SIN IN THE 20TH CENTURY: NIEBUHR, BRUNNER, AND BLOCHER

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The doctrine of universal sin, or more specifically, original sin, is set within the subject of the doctrine of humanity. Regardless of the Christian source, there is a general recognition that humanity is a vexing problem. The more one investigates the definition of humanity, the more there is a realisation of apparent contradictions within the definition as it becomes more complex. Freedom, responsibility, the inevitability of sin, and determinism are among the terms that create the challenge to define precisely what constitutes a definition of humanity. It seems that it is not easy to create a holistic understanding of humanity without getting involved in language that appears to contradict itself.

The Psalmist can express the humility of humanity with the question, 'When I consider the heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have made; what is man that you care for him?' (Ps. 8:4). On the other hand, humanity's grand uniqueness is described in the words, 'So God created humankind in His image, in the image of God he created them, male and female he created them' (Gen 1:26-27). From that brief statement the grandeur, sovereignty, stewardship, and uniqueness of humanity can be developed. The uniqueness that is described leads to considerations of humanity's ability to transcend the self and creation to analyse life, creation, goodness, responsibility, and evil in the individual and in social relations. Consequently, as humans we can begin to analyse both the particular and the whole of life.

Yet the distinctiveness of the Christian understanding of humanity does not begin in the doctrine of humanity, or sin. There is a prior understanding of creation, and before that the doctrine of God. The doctrine of God thus precedes all Christian thought. Our understanding of humanity and sin does not stand isolated from the belief of who God is, and so, within the unique Christian approach to the understanding of God there is the revelation in Christ. This Christological perspective has been summarised in Colossians 1:15-17, 'He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together'.

It is not sufficient, as will be done here, to catalogue various positions on the doctrine of original sin and offer them as a buffet for us to sample and then choose our favourite. The problem of systematic or dogmatic theology lies much

deeper than that. The question of original sin lies as one part of the whole construct of theology and this particular contribution is only one part of the whole. Neither Reinhold Niebuhr, Emil Brunner, nor Henri Blocher approach this topic in isolation from the whole of theological construction. Yet the obvious point is to recognise that their systems do not agree with one another at every point; in some parts they are in agreement, in other parts they differ. As each works on the understanding of original sin there are presuppositions that have entered into the discussion. Sometimes these presuppositions are implied and at other times they are explicitly stated. It is not sufficient to trawl through the Bible looking for proof texts of particular positions since even in the biblical texts there is a theology to be discovered that lies behind the statements or systems.

In reading the material of the three theologians in this essay it will be noticeable that there is scant reference to the early doctrinal development on sin in the Patristic studies of the Eastern Fathers. This is not surprising in the Latin or Western theological thinking. One quote from Reinhold Niebuhr might be sufficient to summarise typical Augustinian thought. He offers a statement concerning theology prior to Augustine by saying, '…it is not unfair to regard all Christian thinkers before Augustine as more or less Pelagian'.[1] With that pre-supposition Niebuhr links pre-Augustinian views of sin to modern liberalism as explained in Schleiermacher.[2] For this reason the conclusion will assess, in light of the three models developed in this essay, whether the Eastern Fathers did betray a natural link to Pelagius.

There are, though, some common theological reference points for the three theologians

> 1) All three begin with a presupposition of revelational theology. It is only in a theology that has a basis in the personal communication of God that humanity can come to terms with the problem of sin;

> 2) There is a common attempt to integrate, in some respects, with secular views on the problem of humanity and then demonstrate Christianity's distinctive contribution;

> 3) Each develops a particular response to original sin from the Augustinian position. Each of the three theologians struggles with the relationship of the inevitability of sin and human responsibility. At the same time, none are uncritical of Augustine;

> 4) Finally, as has already been mentioned, none of the three theologians finds meaningful help in the early Patristic Fathers. For the three, Augustine provided the most comprehensive system in analysing a doctrine of sin, and

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[1] Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man,* Vol I, 'Human Nature', (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1941, 1964), 245.

[2] Reinhold Niebuhr, 246.

none of the three found a reason to jettison Augustine's system.

REINHOLD NIEBUHR

The Christian Distinctiveness

According to Reinhold Niebuhr there are three factors that distinguish the Christian view of humanity:[3]

1. the height of self-transcendence as the image of God;
2. humanity's weakness, dependence, and finiteness are not the source of evil;
3. evil in humanity is the inability to acknowledge dependency and finiteness which accentuates the insecurity of humanity.

Humanity's distinctiveness, described in the image of God, accentuates the concept of humanity's rational capacity to rise to the knowledge of God.[4] Yet the image of God goes beyond rational capacities to the awareness of self and then the transcendence of self. This leads to the further understanding that humanity can develop a future through the freedom of choices, and the combination of transcendence and future leads to the search for God who transcends the world.[5] Frequent in Niebuhr's analysis is the controlling factor regarding the finiteness of humanity which humanity struggles to overcome, but that struggle is falsely constructed for it cannot be overcome. Typical in Niebuhr's thought is this phrase, 'The distinctively Christian doctrine that sin has its source not in temporality but in man's wilful refusal to acknowledge the finite and determinate character of his existence…',[6] demonstrates the emphasis on the finiteness of existence which humanity refuses to adequately recognise.

