

## Lack of Personal, Social and Cosmic Integration: Original Sin from an Eschatological Perspective

---

Henry L. Novello

**Abstract:** This essay critically examines traditional formulations of the doctrine of original sin in Western theology and the contemporary “situationist” and “personalist” reformulations of the doctrine in the search for an adequate understanding of original sin that acknowledges both the evolutionary view of the world and Jesus Christ risen as the new “emergent whole” in evolutionary history. The negative portrayal of original sin as a situational privation of sanctifying grace and the positive portrayal of original sin as rebellion against God are both held to be valid and complementary, but it is argued that only a thoroughly eschatological perspective can illuminate the state of the human condition which is destined for a supernatural end in the Risen One. The essay concludes with the proposition that original sin is best thought of in terms of the lack of personal, social and cosmic integration that humans invariably experience in this life, and that the person of the risen Christ saves us from this complex state of privation by elevating us to a “higher nature” that represents a “new creation”.

THE VALIDITY OF THE DOCTRINE OF ORIGINAL SIN continues to be upheld today as central to the Christian faith because it affirms, against a purely naturalistic view of human destiny, that the human condition is such that it is incapable of attaining integrity of being and personal fulfilment without the grace of God in Jesus Christ.<sup>1</sup> The basic purpose of the doctrine is to establish the universality of sin as a presupposition for the affirmation of the universal redemption that comes in the

---

1. That the doctrine of original sin is still very much a theological concern today is evident, for example, in that an entire issue of *Concilium* (2004/1) was recently dedicated to this topic. *Original Sin: A Code of Fallibility*, edited by Christophe Boureux and Christoph Theobald (London: SCM Press, 2004).

person of Jesus Christ. But if the task of the theologian today is to demonstrate "how one can and must accept the reality of the situation which the phrase 'original sin' was designed to cover",<sup>2</sup> then the substance of the doctrine must be reformulated in terms that reflect our understanding of the world today. The traditional framework of the doctrine consisted of a static world-view where human history is oriented towards its beginning in a single human couple (Adam and Eve). This beginning is seen as marked by an original "fall" that brings detrimental consequences not only for the first human couple but also for all subsequent human beings as biological descendants of the first human couple.

In the contemporary context, however, this static view of the world has been replaced by a dynamic world-view where there is hardly room for a pristine paradise, much less for an original fall with catastrophic results for all. The natural sciences paint a fascinating picture of an evolving universe, as well as an evolving *homo sapiens*, so that evolution is not restricted to cosmic and biological evolution alone, but also encompasses cultural evolution (the civilising imperative) and the emergence of the religious dimension of existence in our world. This implies that the reality described by the term original sin should not exclude the natural-biological and historical-cultural spheres in their connection with the personal-religious nature of the reality described by the term original sin.

The view of the human as made up of integral aspects that are in need of being integrated into a "higher nature" was discussed in an earlier essay of mine entitled "Integral Salvation in the Risen Christ: The New Emergent Whole",<sup>3</sup> where it was argued that the model of "emergentist monism" is the most adequate model of personhood. According to this model in which new properties emerge with increasingly complex systems, the human person, as an agent who has intentionality, is the "whole" in the complex system which is the "human-brain-in-the-human-body-in-social-relations".<sup>4</sup> The human person is the supreme example of "whole-part influence", that is, the view that the underlying physical state of affairs is not sufficient for explaining the emergent properties of the higher-level entity. That the whole exercises an influence on the parts means that the human person strives to integrate all the levels (physical, biological, psychological,

2. Gabriel Daly, *Creation and Redemption* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1988) 117.

3. Henry Novello, "Integral Salvation in the Risen Christ: The New Emergent Whole", *Pacifica* 17 (2004) 34-54. In this earlier essay I pointed out that the doctrine of sin must be thought out from the standpoint of the dynamics of the ultimate revealed in Jesus Christ risen (49). The present essay attends to this necessary task in contemporary theology.

4. Novello, "Integral Salvation in the Risen Christ", 41-42.

moral, intellectual, social, spiritual) of the complex system so as to attain personal identity and integrity of being in active engagement with all-that-is.

In such a dynamic perspective human nature cannot be thought as a definitively known quantity, but as an unfolding and emerging reality in quest of a higher nature. As a referring beyond itself to something else, the human process of transcendence into something that is not only quantitatively more complex but also qualitatively new gives rise to an increase of being to an already existing reality (*creatio ex creatione*). The fact that it is precisely evolving nature that makes the human possible implies that human nature, which the doctrine of original sin seeks to expound, has a markedly eschatological orientation. This is clearly affirmed by the founding event of the Christian faith, namely, the glorification of the body of the Crucified One who is the new “emergent whole” in evolutionary history, the definitive revelation of the higher nature towards which the process of evolving nature has been ultimately destined by God. The doctrine of original sin must therefore be rethought in terms of the dynamics of the Ultimate, that is, the dynamics of the Risen One who is the “Real One” (Bonhoeffer).

The first part of this essay will discuss theological traditions of the doctrine of original sin, represented by Augustine and Aquinas, to determine whether there are enduring insights in their portrayals of the doctrine and whether a synthesis between the two is possible. The second part will then briefly examine two modern reinterpretations of the doctrine, namely, the “situationist” and “personalist” positions which bear a family resemblance to the Thomistic and Augustinian formulations of the doctrine respectively, and will conclude with a discussion of the eschatological perspective introduced above. The third and final part will present a series of four interrelated theses that outline a more comprehensive eschatological approach to original sin in which the intentions of the classical doctrine are maintained while acknowledging the import of the contemporary scientific view of the world. The strength of the eschatological approach, I shall argue, is that it makes unequivocally clear that the reality of sin does not constitute our first ontological status; rather, what is original is our being destined to partake of Christ’s divine identity (*fili in Filio*) and enjoy the beatitude of glorious union with God in a “new heaven and new earth” (Revelation 21). Paradise is less in the past than in the future (cf. Irenaeus of Lyons) when God will become “all in all” (1 Cor 15:28). To participate in the very life of God is the supernatural destiny of evolving creation.

## 1. AUGUSTINIAN AND THOMISTIC THEOLOGICAL TRADITIONS

Augustine is considered to be the "Father" of the doctrine of original sin.<sup>5</sup> His interpretation of the key texts of Genesis 2-3 and Rom 5:12 exercised a profound influence on the Western Christian mind up to the time of the modern era when it had to contend with the challenge posed by historical-critical consciousness. Augustine saw in these texts nothing but the one sin which Adam transmitted to his posterity by way of biological propagation.<sup>6</sup> In order to appreciate Augustine's position, it is necessary to briefly discuss the controversies against the pessimism of the Manicheans over the nature of evil on the one hand, and the optimism of the Pelagians concerning the nature of human freedom on the other.

Augustine rejected Manichean gnosticism's metaphysical-dualistic idea that matter is a negative principle eternally opposed to the good God, which gives rise to an ontological view of evil. He opposed this by formulating an ethical view of evil based upon the biblical affirmation regarding the inherent goodness of created reality (Gen 1:31), which is axiomatic in his thinking. It follows from this axiom that a flaw can exist only as a fault in a good nature, which is to say that evil cannot be a substance but is parasitical upon the good. This means that both Satan and Adam sinned not from the very beginning of their existence, but from the beginning of their sin. Evil is therefore held to be an *historical* phenomenon which affects mutable created natures and the events in which they are involved.<sup>7</sup> By historicising the creation

---

5. Julius Gross makes this statement in his monumental work on the history of the doctrine. *Geschichte des Erbsündendogmas: Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte des Problems vom Ursprung des Übels* (2 Bde.; München: Ernst Reinardt, 1960-72) 1. 375.

