

# Original Sin

THE DEFENCE OF AN UNPOPULAR DOCTRINE.

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## I.

THOSE who heard Principal Whale's recent broadcast talks on "Facing the Facts," must have rubbed their eyes (or their ears!) when they found themselves listening to something like a rehabilitation of such almost obsolete doctrines as "Original sin and total corruption."

The Victorians, intoxicated by the revived new-old doctrine of evolution, believed with a faith "more sanguine than scientific" (to use a phrase of the late Sir Frederick Pollock) in progress all along the line. The amazing advances in material prosperity that they witnessed encouraged them to believe that poverty would soon disappear, and the advances in science, and especially the supposed discoveries of the biologists, made them confident of an unlimited social development and then final elimination of crime and evil.

In January 1894, McClure's Magazine, an American monthly with a very large circulation, contained an article entitled "The Edge of the Future," by a Professor Herbert Nicholls, presumably a teacher of psychology. In this article occurred the following pathetic, if somewhat comic, vapourings: "The new science of psychology will determine the mental laws exactly: the laws of the individual and of society. . . . It will compel men to live by these laws, because it will make them plain to all men—as plain as the law of gravity. The world will then go forward, because it will see how. We shall then have a higher manhood, because its type will be clear to us. We shall have a new art and a new literature, because we shall know the secrets of beauty. Psychology will secure to man wealth and art, wisdom and happiness, by making man capable of them."

That is nearly fifty years ago, and we have had plenty of "new art" and "new literature" since then, though whether they have originated in a knowledge of "the secrets of beauty" is open to grave doubt. But "wisdom and happiness"! Such facile anticipations recall Carlyle's pungent definition of optimism as "a fool's way of looking at things" (The oddest thing, perhaps, is that "the new science of psychology" of which Professor Nicholls wrote in the 'nineties has itself been shelved in favour of the newer science of Freudism, a philosophy of the rankest pessimism, which certainly makes no promises of "wisdom and happiness.")

Over against these empty dithyrambics may be set the following eloquent passage from the 1924 Bampton Lectures (*The Ideas of the Fall and of Original Sin*), in which the Rev. N. P. Williams says: "The countless graves in which the most vigorous of the race now sleep, and the living legacy of mutilation, blindness and madness which the great catastrophe has left behind it, have decisively refuted the dogma of a necessary moral progress implicit in mental evolution."

This conclusion, formally correct, is in reality just and sound only if by "mental evolution" is signified the "mental evolution" of the Germans who provoked "the great catastrophe." (If the language is more generally intended, the conclusion is unsoundly drawn; for the ghastly horrors of the war were largely due to the chivalrous ardours and high ideals of men who refused to bow to Germany's brutal and unrighteous aggression).

But the aphorism is sound, that moral progress is not necessarily implicit in mental development. Clear ideas do not help us one inch along the road to virtue and honour.

And now the Principal of Cheshunt College reminds us, as some neo-Darwinians (notably Professor J. B. S. Haldane) have recently done, that evolution as often as not goes backwards instead of forwards. "Regress," he says, "is a fact. There is positive and deliberate evil in man's make-up . . . and we are all being forced by the bitter facts of experience to look once again at what earlier generations called Original Sin." And he goes on to speak of the back-door retribution which has overtaken a generation which

kicked St. Augustine out at the front door because of his intolerable doctrines of original sin and total corruption.

Intolerable doctrines! Yes, indeed. The carnal pride of man's heart revolts against doctrines which assert not only the deep depravity of his nature but his fundamental inability to set himself right. But there are other causes for the revolt, of which we shall have to speak.

In the first place, however, since one's most important duty, next to verifying one's "facts," is to define one's terms, we have to ask what exactly is meant by "original sin." The expression is theological, not scriptural, though firmly based upon Scripture. *Sin* is here used not of actual overt *sins*, but of that wrong bias or taint in the soul, that sinful principle of alienation from the life and mind of God, from which the overt acts proceed. *Original sin* is such a principle or bias or taint, dating from the very beginning or origin of the individual life and transmitted by heredity from our first parents—"original" in a double sense.