Humanity as Finite

Since humanity is finite and limited, thus lacking in knowledge, a problem is created when humanity assumes it will gradually transcend the limitations. When humanity thinks that it can transcend its limitations it demonstrates the infection of pride. This pride, or will-to-power, disturbs the harmony of creation which in religious life becomes the rebellion against God in which humanity tries to usurp the place of God. Through pride humanity creates the additional moral problem of injustice in social life.[7] Niebuhr calls the abortive attempt to solve finiteness and freedom as the human passion of 'unlimited and demonic potencies'.[8] Finiteness creates anxiety but anxiety is not sin although it can become the

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[3] Reinhold Niebuhr, 150.

[4] Reinhold Niebuhr, 158-159.

[5] Reinhold Niebuhr, 165.

[6] Reinhold Niebuhr, 177.

[7] Niebuhr stated, 'Therefore all human life is involved in the sin of seeking security at the expense of other life', 182.

[8] Reinhold Niebuhr, 179.

'internal precondition of sin'.[9] Anxiety has the potential to be creative or it can become the temptation to hide the limitations of human nature.[10]

The Problem of Free-will

Niebuhr identifies one of the key moral objections to Augustine's development of the doctrine of original sin, both from the rationalists and the moralists. The criticism recognises that within Augustine's doctrine of sin it is inevitable that humanity sins, choice has been removed, sin is a 'fateful necessity'. Yet, at the same time humanity is to be held responsible for that fateful necessity.[11] In response, Niebuhr points out that the corrupt nature of humanity was never believed by Augustine to be essential humanity. Thus, though sin is universal it is not a necessity. But, he then acknowledges, 'The whole crux of the doctrine of original sin lies in the seeming absurdity of the corruption of free-will which underlies it'.[12] As Augustine, along with the Reformers, asserted, the human will is free but it is free only to sin. Pascal has been constantly used as an indication of the acknowledged absurdity, but then, what other comprehensive system is available?[13] Niebuhr believes that the Protestant tradition has constantly maintained the absurdity of human free-will as responsibility while holding to the inevitability of humanity to do evil. Thus, to remain in the Augustinian tradition it is required to face the challenge of not imperilling human free-will or the inevitability of sinning.

A Solution to the Problem

The apparent absurdity in the accusation of the rationalists and moralists did not pass Niebuhr by without a challenge. He turns to psychology to find an acceptability of freedom and responsibility combined with a legitimate concept of sin as inevitable. Since freedom produces anxiety humanity tries to overcome anxiety with the false concept of becoming infinite rather than finite. Niebuhr describes this as humanity trying 'to escape finiteness and weakness by a quantitative rather than a qualitative development of…life'.[14] Quantitative meant trying to be infinite while actually being finite; qualitative meant obedience to the will of God.

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[9] Reinhold Niebuhr, 182-183.

[10] Reinhold Niebuhr, 186.

[11] Reinhold Niebuhr, 241.

[12] Reinhold Niebuhr, 243.

[13] Blaise Pascal commented: 'Original sin is foolishness to men, but it is admitted to be such. You must not then reproach me for the want of reason in this doctrine, since I admit it to be without reason. But this foolishness is wiser than all the wisdom of man, *sapientius est hominibus.* For without this, what can we say that man is? His whole estate depends on this imperceptible point. And how should it be perceived by his reason, since it is a thing against reason, and since reason, far from finding it out by her own ways, is averse to it when it is presented to her?', *Pascal's Pensées.* 445, (London: J M Dent, 1931), 124.

[14] Reinhold Niebuhr, 251.

Responsibility is apparent in repentance and remorse.[15] Niebuhr feels that he could boldly assert, 'Man is most free in the discovery that he is not free'.[16] The transcendent side is able to see and contemplate the situation. To know that he has lost freedom in sin is the achievement of freedom. Thus, there is a genuine paradox. Or, again Niebuhr asserts, 'The final paradox is that the discovery of the inevitability of sin is man's highest assertion of freedom'.[17] In other words, sin is manifested in the proper understanding of freedom.

Original righteousness, the image of God, is the self transcendence of humanity and is never lost. Niebuhr gives limited support to the Irenean view that the 'perfection' of Adam is never developed because Adam fell early after his creation and therefore perfection is never an effective part of Adam's life.[18] Original righteousness recognises human freedom which includes the ability to sin and the knowledge of sin when it has been committed.[19] If in the Pelagian system the tendency is to overemphasise human freedom, the tendency in the Augustinian system is to lose an understanding of human freedom.[20] Niebuhr's intention is to find a way through this paradox of freedom and inevitability to sin.

