustine was later to base his teaching about inherited guilt. The original text says that 'death passed to all men, because all men have sinned'. The Greek for 'because' is the compound conjunction *eph'hoi*, which the Ambrosiaster read as *in quo*, 'in whom' and which he interpreted as a reference to Adam. This then seemed to offer Biblical evidence for the belief that all mankind shared in the act, and therefore in the guilt, of Adam's sin. In fairness, however, it should be pointed out that the Ambrosiaster was obviously reading this verse in the light of the traditional idea of the mystical union of all men with Adam, and that he could have come up with the

same idea from other Pauline passages as well. Far less defensible is the usual Greek interpretation, where *eph' hoi* is taken to refer to death, so that the clause reads: 'because of death, all men have sinned'. This fits in well with their view that man has inherited mortality rather than guilt for Adam's sin, but it can scarcely be said to be an accurate rendering of Paul's original idea.

Pelagius

Such then was the general position of the Church's teaching on original sin when Pelagius and his associates began to attract the attention of Augustine by their unorthodox ideas. Pelagius himself, of course, believed he was doing no more than repeat the traditional views of the Fathers, and on the surface there is a good deal of merit in this claim. Like almost everyone before him, he insisted that the soul of fallen man continued to possess freewill, and would not be held guilty for sins not actually committed by it. Slightly more dubious was his belief that the soul's faculties remained unimpaired by the fall. A similar idea could be found in Athanasius, but Pelagius, who had a strongly creationist view of the soul's origin, denied any kind of inherited sinfulness on the ground that it would make God the author of evil and turn Christianity into Manichaeism.

Pelagius showed what the implications of this teaching were when he went on to discuss the effect of Adam's sin. He agreed that this had had disastrous consequences in that it had introduced both physical and spiritual death, and introduced a nasty habit of disobedience. But unlike the Greek Fathers, who shared his views about mortality, Pelagius did not believe that human sinfulness was in any way inevitable. On the contrary, it was a moral decision freely taken by those who could exercise their freewill. Small children and others who lacked this capacity were simply innocent, doing by nature what the Church claimed could only be accomplished by grace.

Not that Pelagius lacked a doctrine of grace, which he regarded as fundamental to the good life. The snag is that by 'grace' Pelagius meant innate freewill, the law of revelation and the example of Christ. The holy life thus became for him the conscious obedience to the demands of the law of which Christ had set the perfect example. This extremely high view of man was pushed to even greater extremes by Pelagius' associate Celestius, and his disciple, Julian of Eclanum, who went so far as to claim that man was morally independent of God, and had need of grace only if he sinned.

Augustine

It was against this Pelagian background that Augustine developed his classical doctrine of original sin, though it must be remembered that his views on the subject were far from being simply a reaction to Pelagius. Even without the teaching of the British monk, there is ample evidence from

Ambrose and from his own writings, which shows us that he would probably have held much the same views in any case.

Augustine believed that Adam was created with every imaginable virtue, including the freedom not to sin, an innate inclination to virtue and the gift of perseverance in his state of beatitude. These advantages were his by grace however, not by nature, as was the case with the blessed in heaven. For this reason, Augustine did not believe that man was immortal, though clearly he was preserved from death as long as he remained obedient to God.

Adam sinned, said Augustine, because of his nature, which was created, and therefore mutable. In spite of all his advantages he chose to sin, because in his heart he was proud and wanted to be like God. Thus far, Augustine follows Ambrose reasonably closely. But then he goes on to say that Adam's sin was worse than any other imaginable, partly because he was more able to resist than anyone else, and partly because his desire to be like God was the greatest of all possible blasphemies. The punishment meted out to him corresponded to the gravity of the crime, and so the entire human race was corrupted, becoming a *massa damnata*, sinful itself and propagating sinners.[12]

Augustine did not know whether to accept the traducianist or the creationist view of the soul's origin, but either way, every child caught the infection of sin from his parents, who passed it on by the lust excited in sexual intercourse. Infant baptism was therefore necessary for the remission of original sin, and the guilt which accompanied it.[13] More than any of his predecessors, Augustine emphasizes both the evil result of sexual intercourse, which he regards as the fruit of man's perverted lusts, and the guilt for Adam's sin which we share by our solidarity with him. Because of this, even an unborn child has wilfully sinned, in that he was already present in the loins of Adam.