6. The universality of sin was traditionally upheld by citing the Latin phrase *in quo omnes peccaverunt* where the *in quo* (in whom) was given as the translation of the Greek phrase *eph ho*. But it is now widely recognised that the *in quo* is a mistranslation of the Greek *eph ho* which should be rendered "because" or "on the condition that". In this case the *peccaverunt* refers not to humankind's sin in Adam but to each individual's personal sins in each of which the sin of Adam is freely ratified. Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *Romans* (New York: Doubleday, 1993) 413-416, provides an analysis of the various meanings that have been debated and a list of modern commentators who endorse the translation "because".

7. According to Augustine, the fall of Satan and the fall of Adam were chance events; they were a turning away from the good (see *De Vera Religione* xxi. 41): hence the words used to describe evil include *perversus*, *perversitas*, *aversio*, *defectio*, *lapsus*, *deformitas*, *deviare*, and *infirmare*. Moreover, since an evil event is not a mindless happening, only creatures with the faculty of mind are capable of acting against the good. Augustine located the source of evil in the rational will, so that bad creatures differ from the good not by nature but by fault (*De Civ. Dei* XII, i; *De Natura et Gratia* I.iii.3). Thus the demonic forces are seen as working on the human mind and will; they are not to be feared for what they can do to the outside world, but for their ability to make us evil within by presenting what is unreasonable to our minds in the guise of something eminently

narrative, Augustine was logically led to affirming both a period before the first sin of Adam which he described as a “state of integrity” (*posse non peccare*, which allows room for the serpent’s temptation and the fall), and a period subsequent to the transgression which he referred to as the “state of corruption” (*non posse non peccare*, in which it is not possible to realise good without the redemptive grace of God in Jesus Christ). What was lost by the first sin of Adam was freedom from disorderliness of desire and freedom from death. The problem for Augustine, it is important to note, is not desire (cf. “You have made us for Yourself, Oh Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in You”), but the disordering of desires (concupiscence) that are no longer subject to the control of human reason.<sup>8</sup>

Augustine vehemently argued that as a result of the fall, human nature is deeply flawed and thus incapable of realising good and attaining its true end in God. This deep flaw is expressed by distinguishing between true freedom, *libertas*, which consists of the human being’s whole-hearted directedness to its true goal of love of God, and freedom of choice, *liberum arbitrium*, which refers to the voluntary character of this directedness. As a result of the fall, liberty has been lost, hence we humans are no longer free to love God, but we do retain freedom of choice in our self-love or egoistic pride (*amor sui*). Within this perversion of our true direction we remain free in the sense that we sin willingly. Hence Augustine espouses a *positive* understanding of original sin. Since our free choice is qualified by our bondage to sin, then in the condition of original sin we are actively involved in a necessity of sinning. This is a pessimistic view which sees sin not as the mere imitation of Adam’s sin (Pelagius) but as affecting the whole person *at depth*, so that nothing else but God’s healing grace in Jesus Christ can bring about the inner transformation of the person and the directing or ordering of human desires to love of God.

The Pelagians believed that Augustine’s teaching on the severe consequences of the fall so conditioned human freedom that it seriously

---

reasonable and desirable, and persuading us to will what they want us to will (*De Civ. Dei* IV.32). The higher, spiritual truths are therefore beyond our grasp, and the darkness of the sinner’s mind can be overcome only by the light of Christ, whose grace works by aiding our mental sight so that we may see to do the good (*De Peccatorum Meritis et Remissione* II.v.5). God is described as the “Father of our awakening and illumination” (*Soliloquia* I.i.2), in opposition to Satan who is the “Father of Lies” (John 8:44; 1 John 3:8), the source of all error and ignorance (*De Civ. Dei* XI.13).

8. While Augustine has in focus mainly the sexual passions, at times he includes all human rebellion against God (avarice, hatred, greed, pride, and so on) as signs of concupiscence, so that he “is in touch with the potential chaos of human desires, each with a life of its own, running out of control” – Neil Ormerod, *Grace and Disgrace: A Theology of Self-Esteem, Society and History* (Newtown NSW: E.J. Dwyer, 1992) 104.

undermined human responsibility. They maintained that Augustine had made too many concessions to Manichean pessimism by portraying sin as not merely accidental or contingent. The Pelagians were more optimistic about human nature and upheld freedom as indeterminacy, that is, as morally neutral in the face of good (virtue) and evil (vice).<sup>9</sup> We all find ourselves in the same situation as Adam before his fall and the idea of divine justice requires that it is possible for us to avoid sin and to become perfect, for it would be unjust of God to condemn us for something we cannot escape. Augustine agreed that God wants us to be without sin, and what God wants must be attainable, but again and again Augustine stressed that without God's grace in Jesus Christ, fallen humankind cannot turn their hearts toward the goal of love of God. His writings present us with a theology of grace and freedom that can be summed up in the exhortation, "command what You will, but give what You command" (*Confessions*, Book X).<sup>10</sup> Augustine's torturous conversion experience (*Confessions*, Book VIII) and his consciousness of the uncanny resistance of desire and habit to performing good that is pleasing to God, led him to conclude that humans have an inclination to evil that precedes and informs each and every choice that they make. By virtue of our inclusion in the first sin of Adam, Augustine believed that this prevolitional bias is universal; thus freedom cannot be regarded as indeterminate as the Pelagians maintained.

The polemic against Manichean Gnosticism, to sum up, pushed Augustine to historicise evil and to locate the source of evil in the rational will (this gives rise to the *reatus* which is a juridical category of debt and punishment). The ethical-historical view of sin as not present from the very beginning of creation but as beginning with the sin of Adam is shared by the situationists discussed below, although the

---

9. For Pelagius, the capability of freely choosing and doing the good (*bonum naturae*) is the foundational form of grace. In addition to this basic form of grace, Pelagius conceived of various concretisations of grace, such as the law of the Old Testament, the teachings of Christ, and the redemptive grace of forgiveness of sins through Christ. See, for example, Stephen Duffy, *The Dynamics of Grace: Perspectives in Theological Anthropology* (Collegeville MN: Liturgical Press, 1993) 83-90.

10. In the *De Natura et Gratia* Augustine began to work out the roles of nature and grace. He held that God did not make human nature flawed, for every nature is created good, yet human nature is sinful, from which he concluded that something has damaged it (*De Nat. et Grat.* III.iii). Grace acts upon the damage done by sin by co-operating with the intrinsic good in human nature. In *De Libero Arbitrio*, written some twenty years before *De Natura et Gratia*, Augustine had already established that sin is a perverted desire that pursues temporal things instead of eternal things, that evil lies in the turning away of the will from the immutable Good to its own private good (*De Lib. Arb.* II.xix.53.199). The perverse will or "pride" consists in abandoning God, to whom the soul ought to cleave as its end, and becoming an end to itself (*De Civ. Dei* XIV.13.1).

latter oppose any suggestion of sin as biologically inherited, highlighting instead that the sin of Adam results in the reality of sin entering human history (the Johannine “sin of the world” as an external reality), where it exerts a negative influence on the determination of human freedom. The Pelagian controversy, on the other hand, forced Augustine to amplify the consequences of the fall to the point of making sin an acquired or “second nature” (hence the component of the *vitium* which is a biological category of inheritance), so that the will of the person is held to be enslaved to sin. It is this hereditary acquisition of a flawed nature that undergirds the universal need for God’s redemptive grace in Christ, which is received in baptism. The baptized are purged of all past sins, but the inclination to sin remains and is addressed by the force of Christ’s healing grace which transforms the person and empowers the will to do good, so that the baptized may make progress toward their true end of union with or love of God. The personalists discussed below, while they reject any suggestion of a prepersonal dimension to sin, nonetheless follow Augustine insofar as they view original sin as an internal (not external) reality that manifests itself in the person’s unwillingness to obey God and perform good that is pleasing to God.