The Ninth Article of Religion runs thus: "Original Sin is the fault and corruption of the nature of every man, that naturally is engendered of the offspring of Adam; whereby man is very far gone from original righteousness and is of his own nature inclined to evil, so that the flesh lusteth always contrary to the spirit . . . And this infection of nature doth remain, yea, in them that are regenerated."

In reading the strictures upon Original Sin hereinafter quoted from clerical authors, it should be borne in mind that all clergymen of the Church of England have signed their adhesion to the Thirty-nine articles.

The quotation just given expresses fairly closely the teaching of St. Paul, as we shall endeavour to show. It is important to note the terms used therein. For Dr. Montgomery Hitchcock, writing in the March number of *THE CHURCHMAN* in strenuous criticism of the twin doctrines of the Fall and Original Sin, appears to assume that "sin" and "guilt" mean the same thing and that "original sin" is synonymous with "original guilt." This is the error of St. Augustine, of whom Dr. Bicknell says (*Sin and the Fall*, in "Essays Catholic and Critical"): "Going beyond the teaching of St. Paul he insisted not only on original sin, but on original guilt."

The phrase "original guilt" is unfortunately contained in our second Article. Dr. Simpson's claim (*Fact and Faith*) that "original guilt" more nearly represents the dominant idea of the New Testament on this subject than such phrases as taint, corruption, disease, we shall show to be ill-founded. It is quite likely that the framers of the Articles signified by the phrase "original guilt" the "infection of nature" spoken of in Article Nine, but "guilt" is an unfortunate word, imputing blame.

Dr. Hitchcock rightly contends that guilt denotes "moral blameworthiness" and cannot exist apart from responsibility. His quarrel is not so much with the "original sin" of the Ninth Article as with Augustine's exaggerated version. Indeed Dr. Hitchcock allows, as something certain, that "congenital tendencies to indulge certain instincts may, like predispositions to certain physical diseases, be handed down." How near to the orthodox doctrine he comes in these words, is doubtful. Certainly the case could with justice have been put much more strongly, as thus: "Congenital tendencies to indulge certain instincts *in a sinful way* are *always* handed down, differing only in this article of universality from predispositions to certain physical diseases."

"Sin" is a state—a state that universal experience assures us will certainly issue in overt "sins" when the age of responsibility is reached. The failure to distinguish between the use of "sin" and "sins" in the Bible is productive of confusion in more connections than one.

The chief evidences for the doctrine of original sin are two: the witness of human experience and the witness of Holy Scripture.

1. *The Witness of Experience.* The doctrine of an inherited bias which produces sinful acts has received as ready a response from men of all sorts as almost any other Biblical doctrine.

"To believe in original sin is to face the facts," says Dr. Bicknell (*op. cit.*). Man, when he listens to the inner oracle, hears a voice from depths far below the level of his self-expressions in word and deed. He realizes that the evil words and works that his conscience condemns are no chance answers to some external provocation, but are the fruit of some evil root in the deeps of his being, the ex-

pression of a nature fundamentally wrong, radically estranged from the life of God. For most people possessed of even a rudimentary ethical sensibility are continually being pulled up by the consciousness of such a conflict as St. Paul's when he found in himself a law or principle of sin such that, when he would do good, evil was present with him—an indwelling sin which, like an active partner, took the lead and did itself the evil thing (Rom. vii. 21, 20).

The sense that the evil thing we do springs from some deep innate perversity of the will is not the high attainment of the Saint or the Apostle; it is one of the commonest of experiences. When Dr. N. P. Williams (*op. cit.*) says: "The ordinary man may feel ashamed of doing wrong, but the saint . . . is ashamed of being the kind of man who is liable to do wrong," he fails to do justice to an almost universal sense, in men of conscience, of *sin* as distinguished from sins—the sense that expresses itself in the words, "It is not so much what I have done as *what I am* that is wrong."

Poets with the insight to which poetic genius gives force and point have been quick to perceive something "wrong"—*wrung*, that is, from the divinely ordered harmony: the sinful nature: the Original Sin of theology.

"Our life is a false nature—'tis not in  
The harmony of things—this hard decree,  
This ineradicable taint of sin,  
This boundless upas, this all-blasting tree."