Sin as Rebellion

Niebuhr defines sin as 'rebellion against God', and this rebellion is based in the will of humanity.[21] Yet it must not be forgotten that he sees the essence of humanity as 'free self-determination'. Since sin is the wrong use of freedom leading to destruction, then sinful humanity lives in the contradiction of its true essence. Niebuhr's controlling criteria is based on the individuality of persons.[22] The individual corruption can also be identified as 'sensuality'. Sensuality pertains to the disharmony within one's self. Such sins can be identified as 'sexual license, gluttony, extravagance, drunkenness, abandonment to various forms of physical desire'.[23] These types of sins, Niebuhr points out, are easier to identify and thus easier to attain social disapproval. Niebuhr appears to support the Augustinian and Thomist analysis that sensuality was a consequence of the more primal sin of self love, and thus indicated the further confusion in humanity of having lost 'God as the centre of existence'.[24] Sensuality had two sides:

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[15] Reinhold Niebuhr, 255.

[16] Reinhold Niebuhr, 260.

[17] Reinhold Niebuhr, 263.

[18] Reinhold Niebuhr, 280.

[19] Reinhold Niebuhr, 276.

[20] Reinhold Niebuhr, 260-261.

[21] Reinhold Niebuhr, 16.

[22] Niebuhr stated, 'The whole import of the Christian doctrine of creation for the Christian view of man is really comprehended in the Christian concept of individuality', 169-170.

[23] Reinhold Niebuhr, 228.

[24] Reinhold Niebuhr, 233.

1. It pointed out humanity's striving for power, prestige over others, and self-love;

2. It pointed out the attempt to escape from self because self has been recognised as inadequate.[25]

There is an insistence on the priority of sin in the individual before describing collective sin. The sinful heart helps understand the sinfulness of the collective heart, in other words, the sin of a group becomes the extension of individual sin. Yet the group can achieve power over the individual; collective sin can exceed individual sin. Thus the group can become more dangerous and exhibit greater injustice than a person.[26] It can be seen in Niebuhr's system that within humanity's individuality there is also the complementary concept of relationship. Humanity is to live in a harmonious relationship with God but this harmony is violated when the person makes itself the 'centre and source of his own life'.[27] Sin is not the loss of freedom but the misuse of freedom. Human sin distorts the idea of harmony in all human life and thus it is possible to see the reason for Niebuhr's insistence on the requirement of a theology of revelation. He states, 'Only in a religion of revelation, whose God reveals Himself to man from beyond himself and from beyond the contrast of vitality and form, can man discover the root of sin to be within himself'.[28]

Sin as Pride

Complementary to sin as rebellion is sin as pride. Niebuhr believes that sin as pride is the summary of the biblical explication of rebellion and injustice.[29] There are in his analysis three types of pride:

1. The pride of power: a self-sufficiency, self mastery and imagined security.

Pride of power is primarily evident in social power or a misunderstanding of social position in society. Niebuhr describes how the OT prophets preached against this expression of the pride of power, also known as greed. Primarily Niebuhr focuses on Amos who spoke in the word of God against the attempt to make the social life of Israel equal to God as though God sanctioned Israel's social apostasy.[30]

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[25] Reinhold Niebuhr, 234.
[26] Reinhold Niebuhr, 213.
[27] Reinhold Niebuhr, 16.
[28] Reinhold Niebuhr, 17.
[29] Reinhold Niebuhr, 186.
[30] Reinhold Niebuhr, 214.

2. Related to this is 'intellectual pride'.

This includes the problem of ideological systems of whatever stripe. Ideological pretensions in political systems assume unanswerable, non-accountable police power. These systems exist only as pretensions of ultimate and final knowledge.

3. Connected to this is moral pride expressing self-righteous judgements condemning non-conformists as the presence of evil.

Niebuhr makes the comment, 'Moral pride is the pretension of finite man that his highly conditioned virtue is the final righteousness and that his very relative moral standards are absolute'.[31] Eventually this becomes a form of injustice against humanity.

Sin as rebellion and pride, according to Niebuhr, provides the best possible way to understand guilt. Guilt is the objective consequence of the corruption of humanity. There is an equality of sin but not an equality of guilt.[32] The powerful are more guilty than the less powerful.

In the Christian mindset there is the problem that sin forces the spirituality of Christ to be equated with human spirituality. In other words, Christ is forced to conform to human expectations. For this reason Niebuhr repeatedly finds it necessary to argue for a theology of revelation. Again, he asserts the requirement of, '…a religion of revelation in which a holy and loving God is revealed to man as the source and end of all finite existence against whom the self-will of man is shattered and his pride abased'.[33] The way forward, out of a collapse of humanity into unresolved sinfulness, is to understand Jesus as 'representative man'.[34] It is then Niebuhr's view that a literal historical Adam is unnecessary. Human experience is sufficient evidence of the problem and Christology is God's response to the evidence of the universality of sin.

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[31] Reinhold Niebuhr, 199.

[32] Reinhold Niebuhr, 222.

[33] Reinhold Niebuhr, 201.

[34] Reinhold Niebuhr, 261.