It could be said that the import of the Augustinian analysis is that it “enables us to see that two types of language have to be dialectically related in speaking of evil as both moral and tragic: that of freedom and that of inevitability, contingency and universality, responsibility and inescapability”.<sup>11</sup> But notwithstanding the enduring significance of this dialectical relationship between freedom and inevitability, which highlights the complexity of the reality denoted by original sin, difficulties do arise with the Augustinian synthesis. The biggest problem, from a modern standpoint, is the notion that we humans biologically inherit a nature that is flawed due to the first sin of Adam. How can something that is moral, and therefore pertains to the person, be transmitted biologically? From the standpoint of evolving nature, it is certainly legitimate to hold that the *capacity* for intellectual and moral activity, as emergent properties of *homo sapiens*, is dependent on genes, but to say that moral evil is biologically propagated is quite another matter. A further problem arises in relation to Augustine’s rejection of an ontological view of evil in favour of an ethical view: If we humans inherit a flawed nature in which the will is enslaved to sin, does this not imply that evil has ontological status? The argument put forward by Augustine to the effect that sin is not in human nature (which is

---

11. Stephen J. Duffy, “Our Hearts of Darkness: Original Sin Revisited”, *Theological Studies* 49 (1988) 597-622, see p. 600.

created good), but is an attribute of nature, does not effectively overcome this problem. A final problem that also looms large in his synthesis is: Given the necessity of sinning by virtue of inclusion in Adam's sin, what becomes of personal responsibility for sin? It is when we turn to medieval theology that we find a new framework introduced for elaborating the doctrine of original sin that to some extent helps to alleviate these problems.

The first major development away from Augustine's positive portrayal of original sin appears in Anselm of Canterbury who defined original sin *negatively* as the privation or absence of "owed justice" (the voluntary conformity of human will to the will of God).<sup>12</sup> Thomas Aquinas made the next contribution by bringing together Augustine's identification of original sin with concupiscence (material element) and Anselm's negative definition of original sin as the absence of justice (formal element) to arrive at his definition of original sin as the *privation of original justice*.<sup>13</sup> Thomas conceived of the state of original justice as the effect of preternatural gifts given by God so that Adam could attain his supernatural destiny (the vision of God).<sup>14</sup> In the state of original justice, Adam enjoyed a perfect balance between body and soul, between the opposing inclinations of the sense faculties and the superior faculties.<sup>15</sup> What was lost by sin is the perfect harmony or integrity of original justice, with the result that the human was reduced to the state of "pure nature".<sup>16</sup> Concupiscence is viewed by Thomas as part of the natural state of the human but, without the integrating power of the special grace of original justice, concupiscence becomes disordered. The natural inclination to good is still operative in the soul, however it now finds itself in conflict with other competing desires, with the result that it is diminished, but not destroyed, by sin.<sup>17</sup> This

12. See G. Vandervelde, *Original Sin: Two Major Trends in Contemporary Roman Catholic Reinterpretation* (Amsterdam: Rodopi N.V., 1975) 27.

13. *Summa Theologiae*, Ia-IIae, q. 82, a. 3. While Thomas views concupiscence as the material element of original sin, he does not identify the two. Since the loss of original justice leads to loss of interior harmony, then concupiscence is regarded as a negative disorder, not as a positive evil inclination of the will as in Augustine.

14. For Thomas, whose theology is based upon Aristotelian metaphysics, grace is primarily *elevating* and is conceived as a new ontological quality of the soul (being raised to a higher nature that brings fulfilment to the human over and above what the forces of its nature can achieve), whereas in Augustine's more existential analysis grace is primarily *healing* (grace corrects nature and restores it to what it should be). For Thomas grace is also healing, but the healing takes place through sinful nature being raised to a new ontological level and thus to a new principle of operation and activity.

15. See Henri Rondet, *Original Sin: The Patristic and Theological Background*, tr. Cajetan Finegan (Staten Island NY: Alba House, 1972) 161-62.

16. *Summa Theologiae*, Ia-IIae, 1. 87, a. 7.

17. Thomas views the effects of original sin in terms of a threefold good of nature: the first refers to the principles that constitute nature which cannot be obliterated by sin; the

diminishment, moreover, cannot take place in relation to its base (rational nature), but only in respect of the realisation of its goal (virtue) which is frustrated negatively by original sin and positively by personal sin. The innate desire for good is therefore no longer able to achieve its goal in a consistent manner, which led Thomas to conclude that human nature is not totally corrupt, but suffers from a kind of spiritual illness resulting from the disruption of the primeval harmony between opposite inclinations. In this perspective, personal sin is inevitable as in Augustine, not, however, because of the enslavement of free will to sin, but on account of the lack of divine grace (“habitual grace”), which precludes the possibility of personal integration in relation to God (the sinner is deprived of the vision of God).

Thomas’ doctrine of original sin is notably different to Augustine’s emphasis on the total enslavement of our will to sin, for the stress falls on our natural inclination to virtue which is not destroyed by original sin, although we are frustrated in our capacity to attain virtue since we are deprived of a ready inclination to good in our natural state of concupiscence. What we have in Thomas is a working out of the doctrine of original sin in terms of the connection between grace and nature (grace presupposes nature and brings it to perfection), so that grace responds not primarily to the problem of sin, as in Augustine, but to the problem of nature (elevation to a higher nature, to a new principle of operation and activity, that is able to enjoy the vision of God). The significance of Thomas’ concept of the primeval state of original justice is that it serves to highlight the “essential” structure of human nature as destined by God to a supernatural end, so that the fundamental goodness of the human, and of the Creator, are both firmly upheld. The strongly existential analysis of Augustine certainly rings true with our historical experience of a disorder within ourselves and our inability to do good, but this experience must not be allowed to overshadow our essential nature as inviolably related to God who

---

second natural good concerns the natural inclination to virtue, which is rooted in rational nature, and is diminished but not destroyed by sin; and the third natural good is original justice. The damage caused by the loss of this latter good due to Adam’s sin is limited by the other two natural goods. See *Summa Theologiae* I-II, 85, 1 & 2. The good of nature in Thomas’ thought can be seen as arising from his appreciation of the interconnectedness of reality (following Aristotle): real relations hold between God, the mind of man, and the world of finite things (hence the *a posteriori* proofs of God’s existence), so that human experience of the world leads to knowledge of the Cause of all things. The effects of original sin are therefore seen as more pronounced on the human will (appetite for good) than the mind (knowledge of truth).

has determined to bestow upon the human the gift of participation in the divine nature.<sup>18</sup>

While Thomas' doctrine differs from that of Augustine in this notable respect, nonetheless it shares one of the main problems that were raised above. The problem stems from a literal interpretation of the Genesis accounts, from which arises the assertion that the diminishment in the capacity to realise good or virtue, which is the result of the loss of original justice by Adam, is transmitted biologically to his progeny. But again we must ask, How can Adam's sin, which has a personal and moral character, be thought of as inherited by his progeny? As in Augustine's synthesis, the key difficulty revolves around the transmission of original sin. The modern day situationists hold a far more intelligible view when they propose that the privation of sanctifying grace is felt in the historical realm. The effects of original sin are not biologically propagated but are to be conceived as historical forces that enter into the inner determination of human freedom so that our ability to realise good is weakened by the sin of the world.

When we come to the Council of Trent's "Decree on Original Sin" (1546), the Fathers were faced with the difficulty of Augustinian, Anselmian, and Thomistic formulations vying with each other for supremacy. The Fathers therefore sought to avoid formulating a definition and opted instead to elucidate the nature of original sin by describing its effects, which is reflected in the five canons.<sup>19</sup> By adopting this approach, the Fathers at times followed the positive portrayal of original sin (*aversio a Deo*) embraced by the Council of Orange (529 CE), and on other occasions proceeded to present a negative view of original sin as the loss of original justice. But how can these two different portrayals be reconciled? Even the fifth canon directed against the Reformers remains vague about the precise nature of original sin, and it was this persisting vagueness that eventually gave rise to the more precise post-Tridentine definition of original sin as the *privation of sanctifying grace*. The strength of this formulation is

---

18. In *Original Sin: A Code of Fallibility*, 125, Christoph Theobald cautions against confusing experience as "historical" with the "essential structure" of human beings (thus Trent against the Reformers and Pius V against Baius), for such a confusion would threaten the "fundamentally good creatureliness of human beings and the Creator".