Thus the unbelieving poet, Byron. Even more directly writes the believing poet, Robert Browning, of one who

"Launched point-blank his dart  
At the head of a lie, taught Original Sin,  
The corruption of man's heart."

A greater poet than these taught long ago, in much more poignant tones, a similar lesson. David had been overtaken by grievous sins, which he made no attempt either to deny or to palliate. In deep penitence he acknowledged his transgressions and declared that his sins were ever before him. But underneath the foul acts of sin that had polluted Bathsheba and murdered Uriah and caused scandal in Israel and stunk in the nostrils of God, David saw something deeper. "Behold, I was shapen in iniquity, and in sin did

my mother conceive me." This is language which has its deep equivalent in the experience of thousands.

Dr. Montgomery Hitchcock (*loc. cit.*) seeks to turn the obvious testimony of the Penitential Psalm by alleging that the intimacy of married life was considered, as it still is, by many unclean. The psalm, however, provides its own natural exegesis. David is troubled about his *sins*: "Hide thy face from my sins and blot out all mine iniquities." But he is also troubled about his *sin*—that sinful nature which will issue in yet more sins: "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me." Dr. Hitchcock's suggestion is anachronistic. The Jews ever attached the very highest respect and sanctity to the relationship of marriage, and *per contra* had no sympathy with the fictitious value attached later by a corrupt Christendom to the state of virginity.

## II

Facing the facts, we are bound to believe in original sin. But whence comes it? Not from God: we cannot believe that God made man so. "The true foundations of the theory of the Fall and of Original Sin," says Dr. N. P. Williams (*op. cit.*), who himself denies the Fall of Genesis and the Biblical account of Original Sin, "are psychological, based on bedrock facts of ethical and spiritual experience." And again he says: "The conflict between the hypotheses of an inherent tendency to evil in man and of the infinite goodness of God who created man could only resolve itself by the assumption that human nature was not what God meant it to be, and that some historical catastrophe must be postulated to account for this otherwise inexplicable fact."

Our spirits witness to original sin. But whence and by what channel comes that original sin? That we have derived that deep-seated perversity of the will by inheritance from our ancestry is mere common sense. When he sees that invariably—and quite independently of his environment—this bias manifests itself as a child grows to years of responsibility, the plain man has no difficulty in drawing the inference. Dr. Bicknell, who says that "to believe in original sin is to face the facts" shrinks apparently from facing any further facts. To the questions, "What is the connection between the sin of Adam and the universal sinful-

ness of his descendants? Is the tendency to sin transmitted by heredity? he can only reply, "The passage (Romans v.) gives no answer to such questions." This point we shall deal with under the witness of Holy Scripture.

The idea that men inherit a tendency to evil by natural generation in much the same way as they inherit physical peculiarities seems to be a stumbling-block to Dr. Bicknell, as it is to some others. "It comes," he says, "very near to reducing moral evil to a physical taint." Dr. Simpson (*op. cit.*) deprecates metaphors taken from disease, such as "the fault and deformity of nature" of the Anglican Reformers, the "corruption of man's heart," and so on, "which may easily cover notions of heredity as dubious as they are materialistic."

Such figures Dr. Simpson seems to regard as alien from the Biblical view of sin. "It is the devout imagination," he says, "not the sacred narrative, which speaks of Christ as the Good Physician." But our Lord Himself said: "They that are whole need not a physician, but they that are sick"—language that certainly implies that He regarded Himself as a Physician and sinners as men suffering from a form of sickness.

And why are such notions "materialistic"? How do they reduce moral evil to a physical taint? Is such transmission any more "materialistic" or "physical" than the transmission of mental and temperamental tendencies and aptitudes, tricks of mind, temper and disposition? Yet these are unquestionably as much transmitted as are physical traits and peculiarities, though, seeing that matter cannot think or feel, the process is past our comprehension.

So much with regard to heredity is beyond doubt and was well known long before Darwin and Mendel.

