

“Catholics Re-examining Original Sin in light of Evolutionary Science: The State of the Question”

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The classical doctrine of original sin owes a great deal of its formulation to Augustine of Hippo and the incorporation of his thought into Patristic, Medieval and Counter-Reformation thought and doctrine. This doctrine was based on a literal reading of Genesis 1–3, which was taken to recount a pre-historical unfolding of past events and was interpreted to impart the reality of a halcyon era ended by a “fall” into sin and the concomitant coming of suffering, disorder, and death. It was not until the twentieth century that Catholic thinkers began to rethink this conception in light of advances in biblical hermeneutics and evolutionary science. This paper will look at three pioneering and three more recent of these efforts at reevaluation and reformulation. In so doing, it will seek to determine in particular how the authors answer the following questions: How is the story in Genesis to be interpreted and how is the relationship between sin, death, and evil to be thought of if the Genesis account is not taken literally? What role is there for discovering historical origins and what role should evolutionary science play in reevaluating the doctrine of original sin? Is the doctrine of original sin still helpful, and if so, what should and should not it be imparting? The paper will address each of these questions in the exposition of each effort, and will also compare them at the end.

The investigation will begin with an overview of the doctrine as formulated by Augustine and passed down to the twentieth century; here the aim will not be an exhaustive history but merely the gleaning of an accurate sketch of the development of the doctrine with which the contemporary authors engage. It will then proceed to first briefly note the seminal pre-Vatican II thought of Jesuit paleontologist and theologian Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, and second to examine the work of two Vatican II era Jesuit systematic theologians, Piet Schoonenberg and Karl Rahner. Subsequently, it will turn to three more recent efforts: theologian John Haught, the joint effort by theologian Monica Hellwig and paleontologist Daryl Domning, and finally, moral theologian Jack Mahoney. It will conclude with a discussion of where these authors agree and disagree

on each of the above questions and what overall can be said in light of their work about the doctrine of original sin going forward.

To be clear, my aim in this paper is not to give an exhaustive account of interpretations of original sin in light of evolutionary science. I do, however, aim to give a representative snap-shot of both the doctrinal tradition on original sin and how contemporary Catholics who wish to take seriously both the tradition and science have attempted to engage the issue. To get this snapshot it is necessary to look at a variety of thinkers from across the past half century; thus I look at both Vatican II era and more recent figures and include systematic theologians, a moral theologian, and theologically informed scientists. Of course, this effort will still be far from exhaustive even of Catholic thought on the subject, but it will provide an adequately accurate picture of the state of the question and point out some avenues for further development of doctrine.

The Classical Doctrine: From Augustine to Trent

The classical doctrine of original sin owes its form and content largely to Augustine of Hippo (354-430 C.E.). As Tatha Wiley points out, working neither from scratch nor from a “theological doctrine intact from scripture and early Christian belief,” Augustine “fixed the meaning of the basic terms of the doctrine.”¹ He was influenced by many factors in coming to his formulation, including his reflection on the significance of the practice of infant baptism, his rejection of Manichean views, and his controversies with Pelagius and the Donatists.² The main scriptural sources he drew upon were the account of the Fall in Genesis 2:4 to 3:24 and the theological reflections produced on this by Paul, especially in Chapters 5 and 7 of Romans.³ From these sources, Augustine eventually—for it was a progression of ideas throughout his career—fine-tuned what would become the classical doctrine addressing the sin of Adam and Eve, the inheritance of sin, the universal sinfulness of humankind, Christ’s redemption, the church as mediator of salvation, and the sacrament of baptism.⁴

At the base of this understanding was a presumption of the historicity of Adam and Eve as well as an interpretation of the Genesis account that emphasizes human free will, places pride as

¹ Tatha Wiley, *Original Sin: Origins, Development, Contemporary Meanings* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 2002), 56.

² *Ibid.*, 74.

³ Also influential were other Pauline formulations. For example in 1 Corinthians 15:22-23, Paul wrote “As in Adam all men die, so in Christ all will be brought to life; but each in his proper place: Christ the first fruits, and afterwards, at his coming, those who belong to Christ.”

⁴ Wiley, *Original Sin*, 56.

the paradigmatic human sin, and portrays the first sin as having devastating impacts on the whole of creation. As Wiley puts it, for Augustine “sin originates in the human refusal to acknowledge created dependence on God and do what God wills as good through fidelity to natural and revealed law.”⁵ The initial refusal by Adam and Eve had multiple and devastating effects on all of nature. For human beings the effect of Adam’s sin was ignorance, concupiscence, weakness, suffering and the inevitability of death. No longer was human nature possessed of an internal harmony between reason and the passion and lost was the true freedom to direct oneself wholly to the true good of God; instead it was now tragically biased toward sin.⁶ This heritage is transmitted by the physical act of procreation, and is therefore inescapable for all human beings.⁷ Further, as Jerry D. Korsmeyer makes clear, Augustine saw the “very nature of nature” as changed, and so “natural evils of sickness, storms, earthquakes, wild animals, and unforeseen accidents are all part of the punishment administered by a just and righteous God.”⁸ Thus it was that Augustine explained why Christ’s redemption as well as the sacraments of the church are necessary for all (including infants), why grace is always necessary to order our fallen moral nature, and why natural evil exists in the creation of the all-powerful and loving God.

Augustine’s understanding was soon incorporated into the official teaching of the Church. Condemning Pelagian views and holding up Augustinian alternatives, the Council of Carthage (411-418 C.E.) declared that death is not a natural part of human existence but a result of Adam’s sin, that infants were born in a state of sin, and that grace is necessary to avoid sin and to perform divine commands.⁹ A century later in response to those who were taking Augustine’s theory to an extreme by denying that free will had survived the Fall, the Council of Orange (529 C.E.) reinforced and clarified the teachings of Carthage. It maintained against lingering Pelagianism that original sin had changed both body and soul, and against Augustinian extremists, that the change in free will was a diminishment rather than a destruction, but that grace is indeed required for both faith and good

⁵ Ibid, 74.

⁶ Ibid, 69.