19. DS 1511-1515. Canons 1-4 mostly reaffirm the teaching of Orange (physical death, as well as the death of the soul, is transmitted to Adam's posterity; Pelagian imitation theory is rejected; and the necessity of infant baptism is upheld). Only Canon 5, which is directed against the Reformers, goes beyond restatement of previous conciliar positions. Canon 5 rejects Luther's teaching that concupiscence remains in the baptized and constitutes sin in the true and proper sense, affirming instead that baptism wipes away sin in the true and proper sense, although concupiscence as the "tinder of sin" (*fomes peccati*) remains in the baptized.

that it derives not from speculative arguments about the original state of Adam, but from the sacramental life of the baptized Christian in the present (sanctified) state. So powerful is this tradition that it continues to be felt today in the situational reinterpretation of the doctrine, which I discuss below.

When seeking to interpret the magisterial statements it must be borne in mind that the modern era of historical-critical consciousness had not yet dawned, meaning that the Fathers took a literal interpretation of key biblical texts (Genesis 2-3; Rom 5:12). In determining the precise didactic intention of the magisterial statements, we must ask: What do they mean to say and what are they not saying? The concern of Trent was to uphold the *origine unum* (one in origin) that establishes the universality of sin as a presupposition for the affirmation of the universal need for God's redemptive grace in Jesus Christ. The Fathers "did not intend to say more than that the unity of original sin consists only in its origin."<sup>20</sup> Needless to say, the assumption of monogenism and of Adam as an original unique progenitor poses serious problems today for the theologian who must reckon with historical-critical consciousness and the scientific view of the world. The doctrine is clearly in need of reformulation and the next two sections will address the various ways in which this has been attempted.

But before taking our leave of this first section we must ask whether it is possible to reconcile or bring together in some way the positive and negative portrayals of original sin? The valid and enduring aspect of Augustine's *existential* analysis, to my mind, is that he focuses on the material character of original sin; that is, human experience provides ample evidence of the problem of the disordering of competing desires and an inexplicable evil inclination within the heart (cf. Rom 7:14-25: the divided-self) which leads us to confess that we have a flawed nature in which we are actively complicit in sinning, hence our need of being healed by the power of Christ's grace. With regard to the negative portrayal of original sin, on the other hand, where the focus rests upon the formal element of original sin defined along more *ontological* lines, the significant import lies in its not painting an overly pessimistic picture of human nature as wholly corrupted by sin; it reminds us that there is such a thing as "natural" concupiscence, which is not sin but the raw material that God is graciously working with so as to elevate humanity to a "higher nature" that represents the perfection of human nature (grace presupposes nature and brings it to perfection). The evil inclination within us, then, should never be

---

20. Piet Schoonenberg, *Man and Sin* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1965) 175.

presented as the full picture, but must be complemented by a natural inclination to good that is not destroyed by sin.<sup>21</sup> For only by retaining an inclination toward the transcendent good (what ought to be) can we be conscious of an evil inclination that causes us to fall away from our dignity and destiny as beings called to partake of the Supreme Good and to behold the vision of God.

## 2. SITUATIONAL, PERSONALIST AND ESCHATOLOGICAL REINTERPRETATIONS OF ORIGINAL SIN

Two trends have emerged in contemporary Catholic reinterpretation of original sin, namely, original sin as *historical situation*, on the one hand, and as *personal sin*, on the other.<sup>22</sup> Both are motivated by dissatisfaction with the traditional doctrine that is seen as undermining personal responsibility of the sinner, although they part company when it comes to proposing a solution to the problem. The situationists seek to do justice to the elements of the doctrine expressed in the theological and magisterial traditions, and retain the notion of a prepersonal dimension to sin, while the personalists reject the latter in order to do full justice to the category of person.

(a) The situational reinterpretation is based upon the view of history as the context and content of the human being, from which arises an understanding of original sin as “the situational privation of sanctifying grace that renders every being (analogously) guilty from the moment of birth”.<sup>23</sup> The post-Tridentine formula of original sin as the privation of sanctifying grace is taken as the starting-point, to which is added the concept of the human being as historical situatedness, which results in a dynamic view of original sin. By privation of grace what is intended is the “spatiotemporal” lack of grace in a sinful world (the “sphere” of existence), which must be distinguished from the “transcendental” presence of grace (the “horizon” of existence) that constitutes an ineradicable *Existential*, an ontological determinant of the situation of every human being. Privation is thought of as the negation of the intended spatiotemporal presence of grace as historically mediated through human beings. Each one of us is held to be an historical mediator of grace for our fellow human beings and for future generations. Hence the entrance of sin into the human world results in

21. Bernard Sesboüe, “The Theological Rationalization of Original Sin”, in *Original Sin: A Code of Fallibility*, 11-18, at 15, regards the two definitions represented by Augustine and Thomas as “complementary emphases”.

22. G. Vandervelde in his *Original Sin* has examined Piet Schoonenberg, Karl Rahner, and Karl-Heinz Weger as situationists, and A. Vanneste and U. Baumann as personalists.

23. Vandervelde, *Original Sin*, 147.

a disruption of the intended spatiotemporal manifestation of grace. The traditional phrase *generatione, non imitatione* is therefore interpreted as referring to the whole process of socialisation by means of which a human being enters into the world and is inextricably caught up in an intricate web of sinful relations that has characterised human history from its beginning. This implies that being-situated in a sinful world is not primarily a conscious decision but an inner determination of human freedom that precedes personal sin.<sup>24</sup> It is not adequate, on this view, to portray sin as simply conscious acts of the will, for we must recognise a prepersonal dimension to sin that attaches to the human as historical being.

(b) It is precisely this prepersonal aspect of sin that is rejected by the personalists who are keen to bring to centre stage the biblical emphasis on sin as the unwillingness (as opposed to inability) of the person to turn their hearts toward God. Vanneste, for example, contends that the doctrine of original sin serves to highlight the *breadth* dimension of sin, that is, the universality of personal or actual sins. "That all men are born in original sin means that all are sinners from the first moment that they are man because it happens to be a fact that all men sin."<sup>25</sup> But this axial assertion that all people in fact sin when they arrive at the level of moral consciousness is jeopardised by the argument that the free act of an individual person is by its very nature contingent and thus unpredictable as to direction. If one insists on portraying history in terms of the genuinely free acts of individuals, then the extent of actual sins remains an open question. It appears that Vanneste affirms the universal facticity of sin on the basis of the traditional Christian tenet regarding the universal need for God's redemptive grace in Jesus Christ to realise our supernatural end. His position, note, does not affirm the Augustinian emphasis on the radicality of sin, adopting instead a more Thomistic line of argument where sin is seen as weakening human nature, the essence of which remains intact as inclining toward the good and directed toward its supernatural end.

The personal reinterpretation of Baumann differs from that of Vanneste inasmuch as his concern rests primarily with the *depth* dimension of personal sin, not the breadth dimension which is seen as

---

24. Pannenberg explains how the lineage of the notion of the "sin of the world" can be traced from Kant's idea of a "kingdom" of evil, through Schleiermacher's idea of a "corporate life of sin", through Ritschl's doctrine of the "kingdom of sin", to Schoonenberg's notion of original sin as the "being-situated" of human beings in their sinful social setting; see Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Anthropology in Theological Perspective* (trans. Matthew J. O'Connell; Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1985) 125-28.

