



BORN BAD

ORIGINAL SIN AND
THE MAKING OF THE
WESTERN WORLD

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*To my parents,
Peter and Lorinne Boyce*

In gratitude

He did not need man's testimony about man, for he knew what was in a man.

—JOHN 2:25

Original sin: The view which holds that the sin which caused Adam's fall and expulsion from paradise is transmitted from generation to generation, so that all descendants of Adam must be regarded as being of a 'perverted' or 'depraved' nature.

—MARTIN LUTHER KING, SERMON NOTES

PREFACE

*But for this mystery [of original sin], the most incomprehensible of all, we remain
incomprehensible to ourselves.*

—BLAISE PASCAL

What is wrong with me? This question has haunted the West for fifteen hundred years, but until recently it came with an answer – which was called original sin. Western people believed they were ‘born bad’ because they had inherited the sin of the first humans. Their understanding of themselves was shaped, as it has been in almost all cultures, by an overarching story of creation.

‘Adam and Eve’ is an ancient myth whose origins are lost in the campfires of prehistory, making the Western interpretation of the story a comparatively recent one. The West shared the same primordial parents as now vanished tribes, Jews, Muslims and Eastern (Orthodox) Christians, but it stood alone in seeing the eating of the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden as the *original* sin – not only the first sin of human history, but also the one that subsequently became innate to the human condition. Only in this version of creation did a decision to disobey God in Paradise become a sin that was inherited by all. ¹

The articulation of original sin and the making of the Western world were enmeshed. The doctrine, like the West itself, was a product of the tumultuous breakup of the Latin-speaking part of the Roman Empire. It underpinned the distinctive religion formulated by the Catholic Church as a Christian culture was built out of the imperial ruins. The creation story was the spiritual foundation on which the Western world was made, directing how people understood the divine, each other, the natural world and, above all, themselves.

Original sin is not part of the wider Judeo-Christian tradition. For Jews and Eastern Christians, the doctrine’s divorce of sin from morality was incomprehensible. It was not just the modern mind that found it difficult to imagine how Adam’s sin could become everyone’s, or to conceive of a God who would condemn otherwise innocent people to hell because of it. In no other religion were people understood to be *born* bad; in no other were they conceived with a permanently corrupted nature that faced the wrath and judgement of God. ² The deity of the West is unique in judging people before they commit a moral act. Those who first fought against the doctrine, in the fifth century, argued that a newborn baby could not be regarded as a sinner. They lost the debate.

An alternative tradition, inherited from Judaism and sustained by Eastern Christianity, recognised that all human beings sinned, but saw sin as freely chosen behaviour which did not corrupt the essential goodness of created nature. This perspective was never totally extinguished in the West, but the dominant view was that human beings were born sinners, subject to the just wrath of God not on

because of *what they did*, but *who they were*.

But is the doctrine anything more than the idiosyncratic teaching of a bygone age? In 1934 Carl Jung observed: 'Christianity is our world ... Our whole science, everything that passes through our heads has inevitably gone through this history.' Jung exaggerated in claiming that 'the age of rational enlightenment has eradicated nothing', but he was right to be frustrated at the assumption that the influence of Christian ideas concluded when people rejected the Christian religion.³ Today the influence of original sin is most obvious in the distinctive discontent of modern people – the feeling of guilt and inadequacy associated not with *doing* wrong but with *being* wrong. This angst is evident in the anxieties of contemporary consumers as it was among ancient believers.

Western people are increasingly ready to respect creation myths. It is now widely understood that the point of such allegories is not to document a literal, historical truth; rather, they represent internalised lore which helps people place themselves in the cosmos. They provide a framework that shapes consciousness itself. But this anthropological wisdom, so sound in its application to other cultures, is suspended when the thinker turns to home. Even those who courageously endeavour to understand themselves and mend their relationships with other people and the natural world often remain ignorant or scornful of the story that shaped them.

The purpose of this book is neither to defend nor condemn the Western creation story, but to show that its influence was not ended by science and secularism. I do not wish to join the ancient arguments about the truth of original sin, but I hope to demonstrate that, for better or for worse, the doctrine has always been central to the Western experience of what it means to be human. Without some knowledge of this mystery, the danger is that we will be, as Pascal suggested, 'incomprehensible to ourselves'.

PART I

ORIGINAL SIN IN CHRISTENDOM

THE FATHER OF ORIGINAL SIN

We do not say that God is the author of evil, and yet we can correctly say that human beings are born evil as a result of the bond of original sin with God alone as their creator.