EMIL BRUNNER

Key Theological Concerns

There are several theological concerns that mark Emil Brunner's work on the doctrine of sin. All theological development must evolve in relation to a comprehensive doctrine of God. Since, in Brunner's theological framework, Christ is the cornerstone for all theology, Christology thus forms the foundation for understanding sin. It is from this reference point that the doctrine of sin is grounded. Secondly, a biblical doctrine of creation includes a God of freedom who created humanity for responsible freedom. Repeatedly, Brunner reacts negatively to any thought of divine determinism that effectively denies human responsibility and freedom. It is sin that has defaced or marred the original intention of creation and it is only God who can bring creation back to a place of restoration, or responsible freedom, in communion with God. Within the doctrine of creation humanity has a destiny, a forward movement. It is sin that has re-directed the forward movement and reversed it.

Brunner is also determined to maintain the solidarity of humanity. Persons are not isolated pockets of humanity but are persons in relationship to God, creation, and other humans. A correct understanding of relationships requires moral responsibility and this gives humanity its true identity. Brunner believes that Immanual Kant came close to expressing this theological position but eventually fell short because of his insistence on the authority of human knowledge independent of God.

Brunner gives some time to working through the historical development of the doctrine of sin, and believed that until the time of Augustine the concept of sin was underdeveloped.[35] After the magisterial contribution of Augustine, he explains that the Reformation tried to recover the personal responsibility of humanity which had been inadequately identified in the later Augustinian tradition, while accepting the Augustinian formulation of original sin.[36]

Emil Brunner describes humanity as a contradiction between what humanity actually is, in empirical nature, and what humanity is as 'true nature', that is, as actually created.[37] Humanity is defaced by sin, the empirical nature is in opposition to God's created intention which was a humanity in communion with God. He repeatedly emphasises that this understanding is the theological understanding of humanity based on the revelation given by God.

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[35] Emil Brunner, *Dogmatics II,* 'The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption', (London: Lutterworth Press, 1952), 113.

[36] Emil Brunner, 116.

[37] Emil Brunner, *Man in Revolt*, (London: Lutterworth Press, 1939), 114.

Criticism of Augustine

In his early study on humanity, called *Man in Revolt*, Brunner does not completely reject the Augustinian tradition, for he finds it to be the most comprehensive doctrinal formulation. But, he writes to criticise its traditional expression. Brunner calls the Augustinian tradition the 'ecclesiastical tradition', which is the position of the Western Latin Church. He then comments by raising questions regarding its formulation:

The traditional ecclesiastical doctrine deals with this contradiction under the twofold conception of the Fall and of Original Sin. The idea of the Fall suggests that the 'contradiction' consists in apostasy from man's origin; the idea of Original Sin maintains that this 'contradiction' is a fatal determination of man's actual condition. Primarily there is no objection to this twofold view; indeed it is entirely relevant and must not be abandoned. The question, however, is only this: is the way in which these two aspects of the same fact are seen together in accordance with reality? And does it succeed in expressing the two intentions— necessity and responsibility, totality and individuality—equally clearly?[38]

Brunner answers with an emphatic, 'No!', to the adequacy of the ecclesiastical Augustinian tradition. No matter how the traditional Augustinian formulation is constructed the emphasis lies in determinism more than responsibility.[39] In his interpretation of Romans 5:12-18, Brunner asserts, 'The story of Adam is *one* of the means by which Paul interprets the universality and power of sin…The condemnation of all is not directly attributed to the fall of Adam but to the sin of all.'[40] What Paul expressed, according to Brunner, was the solidarity and responsibility of humanity through the concept of Adam.

Responsive Love

In creation true responsibility is grounded in the responsive love of God; only in God's love can humanity fulfil its original destiny.[41] The love of God is to be expressed in the reciprocal human love back to God and neighbour and by this humanity is 'truly human'. Only in the cross of Christ can we become aware of the utter corruptibility of sin and become aware of our opposition to creation. The human denial of this destiny is the evidence of sin.[42] Responsibility lies at the heart of the creation of humanity. 'This', Brunner comments, 'is the Biblical idea of man, that God, since He creates me as responsible, creates me in and for community with others'. This he calls 'mutual responsibility'.[43] Humanity had

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[38] *Man in Revolt,* 122.

[39] *Man in Revolt,* 121.

[40] *Man in Revolt*, 119 n 1.

[41] *Man in Revolt,* 155.

[42] *Man in Revolt,* 156.

[43] *Man in Revolt,* 140.

been created by God for love, 'the life-giving purpose of God'.[44]

The beginning step in the doctrine of sin is the acknowledgement that sin describes humanity's need for redemption. Only God can provide the needed redemption, thus 'justification' is both a divine gift and a new creation.[45] The starting point for Brunner is not to create a catalogue of scriptural texts, but to establish Christian thought in the doctrine of God, particularly, Christology.[46] Brunner believes that Genesis 3 had little effect on the biblical description of the doctrine of sin, and Paul's use of Genesis 3 in Romans 5:12-18 only requires an acknowledgement of the fall of humanity.