⁷ Monca Hellwig, “The Classic Teaching on Original Sin,” in Domning and Hellwig, *Original Selfishness: Original Sin and Evil in the Light of Evolution* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2006), 13. It is also important to note that Augustine did distinguish between *peccatum originans* (the event of original sin) and *peccatum originatum* (the condition of original sin in humankind), the latter of which included both concupiscence—the tendency toward sin and typified by lust—and suffering, death, and natural disorder in the rest of creation.

⁸ Jerry D. Korsmeyer, *Evolution and Eden: Balancing Original Sin and Contemporary Science*, (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 1998), 36.

⁹ Wiley, *Original Sin*, 72; Korsmeyer, *Evolution and Eden*, 38.

works.¹⁰ Augustine's conception of original sin and its effects was now official teaching.

Not until half a millennium later would something significant be added to this understanding by two medieval thinkers in particular. Along with all medieval thinkers, Anselm of Canterbury (1033-1109 C.E.) and Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274 C.E.) both took for granted the patristic idea of original sin and the concomitant assumption of the historicity of paradise, the persons of Adam and Eve, a first sin, and a fall. But they also sought to further explain the notion in light of contemporary questions and frameworks. Seeking to provide intellectually satisfying answers to contemporary questions about the purpose of incarnation and redemption and heavily influenced by his hierarchically structured feudal society, Anselm of Canterbury gave the unique definition of original sin as the privation or absence of original justice.¹¹ He also made a clearer delineation between concupiscence (the effect and punishment of disordered desire) and original sin than had been explained by Augustine.

Aquinas accepted and expanded Anselm's idea of original sin as ontological privation of original justice as well as his distinction between concupiscence and original sin, and, utilizing Aristotelian metaphysics, he was able to bring together Anselm and Augustine's understandings of original sin. He explained that original justice established internal harmony in human nature with a threefold subjection of human will to God, moral will to reason, and the powers of the body to those of the soul.¹² Original sin is the loss of this original justice and thus the loss of the threefold subjection and internal harmony as well as freedom from suffering and death. It is also the loss of the gift of sanctifying grace or holiness, which is necessary for eternal life. He further elaborated the elements of original sin in Aristotelian categorical terms, and thereby brought together the Augustinian and Anselmian strands: the *material* element is the bias toward evil, or concupiscence (Augustine), and the *formal* element is the privation of justice.¹³ The forgiveness of baptism removes original sin, but concupiscence remains. In sum, then, Thomas explained that human beings inherit a fallen rather than integral nature, one deprived of the gift of original justice essential for moral integrity. Further, sin is an ontological and not solely a moral problem; not only can fallen human nature not know and do good on its own, but

¹⁰ Wiley, *Original Sin*, 73; Korsmeyer, *Evolution and Eden*, 39-40.

¹¹ Wiley, *Original Sin*, 77-9; Korsmeyer, *Evolution and Eden*, 39-41. Of course, this was part of his larger theory of Atonement, wherein Christ's incarnation was the means of, and redemption the repayment for, satisfying the infinite debt owed to God by Adam's sin.

¹² Wiley, *Original Sin*, 85.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 91.

it also can no longer achieve the supernatural destiny for which it was created.¹⁴ But, there is a remedy for both problems in divine grace; Christ's redemption both healed human nature—by enabling it to achieve moral integrity—and elevated it—by infusing the supernatural means for attaining union with God.¹⁵ This grace is mediated in the sacramental life of the church.

Challenges to this synthesis arose in Reformation thought, particularly in that of Martin Luther (d. 1546). Although it is clearly more complex, for our purposes it suffices to say that Luther challenged the Thomistic metaphysical synthesis by taking a more existential and—he thought—more Augustinian and biblical view. First, he collapsed the distinction between original sin and concupiscence; the latter, a disordered propensity toward evil, simply *is* original sin—and it is rooted primarily in a lack of faith. Second, he insisted that this sin went to the core; because of Adam's sin, human nature became totally depraved. Not just wounded, but corrupted. Therefore, baptism removes only the guilt, not the deep-rooted sin. Finally, he challenged the role of the church in salvation. Because original sin is a religious problem—the lack of faith—not a moral or ontological problem, justification is not a sacramental matter, but rather one of individuals realizing their sinfulness and becoming justified by faith.¹⁶

In response to these challenges, the Council of Trent (1545-63 C.E.) clarified and codified the Thomistic synthesis as “dogma,” thereby making it a truth affirmed by the Church as rooted in divine revelation and one that was necessary for salvation.¹⁷ In its Decree on Original Sin, Trent defined the essence of original sin as the privation of the supernatural gifts of original justice and sanctifying grace; because of his sin, Adam had lost these gifts for himself and his descendants. The effects of this loss of supernatural gifts were concupiscence, suffering, and death; thus concupiscence is both from original sin and inclines persons to original sin, but is not sin itself. Further, the powers of the soul (reason and will) were not totally corrupted, but simply changed for the worse. Through sexual intercourse, all human beings inherit the sin as well as its effects. Because the inherited sin requires forgiveness, baptism is necessary for all, including infants, and in baptism sanctifying grace is restored. Thus, in short, Trent located original sin in a lost ideal, in what human nature lacks for salvation and what must be restored for eternal life, and it emphasized the ecclesial mediation of grace in this restoration.¹⁸ It also codified original sin as an explanation of death and suffering.

¹⁴ Ibid, 97.

¹⁵ Ibid, 87.

¹⁶ Ibid, 95-6.

¹⁷ Ibid, 88. The following account of the Council of Trent is drawn from Wiley, 91-94.

¹⁸ Wiley, *Original Sin*, 91.

A Survey of Post-Vatican II Reevaluations

The official position of the Catholic Church remains much the same as the Tridentine synthesis. Indeed, in its treatment of human origins and creation, the 1994 *Catechism of the Catholic Church* makes no reference to evolution, and regarding original sin it largely summarizes the doctrine of Trent (nos. 379–421.) This is somewhat surprising given that most advances in biblical interpretation have been accepted by the magisterium, and given the positive attitude expressed toward evolution, particularly during the pontificate of John Paul II. Bishop (and now Cardinal) Christoph Schönborn explained that original sin was a “particularly delicate subject” and that “it cannot be the task of the Catechism to represent novel theological theses which do not belong to the assured patrimony of the church’s faith.”¹⁹ However, as Gabriel Daly argues, because of this reluctance the *Catechism* moves rather awkwardly between sometimes describing the biblical language as symbolic and sometimes seeming to accept it as historical fact.²⁰

Despite the *Catechism’s* reticence in acknowledging them, there have been serious Catholic reevaluations of the understanding of original sin, particularly since the Second Vatican Council. These advances were influenced by and came in response to many factors: personalist and existentialist philosophy; discoveries in modern biblical scholarship that allowed, among other things, a questioning of the historicity of Genesis 3; the extension of this historical-critical method from scripture to magisterial teachings.²¹ In conjunction with these influences was the attempt by some thinkers to come to terms with the implications of an evolutionary worldview; we will be concerned with these latter efforts in particular.