Augustine furthermore insists that human freewill was lost at the Fall. It is true that the faculty of the will as such remains unimpaired, but it is no longer able to make choices which are not tainted by evil. In this way, Augustine hopes to avoid the suggestion that we are the victims of fate, because we retain the spontaneous use of our will. In this sense, Augustine traces the origin of sin to a much deeper psychological source than the mere exercise of the will; our whole being, in the depths of its nature, enters freely into the act of sinning.

With such a view of original sin, it is not surprising that Augustine emphasizes the absolute necessity of God's saving grace, which must conquer and convert the human will, not merely help it along towards perfection. Nevertheless, Augustine could have avoided much misunderstandings and even a certain distortion in his teaching, had he been able to be more precise in his use of technical terms. In particular he had a concept of nature which was too broad and too vague, obliging him to attribute concupiscence to human flesh and giving the impression that sin

was a physical, rather than a purely spiritual inheritance. It is true that his concept of solidarity with Adam, like that of Ambrose before him, was moving towards a sense of personal identification with the first man which, had it been developed in theological terms, would have gone a long way towards correcting the ambiguity of the term 'nature'. As it was, he was misunderstood in his own lifetime, and after his death his teaching was developed in ways which he himself would probably not have recognized. In particular, it laid him open to the charge of Manichaeism, something of which he was certainly not guilty, but which it is easy to read into his writings because of his imprecise use of the word 'nature'.

Conclusion

The doctrine of Augustine triumphed over Pelagianism and at the Council of Orange in 529 and became, almost without modification, the official teaching of the Western Church, It is true, of course, that this did not happen without protest; Vincent of Lérins and especially John Cassian, insisted that Augustine had gone much too far in his refutation of Pelagius. Their objections centred on the state of the fallen will, which they believed to be more capable of responding to God than Augustine had taught, and on the extent of God's grace, which they believed was available to all men, even though not all were willing to receive it.

To some extent their views co-incided with the teaching of the Eastern Church, which Westerners have frequently thought of as Pelagian, but the resemblances are superficial. Whether they like it or not, the semi-Pelagian opponents of Augustine were indelibly marked by his outlook, and framed their views more in objection to him than as a positive statement of an alternative position. The Eastern Church was different. There Pelagius had made almost no impact, and the arguments of Augustine were simply not understood or discussed. To a quite remarkable extent, the Greek Fathers carried on in their time-honoured fashion, emphasizing above all else the universal mortality which has spread as the result of Adam's sin, but steering clear of any imputation of his guilt. Cyril of Alexandria states quite explicitly that we did not actually sin in Adam, a suggestion which he regards as absurd because we were not born then,[14] and confines the effects of the fall to the resulting corruption of our nature.

That might seem to be a reasonably Augustinian conclusion, except that Cyril's understanding of 'nature' was much more precise and limited than Augustine's. In particular, he knew nothing of the deep moral and psychological undertones which so deeply coloured Augustine's treatment of the subject. Cyril's outlook was shared even by his Antiochene opponents and the little we know of Theodore of Mopsuestia and Theodoret of Cyrus bears out the view that on this matter at least, the Greek Church spoke with a single voice. That same voice would later be heard in Maximus the Confessor, who knew more of Latin theology than any of his contemporaries, and it would be repeated by Gregory Palamas, at the very moment

when mediaeval Augustinianism was making its strongest bid for the loyalty of Eastern Christendom. More than perhaps anything else, the doctrine of original sin stands as a monument to two different, and mutually incompatible ways of thinking. Whether we believe, as our own theological tradition has taught us, that one of these approaches is superior to the other, or whether we prefer to think, in ecumenical fashion, that both are equally valid insights into an ultimately mysterious truth, the fact remains that we cannot readily move from one to the other. In the end we must opt for Augustine or against him, and allow the rest of patristic thought on the matter to be seen in the light of that fundamental choice.

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NOTES

1 Irenaeus, *Adv. haer.*, 4. 38:1–3.
2 Irenaeus, *Hom. in Luc.*, 14.
3 Athanasius, *De Incarn.*, 4:7.
4 Gregory, *De hom. opif.*, 16.
5 Ambrose, *In Ps.* 118, 7–8.
6 Ambrosiaster, *In Rom.*, 5:14.
7 *Ibid.*, 7:14.
8 *Mark* 7:21.
9 Irenaeus, *Adv. haer.*, 5:16.3.
10 *Ibid.*, 3:18.7.
11 Athanasius, *Contra gentes* 3.
12 Augustine, *Enchir.*, 27.
13 Augustine, *Contra Tul.*, 6. 49.
14 Cyril of Alexandria, *In Rom.*, 5:18.