Sin as Rebellion

Sin is apostasy or rebellion, a falling away from God, Sin, it must be remembered is not the starting point but the result of breaking away from God's original offer of grace in creation. Brunner is quite specific when he comments, 'Sin is apostasy, rebellion, because it is not the primary element, but the reversal of the primary element'.[47] As apostasy, sin creates a change in relationship to God, thus sin is distinctly personal. Sin is the attempt of humanity to be completely independent of God, it is self-deification. Brunner adds, 'For through sin man is in rebellion against his destiny'.[48] This must be understood in the light of Christ. Sin becomes a state of rebellion, not simply as act.[49] This necessarily affects the whole of humanity, the *Imago Dei* has been defaced in humanity. Sin, then, is not only a wrong decision, it is a 'perverted tendency of our nature'.[50] The tension that this creates is the tension that maintains freedom and responsibility, excludes determinism, yet acknowledges that humanity's freedom has become limited through the enslavement of sin.

Since humanity was created in a finite manner, unable even to invent sin, sin is then the outsider that invades humanity which preserves the idea of God's created responsibility in humanity. Sin is both an act and a state which identifies the depth of sin, but it is sin only by definition of its relation to God. Yet the state of sin does not require a person to commit acts of sin. Here Brunner tries to avoid the literal determinism which denies responsibility. As he works through this 'mystery' he states, 'The fact that "I am a sinner" does not mean that I must tell lies, steal, commit adultery, or murder'.[51] He completely rejects moral

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[44] *Man in Revolt,* 127.

[45] *Dogmatics II*, 89.

[46] *Dogmatics II,* 90.

[47] *Dogmatics II,* 92.

[48] *Dogmatics II,* 124.

[49] It is possible to note a change in describing sin as a state from the earlier work, *Man in Revolt*, in which he stated, 'Sin is never a state, but it is always an act'. 148.

[50] *Man in Revolt,* 145.

[51] *Man in Revolt,* 109.

determinism. Sin does not destroy all freedom but it has destroyed the central freedom of responding to God, and on the basis of this everyone is a sinner. With this in mind, evil is then the avoidance or denial of responsibility.[52]

Brunner compares the concept of universal sin, which he finds acceptable in much non-Christian thought, to a disease which infects humanity. This includes individual sin as well as institutional sin. Institutional sin is far more dangerous. He states, 'Evil which takes the shape of social wrong, or incorporated in institutions, or as a mass phenomenon, is worse than evil in any individual form, in isolation'.[53]

Adam in Solidarity with Humanity

Brunner asserts that 'Adam' is '**tupo" tou mellonto"**', the identical act of all. Only in Christ, the revelation of God, can this be discerned. Only in this solidarity of the rebellion of humanity that we stand before Christ.[54] Solidarity is the preferred term for universal sin rather than 'inheritance'. Inheritance diminishes responsibility while solidarity emphasises responsibility.[55] Solidarity is equivalent to Adam as our representative. The Adamic reference meant that, 'we, each one of us, are "Adam", just as we all together are "Adam"'.[56] Brunner doees not attempt to define the origin of sin in humanity, other than to assert its existence. Within humanity he postulates that its appearance comes at the point when we recognise that we are conscious of ourselves, when we express the 'I', the personableness of humanity.

Brunner does not accept the doctrine of the Fall as an historical event yet he is not prepared to dispense with the universality of sin. In an interesting discussion he comments that the restoration of creation is not a return to the original paradise. This idea of a return to the original paradise bears more similarity to pagan cyclical creation stories then biblical revelation.[57] The End is not like the Beginning and this relieves the understanding of creation and redemption from Greek metaphysics.

In a brief section called, 'The Problem of Original Sin', Brunner contends that Augustine's explanation 'is completely foreign to the Bible',[58] but it does accurately combine the solidarity of sin in humanity along with the dominating force of sin. Brunner's criticism of Augustine centres on Romans 5:12 which is the recognised mistranslation of Augustine; **ejf j w%** in Greek became for

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[52] *Man in Revolt,* 115.

[53] *Dogmatics II,* 96.

[54] *Dogmatics II,* 97.

[55] *Man in Revolt,* 122.

[56] *Man in Revolt,* 149.

[57] *Dogmatics II,* 102.

[58] *Dogmatics II,* 103.

Augustine *in lumbis Adami*.[59] Brunner counters that Adam's descendants are involved in death because they themselves commit sin. Romans 5:12 is not about inherited sin in the Augustinian tradition for, 'sin, godlessness, alienation from God can never be inherited'.[60]

Avoidance of Determinism

Brunner is firm in trying to avoid a deterministic view of sin which he believes to be a major point in the Augustinian tradition. There is a difference between humanity as a mammal and humanity as a sinner. In the one case, it is part of God's creation and humanity can be pleased to be a mammal and can do nothing about it. On the other hand, humanity was not created as a sinner, and should not be pleased about being a sinner, and can do something about it. Brunner may appear here to sound Pelagian; he is not. Humanity is a prisoner to sin, entangled in sin, a slave to sin in which it is impossible to overcome. The door to true freedom is shut. It is impossible for humanity to enter into communion with God. Then he adds, 'He cannot restore this by his own efforts, he cannot forgive his own sin'. Humanity cannot get rid of the guilt that separates God and humanity, 'This return to God cannot be made by a human act—like the forgiveness of sin—only by an act of God'.[61]

Humanity was created in 'responsible existence'; 'Man is and remains a moral responsibility; but he has lost the possibility or ordering his life in accordance with his divine destiny'.[62] This does not relieve humanity of responsibility, only the erroneous predestinarian determinism does this. The *Imago Dei* always remains, although marred by sin. In this sense freedom and responsibility remain.