We can begin by looking briefly at the evolutionary worldview planted by the Jesuit paleontologist and theologian Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. As Jerry Korschmeier puts it, Teilhard was the “first Catholic churchman to be totally caught up in the concept of evolution,” which he considered “key to all human understanding.”²² At base Teilhard put forth that God creates by evolution, and that the three mysteries of Creation, Incarnation, and Redemption are three modes of the same process: creative union of the whole world in God.²³

¹⁹ Quoted in Mahoney, *Christianity in Evolution: An Exploration* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2011), 4-5.

²⁰ Gabriel Daly, “Creation and Original Sin,” in *Commentary on the Catechism of the Catholic Church*, ed. Michael J. Walsh, 82-111. (London: Geoffry Chapman, 1994).

²¹ Brian O. McDermott, “Original Sin: Recent Developments” *Theological Studies* 38 (1977): 478-512. at 478.

²² Korschmeier, *Evolution and Eden*, 58.

²³ *Ibid.*

While he did not have a systematically worked out theory of original sin, Teilhard did comment upon it in various works. It is fair to say that he almost despaired of the doctrine and found the traditional Augustinian interpretation of paradise at the beginning of history as totally untenable.²⁴ However, he sought not to do away with original sin, but rather, as Jack Mahoney describes it, to “reinterpret it in a synthesis that combined the evil in the world with the threefold dimension of creation, fall, redemption, which he envisaged were all operative in the evolution of the cosmos toward its Christological destiny.”²⁵ Thus, in short, original sin for Teilhard “expresses, translates, personifies, in an instantaneous and localized act, the perennial and universal law of imperfection which operates in mankind *in* virtue of its being ‘*in fieri*’ [in the process of becoming].”²⁶ During his time, his innovations were not welcomed by the magisterium (he was in fact censured for his views and forbidden to publish on theology and evolution). However, his ideas on original sin, and his evolutionary worldview more generally, have had a very large impact on many thinkers down to today, including most of the authors considered in this paper.

The Dutch Jesuit theologian Piet Schoonenberg, one such thinker influenced by the evolutionary ideas of Teilhard, further pursued the problem of original sin in light of the new intellectual and cultural horizon constituted by the evolutionary worldview of modern empirical science as well as historical consciousness and modern biblical scholarship.²⁷ He acknowledged the problems with the classical doctrine yet also wanted to affirm the reality of universal sinfulness to which the doctrine points. Thus he sought to rearticulate the essence of human alienation from God both in light of the tradition and in light of the context of a dynamic evolutionary world and a modern critical understanding of history and human origins.

Schoonenberg identified at least three key problems with the classical doctrine. First, the traditional account presupposes the historicity of Adam, a fall, and monogenesis; it also focuses on the physical transmission of this actual sin and its consequences. These elements are improbable in an evolutionary perspective, and are incapable of communicating the essence of original sin to a contemporary audience.²⁸ Second, sin itself has been cast in juridical and individualistic terms—as the disobedience of law; and the doctrine of original sin extended the individualism of personal sin to account for universal

²⁴ Ibid, 59.

²⁵ Mahoney, *Christianity in Evolution*, 75.

²⁶ Teilhard de Chardin, *Christianity and Evolution* (London: Collins, 1971), 51.

²⁷ There were other Dutch theologians pursuing a similar line of inquiring, for example, Ansfried Hulsbosch, O.S.A. Here we focus on Schoonenberg as arguably the most widely influential of this group of thinkers.

²⁸ Wiley, *Original Sin*, 134.

sin. This fails to capture the central feature of sin—the failure to seek and love God—as well as the social a reality of sin.²⁹ Finally, the abstract metaphysical categories of scholastic theology—which had become dogma with Trent—did not capture an apprehension of human historicity and becoming.³⁰

In place of the classical understanding and the concomitant problems with a biological, juridical, and metaphysical conception, Schoonenberg put forth a more existential view. At center of his existential view is the idea of “being situated,” which is a universal feature of human nature operative in all acts of freedom. For all humans the existential and social context is one already shaped by sin, which, as noted above, he understood as at root a failure to enter into a relationship of love with God, which results in alienation from God and others, which is in turn manifest in evil. The world, then, is a “fellowship in sin,”³¹ and the existential situation of being situated in a world alienated from God is what the early church writers named humanity’s original sin.³²

Importantly, he thought that taking seriously an evolutionary world-view means that this existential situation cannot be thought of as the loss of supernatural gifts. Indeed, this medieval concept poses the dilemma of positing “a higher form of humanity at the wrong end of man’s evolution.”³³ Instead, Schoonenberg adverts that sin did indeed enter the world in refusal of God and failure to love, but it is not plausible that it did so in some ideal realm, nor that it did so once for all. Thus original sin is not solely some catastrophic sin of the first man, but the whole history of sin in the world, the “innumerable sins of all humanity taken collectively throughout human history.”³⁴ And transmission can and should be explained not through problematic ideas of biological and physical inheritance, but precisely because humans are always situated in sin.

Clearly, then, for Schoonenberg original sin is a reality, and one that profoundly affects human freedom and action. We are inevitably situated in sin, and this affects our values and our decisions. But we are not only situated in sin for Schoonenberg. In fact, it is the revelation of God’s redemptive act that points to humanity’s fundamental sin of refusal to love. We are thus also situated by redemption, and called to an alternative interior life of faith and love. This interior

²⁹ Ibid, 133–4.

³⁰ Ibid, 132.

³¹ Schoonenberg, “Sin and Guilt” in Karl Rahner, ed. *Encyclopedia of Theology: The Concise Sacramentum Mundi* (New York: Seabury Press, 1975), 1579–86, at 1584.