25. Vandervelde, *Original Sin*, 284, citing A. Vanneste.

one of three aspects of the depth dimension.<sup>26</sup> This radicality of sin recalls Augustine's synthesis, although Baumann rejects any notion of a prepersonal dimension to sin. He believes that the main thrust of the traditional doctrine is the affirmation of the *sola gratia* (against Pelagianism) which sheds light on the truth of the human's personal guilt before God: the depth of grace reveals the abyss of sin. The entire rethinking of the doctrine revolves around the triad guilt-person-responsibility, with "person" functioning as the central axis. The deepest core of the human being, the person, or the "I", is simply not susceptible to objectification (be it historical, evolutionary, or sociological) because it has to do with a transempirical relationship to God. The existential method, according to Baumann, offers the best approach, since sin is viewed as the sin of the person: at the root of sin is decision, but in that decision "I" myself am decided; it is not merely the case that something is decided (to obey or disobey a law). This means that all actual sins are regarded as a wilful turning-away from God (*aversio a Deo*) since there are only two possible responses to God: "yes" (faith) or "no" (defiance).

To my mind there are elements in both the situational and personalist reformulations of original sin that are valid and should be brought into relationship with one another so as to elaborate the complex nature of sin. The strength of the personalist position is that the voluntary or active element of sinning is highlighted so that personal responsibility for sin is strongly upheld. The weakness of this position, however, is that it isolates the personal character of sin from concrete human history and the structures of society. The situationist reinterpretation is valid insofar as the historical activities of human-kind clearly enter into the structures of society, including the activity of sin, in which case the human is born into a preexisting situation of sin. There exists, in other words, an involuntary or passive element which amounts to a prepersonal dimension of sin. The situational synthesis recalls Paul's statement that "sin came into the world through one man" (Rom 5:12), by which Paul intends to say that the first sin of Adam has introduced external "powers" of sin into the world, powers which seek to determine human freedom toward all manner of evil-doing (thus Adam's posterity have all sinned). There exists, then, a kind of involuntary (situation of sin) at the core of the voluntary (personal freedom), which is due to the historical emergence of sin in the world. The weakness of the personalist reinterpretation is that it

---

26. Baumann presents three aspects of the depth dimension of sin: radicality, totality, and universality.

fails to accept any structural and hence involuntary element in the interests of securing personal responsibility for sinful behaviour.

(c) In addition to the tendency today to interpret original sin as the “sin of the world”, there is another approach that has been proposed which is based on the “transformation of *historical antecedence* into *eschatological dynamism*”.<sup>27</sup> In this eschatological perspective, original sin is thought along the lines of a contradiction or discrepancy between what we humans presently are and what we are destined to become in the person of Jesus Christ risen. It is by starting from the Ultimate, not by starting from the past, that the reality of sin can be designated: “It is the grandeur of the ‘second Adam’ that explains the ‘transgression’ of the first, who is the symbol of humanity.”<sup>28</sup> The key to putting both the past and the present in perspective is the future reign of God’s kingdom of grace. History can be seen for what it is only from the vantage point of the final end that is proleptically realised in Jesus Christ risen.<sup>29</sup> The dynamics of the Ultimate leads to a reversal of the order of presentation which traditionally dominated the doctrine of original sin, for Christology rather than original sin becomes the fundamental axis for the doctrine of soteriology. Instead of deducing the significance of Jesus Christ from the doctrine of original sin, theology today tends to proceed from the universal need for God’s grace in his person as the centre and measure of the human, to a derived doctrine of original sin. This approach is reflected in the documents of Vatican II where we read that “it is only in the mystery of the Word made flesh that the mystery of man truly becomes clear... Christ the new Adam...fully reveals man to himself and brings to light his most high calling” (*Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* [*Gaudium et Spes*] §22). The human vocation is to attain perfect

27. C. Duquoc, “New Approaches to Original Sin”, *Cross Currents* 28 (1978) 189-200, see p. 195.

28. Duquoc, “New Approaches to Original Sin”, 197. Karl Barth, it is worth noting, strongly supports this view regarding the primacy of Christ when he writes about how God desires to be our partner: God wants us to accept his merciful love for sinners in accordance with the covenant of grace established from all eternity in the person of Christ, the Elect One, who “takes the first place as the original”, not Adam, since it is in Christ that God has decreed our determination to election and thus eternal blessedness. See *Church Dogmatics*, IV/I, 512-513.

29. This fundamental point is underlined in Jewish apocalyptic writings. The discovery of the Qumran Scrolls and the Nag Hammadi texts has led to a resurgence of interest in these writings and their significance for Christian theology. Ernst Käsemann in his seminal essay, “The Beginnings of Christian Theology”, *New Testament Questions of Today* (Fortress and SCM Press, 1969) 82-107, reached the controversial conclusion that “Apocalyptic was the mother of all Christian theology”; and Wolfhart Pannenberg in his essay “Redemptive Event and History”, *Basic Questions in Theology* (London: SCM, 1970), 15-80, reintroduced apocalyptic universal history as the horizon that spans the whole of Christian theology in general.

integrity of being and completed personhood by our being conformed to Christ, in the Spirit. The language used by Vatican II is positive, for it is ontological language that highlights the primacy of grace in bestowing upon the human being final fulfilment as “participation in the divine nature” (*Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation [Dei Verbum]* §2). The story of creation should not be presented as tied up with the garden of Eden, for “the way lies through another garden, Gethsemane, and up the hill of Golgotha, where the tree of life was planted”.<sup>30</sup> The reality of sin is but one vector in this life of ours, which is drawn by a second vector, grace: “Sin is located along a graced horizon that humans are struggling toward...not paradise lost but the kingdom ahead is the homeland.”<sup>31</sup>

The eschatological framework of the dynamics of the Ultimate lends itself readily to the idea of evolving nature (active self-transcendence), the inevitability of sin in the world, and a holistic view of redemption that is not reduced to the mere forgiveness of individual sins. With the emergence of the human properties of intelligence, morality, and personal relatedness, new possibilities are opened up for the human being. Yet at the same time the emergence of human consciousness has introduced new demands on the human. What is distinct about the human is that behaviour is no longer governed purely by genetically produced instincts and appetites which preserve the self and herd;<sup>32</sup> rather, the new possibilities and new demands opened up to the human mean that peace is attained through the harmonising of knowledge and action rather than by the satisfaction of the appetites.<sup>33</sup> But in this evolutionary advance to rationality and self-consciousness,

---

30. Duffy, “Our Hearts of Darkness”, 622.

31. Duffy, “Our Hearts of Darkness”, 618.

32. The primal instincts, drives, and emotions, such as aggression, territoriality, hatred, vengeance, sexual appetite and prowess, fear, and jealousy, can destroy us if they are not named and dealt with. They incline us toward sin, they are the “tinder of sin”, but they are also, as Daly points out in his *Creation and Redemption*, 146, the “raw materials of holiness”. Karl Rahner asserts that the natural drives and appetites constitute a “natural” concupiscence (disorders that are morally neutral) that must be distinguished from concupiscence that is the result of sin. See his essay, “The Theological Concept of Concupiscence”, *Theological Investigations* 1 (Baltimore: Helicon, 1961) 347-382. See also Piet Schoonenberg, *Man and Sin*, 79; Sebastian Moore, *The Crucified Jesus is No Stranger* (New York: Seabury, 1981) 43-46; Stephen Duffy, *The Dynamics of Grace: Perspectives in Theological Anthropology* (Collegeville MN: Liturgical Press, 1993) 226; and Denis Edwards, *The God of Evolution: A Trinitarian Theology* (New York: Paulist, 1999) 65-66.

33. Daly, *Creation and Redemption*, 140, points out that Augustine spoke of the peace of the irrational soul as the satisfaction of the appetites, but in a rational soul peace is attained through the harmony of knowledge and action. The human, in other words, must subordinate the appetites which it shares with the animals to the peace of the rational soul which is referred to God; the desire within human nature must be directed into the paths willed for it by God.

cultural evolution, like biological evolution, takes place only through the process of trial and error, so that it is little wonder that we should speak of human fallibility when seeking to describe the human predicament in the world.<sup>34</sup>

But in spite of our “fallen” nature we are still agents with intentionality and continue to be referred beyond ourselves to Something More wherein lies our final destiny and definitive identity. In fact, it is precisely in the consciousness of guilt that humans come to recognise that they “are not identical with the idea of their destiny”.<sup>35</sup> It is through the experience of self-transcendence that we become conscious of the distance that separates us from what ought to be, from the as yet unrealised possibilities of our nature that seeks transcendent meaning and goodness. The understanding that divine redemption in the person of Jesus Christ is addressed to evolving nature implies that redemption is to be conceived as *a movement upwards toward a higher nature*.<sup>36</sup> Integral to this movement upwards, of course, is the forgiveness of sins and removal of guilt, but we must appreciate that the bestowing of God’s merciful love on sinners is what establishes the integrity of the human person oriented toward divine grace as the horizon of life in the world.