—ST AUGUSTINE ¹

ST AUGUSTINE (354–430) IS THE FATHER of Western Christianity. He completed for religion in the West what St Paul had begun for the faith as a whole: the creation of a cohesive and binding set of teachings from diverse and disputed traditions. ² He was also a faithful lover and doting father, who famously struggled with sex. Much of Augustine's extraordinary theological output of some ninety books and eight thousand sermons (distributed by relays of stenographers and teams of copyists across the Roman Empire) was highly original, but his struggle to achieve celibacy, as he documented in his autobiography, *Confessions*, was standard fare in the saintly struggle. What was distinctive about Augustine's account was that he blamed himself, rather than the seductive temptations of the Devil, for his plight. Appropriately enough for the author of the creation story of a culture which would become focused on individual experience, lust led him to search *within* to understand sin's inexorable grip, and from this intensely personal journey emerged an explanation for *everyone's* desire to sin.

Augustine's extended effort to achieve chastity has been satirised for centuries. It is usually assumed that before he became a repressed celibate, Augustine led a life of debauchery. In fact, his family life, both as a child and after he became a father himself, was unremarkable. Augustine recorded his life journey not because he thought it unusual – the standard autobiographical motivation – but because he believed it represented the universal human condition.

Although Augustine's father, who died while his son was still in his early teens, had not been practising Christian, the young man was brought up a Catholic by his mother, Monica. In his late teens, he formed a faithful long-term relationship with a young Catholic woman from a neighbouring town, and their son, Adeodatus (meaning 'gift of God'), was born in 372. Augustine records that he 'lived with only one woman and kept faith with her bed' during the fifteen years they were together. He ended the relationship only when his family arranged his engagement to a girl of higher social standing.

The two-year wait until his new fiancée reached the legal marriageable age (which was twelve) was a critical period in Augustine's self-discovery. An old translation of *Confessions* well captures his inner torment:

[She] who was wont to be his bed-fellow, being torn from my side as an impediment to my marriage, my heart that cleaved to her was broken and wounded until it bled. To Africa then

returned she, vowing to thee that she would never know man more, and leaving with me the son whom I had begotten of her. But I, miserable man, unable to imitate the woman, and being impatient of the two years delay after which I should receive her whom I desired [for marriage], and being less a lover of marriage than a slave to lust, did procure yet another – though not a wife – by whom that disease of the soul, as strong or even stronger than before, might be sustained.⁴

It was in the ashes of a broken relationship, seeking consolation in sex which comforted the body but tortured the soul, that Augustine embarked on the confrontation with his inner self that would provide the template for the authentic Western spiritual search. ‘Depressed and even overwhelmed’, he began to ‘search after the cause of evil’ by entering ‘into the very innermost part of my soul’, lamenting ‘What torments did my heart endure in that travail, what sighs were those, O my God!’⁵

At the core of his bodily being, Augustine found not the evil that the Manicheans and the Platonists stressed, but evidence of the enduring love of the creator God.⁶ Augustine discerned, ‘even beyond my soul and mind itself, the unchangeable light of the Lord’, and that all creatures ‘have a being because they are of thee’. He argued that ‘the Catholic truth was distinguished from the false doctrine of Plotinus, in respect of the phrase *the Word was made flesh*’.

But if goodness was the essential substance of the body, whence came its attraction to sin? How could Augustine reconcile benevolent creation with his determination ‘to will that which is evil, and not to will that which is good’? The critical question was this: ‘Who placed this [evil] power in me and who engrafted upon my stock this branch of bitterness, seeing that I was wholly made by my God most sweet?’ Augustine believed that the Devil could not be the *origin* of evil, since even he was made by the ‘good Creator’.⁷

It was through the Bible, and ‘above all others ... thy Apostle Paul’, that Augustine learnt that ‘the flesh lusteth against the spirit, and the spirit against the flesh’. He came to believe that accepting this reality, through ‘tears of confession, and ... a troubled spirit, [and] a broken and contrite heart’, was the essential first step towards salvation.⁸

The purpose of *Confessions* was to document how Augustine came to accept the truth of the human condition. It was not intended to illustrate the author’s growing piety or the evil of sexual desire, but to highlight the insurmountable depravity that must be accepted before grace, the unearned gift of God’s forgiveness, could be received. Augustine’s point was that the desire to sin could not be banished by human effort.

To illustrate this, *Confessions* places surprising emphasis on a seemingly harmless adolescent prank. As a youth, Augustine once stole pears from an orchard; even though he had no need of the pears, already having his own, and never ate them, he nevertheless enjoyed the sin: ‘What an abomination! What a parody of life! What abysmal death! Could I enjoy doing wrong for no other reason than that it was wrong?’⁹ Observing the supposedly wilful greed of babies revealed the same truth: the basic human desire, from the very first, was to sin. No human being could free themselves from this perversity, which infected every aspect of human nature.