³² Wiley, *Original Sin*, 136.

³³ Schoonenberg, “Original Sin and Man’s Situation,” In *The Mystery of Sin and Forgiveness*, ed. Michael J. Taylor (Staten Island, NY: Alba House, 1971), 251.

³⁴ Ibid, *God’s World in the Making* (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1964), 83.

life is God's grace that is mediated through right human decisions and actions; the church in particular facilitates this mediation through the lives of its members. We are thus called to transcend our 'sin-situatedness,' to accept God's grace with the help of the Church, and to be what the ascent toward humanity was geared toward: God's image and friend.³⁵

The widely influential German Jesuit theologian Karl Rahner also utilized existential language in attempting to come to terms with the traditional doctrine of original sin. Rahner was particularly concerned to be loyal both to the tradition and the contemporary magisterial teaching while also recognizing that unless the many questions raised by modern science and secular anthropology are dealt with "it is no longer so clear that even the official teaching of the Church on original sin can be adduced as a real and vital factor such that it is adequate to sustain a real faith."³⁶ Regarding the topic of evolution more generally, Rahner was one of the few Catholic theologians engaged in efforts prior to Vatican II to investigate the compatibility of the Christian message and the conclusions of evolutionary science.³⁷ He concluded that evolution was indeed compatible with Scripture, and more specifically, that the objection raised by Pius XII's 1950 encyclical *Humani Generis* regarding special creation of the soul was not theologically tenable (because it would make God a secondary cause.) However, for a time he held on to the doctrine of monogenism—the idea that all humans are descended from one couple—as essential to the doctrine of original sin.³⁸

But, eventually, he came to see that monogenism was not necessary to maintain the essence of the teaching on original sin, and instead argued for a form of polygenesis which he thought better serves the traditional understanding of original sin.³⁹ He still held that physical-historical unity was significant for salvation history, and so rejected a polyphyletic origin of the race as contrary to unity. Instead, he posited a single, original group at the beginning of human history, an idea which he argued takes seriously the basic anthropological fact that the human person cannot exist as a solitary unit and that coming to freedom is always a social as well as personal adventure.⁴⁰ This original

³⁵ Ibid, 33. It should be noted that Schoonenberg also appealed to the Johannine "sin of the world" as an affirmation of the social and ideological dimension of human sinfulness. Cf. John 1:29. *Man and Sin: A Theological View*, 66.

³⁶ Rahner, "The Sin of Adam," 247-262 *Theological Investigations, Vol XI*, trans. David Bourke (New York: Crossroad, 1982), 248.

³⁷ See Rahner, *Hominization: The Evolutionary Origin of Man as a Theological Problem* (London: Burns and Oates, 1965). (or. 1958).

³⁸ McDermott, "Original Sin: Recent Developments," 482.

³⁹ Rahner, "Evolution and Original Sin," 61-73 in J. Metz (ed.), *The Evolving World and Theology*. Concilium, vol. 26.

⁴⁰ McDermott, "Original Sin: Recent Developments," 483.

group “denied God in all its members at the beginning” and thereby “blocked the grace-transmitting function of the original group for its descendants.”⁴¹ In other words, this group created an “unredeemed situation, which is rightly called ‘original sin’ and which precedes the personal decision of those that come afterward.”⁴² Adam, then, represents this group, and the sin of this group is the “sin of Adam” or *peccatum originans*, while the “unredeemed state” that follows is the real, irrecoverable and irrevocable situation that has perpetual influence on everything that follows (*peccatum originatum*).⁴³

This “unredeemed state” was obviously not intended by the Creator. Instead, “holiness was intended as a gift to, and claim upon, humanity as a whole by the Creator of mankind, who graciously willed to ‘raise’ it.”⁴⁴ This is of course similar to the scholastic and Tridentine language of a loss of supernatural gifts, and surely Rahner was trying to bring this idea into contemporary relevance. But there is also a large difference in that Rahner does not commit himself to a pre-lapsarian state of perfection that was lost, with disastrous effects for all creation. There was indeed a refusal of grace, and this was “in the beginning,” and this does have a profound impact on human beings throughout history. But Rahner does not think we can know much about this event, other than that it occurred, and that it occurred within a single group.

Rahner also offered a clarification of the idea of concupiscence.⁴⁵ Basically, as Denis Edwards explains, “he distinguishes between the disorder that springs from *sin* and the disorder that is intrinsic to being a *limited* and *finite* being.”⁴⁶ The former comes from the history of sinful rejection of God, which partially shapes us and which is the context for our free decisions. The latter is “intrinsic to being a spiritual creature who is at the same time radically *bodily* and *limited*”; because of this bodiliness and finitude, “we human beings are never fully autonomous, integrated, or in control.”⁴⁷

Despite this limitedness, Rahner insists on a state of “original freedom.” In other words, a freedom “such that the situation in which it existed was still unspecified by any decision of human freedom (whether that of the individual himself, or that of others).”⁴⁸ He takes this not to be contradictory to “the empirical ideas which we

⁴¹ Rahner, “Evolution and Original Sin,” 71.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ McDermott, “Original Sin: Recent Developments” 483.

⁴⁴ Rahner, “The Sin of Adam,” 256.

⁴⁵ Rahner, “The Theological Concept of Concupiscentia,” *Theological Investigations I* (Baltimore: Helicon Press, 1961), 347-82.