Once it is appreciated that in the process of evolving nature the higher nature always contains the lower that had prepared the way for the actual event of self-transcendence, then the world is to be regarded as a fundamental unity in which everything is linked to everything else. The Incarnation of the eternal Word must therefore be considered ontologically, not merely morally, as the goal of the movement of evolving nature as a whole. The measure of the human is not sin, but Jesus Christ risen, in whom the process of becoming has reached its final goal of “divinisation” or participation in the divine nature. The idea of evolving nature, coupled with the glorification of Jesus’ humanity in his resurrection from the dead, makes it clear that grace is not extrinsic to nature, is not juxtaposed to nature, but is “something

---

34. Philip Hefner, *The Human Factor: Evolution, Culture and Religion* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993) 135-38, explains that cultural evolution involves a process of trial and error, hence it is accompanied by our awareness of fallibility. Hefner, though, equates our experiences of fallibility with sin. In the next section I will propose that such experiences should not be equated with sin.

35. Pannenberg, *Anthropology in Theological Perspective*, 152.

36. Charles Birch and John B. Cobb, Jr., *The Liberation of Life: From the Cell to the Community* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981) 120. Rahner holds the same view, for he regards the process of “active self-transcendence” as a movement toward a higher nature that involves an increase of being to an already existing reality. Redemption has to do with participating in the divine nature and thus attaining a “higher” nature.

magnificent that happens to nature. It is nature lit by a new light and fired with a new vision."<sup>37</sup> The fact that it is precisely evolving nature that makes the *humanum* possible serves to caution us against thinking of nature in purely essentialist terms, for this would mean that "neither grace nor sin can alter the nature of *homo sapiens*".<sup>38</sup> The picture being painted here is congruous with the Thomistic axiom that grace presupposes nature and brings it to perfection, which amounts to a positive construal of the grace-nature relationship.

The phenomenon of human self-transcendence indicates that humans have their centre not only within themselves (I-as-developing-self) but also outside of themselves (I-as-situated-by-otherness).<sup>39</sup> Hence human nature is in a state of becoming which has human identity and destiny as its goal. In this dynamic perspective it follows that efficient causality does not adequately account for human activity in the world, and since the cosmos has become conscious of itself in the human being this in turn implies that efficient causality alone cannot adequately account for the cosmos as a whole. What emerges is the primacy to be accorded to final causality, whence it follows that the dynamics of the Ultimate offers the most promising framework for a rethinking of the doctrine of original sin.

### 3. FOUR THESES FORMULATED IN AN ESCHATOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

In light of the critical discussion above, I will now formulate four theses that elaborate in a systematic way the understanding of the reality designated by the term original sin from the vantage point of "emergentist monism" and the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who is the new emergent whole or new creation in person.<sup>40</sup>

**Thesis 1. Person-in-nature.** *Since the human being is the product of biological evolution, it has natural drives, appetites, and instincts that are attached to the genetic side of its inheritance. The human is moved by its*

37. Daly, *Creation and Redemption*, 132.

38. Daly, *Creation and Redemption*, 132.

39. Frans Jozef van Beeck, *God Encountered*, Vol. 2/3 (Collegeville MN: Liturgical Press, 1995) 113-122, maintains that "integrity" is made up of two components: "identity" (interiority, our immanent original selves, the I-as-developing-self) and "alienation" (exteriority, our situated selves, the I-as-situated-by-otherness). These two elements exist in mutual interpenetration although the relationship is asymmetric inasmuch as identity harbours our native capacity for transcendence and is thus "initiating" in engaging the world of otherness, whereas alienation holds much potential and is thus not so much initiating as "expectant". The upshot of this is that human identity is always a "responsive identity" in the dynamic quest for self-actualisation.

40. The first three theses are similar to those proposed by Denis Edwards in his *The God of Evolution*, 64-70. Edwards, following Rahner, subscribes to the situationist reinterpretation of original sin, which is evident in his proposed Thesis 2.

*natural desires, yet it takes much wisdom to direct them constructively in order to attain integration of the self. There exists a natural lack of congruence between the innate natural desires and the human spirit which harbours the integral self. This "natural" concupiscence is not sin or the result of sin, but it does incline toward sin.*

The theological tradition has described the disordered drives and desires that humans experience as "concupiscence", which is the result of the original sin of Adam. This first thesis, however, draws attention to the fact that the natural conditions of human existence in the world constitute a state of disorder inasmuch as the natural desires and drives are in need of integration into the developing self. This natural concupiscence, intrinsic to being a spiritual creature who is at the same time limited, finite, and bodily, is not sin, but it certainly is the instrument or tinder of sin (*fomes peccati*), since it is as prone to actual sin as kindling is to catching fire; it is also compounded by actual sin. This does not mean that human nature is sinful, but it does point to a sickness of nature that constitutes a precondition for personal sinning. Hence the need for much wisdom (acquired through trial and error) and for sanctifying grace in directing and integrating natural desires into paths willed by God, that is, into paths that lead to new possibilities of being in the world or to a higher nature (participation in the divine nature).

While the natural conditions of human existence are experienced as inherently fallible, at the same time the competing desires (the lower level sense appetites and drives must be integrated through intellectual and moral activity) are to be acknowledged as "the raw materials of holiness" (Gabriel Daly) in God's ongoing creative activity in the world. The reality of sin, which is known in self-consciousness (guilt), cannot be attributed to the lower level physical properties of the human person. Yet at the same time we must appreciate that the person is always a person-in-nature who is required to balance and integrate the competing desires into the developing self. Insofar as this lack of harmony that is felt by the human as a natural being is part of the human condition from the beginning, it can be regarded as "original", although it is not sin. The movement from biological evolution to cultural evolution means that peace is attained at a higher level for human life than it is for animal life. Hence the movement upwards inevitably involves a loss of innocence.

**Thesis 2. Person-in-history.** *The human being is born into a historical situation of sin which enters into and becomes an inner determination of human freedom. There exists a prepersonal dimension to sin that attaches to*

*the human as historical being. The social-cultural sphere of existence is experienced as a situational privation of sanctifying grace.*

The history of humanity's rejection of God, which gives rise to a historical situation of sin, is captured by Paul's statement that "sin came into the world through one man" (Rom 5:12). In this key biblical text, Paul intends to assert that sin does not re-enter history ever anew in seeking to gain mastery over human freedom and determine its fate toward death; rather, sin is encountered as an already existing power external to the individual that enters into and becomes an inner dimension of each person's situation. In such a perspective, original sin emerges as a dynamic reality, for the personal sins of each individual are seen as mediating and contributing to the historical power of sin and thus to the historical privation of sanctifying grace in the world. The human being experiences disordered drives and impulses not only from the genetic side of its inheritance, but also from the cultural side of evolutionary history.

In this second thesis we are required to recognise that *in the act of sinning we are never acting purely alone* (against a moralistic conception of sin, as in Vanneste), but are conspiring with powers of sin in the world, with the result that we are adding to the collective burden of humanity. The history of personal and communal sin that enters into the situation of each person, moreover, is sin only in an analogous sense since it is not yet personal and actual (personal sin is the subjective ratification of the objective situation conveyed by the term original sin), and it compounds the inherent fallibility due to the human's naturally disordered desires that are in competition with each other, so that the task of integration of the developing self is further frustrated and impeded.