Augustine chose Christ and celibacy in the Easter of 387, and shared his baptism with Adeodatus. The boy whom his father had called 'the child of my sin' was now also a child of grace. Father and son shared the grief of Monica's death later the same year, and eventually lived together as members of the scholarly community Augustine formed in North Africa. Adeodatus was central to the learned discussions that took place there, but died in 389 or 390, before he was even eighteen years old. ¹⁰ The loyalty and love Augustine showed to his son and had long maintained for the child's mother was glossed over by the church for centuries; this was not proper behaviour for a saint.

In 391, at the age of thirty-seven, Augustine became a priest in the North African town of Hippo and in 395 was made bishop. It was not until the early fifth century, while immersed in a study of Genesis, that he expounded the doctrine which he had begun to set out in *Confessions*. Having limited Greek, Augustine adopted the mistranslation of Paul used in the fourth-century Latin Bible known as the Vulgate, which stated that 'all men had sinned in Adam', and he became ever more concerned to stress how much the original sin in the Garden of Eden had permanently corrupted human nature. Augustine drew heavily on custom, theology and tradition to buttress his case. ¹¹ He accepted that original sin was not fully expounded in the Bible, but was adamant that unless it was accepted, even good Christians would be tempted to seek salvation through holy living and end up in hell. ¹² Before they could be saved, he argued, a person must admit that they were wholly incapable of reforming themselves, so that they would rely only on the mercy of God: 'One hope, one trust, one firm promise – your mercy.' ¹³

The obvious difficulty in Augustine's account was how the transmission of sin occurred. This was to remain the subject of confused controversy for centuries to come – in fact, it would never be resolved – but Augustine kept his answer simple: semen was the culprit. Original sin, and the guilt and judgement of God which followed from it, was physically transmitted via sexual intercourse to every human being. Only Jesus 'alone of those who are born of a woman is holy ... by reason of the novelty of His immaculate birth', whereby the Holy Spirit 'infused immaculate seed into [Mary's] unviolated womb'. ¹⁴

Despite his grim view of human nature, Augustine did not despise the body, as many of his opponents suggested. Indeed, he was critical of the ascetics who were 'waging war on their body as if it were a natural enemy'; he believed that they were blind both to God's goodness and to the necessity of relying on grace alone. ¹⁵ For Augustine, God had not made the slightest error in his creation of human beings, but evil desires, 'after establishing themselves in the stock of our ancestors, have become naturally ingrained'. ¹⁶ He was convinced that everyone was hopelessly and innately subjected to desires that could never be overcome by human will. At the core of each person was not an incorruptible divinity, as some Eastern theologians suggested, but a putrid lust which continuously contaminated the whole being. To his optimistic opponents he pointed out that even when sexual intercourse was prohibited and lustful thoughts were vanquished, random erections and night-time emissions remained.

Augustine knew that original sin was an idea well suited to the times. Many pagans remained in the

Roman Empire, and teachings that explained why even the most moral of them was destined for hell. encouraged precautionary Catholic baptisms. Moreover, Catholicism did not enjoy an ecclesiastical monopoly even in the Latin-speaking West. ¹⁷ One of its rival churches, that of the Donatists, which was particularly strong in North Africa, sought to preserve its purity by avoiding any compromise with the world and its sinful ways. This ensured Augustine's assertion that the church was a community of fellow sinners would be tested in the fires of public debate. And when Augustine wearied of argument, original sin provided a justification for the forceful suppression of such dissidents. Because people were not rational beings who could freely choose good, *disciplina* – 'an active process of corrective punishment' – had to be employed against Christians as readily as pagans. Augustine believed that the law must be imposed on his fellow believers: 'Take away the barriers created by the laws! Men's brazen capacity to do harm, their urge to self-indulgence would rage to the full.' ¹⁸

Augustine's argument with the doomed Donatists was largely over by the time his doctrine of original sin found its final, extreme form. Whereas in his earlier writings he had held on to a notion of free will, in the last decades of his life, he came to believe that human beings were so corrupted that they could not even *choose* to embrace the mercy of God: those who appeared to have chosen to be saved had, in reality, already been predestined by God for salvation. ¹⁹ For Augustine, this was a paradoxical source of hope: whatever happened in this fallen world, God had already set apart those who were to be saved. But the comfort this gave baptised believers came at a considerable cost to everyone else, 'that mass [of people] which will certainly be damned'. ²⁰

When Augustine was born, the Roman Empire was enjoying renewed prosperity, but by the time he died, in 430, the Vandals were besieging his home in Hippo. Although the growing power of the barbarians corresponded with Augustine's increasingly bleak prognosis of the human condition, the rampages were not solely to blame for this. His most forlorn descriptions of human nature were formulated during a ferocious public debate that began when a group of intellectual ascetics from Rome sought refuge in North Africa following the sack of Rome in 410. It was within the furnace of a culture war that Augustine's most cherished doctrine would be refined and tempered, and would ultimately receive papal and imperial sanction.

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