⁴⁶ Denis Edwards, *The God of Evolution: A Trinitarian Theology* (New York: Paulist Press, 1999), 65. The following explanation of Rahner’s position is drawn from Edwards.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Rahner, “The Sin of Adam,” 261.

have evolved today of ‘early’ man, because this situation of freedom exists independently and is capable of realization regardless of which particular category of material in this world was available to this freedom as the medium in which it could be exercised, and how far this original freedom was, or could be, consciously reflected upon, and inherent in a subject capable of reflecting upon himself.”⁴⁹ Further, the subject of such a free decision at the beginning can “freely be conceived of as a ‘group’” for “even a humanity conceived of as polygenist in origin constitutes a real unity, however varied the aspects which it displays.”⁵⁰ It was in this “originally free” group “at the beginning” that the historical decision was made to deny God. However, it must also be said that the “initial constitution” of this “ultimate beginning” is “withdrawn from us and never recurs.” Indeed, its “true nature” is only “gradually revealed in the light of the future which is Christ.”⁵¹

In sum, then, Rahner has a Christological orientation for his reflection on original sin. Creation was originally in view of grace, and grace was present from the beginning. Thus, importantly, original sin and grace are two “existentials,” though they are not equal and are not related in temporal succession; in other words, grace is not a result of original sin nor does original sin ultimately prevent redemption. Sin and grace should therefore be taken together to “imply a single dialectical ‘situation’ of man (as a being endowed with freedom) to the extent that a specification is imparted to him both by the beginning (that which provides the origins of mankind) and by Christ as the ‘end’ and ‘goal.’”⁵² Thus for Rahner, Christ is always the ground of God’s self-communication in grace—even in the ‘original state’—but God intended this self-communication to be mediated by membership in the human community as such.⁵³ Such membership and descent from the human race was “capable of being, and should have been the medium in which sanctifying grace was communicated,” but original sin means that grace is grounded in and mediated by Christ *as Redeemer*.⁵⁴ Of course, this does not answer the much broader question of how Christ mediates salvation, but for our purposes it does clarify that the state from which we are redeemed is that which should not have been, but is. In short, for Rahner we always needed Christ, but now we need Christ as Redeemer.⁵⁵

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid, 254.

⁵² Ibid, 259.

⁵³ Ibid, 256.; McDermott, “Original Sin: Recent Developments” 484.

⁵⁴ Rahner, “The Sin of Adam,” 256.

⁵⁵ It should be noted that several contemporary Rahnerians have sought to further develop his thought on original sin and evolution. For instance, Denis Edwards explicitly

More recently, the American systematic theologian John Haught has sought to place original sin in the context of his own “aesthetic understanding of cosmic evolution.” Drawing on the works of Teilhard de Chardin, Alfred North Whitehead and others, Haught’s larger project is to respect Christian orthodoxy but also to reconstruct it in light of evolutionary science, which he contends can in fact enrich theology and bring about greater understanding. Thus he posits that one of the “the great gifts of post-Darwinian thought is that it makes the notion of ongoing creation much more immediate and understandable than at any other time in the history of Christianity,” and at base he asserts that “the epic of evolution is the story of the emerging independence and autonomy of a world awakening in the presence of God’s grace.”⁵⁶ In short, he argues for replacing the idea of static design by a controlling power with an understanding that sees God as self-giving love and creation as unfinished and freely developing in the context of God’s grace.

Within this understanding of cosmic evolution, Haught seeks to explicate what original sin can still meaningfully express. To this end he delineates what past understandings must be discarded and what new understandings must be avoided. Regarding the former, he stresses that evolutionary science “has rendered the assumption of an original cosmic perfection, one allegedly debauched by a temporally ‘original sin,’ obsolete and unbelievable.”⁵⁷ Further, it has also abolished “the whole cosmological framework in which motifs of reparation and expiation have become so deeply entrenched in our cultures and our classical spiritualities.”⁵⁸ But, after Darwin we can still “render the notion or original sin no less meaningful,”⁵⁹ though we must also be wary not to make hasty conflation from evolutionary insights to theologically suspect conclusions. Proceeding cautiously, he further clarifies that original sin does not point “to some vague genetic flaw inherited biologically,” nor should it be simply identified “with the instincts of aggression or selfishness that we may have inherited from our nonhuman evolutionary ancestry.”⁶⁰ These tendencies may be a part of our evolutionary heritage, but it is “theologically inappropriate” to identify original sin with them.

Instead, original sin in an evolutionary context can appropriately be understood as the “intractable situation that has come to prevail

denies that sin can be responsible for all the discrepancy and infallibility that humans experience, and develops his own Rahnerian proposal. See *The God of Evolution: A Trinitarian Theology*.

⁵⁶ Ibid, 51.

⁵⁷ John Haught, *God After Darwin: A Theology of Evolution* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2000), 141.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid, 139.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

as a result of the human family's cumulative indifference to its creative mission in the cosmos," or in other words the "culturally and environmentally inherited deposit of humanity's violence and injustice that burdens and threatens to corrupt each of us born into this world."⁶¹ Thus, in short, original sin for Haught means that "each of us is born into a still unfinished, imperfect universe where there already exist strong pressures—many of them inherited culturally over countless generations—for us to acquiesce in an indifference to God's creative cosmic aim of maximizing beauty."⁶² So understood, it can still meaningfully express our estrangement from the ideal. But the ideal is properly understood for Haught as "the enlivening new creation yet to come", the "Absolute Future that seeks always to transform and renew the world," not a once perfect world to which we "seek nostalgically to return."⁶³

Influenced by Teilhard and John Haught, paleontologist and theologically knowledgeable lay Catholic Daryl Domning has sought to reconcile his scientific understanding of evolution with the doctrine of original sin. This project culminated in a book done in collaboration with theologian Monica Hellwig, who, as she describes it "contextualizes the discussion at the beginning, and responds with agreement or disagreement at several points."⁶⁴ Domning is concerned not only with the compatibility of Neo-Darwinian evolutionary theory and Catholic doctrine, but with the origin of evil in human history, as well as the problem of evil in natural history. He thinks evolutionary thought can shed new light on these questions, whereas Hellwig questions whether they are properly the subject of the doctrine of original sin, or of theology at all.

In her contextualization Hellwig makes clear that contemporary theologians are not committed to literal interpretation of the Fall or of the story of the garden and that they have not been reluctant to provide a more coherent explanation of original sin and its meaning. Indeed, theologians increasingly have little objection to an evolutionary worldview as well as modern social science and are using both to reexamine the doctrine. In contemporary Catholic thought, much of the focus has been drawn "to the questions of the social expression and cultural embodiment of the distortions due to destructive and evil deeds in human society" and this has in turn led to a focus on "social sin and sinful structures as the real issue of the traditional doctrine."⁶⁵

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid, 138.

⁶³ Ibid, 140.

⁶⁴ Daryl Domning and Monica Hellwig, *Original Selfishness: Original Sin and Evil in the Light of Evolution* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2006), ix.

⁶⁵ Ibid, 16.