With regard to divine salvation, this second thesis cautions against reducing salvation to the mere forgiveness of individual sins, for God's saving work in Jesus Christ involves the conquest of the powers of sin in the world that thwart God's good purpose for the world (cf. 1 John 2:2; Rom 5:12-21). On the view that the individual sinner acts in solidarity and complicity with the sin of the world, it is the entire history of sinful humanity that has been reconciled to God on Calvary, not merely the individual sinner. The conquest of the powers of sin in the world implies that the power of God's grace in the Crucified One now enters into and becomes an inner dimension of each baptized person, so that the freedom of Christ becomes the freedom of the baptized person to love God above all else and attain personal identity and integrity of being.

**Thesis 3. Person as Responsive Identity.** *The reality of original sin impacts upon the whole person. It should not be associated solely with the biological or cultural side of the human being. In light of our peculiar exocentricity and the emergentist theory of personhood, the person is required to respond to both genetic and cultural conditionings. The source of moral evil therefore lies in the human will and the person cannot escape responsibility for evildoing.*

This third thesis acknowledges the biblical view of sin as a wilful turning-away from God, which finds further expression in Augustine's positive understanding of original sin as *aversio a Deo* and Baumann's existential conception of original sin as the "depth" dimension of sin. In the confessing of sin we are conscious not only of our deliberate personal sins, but also of a deep complicity with sin. The depth dimension of sin within the person is acknowledged in the awareness of "ontological guilt", which is the guilt that follows when "we are aware that we transcend the structures that perpetuate the conditions of original sin but choose instead to remain in complicity with those structures".<sup>41</sup>

The claim being made in this third thesis is consistent with the emergentist theory of personhood where the physical causes of the emergence of the mental life (life of intentionality) do not completely determine the outcome of the mental life, thereby leaving room for genuine mental causation (whole-part influence or top-down causality). The person, as the whole in that complex system which is the human-brain-in-the-human-body-in-social-relations, is the supreme example of whole-part influence which is exerted not only on its physical body (the level of natural properties = Thesis 1) but also on its surrounding world, including the human world of other persons (the level of social-cultural properties = Thesis 2). The existence of multiple layers of properties that are interdependent but not mutually reducible to one another, means that the person as the highest level whole in the hierarchical complex is ultimately responsible for its behaviour and the direction that it gives to its intentional life. In the perspective of this third thesis, divine salvation has to do with personal conversion and the attainment of real freedom of the self (cf. Gal 5:1, 13-14). To experience this real freedom, which is to live "according to the Spirit" (Rom 8:1-8; cf. Gal 5:22-23), is to be introduced to a new mode-of-being-in-the-world where the final graciousness of reality is allowed to provide the basic orientation to personal existence in the world.

---

41. Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki, *The Fall to Violence: Original Sin in Relational Theology* (New York: Continuum, 1994) 138-139.

**Thesis 4 Person in Jesus Christ.** *From the perspective of the dynamics of the Ultimate revealed in Jesus Christ risen, who is the centre and measure of the human, the reality of original sin denotes the gap or discrepancy that exists between what we humans presently are and what we are destined to become in the glorified Christ. Sin does not constitute our first ontological status; it is not our original reality, for the deeper situation that we humans are born into is our being created in God's image (imago Dei) and our being destined thereby to partake of the divine nature and enjoy the beatitude of eternal life.*

This fourth thesis acknowledges the directional qualification of present reality, which is to say that there can be no original perfection at the beginning of creation; rather, the first human is inherently finite, limited, and fallible (Note: the classical doctrine recognises this insofar as it holds that in Adam's state of integrity – *posse non peccare* – he was still open to temptation and to falling into sin). In the context of making something, the term "good" is always good in relation to some purpose. Thus in the context of the biblical creation story "good" can only mean "that creation is good for that which God intends it".<sup>42</sup> It is precisely the inherent fallibility of the human being that sets the stage for the gracious bestowing of God's merciful love upon sinners whose vocation as creatures consists in their inviolable relationship to the living God. The goodness of creation is not an ethical or objective judgement that the human exercises. Rather, the assertion of the Genesis account is that creation is good in the eyes of God who alone is able to view all things from the vantage point of the final purpose for all-that-is. The divine blessing (Gen 1:28) given at creation, which continues in history through the genealogies<sup>43</sup> incorporated by the Priestly writer into the Book of Genesis, is what guarantees the meaning and purpose of human existence, notwithstanding the experience of human life as fragmented, limited, fallible, and always threatened by anxiety, insecurity and non-being. The emphasis in Genesis on the divine blessing that continues effectively in history means that redemption is not something added to creation; rather, "creation and redemption belong together as the obverse and reverse

---

42. Claus Westermann, *Creation*, trans. John J. Scullion (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1974) 61.

43. The Priestly (P) writer has organised the Book of Genesis according to the *toledoth* formula – "these are the generations of" – which appears five times in the primeval history (2:4a; 5:1; 6:9; 10:1; 11:10) before Terah, the father of Abraham (11:26), and five times in the patriarchal history (11:27; 25:12; 25:19; 36:1; 37:2). See Frank Moore Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1973) 293-325, especially 301-305; and Richard Clifford, "The Hebrew Scriptures and the Theology of Creation", *Theological Studies* 46 (1985) 521.

of the same theological coin".<sup>44</sup> The history of humanity, though plagued and thwarted by the detrimental consequences of sin, is nonetheless always a history that holds the inviolable promise of new beginnings because transcended by God's original and originating blessing. It is this presence and activity of the living God in our midst that gives a directional qualification to present reality.

This directional qualification of created reality is especially highlighted in the eschatological dualism of Jewish apocalyptic thought, where history is viewed in terms of a disjunction between the present evil age and the glorious age to come.<sup>45</sup> For the apocalyptists, the full meaning of history can be apprehended only from the vantage point of the end of history. It is apparent in Paul's writings that he views the death of the Crucified One as *the* apocalyptic event inasmuch as the "principalities and powers" (1 Cor 2:8; 15:24-26; Col 1:16; 2:15; Eph 1:21; 6:12) in the world have been vanquished by this unique death.<sup>46</sup> The death and resurrection of Christ reveals the "mystery" of the divine will that has been set forth "as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth" (Eph 1:10). It is from the standpoint of the fullness of time present in the person of Christ that we are given a unique glimpse into the divine plan for all things. Thus the reality of original sin should be reflected upon in light of this eschatological event which truly illuminates the human condition and the kind of hope that Christians must give witness to in a world groaning for salvation (Rom 8:18-24).

In light of the directional qualification of present reality, the first three theses formulated above can readily be subsumed under the fourth thesis. The first three alert us to the need to hold together in dialectical tension the negative-ontological and positive-existential portrayals of original sin, but it is only when this dialectical relationship is placed within the eschatological framework of the fourth thesis that the complex system becomes a more intelligible whole. The question of eschatological salvation in the Risen One is not

---

44. Bernhard W. Anderson, "Mythopoeic and Theological Dimensions of Biblical Creation Faith", *Creation in the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984) 6.

45. See Henry Novello, "The Nature of Evil in Jewish Apocalyptic: The Need for 'Integral' Salvation", *Colloquium* 35/1 (2003) 47-63, especially 54-55. In this essay I propose that the "cosmic dualism" (the battle being waged without) and the "ethical dualism" (the battle being waged within) that are to be found in the apocalyptic writings function effectively only when they are placed within the framework of an "eschatological dualism" that anticipates the glorious age to come when the present evil age shall be no more. It is worth noting that cosmic dualism (powers external to the individual) bears a family resemblance to the situational analysis of original sin, while the emphasis in ethical dualism (evil inclination within the heart) parallels the personalist reinterpretation of original sin.