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[59] *Dogmatics II,* 103.

[60] *Dogmatics II,* 105.

[61] *Dogmatics II,* 107.

[62] *Dogmatics II,* 118.

HENRI BLOCHER

The Riddle of Humanity

Henri Blocher utilises three introductory questions to create a framework for an analysis of original sin and his defence of the Augustinian position. The questions are stated in a manner in which the 'riddle' of humanity is expressed with the accompanying thought that the Augustinian understanding of original sin is the most comprehensive solution.

The three questions are:

> 1. Why is the perception of human evil accompanied by feelings of guilt, indignation, or shame?

> 2. If humans are capable of so much evil, why are they also capable of heroism, selfless servitude, and devotion to the truth?

> 3. For those who believe that the world is not self-explanatory but its origins are in a holy, wise God, how do we account for the apparent contradictions of human goodness and human evil? [63]

With a modified Augustinian doctrine of original sin, Blocher believes that the three questions are handled in a satisfactory manner, or, at least, the Augustinian position is more coherent than any other.

For Blocher, original sin is:

> 1. universal sinfulness;

> 2. it belongs to the 'nature' of humanity present from birth;

> 3. in this sense it is inherited;

> 4. it stems from Adam; it has an historical beginning.

Genesis and Palaeontology

Blocher recognises the difficulty between the biblical account of the Fall as an historical account of Adam and Eve, and the current work in palaeontology. His resolution to the difficulty is presented, not in dogmatic form, but as suggestions for a way forward. Blocher insists that the Augustinian tradition of original sin requires an historical Adam and Eve; thus he does not treat Genesis 2 and 3 as mythological saga outside historical events. He rejects, therefore, the methodology of Emil Brunner and Reinhold Niebuhr who eliminate the historicity of the story of the Adamic fall. At the same time, to treat the opening chapters of Genesis in a purely literal fashion is the least satisfactory method.[64]

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[63] Henri Blocher, *Original Sin: Illuminating the Riddle,* (Leicester: Apollos, IVP, 1997), 11-12.

[64] Henri Blocher, 40.

Gen 2:4-3:24 is pictorial, symbolic language, not rigidly literal. Blocher insists, 'It is permissible therefore not to identify the narrative with a straightforward, ordinary history, and to look for another historical genre'.[65] This he finds in the ideas of 'a well crafted childlike drawing', or, 'the tympans of Romanesque cathedrals and the stories told by their stained glass windows'.

Connected to his development of the theology contained in the Genesis 1-3 narratives, Blocher addresses the concern of how much history is required for an adequate theology.[66] Although he is unable to answer the question precisely because he locates his theological formulation in the catalogue of biblical texts rather than in Christology, he is cautious about accepting the tendency to devalue history while maintaining theological truth. Thus he believes that the Fall is to be interpreted as an historical event, or as he states, 'only if the problem is historical will the solution *happen*'.[67] Adam is therefore a personal historic character who represented humanity. Blocher endeavours to avoid a fideistic system which would ignore the results of palaeontology and natural science. The precarious position for Blocher is in the recognition that his stance on original sin must not be seen as anti-science or a 'God-of-the-gaps' solution. The result is to propose that the Adamic race began about 40,000 years ago and Adam is the first 'theological' man.[68] He thus places Adam's fall in the neolithic age and it was a fall from 'perfection'.[69]

The Bible and the Adamic Fall

Blocher's book serves as an attempt to demonstrate that the Adamic Fall plays a greater role throughout the biblical material than has been recognised in current studies. He locates Old Testament inter-textual references to the Adam story in the Prophets, especially Isaiah and Ezekiel 28.[70] The Wisdom literature also mentions the Genesis story as a basis for sin. In the New Testament he identifies the Genesis account in the Synoptics, the Johannine literature, and finally in the Pauline texts. Blocher's conclusion is that the explicit reference in Romans 5 to the Adam/Christ typology is not an isolated passage.

Romans 5 is the crucial text for an explanation of original sin. He rejects two interpretations of Romans 5. First, we are not condemned for our sins; Blocher comments, 'Adam's role is reduced to that of a remote fountainhead'. Then he rejects the position that we are condemned for Adam's sin. Again, Blocher comments, 'the equity of that transfer is hard to see'.[71] For Blocher Adam is the

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[65] Henri Blocher, 41.

[66] Henri Blocher, 59.

[67] Henri Blocher, 62.

[68] Henri Blocher, 42.

[69] Henri Blocher, 37.

[70] Henri Blocher, 44-45.