Dr. Bicknell, who holds that to believe in original sin is to face the facts, considers it rash to explain original sin by heredity, because that would be a case of transmission of an acquired characteristic, which the dominant school of biologists strongly denies. But the evidence of science (even if the intransmissibility of acquired characteristics were granted) is entirely irrelevant in the present connection. The doctrine of the Fall involves a unique, we may say a supernatural, break and distortion in the relations of God and man—such a dividing line, ushering in such an entirely

new condition as "fallenness" (to use Dr. Bicknell's own word), that it is beside the mark to attempt to apply to the conditions of life before the Fall the implications of our modern (and still only partial) knowledge of genes or units of heredity.

Dr. Hitchcock also—somewhat unguardedly—commits himself from the biological side when he argues that "the doctrine of original sin requires the sacrifice of the sinless nature of Christ." Undoubtedly, if the Virgin Birth is denied, it becomes embarrassingly difficult to maintain at once the doctrine of original sin and the doctrine of the sinless nature of Christ; for in that case Christ had two human parents, both infected with the taint of original sin. If the Virgin Birth is upheld, the case is changed. As the present writer wrote two years ago in defending the Virgin Birth (*The Christian*, February 10, 1938), "Experience tells us what happens when both parents are infected with the sinful bias, but yields no answer to the question, 'If only one of the parents is human and therefore tainted with sin, will not the child be also so tainted?'"

The assumption of Dr. Hitchcock, and of the Romish divines who invented the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception in order to get round the supposed difficulty, that the one tainted parent will necessarily transmit the taint is not justified. It fitted the old Galtonian Conception of heredity, but the Mendelian theory on which modern research in heredity is largely based teaches that traits and qualities are transmitted from one parent unmodified by the other. Mendel showed that, if a pea of a tall strain is crossed with one of a short strain, all the offspring are tall, tallness being what is termed a "dominant." Sinlessness might, therefore, conceivably, as a Mendelian "dominant"; be transmitted uninfluenced by the "original sin" present in the Virgin Mary.

These are but one or two of the objections raised against original sin on scientific or quasi-scientific grounds. But the whole conception is declared to be contrary to the findings of science. "The conflict between the teaching of history, natural science and palaeontology, on the origins of the human race, and that of the ecclesiastical doctrine has led all along the line to the victory of the scientific view" (It is not quite clear whether this is Dr. Hitchcock's obser-



vation or a quotation from Emil Brunner's *Man in Revolt*, which Dr. Hitchcock reviewed in the March CHURCHMAN.) "Science," says Dr. Hitchcock, "repudiates the doctrine of the Fall as untrue."

By science, of course, is clearly meant the theory of evolution as applied to human origins. Dr. N. P. Williams (*op. cit.*) refers to it quite directly. "Biology proclaims the unbroken continuity of man's descent from the brutes, and anthropology can find no room for paradisaical perfection." A bold claim! Many biologists may proclaim it, but biology itself has never shown it.

Let us suppose, however, that, taking our stand upon the very doubtful evidence at our disposal, we maintained that man's bodily frame was derived by descent from the brutes. What then? What about his moral and spiritual nature? Can we speak of "man's" descent and leave out the greater and nobler part of him—that part, in fact, in virtue of which he is truly man?

Biology can tell us nothing about the spirit of man. And yet this is what we are dealing with when we talk of original sin. Professor Alfred Russel Wallace, well known as the co-discoverer of the revived doctrine of evolution, was unable to account upon evolutionistic principles for the spirit of man, and postulated, therefore, at a certain stage in man's development, an intervention of a Higher Power. In other words, while proclaiming the descent of man's body from the lower animals, he acclaimed *man himself* as a creation.

It is odd that so many theologians have elected in this matter to follow the more materialistic Darwin rather than Wallace. But their choice has, of course, greatly influenced their attitude to original sin. It has in fact notably degraded the Christian doctrine of sin. Evolutionistic theologians derive the sin of man from the uncurbed instincts of the brute—a derivation which may (somewhat dubiously) explain the grosser "animal" sins but takes no account of spiritual sins.

Dr. Tennant (*Origin and Propagation of Sin*, Hulsean Lecture) made—so Dr. Bicknell tells us—the first attempt in this country to reinterpret the doctrine of original sin in the light of biology. "So-called original sin he regards as the survival in man of animal tendencies, useful and necessary

at an earlier stage, but now felt to be an anachronism. Our consciousness of divided self is due to the fact that these animal impulses are only in process of being moralized." But, as Bicknell well points out, it is not the possession of these animal tendencies that is the real problem, but the universal failure to control them. Whence this lamentable and universal failure to "moralize" the surviving instincts of the brute? Whence, indeed, but from that sinful bias that we call original sin?