46. Novello, "The Nature of Evil in Jewish Apocalyptic", 60-61.

primarily about how the individual is to be saved from eternal perdition in hell, but about how the *whole movement of evolving nature* will arrive at its ontological perfection as planned and willed by God from all eternity. The Incarnation of the eternal Son that culminates in his paschal mystery has to do with the “divinisation” of created reality, that is, a “new creation” or “new emergent whole” in which the identity of the person (thesis 3) is definitively established in conjunction with a completely reconciled social-historical process (thesis 2) and a fully transfigured cosmic-biological process (thesis 1). Salvation in the person of Jesus Christ, as the fullness of evolving creation, has a complex or integral character that includes physical (new embodied existence in a new creation), moral (elimination of sin), and eschatological (real freedom in glorious union with God) dimensions, all of which are intimately intertwined, yet not mutually reducible to one another. In this holistic and complex perspective, human consciousness of the distance that separates us mortal sinners from what *ought to be* is consciousness of the reality denoted by the term original sin; that is to say, we are aware that there is something tragic in the human condition which is marked by a *lack of personal, social, and cosmic integration*. It is by looking forward to the Risen One, to the new age to come, not backward to some past epoch in primeval history, that we come to appreciate the reality of the human condition and what evolving creation is destined to become by the workings of God’s unfathomable breathing life into things that do not exist (*creatio ex creatio*).

#### CONCLUDING REMARKS

(a) The main concern of the Council of Trent was to uphold the *origine unum* (i.e. the unity of original sin consists in its origin) in order to establish the universality of sin as a presupposition for the Christian claim regarding the universal need for God’s redemption wrought in Jesus Christ. In the eschatological perspective presented above, since the destiny of humanity is to be elevated or “drawn up” (John 12:32) into the glorified humanity of Christ and enjoy the beatitude of the risen life, the unity of original sin is established by the fact that no one attains to their supernatural destiny in this life, for human existence is a being unto death. In light of the fact that time is still running its course and death is the horizon of life, all inevitably experience the lack of personal, social and cosmic integration that the term original sin denotes, while at the same time this fundamental experience of our existence in the world is made possible by our consciousness of being referred to Something More, to the Wholly Other, who is the absolute

source and ultimate term of the active process of human self-transcendence.

It is helpful when reflecting on the significance of time to consider the event of the Incarnation as the eschatological union of time and eternity in the person of Christ, so that it can be said that Christ is the hypostatic union of time (humanity) and eternity (divinity).<sup>47</sup> On this view, eternity is seen as the meaning of time and time appears as the expression of eternity. While time is not eternity and eternity is not time, nonetheless given the eschatological union of time and eternity in Christ neither can be considered without the other: “we can say that the humanity of Christ or the time of Christ is God’s point of observation of other times whence all other times are measured.”<sup>48</sup> What is more, since it was as a consequence of his resurrection from the dead that the time of the Crucified One was sublated by God’s eternity, this means that my life-time is determined by the time of Christ who bestows God’s eternity upon me. This takes place in the event of my death when my time comes to an end and I enter definitively into Christ’s time as the sublating fulfilment of time (which implies resurrection at death). However, personal identity and integrity of being are not fully established at death (as the entering of my time into Christ’s time) for not until the whole of history (upon which I have left my mark, for both good and ill) and the entire cosmos enter into eternity will personal, social, and cosmic integration be finally established in a “new heaven and new earth”. The upshot of all this is that no one prior to death can attain that elevation to participation in the divine nature which is the risen life. Hence human existence is characterised by a fundamental discrepancy or gap between what we presently are and what we are destined to become in the life to come.

(b) In addition to the concern to establish that the unity of original sin consists in its origin, a concomitant concern of the traditional

---

47. Tibor Horvath makes this suggestion in Chapter 3 of his *Eternity and Eternal Life: Speculative Theology and Science in Discourse* (Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1993). Horvath regards the eschatological union of time and eternity in Christ as the “first principle in Christian eschatology”.

48. Horvath, *Eternity and Eternal Life*, 73. Eberhard Jüngel in his *Death: The Riddle and the Mystery*, trans. Iain and Ute Nicol (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1974) 118, holds a similar view when he says that each human life-time is genuinely historical and irreplaceable because it is “a moment in God’s history with all men”; every human life is ontologically defined by the “humanity of God”. Pope John Paul II, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994) 74, could also be mentioned here, for he employed the Gospel metaphor of “the vine” and “the branches” (John 15:1-8) to highlight the view that the paschal mystery of Christ is “grafted onto the history of humanity, onto the history of every individual”. Each human life-time, then, is hidden and taken up into the life of God, who is our beyond.

doctrine of original sin is the affirmation of the *sola gratia*, directed against Pelagianism. The eschatological argument presented in this essay certainly lends its support to this traditional teaching. For if salvation is conceived as “participation in the divine nature” (*Dei Verbum* §2; cf. 2 Pet 1:4) by means of “being made partners” in the paschal mystery of Christ (*Gaudium et Spes* §22; cf. Rom 6:5; 8:11), then this must come as God’s gift of pure grace, in the Spirit. The human being simply has no power within itself to conquer death in its full or integral sense (i.e. physical, moral, and eschatological death) and secure personal identity and ontological fulfilment. We are conscious of being engaged with a process of self-transcendence (exocentricity), of having intentionality and thus of being referred beyond ourselves to the other and ultimately to the eternal Other who is our beyond, yet personal integration proves to be ever elusive. For the self is experienced as divided against itself and death appears as the horizon of life, so that whatever fragments of meaning and goodness are realised in this transient life risk being reduced to meaninglessness and nothingness (cf. Jean-Paul Sartre) and existence itself risks becoming an absurdity. Only if God takes the whole of our lives as we have concretely lived them and graciously heals and transforms them into the wholeness that God has determined for humanity in the person of the Son (the incorruptible wholeness referred to in Scripture as “eternal life”) can personal identity be definitively established.

(c) We need to appreciate that the involuntary (prepersonal) and voluntary (personal) dimensions of sin should not be cleanly separated for the sake of conceptual clarity.<sup>49</sup> A dialectical tension exists between original sin as a situational privation of sanctifying grace and active rebellion against God. The state of natural concupiscence perforce requires us to recognise an involuntary element intrinsic to human nature, for we do not inherit a nature that is harmonious; rather, as consciously self-transcending, what we inherit must be brought to perfection by means of human freedom into an integrated whole that represents a higher nature than the previously existing reality. The historical situation, though, compels us to affirm another involuntary dimension of sin external to the individual, which is closely related to the internal condition of human nature (there exists a symbiosis of genes and culture). Yet these two closely interrelated prepersonal dimensions of sin are not the sole sources of sin, for the fact that we actively conspire both with the lower level sense appetites and the evil

---

49. Brian O. McDermott, “The Theology of Original Sin: Recent Developments”, *Theological Studies* 38 (1977) 478-512, plainly makes this point: “original sin and personal sin do not stand opposed as simply the involuntary and the voluntary” (p. 512).

forces in history underlines the voluntary dimension of sin, which is acknowledged in our confession of guilt and the need for personal conversion.

To conclude, the human person's complicity with sin is to be seen as grounded in both self (freedom) and a negative involuntary that attaches to the human as both natural being and historical being. What the term "original sin" expresses is the understanding that sin is located at a deeper level than the mere individual act (against a moralistic conception of sin). Original sin points to motivational structures that precede and underlie the actions of the person, and the deadly fate of the human condition apart from God's redemption in Jesus Christ who has conquered the powers of sin and death in the world so that we may walk in the freedom of new life "according to the Spirit" which involves the transformation of life "according to the flesh" (Rom 8:1-11). The person is not only a person-in-nature and a person-in-history, but also a person-in-the-Risen-One who, as the new creation and the meaning of history as a whole, saves us from the condition of original sin so that we may experience, in our ecclesial communities of faith, the freedom and joy of personal, social and cosmic integration. The new life that we enjoy in the Spirit of the Risen One is never completed in this life, however, for death remains the horizon of life, and the glorious resurrection life remains the firm Christian hope for the completed wholeness of evolving nature.