[71] Henri Blocher, 77

covenant head, or representative, or federal, head of humanity. God, according to Blocher, sees humanity in Adam and through Adam. God sees the sin of humanity committed by and through Adam. Adam is the 'natural and legal head or mediator'.[72] Particularly, Romans 5:12 is not about the imputation of sin but is about the condemnation of sin beginning with Adam. Blocher states, '…the reign of death is based on condemnation…and it is one and the same thing to reckon sin and to condemn the sinner'.[73] Here he appears to avoid Augustine's recognised mistranslation of Romans 5:12 by calling it a 'disputed clause'. The 'disputed clause' does not appear to support Blocher's position but then he added, 'Apart from the disputed clause in verse 12, "because all have sinned", nowhere does the apostle put forward the actual sinful tendencies or behaviour of humankind as the ground for their condemnation'.[74] But then he does not consider Augustine's mistranslation of Romans 5:12 as fatal to a doctrine of original sin, although he does not favour the traditional position of the seminal transmission of sin. Yet, this interpretation found support in two of his preferred theologians, Augustine and Francis Turretin.

Adam as Legal Head

Blocher has rejected two possible positions on original sin—we are not condemned for our own sins, nor are we condemned for Adam's sin. Yet, Blocher is convinced that Paul spoke in judicial, legal terms. 'Therefore, he comments, 'Romans 5 *is to make possible the imputation, the judicial treatment, of human sins'*.[75] Within the framework of the covenant of creation, God sees humanity collectively 'in Adam and through Adam'. Adam is the legal head of all humanity and all humans are related to Adam. Thus sin is imputed to all humanity; we are sinful in Adam. Blocher upholds the 'federal' line which allows for individuality while at the same time humanity stands together in the requirement of the legal debt. Adam was appointed by God as the legal reality [76] and so there is individual responsibility along with hereditary determinism.[77] The headship of Adam means being 'in Adam'—it means that Adam defines humanity and we bear his image. Blocher can then conclude that Romans 5:12-18 is not dealing directly with original sin but the implications of an understanding of original sin. It appears that God is required to respond to humanity in a legal, judicial manner. It is then possible to conclude that *justice* is the primary attribute of God that determines divine action.

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[72] Henri Blocher, 80.

[73] Henri Blocher, 70.

[74] Henri Blocher, 67.

[75] Henri Blocher, 77.

[76] Henri Blocher, 117.

[77] Henri Blocher, 122.

Human Experience

Blocher believes that human experience is one indispensable tool in the evidential support for original sin. Taking in summary fashion literature, economics, politics, psychoanalysis (particularly Freudian), all points to the problem of universal evil. Yet, although progress in medicine, science, education, psychotherapy continues to be impressive and humanity expresses an advancement in education, technology, and in some cases morality, this can be explained, according to Blocher, by Calvin's use of 'common grace'.[78] Still, universal sin accords with human experience. Blocher accepts the Augustinian definition that evil is the 'deprivation, corruption, perversion of the good'.[79] This, he insists, is part of the doctrine of original sin.

It can be clearly understood that Blocher holds to the view that universal sin is explained by the Augustinian explanation of original sin. It holds in tension two important concepts, the fatalism of 'you will sin', and responsibility, 'you will be held accountable'. Blocher calls this 'necessity and responsibility', or 'fate and guilt'.[80]

In this system it is guilt that implies responsibility. Blocher finds his way through the moral tension of 'fate and guilt' by positing that 'the bondage of all human beings from birth (is) to be attributed to the will—and not be included in the metaphysical definition of humanness'.[81] In other words, sin is an outsider that invades humanity and we are powerless to stop the invasion. Blocher finds help in keeping the Genesis 3 account in the realm of historical reality. He added, 'Sin's historical origin makes it a matter of tragic necessity, but not of fate'. The way here is not always clear but he appears to support a supralapsarian view that all was decreed by God before the creation of the universe. At the same time he is trying to avoid an impersonal fatalism while asserting a personal determinism.

Sin as a disease is a useful metaphor, but it does not convey the total reality of sin. Blocher is dissatisfied with the metaphor, though he finds it in scripture, because it does not adequately imply guilt and responsibility.[82] Blocher does not propose an antithesis between the medical analogy and the matter of the will, for he thinks that a harmony would be preferred. But the harmony is first to prioritise the will which will allow the biological concept to become a useful subdivision.

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[78] Henri Blocher, 89.
[79] Henri Blocher, 92.
[80] Henri Blocher, 99.
[81] Henri Blocher, 100.
[82] Henri Blocher, 110-111.

The Defence of Augustine

Blocher assesses the situation regarding original sin in stating, 'To reject the Augustinian definition of original sin, conflicts, as I have shown, with the teaching of scripture. It ignores some elements in experience. It slips back, in open or hidden fashion, into metaphysical interpretations of evil. It is a road we should not travel'.[83] He adds, 'Sin, being corruption, perversion, constantly uses created reality as a tool and vehicle through the variety of its manifestations. It must have employed some cause, law or structure of creation in order to spread from Adam to all'.[84]

In all of this Blocher excludes the 'sin gene', or, 'sin as a chromosome aberration'. He rejects this as crude and in error,[85] although he recognises that there is a hotly debated controversy within genetics that revolves around hereditary behaviour. To add to the details of Blocher's position he appears to hold to the 'creationist' position. Here, sin makes use of the physical properties to corrupt humanity and because of the close relationship of the soul to the body, the soul is corrupted. At the same time Blocher reiterates that no 'alien guilt is transferred'.[86] Guilt is applied only after the first sin is committed: 'Alienation from God, the condition of being deprived and depraved, follows immediately upon the first act of sinning—for Adam himself and for his seed after him'.[87]

