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Calvin College and Original Sin

Earlier this year [I wrote on the topic](#) of original sin. Realizing that it may seem a little gloomy to return to this topic at this time of the year, thanks to the publication of a most interesting [new paper](#) on the subject, I do nevertheless want to reopen the subject. As background, I take it that the traditional understanding of original sin, stemming from the thinking of Saint Augustine around A.D. 400, is that humans are tainted because of the sin of Adam, eating the forbidden fruit. Although God is perfect and hence created us perfect, we are born with an inclination to sin because Adam freely disobeyed God. It was for this reason that Jesus had to come and die on the Cross. However it worked -- as a substitute, as a sacrifice, or whatever -- his death and subsequent resurrection made possible our eternal salvation.

This position is one adopted particularly by those Christians whose theology goes back in a strong way to Augustine, meaning especially Calvinists. The problem scientifically is it seems to depend on a literal Adam, and this is something made impossible by modern evolutionary thinking. Many also think that there is a problem with this position theologically, because it seems to make the coming of Jesus something contingent on Adam's fall. Jesus did not have to come and would not have done so had Adam done what he was told. In other words, we seem to be living with "Plan B," meaning something cobbled together by God when things went wrong. (Theologically this position is known as "infralapsarianism.")

My argument (one repeated from my book *Can a Darwinian be a Christian?*) is that we should think of Adam metaphorically, and that we should see humans as the product of evolution through natural selection. In order to succeed in the struggle for existence and reproduction, we had to be good social beings but also selfishness was going to be part of the package. In other words, I argue that we can make good sense of original sin in an evolutionary context, staying faithful to the Christian insight and at the same time accepting modern science. (Interestingly this approach is also very Augustinian, for he stressed that Christian, bible-based beliefs must not conflict with good science.)

I am a philosopher rather than a theologian. If challenged, I would have supposed that my kind of thinking was not original, though I would not have been able to put my position into the Christian theological tradition. But now, John Schneider, a theologian at Calvin College in Michigan, which is the Reformed Church's flagship institution of higher education, has written a fascinating article showing that my kind of thinking (although obviously updated with evolution) has an even longer tradition than the Augustinian take on original sin. Irenaeus of Lyon (around A.D. 200) worried about the Plan B aspect of making the arrival of Jesus dependent on Adam going wrong. He argued that God planned the Incarnation from the beginning, and that the whole drama did not depend on a rather naive Adam falling for the wily arguments of the subtle serpent. Original sin is rather a function of our slowly developing

nature and that God fully intended Jesus to come to complete the drama. "O happy fault, that merited so great a Redeemer!" (This position is known theologically as "supralapsarianism").

There is of course still the problem of how you reconcile an all-powerful, all-loving God with so unpleasant a process as natural selection -- so many dying that so few can succeed. My solution is Leibnizian. Agreeing with Richard Dawkins that only natural selection can produce the design-like nature of the organic world, I argue that God had no choice but to allow pain and suffering if he were to produce organisms, including human organisms. Schneider argues rather that God decided to allow pain as part of his overall aesthetic sense of the best kind of universe. In support, he refers to the story of Job as well as to the New Testament:

Paul offers no logical explanation of God's actions. Instead, even if somewhat obscurely (Paul was no poet), Paul, like Isaiah (whose poetic instincts were better), turns instinctively to aesthetics and to the nature of art. God's actions in history are better understood in the analogy of artistic or aesthetic preferences than in analogies of logical perfection (pace Leibniz) and the moral utility of a "best possible world." In Paul's terms, they are choices that simply pleased God. They pleased God in a manner compatible with perfect moral goodness, understood as universal grace to be extended to everyone.

To be candid, I find this all a bit too Calvinistic for my taste. God's sovereignty is being put above everything, including God having a care for the suffering of humans and animals. I don't much like the idea of the gazelle dying in agony in the predator's jaws just to be a matter of God's aesthetics. But each to his own.

Although apparently not! Schneider today is in deep trouble with the president of his college who wants him kicked out for transgressing the standard line. And some of the president's supporters are even more shrill, demanding that he be fired for "heresy." A subscription to Calvinism that is "serious but not uncritical" (to quote Schneider himself) "and which thus allows one to contradict the Reformed Confessions at will is," in the opinion of a writer in the *Christian Renewal*, "no subscription at all. It is mere hypocrisy. The failure of Calvin College to enforce adherence to Reformed standards belies its claim to be Reformed."

One can surely agree that a church-affiliated college has the right (and the duty) to see that its faculty does not presume unlimited license. I think abortion should be a woman's choice, but I can see the point of saying that a faculty member at Notre Dame should not be preaching abortion on demand. If you want to do that, go somewhere else. Having said that, evolution is true and Adam and Eve are at best mythological. The human species never, ever got down to two people only. Nor did it start that way. So one can only welcome it when trained, serious, committed theologians try to reinterpret their beliefs in terms of (or compatible with) modern science. It is a sad day indeed when a faculty member of one of the leading Christian colleges in the nation is threatened with the sack by his president for trying to stay true to the faith of his parents and to the demands of reason and evidence, showing that he is indeed made in the image of God. John Schneider is just the sort of man who makes me, a non-believer, realize that for all its faults there is much good in religion. I hope good sense and Christian charity prevail in Michigan.