Domning agrees with much of the trajectory of contemporary interpretation. He applauds the efforts Hellwig describes as being “defensible” and as an improvement on the “pre-critical” classic doctrine. Further, he finds the specific attempts of Teilhard de Chardin and John Haught especially helpful and enlightening in dealing with the question of evil and with giving a theologically viable vision of cosmic evolution. Thus he largely accepts John Haught’s account that “the notion of God as defenseless and vulnerable love provides...an *ultimate* explanation of nature’s evolutionary character... without having to candy over the deviations, disorder, and tragedy that Darwinian science has uncovered.”⁶⁶ And he feels that these accounts can largely explain the existence of natural and human evil: a “non-autonomous world is not worth creating” and given this, “the key to the paradox is simply to realize that banishing evil from an autonomous world involves a contradiction, and is therefore impossible.”⁶⁷

However, he argues that while the contemporary trajectory does not conflict with modern ideas on evolution, this contemporary trajectory needs to be improved upon. In Domning’s view, the tendency to equate original sin with the sinful situations or structures into which each person is born—a tendency which he terms the “cultural transmission model”—fails to make any explicit or constructive use of evolutionary science. Wary of “yielding too much ground to genetic influences on human behavior,” and uneager to “talk about the ‘first’ humans,” contemporary theologians fail to ask the question that “inevitably occurs to an evolutionary biologist: if original sin is merely a matter of our birth into a corrupting human culture, what was the corrupting culture that greeted the *first* humans ever born, when no *human* culture yet existed?”⁶⁸ In short, then, they fail to explain where the sinfulness of human society came from, and are not really all that interested in asking the question.

Even Haught and Teilhard have not gone far enough in Domning’s view. Teilhard “paid no real attention to evolutionary mechanisms,”⁶⁹ and so there is thus a need to go beyond his “abstract generalities.”⁷⁰ Haught “has not taken into account all that science has revealed about the inevitability of evil.”⁷¹ And because he is not comfortable enough with the extent to which human sinfulness can be said to have any genetic basis, Haught places too much stress on original sin not being a matter of genetic determinism, which, while true, fails to

⁶⁶ Ibid, 177.

⁶⁷ Ibid, 167.

⁶⁸ Ibid, 178.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid, 173.

⁷¹ Ibid, 177.

give the whole story in Domning's view.⁷² Thus, Domning asserts the need for a better sense of evil intrinsic basis of sin and its social and cultural transmission.

To capture this, he proposes that the cultural transmission model be broadened to "include the environmental, social, and behavioral situation into which *humanity itself* was born—as it were, 'the society before (human) society' which was molding our ancestors' behavior (both learned and genetically determined) for millions of years before they became human."⁷³ In essence, he argues for biological "selfishness" which is "literally programmed into the genes of all living things" and which accounts for the "definite trait" that is "passed on by 'propagation' or 'generation' as part of our human nature, and not merely by imitation."⁷⁴ This evolutionary selfishness "is a necessary and sufficient explanation of the sinful social structures on which the 'cultural transmission' school blames our individual sinfulness," and it also accounts "for our theological need of grace and salvation."⁷⁵

In response to Domning's proposal, Hellwig seeks to clarify several points about the nature of theological proposals about the doctrine of original sin. She insists that what theologians seek in their theoretical attempts to give a coherent explanation is "not to give a credible account of how evil may have originated in human history," but instead "to understand the meaning of the stories and the subsequent doctrinal formulations in terms of their role first in Hebrew and later in Christian faith."⁷⁶ Thus, in answer to the scientist's objection that theologians fail to explain "the historical, or prehistorical, beginning of sin and evil, the theologian can only answer that this is not the purpose of the doctrine of original sin."⁷⁷ The "real systematic exigence," then, is to "clarify the situation of the here and now, any here and now, as a task for human living." This situation is one in which sin and evil are not only outside oneself but also within; in which this sin and evil must be resisted both by examining one's own conduct and prophetically critiquing one's social situation; finally, in which "the creator is greater than all creaturely actions, and therefore redemption from sin and suffering is really possible."⁷⁸ Given this, a Catholic theologian "need not dispute Domning's contention that instincts of survival and propagation from prehuman development survive in the human species and erupt in violence, greed, domination, dishonesty,

⁷² Ibid, 178.

⁷³ Ibid, 142.

⁷⁴ Ibid, 143. This he argues is a key part of the traditional understanding that is not accounted for by the "cultural transmission" model.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid, 96.

⁷⁷ Ibid, 98.

⁷⁸ Ibid, 97.

and deception.”⁷⁹ But, what the Catholic theologian cannot grant is a “reduction of the doctrine of original sin” to these elements.⁸⁰

Finally, the moral theologian Jack Mahoney deals with original sin as part of his larger focus on the development of doctrine in light of evolution. Mahoney’s treatment centers around his view that “the death and resurrection of Jesus have had the evolutionary cosmic effect of providing a remedy for human death, the universal fate for individuals that is apparently essential to the advance of evolution through natural selection.” In short, Jesus’ death and resurrection “saved humanity from death rather than from sin” and realizing this raises fundamental questions about “the traditional Christian beliefs positing an original sin and Fall and interpreting the death of Jesus as a remedy for that moral Fall on the part of early humanity.”⁸¹

Mahoney thus attempts to explain the origins of these beliefs and to argue why they are no longer necessary in an evolutionary view. For Mahoney, the ideas of original sin and the fall are not “a truth in the descriptive sense.” Instead they started as an “etiological myth in Israelite culture to explain the phenomenon of death, which depicted human mortality as the result of human disobedience to God”⁸² To this were added many “accretions” in theological history, beginning with Paul and his reflections on Genesis 3, gaining momentum and a certain type of clarity with Augustine, and culminating in codification at Trent. At base these accretions communicate the idea of the fall, the coming of death, and the transmission and sharing of a “fallen nature” including concupiscence and ignorance.

