

ORIGINAL GOODNESS, NOT ORIGINAL SIN

The true and essential work of all religion is to help us recognise and recover the divine image in everything In his first letter John puts it quite directly: “My dear people we are *already* the children of God, and what we are to be in the future is still to be revealed – all we know is that we are like God, for we shall finally see God as he really is.” (1 John 3:2) And who is this God that we will finally see? It is somehow *Being Itself*, for God is the one, according to Paul, “in whom we live and move and have our being. (Acts 17:28)

Our inherent “likeness to God” depends upon the objective connection given by God equally to all creatures, each of whom carries the divine DNA in a unique way. I would also call it “original blessing” or “original innocence”. Whatever you call it, the “image of God” is absolute and unchanging. There is nothing humans can do to increase or decrease it. And it is not ours to decide who has it or does not have it, which has been most of our problem up to now. It is pure and total gift, given equally to all.

But this picture was complicated when the concept of *original sin* entered the Christian mind. In this idea – put forward by Augustine in the 5th century – we emphasized that human beings were born into “sin” because Adam and Eve “offended God” by eating from the “tree of the knowledge of good and evil”. This strange concept of original sin does not match the way we usually think of sin, which is normally a matter of personal responsibility and culpability. Yet original sin wasn't something we did at all: it was something done *to us* (passed down to us from Adam and Eve). So we got off to a bad start.

By contrast most world religions including our own Judeo-Christian tradition start with some sense of primal goodness in their creation stories. The initial metaphor for creation was a garden, which is inherently positive, beautiful, growth-oriented, a place to be “cultivated and cared for” (Genesis 2:15). But after Augustine, most Christian theologies shifted from the positive vision of Genesis 1 to the darker vision of Genesis 3 – the so-called fall, or what I am calling the “problem”. Instead of embracing God's master-plan for humanity and creation, Christians shrank the image of both Jesus and Christ, and our “Saviour” became a mere Johnny-come-lately “answer” to the problem of sin, a problem that we had largely created ourselves. That is a very limited role for Jesus. His *death* instead of his *life* was defined as saving us! This is no small point. The shift in what we valued often allowed us to avoid Jesus' actual life and teaching because all we needed was the sacrificial event of his death. Jesus became a mere mop-up exercise for sin, and sin management has dominated the entire religious story line and agenda to this day. This is no exaggeration.

In one way the doctrine of “original sin” was good and helpful in that it taught us not to be surprised at the frailty and woundedness that we all carry. Just as goodness is inherent and shared so it seems is evil. Knowledge of our shared wound ought to free us from the burden of unnecessary - and individual – guilt or shame and help us to be forgiving and compassionate with ourselves and with one another.

Yet historically the teaching on original sin started us off on the wrong foot – with a no instead of a yes, with mistrust instead of trust. This theology of mistrust and suspicion has shown itself in all kinds of misguided notions: a world always in competition with itself; a mechanical and magical understanding of baptism; fiery notions of hell; systems of reward and punishment and the shaming and exclusion of wounded individuals.

When we start with a theology of sin management administered by a too-often elite clergy, we end up with schizophrenic religion – a Jesus who is merciful while on earth but who punishes in the next world. Who forgives here but not later. It may be scary for Christians to admit these outcomes to themselves, but we must.

To begin climbing out of the hole of original sin, we must start with a positive and generous cosmic vision. Generosity tends to feed on itself. I have never met a truly compassionate or loving human being who did not have a foundational and even deep trust in the inherent goodness of human nature.

(Adapted from *The Universal Christ*, Richard Rohr SPCK)