Dr. Hitchcock takes much the same view of original sin as does Dr. Tennant. "To the physical or organic unity of the race we owe our instincts, appetites and passions in stronger or weaker form. This is our universal inheritance—the material out of which the will makes good or evil, and which are not in themselves good or evil until they have been made so by the will. Here is ground both for individual freedom and for universal sinfulness." But, if the instincts and appetites of the brute are of neutral moral complexion, how can they account for "universal sinfulness"? It is the will, we are told, that makes these neutral instincts to be good or evil. Why, then, the "universal sinfulness" unless the will is itself corrupt? And so we come round to the orthodox doctrine of original sin—that innate bias towards evil that caused St. Paul to say that "they that are in the flesh cannot please God."

But indeed it is impossible to explain sin except upon the basis of a spiritual nature, and, as Wallace said, it is impossible to derive a spiritual nature from the brutes.

This derivation of sin in man from the instincts of the brute results, as Dr. Bicknell said, in an underestimating of the gravity of the situation. And this is true in more ways than one.

Dr. Tennant, for instance, speaks of "Animal tendencies, useful and necessary at an earlier stage, but now felt to be an anachronism." Is this, from an ethical point of view, a satisfactory account of Nature as we know it? Can we suppose that this Nature is a reflection of the Divine counsels? Do we not feel that the mind of God is better expressed in the words, "They shall not hurt nor destroy in all my holy mountain?"

No, Dr. Williams here is right when he remarks that "to explain evil in Nature, no less than in man, we are

compelled to assume a fall." Dr. Williams, however, argues—speculatively, not to say mythologically—for a vitiation of the world-soul by some pre-cosmic catastrophe, by which the life-force was tainted. The predatory blood-stained violence of Nature is itself due to some kind of fall. It is useless to tell us that we are not "fallen": that we are merely the inheritors of animal instincts. How did the animals fall? The Bible teaching is clear that the First Adam in his fall dragged down nature with him, the earth itself being cursed for his sake, even as in the Second Adam the whole creation that groans and travails together until now earnestly expects the manifestation of the sons of God.

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#### THE ASSURANCE OF GOD

*By Canon Patrick Carnegy. (Longmans.) 7s. 6d.*

Here is a book that gives the Scriptural way of Salvation, and of holiness. The word "Assurance" in the title is used in a very full sense. It means not merely assurance of Salvation, but also full confidence in God and in His grace, that brings a joyous, loving spirit, and victory over sin. It means the full assurance of understanding (Col. iii. 2), the full assurance of faith (Heb. x. 22) and the full assurance of hope (Heb. vi. 11). It implies all that is meant when one can say "The Lord is the Rock of my Salvation"—that is, He gives me full confidence, that nothing can move.

This book is written in modern theological style and language, but it often quotes, and approves, the language which John Wesley and D. L. Moody used. It will much help the parson with his sermons, and the Bible-class leader with his message; and, it is to be hoped, will help the seeker, who is convicted, and wants to find Christ as his own Saviour.

The titles of the nine chapters are all suggestive and their order is logical and consecutive. The first chapter is called "The certainties of God." To have these "certainties" is to have a vital, overcoming, soul-winning religion. Such was the religion of the early Christians. But assurance is largely lost to-day due to "The Challenge of Modern Scepticism." The Sceptic is seeking for truth, with his intellect. The Christian enquirer is seeking a Person with his heart.

So "The need of Revelation." Christianity is much more than a system of Ethics. It involves the right relationship to God; established through the Son of God. Thus assurance needs a Revelation of "God's Work for Man" in Christ through the Incarnation, Crucifixion, Resurrection and Ascension. Christ Himself was the message from the Father to a world of sinners, and "The Reasonableness of Faith" calls for Man's response of faith.

Thus, this book deals helpfully with the Christian life and experience and we warmly commend it.

BARCLAY F. BUXTON.