However, according to Mahoney, there is no need to keep this theological concoction. Following J. Fitzmeyer, he argues that Genesis 3 teaches only “the loss of God’s trust and friendship by Adam and Eve” and does not contain “a hint of a ‘fall’ from grace or original justice, as patristic and later scholastics eventually formulated it.”⁸³ Thus, there is “no biblical warrant for considering that a first sin had a cataclysmic effect of the whole of human nature, far less that such an effect was inherited by every subsequent human being” by sexual transmission.⁸⁴ Further, there is no need in light of evolutionary science to explain death; it is now recognized as an “essential biological process that applied to all living creatures well before the advent of humanity and that has naturally encompassed all human beings since their first arrival on the cosmic scene.”⁸⁵ In short, then,

⁷⁹ Ibid, 188.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Mahoney, *Christianity in Evolution*, 51.

⁸² Ibid, 64.

⁸³ Ibid, 60.

⁸⁴ Ibid, 64.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

the etiological myth of the fall and the theological accretions that have developed around it as “original sin” are no longer necessary; original sin has no “revelationary, far less historical, warrant” and so it would be “more theologically appropriate now to drop it as unnecessary and cumbersome religious baggage.”⁸⁶

Now, Mahoney insists that all of this is not to suggest that in evolutionary theology there is no place for human sin and weakness and for divine forgiveness and redemption. Indeed, saying that there was no original sin and fall does not mean that “humans do not commit sins and do not require forgiveness.”⁸⁷ And further, “it may well be true that at some stage in human evolution, something went badly wrong, morally speaking” and that this was basically that humans “began to sin and have kept on sinning, making moral choices affecting each other that were out of harmony with the cosmic design and destiny their creator had in mind.”⁸⁸ So, there is surely a place for sin and forgiveness for Mahoney, but they are “best understood when viewed within the positive dynamic movement of cosmic evolution.”⁸⁹

Original Sin and Modern Science: Where Are We Now?

We turn now to some comparisons and evaluation of the state of the question in light of this survey. A first set of questions which are similarly—though with some variation—answered by most of the authors is that of the *origin* of how we came to be in the situation we are now in. Do we need to delve into an explanation of the ‘first sin’ and its circumstances, or can we simply begin with the fact of the state of mankind? Relatedly, was there a state of paradise and order from which we “fell”, or is it better to look toward the paradise to come rather than paradise lost? Generally, all our authors are not looking to explain past events in any detailed sense (though Rahner wants to make certain claims regarding an original group, which we will note below). Mahoney is perhaps clearest on this: there is no need and no grounds for speaking of a single moral catastrophe in light of evolutionary science. Domning also agrees with much of this trend, but only to a point. He does not wish to delve too deeply into the question of “who, what, when, where, or how many the ‘first

⁸⁶ Ibid, 65. Mahoney is also concerned about the pastoral harm that has been done by excessive preoccupation with concupiscence, and this surely contributes to his conclusion. Further, it is not just the doctrine of original sin that should go; he also argues that taking evolution seriously entails abandoning the sacrificial redemption of fallen humanity through propitiatory sacrifice, or ‘atonement.’

⁸⁷ Mahoney, *Christianity in Evolution*, 94.

⁸⁸ Ibid, 156.

⁸⁹ Ibid, 94.

humans' were."⁹⁰ But, he does want to go much further into a joint theological-scientific question of origins than any of the other authors; we will return to this below as well. It can for now be stressed that they are all certainly uncomfortable with positing an actual pre-fall state of perfection. As Schoonenberg succinctly put it, there was not "some higher form of humanity at the wrong end of evolution." Original sin and the fall, then, are not a truth in the descriptive sense, as Mahoney puts it. And, as Hellwig insists, the question of origins is generally not the focus for theological reflection. Further, in Teilhard and those influenced by him—including Domning, Haught, Mahoney, and Schoonenberg—the focus is very much on the perfection and renewed creation which is still coming and in which we participate.

Though not as explicit and framed a bit differently, Rahner can be said to agree to some extent on the question of origins. What he most wanted to make clear was the existential unredeemed situation in which we find ourselves. We need redemption, and it must be asserted that this need arose in history and continues in history. He does insist on a specific type of polygenesis—as single group in order to maintain biological-historical unity. But he does not insist on any overly specific account of how this state came to be; in the end, we can't garner, and don't need, an exact account, for the situation is what it is—unredeemed and in need of Christ's redemption. Indeed, it is only "in the light of the future which is Christ" that we see the true nature of the initial constitution of what should have been but was not. Christians should thus be looking toward this salvation—when we will accept grace and trustingly live loving God and others.

There is a related question of the enduring significance of the terminology of "original gifts" being lost. Again, none but Rahner try to salvage this in any clear way; they do not want to posit the existence of original gifts "lost." Of course, most do want to posit—at least in some way—that such gifts may still be gained, and that salvation is precisely the process of gaining them. For his part, Rahner clearly adverts to a state of 'disorder' due to physical reality and not sin, though he also wants to speak of a state of ultimate freedom, and so also something like possible state where original gifts could have been gained.

Another question related to origins and the existence of a fall, is the question specifically of death. Original sin is clearly not an explanation of the origin of death for any of the authors. Mahoney is most explicit on this: death is a necessary evolutionary fact and clearly not a punishment or consequence of the fall. In other words, death is an inevitable part of the advance of evolution through natural selection. All of the authors would agree with this, at least up to a

⁹⁰ Domning and Hellwig, *Original Selfishness*, 143.

point, and Haught in particular would add that this process is itself the necessary result of a loving God who gives freedom to creation.

Relatedly, there is the question of natural evil. Since Augustine this has been a major part of that for which original sin has been propounded as an explanation. Most authors now agree that sin is not the cause of natural evil, though there are various levels of grappling with this. The set of insights that most explicitly deals with it stems from Teilhard and is developed by Haught, Domning and Mahoney. Basically, God is self-giving love who allows for a free creation; this very freedom entails a certain level of chance and a free evolution that results in both creative advance and in disasters. However, this view is certainly not officially articulated in Catholic teaching, and it entails at least a certain level of reconsideration of the divine nature itself, with which many are uncomfortable.