CONCLUSION

In Western/Latin theology there has been a tendency to understand the early Patristic Fathers as having an undeveloped or inadequate concept of sin. Gerald Bray has commented, 'It is virtually an axiom of historical theology that the doctrine of original sin, as we recognise it today, cannot be traced back beyond Augustine'.[88] Bray pointed out that the major dogmatic concern in early Church history and theology revolved around Christological questions. Christological controversies were primary with the final resolution defined at Chalcedon (451). After this the ecumenical Councils were conciliatory in direction. Typical of the Eastern historical approach, Christian doctrine should be interpreted in terms of Christology. The doctrine of sin was not ignored during these years but it did take a different direction. Generally, the accepted biblical presupposition was that sin entered human life through the sin of Adam. Gerald Bray's summary conclusion does need to be recognised when he commented that Pelagius had no impact on the doctrine of sin in Eastern Patristic writings, and he would have found no

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[83] Henri Blocher, 107.
[84] Henri Blocher, 109.
[85] Henri Blocher, 125.
[86] Henri Blocher, 128.
[87] Henri Blocher, 128.
[88] Gerald Bray, 'Original Sin in Patristic Thought,', *Churchman* Vol. 108 No. 1 (1994), 37.

support in the classical early Patristic theologians.[89] Sinfulness, according to Eastern Patristic thought, was inevitable for all humanity. For purposes of drawing this essay to a conclusion, rather than explaining the whole system of these early Church Fathers, I shall limit my comments to Irenaeus. It should not be construed that there is a monolithic Eastern theology to which all the Easterners adhered. Their theology is very diversified and complex. Irenaeus is one example, but an important and leading example.

Humanity was created with free-will in the image and likeness of God. The image of God was the ability to relate to God; the likeness of God was the ability to grow in grace and holiness.[90] In Irenaeus' understanding of creation there are controlling factors.[91] First, there is an infinite separation between God and humanity. Humanity cannot fully close this infinite gap but can grow in grace in communion with God. Secondly, humanity was created in a child-like condition[92] and Satan was not hesitant to exploit this infantile finiteness of humanity. Infantile finiteness implied ignorance and this helped explain Adam's fall from grace. Sin was not originally a deliberate rebellion against God, but thoughtlessness. Thus, according to Irenaeus, our physical descent from Adam meant that we share in Adam's resultant offence against God.[93] Satan will always exploit our infantile innocency to turn us away from God.

Adam became the representative for humanity, [94] and in our likeness to Adam we also have offended God.[95] Once fallen, through thoughtlessness we have rebelled against God. With this theology of creation Irenaeus could explain the origin of human sin, that is, how it was possible for humanity to fall, something that Augustine found difficult to do.

In this all too brief summary of Irenaeus, it is possible to understand that the Augustinian doctrine of sin is essentially incompatible with the Eastern explanation, yet both accept without question the universality of human sin and the Eastern approach cannot be so easily equated with Pelagianism, or semi-

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[89] Gerald Bray, 46.

[90] Irenaeus saw humanity as body, soul, and spirit. The body was the physical appearance, the soul was the mind, and the spirit was the life given by God. Irenaeus stated: 'But when the spirit here blended with the soul is united to (God's) handiwork, the man is rendered spiritual and perfect because of the outpouring of the Spirit, and this is he who was made in the image and likeness of God' (*Against Heresies* V.vi.1). The perfect man is the union of body, soul, and spirit in which the Spirit gives life.

[91] Gerald Bray, 39.

[92] Because humanity was created in an infantile state, Irenaeus believed that Jesus passed through every stage of human life, infant to old age, to redeem it and sanctify it (*Against Heresies* II.xxii.4).

[93] *Against Heresies* V.xvi.3; III.xviii.7.

[94] *Against Heresies* III.xxi.1-2. The twentieth century Orthodox theologian Georges Florovsky identified sin as a freedom that exists in disfigured actions, or, a refusal to ascend to God, 'a self-erotic obsession, a spiritual narcissism' [*Collected Works*, Vol. 3, 'Creation and Redemption' (Belmont, Mass: Nordlund, 1976), 84-85.

[95] *Against Heresies* III.xvi.2; xix.1; xxxiv.2.

Pelagianism.

Finally, though it is possible to conclude that there is a basic incompatibility between the Eastern and Western approaches to the understanding of original sin, there is possibly a more positive, forward looking, direction in the amalgamation of the best of the two systems. But such a proposal would require that one must travel such a road very carefully. Perhaps at this point it can be recognised that, though there is disagreement between the three Western/Augustinian theologians, they give evidence of the flexibility within the Augustinian system. It is that flexibility that can produce a way forward without the necessity of jettisoning the whole even if one is determined to stay within the Augustinian theological framework. It appears that the way forward is being discovered as illustrated in the comparison between Niebuhr, Brunner, and Blocher.