Granting that no pristine state of the world ever existed, is it still *sin* from which human beings are being saved, or just the present disordered state, for which we are now partially responsible, but out of which we can evolve? In short, should *sin* categorize this state of imperfection from which we need to be saved? Mahoney shies away from the language of “saving from sin” most; again, for him, Jesus did not save us from sin but rather from death. For the rest, we are “saved from sin”, and not just personal sins, but a *state* of sin. Now, they would not claim that we are striving for a return to an original moral order. But they do claim that we are being saved from a state of *moral* disorder—from a situation that should not be and one that we both contribute to personally and are also born into. And, to be fair, Mahoney does not disagree that there is a state of moral disorder, but the language of original sin for him entails implications of a single moral catastrophe and resultant salvation process, and this—and the consequences it has wrought in theological history—makes him wary of speaking in terms of original sin. The key questions are, then: to what extent the present situation of sin is appropriately called original sin, and what of the original doctrine do the various descriptions retain?

For most of the authors considered, this state can properly be called original sin, and calling it such is still helpful. As noted, what original sin really seeks to impart is our solidarity in the present state of sin and our need for redemption. Rahner and Schooneberg stress that this is a result of some past refusal of grace that altered what could have been. Thus, for them, there can be said to have been a “fall from grace,” if this is understood as a refusal of such grace. Original sin names this refusal and the state of sin that persists as real sin prior to each individual’s involvement. For all the other authors, original sin more describes the situation of an unredeemed state that persists (*peccatum originatum*) and less any sin that originated this state (*peccatum originans*). However, there are also slight variances

on how this state is manifested and transmitted. Haught, Rahner, and Schoonenberg, could all be said to have a view that invokes cultural transmission more than anything else. Relatedly, they, and many others, have invoked the idea of social sin and structures of sin, as Hellwig points out.

Domning, on the other hand, wants to go further than the rest on both the question of origin and transmission. Indeed all the other authors can be said to fall largely into what he calls the cultural transmission model, with some recognition of the genetic basis of sin. Domning wants the genetic basis and evolutionary history to play a much larger part in the theology. Hellwig rejects going too far in this direction as theologically inappropriate, for, she insists, the question of origins is not the proper question for theology. Further, both she and Haught warn against any simple reduction of original sin to the inherited genetic instincts of selfishness and aggression, and Rahner had earlier made a plea for distinction between genetic and spiritual disorder. Thus, what Haught, Hellwig and Rahner seem to be arguing for is a balanced notion of genetic and social causes and a clear statement that sin is involved in our free rejection of God and our ever-present need of redemption, and not simply with our biological proclivities. But, as Domning contends, they do not go very deep into what these genetic causes are, nor into what the situation of ‘original freedom’ of the first humans was like; in other words, they shy away from an examination of origins.

Domning’s case for more on the question of origins clarifies this aspect of the present state of the issue and raises important questions about whether it has gone far enough. First, even though the theologians considered here (and others) do not have a literal interpretation that posits a great deal about origins, neither can they so easily dissociate themselves from the question of origins. Indeed, as Domning point out, “too much Christian catechesis, for too many years, has put forward Adam and Eve as real historical personages, and the Garden of Eden as the cradle of our real beginnings.”⁹¹ The fact is, then, that “the Church has long claimed to know something about our beginnings that it did not know”; this claim continues by some (including, arguably, the *Catechism*) and creates no small amount of confusion and distress among believers.⁹²

So, while it can be said that a good way to proceed is to call for a balanced statement of genetic and social factors—it is not a matter of being all genetic nor all social—questions still remain. If it the case that, as he argues in a concluding rejoinder to Hellwig, Domning’s scientific explanation is not simply reduction and “should not be understood to imply that further evolution can fix what’s

⁹¹ Domning, *Original Selfishness* 190.

⁹² *Ibid.*

wrong with what evolution up to now has done”—that, in other words, we do actually need *redemption*—then it is not clear why the scientific dimension of our origins should not get more attention in the theology. Put somewhat differently, it is not entirely clear that “scientists’ conclusions have no immediate relevance to redemption,” particularly in more properly identifying and fully explaining “that from which we need to be redeemed.”⁹³

And of course, this is not the only set of problems unresolved. For a start, to what extent was there “original freedom,” and what does this mean and imply? Perhaps we can even say—as Rahner does—that there was freedom unrestrained by any other human decision. But, even grating this, what about the constraints of a hostile and violent environment? And what should be said about the “disorder” that Rahner himself acknowledges is inherent because of bodiliness and finitude? If we are never fully autonomous, integrated, or in control—as Rahner posits—could we really have been expected to do otherwise than sin? Does this not require more explanation of our “original state” and can science not help in this, as Domning asserts?⁹⁴ Further, as noted above, natural evil remains a very open question, one not entirely explained by the positing of a loving God who gives freedom to creation.

Also, as we have touched on but not gone into any depth about, the question of the role of the Church in the process of salvation is clearly an open one. And, relatedly, though itself a separate question, is the question of the necessity of Christ. As seen above, a key part of the development of the dogma was the assertion of the Church’s role as tied up with the role of Christ. All of the contemporary authors would posit Christ as necessary for salvation, and indeed as integral to the coming culmination of creation. And all would argue against any simple exposition of the incarnation as necessary because of the fall. But there are variations among our authors (and certainly among a broader range of Christian thinkers) on how exactly salvation is mediated by Christ and by the Church. Unfortunately, it is beyond the scope of this paper to go further into this set of questions.

Conclusion

To sum up, contemporary Catholic theologians have responded variously to the doctrine of original sin. Some, such as Mahoney, argue the language of original sin is no longer helpful at all. Others still find it helpful but want to make clear what it is actually doing; they

⁹³ Ibid, 191.

⁹⁴ Perhaps Domning’s answers will not be the best, but is it best to bifurcate the tasks of science and theology on the question of origins?

thus stress solidarity in sin, the need for redemption, the perpetual state of sin, and the role of Christ in redemption. Most do not want to point back to a halcyon era without death, nor do they wish to give an exact account of how we came to be in an unredeemed situation. With regard to how this situation persists, most advocate a balanced position that acknowledges evolutionary factors but also stresses sinful structures and cultural transmission. Of course, there are, and will continue to be, variances on what this balance looks like, and how much is said about the evolutionary part of the balanced portrayal.

As noted at the outset, the official Catechetical exposition still does not acknowledge many of these developments. In order to remain relevant, the official teaching must do so, for evolutionary advances demand a more adequate official recognition. The overarching questions, then, are to what extent, when, and how the language of evolution and the theological advances noted in this paper will be incorporated into Catechetical and magisterial explanations of original sin.

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