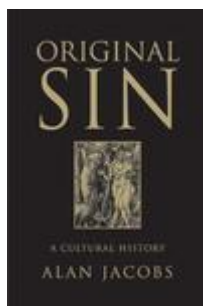


ORIGINAL SIN

(edited by Nolan, 2008)



Original Sin: A Cultural History by Alan Jacobs

Price: \$24.95 On Sale: 4/29/2008 Formats: Hardcover | E-Book

Essayist and biographer Alan Jacobs introduces us to the world of original sin, which he describes as not only a profound idea but a necessary one. As G. K. Chesterton explains, "Only with original sin can we at once pity the beggar and distrust the king."

Do we arrive in this world predisposed to evil? St. Augustine passionately argued that we do; his opponents thought the notion was an insult to a good God. Ever since Augustine, the church has taught the doctrine of original sin, which is the idea that we are not born innocent, but as babes we are corrupt, guilty, and worthy of condemnation. Thus started a debate that has raged for centuries and done much to shape Western civilization.

Perhaps no Christian doctrine is more controversial; perhaps none is more consequential. Blaise Pascal claimed that "but for this mystery, the most incomprehensible of all, we remain incomprehensible to ourselves." Chesterton affirmed it as the only provable Christian doctrine. Modern scholars assail the idea as baleful and pernicious. But whether or not we believe in original sin, the idea has shaped our most fundamental institutions—our political structures, how we teach and raise our young, and, perhaps most pervasively of all, how we understand ourselves. In *Original Sin*, Alan Jacobs takes readers on a sweeping tour of the idea of original sin, its origins, its history, and its proponents and opponents. And he leaves us better prepared to answer one of the most important questions of all: Are we really, all of us, bad to the bone?

Alan Jacobs: An Original Defense of Sin

by Marcia Z. Nelson, *Religion BookLine -- Publishers Weekly*, 2/13/2008

Scholar and author Alan Jacobs, who teaches literature at Wheaton College in suburban Chicago, traces the point and counterpoint of the cultural argument over a controversial theological doctrine in *Original Sin: A Cultural History* (see starred review below). Jacobs tours Western literature and culture to show how the idea of original sin has affected our institutions.

RBL: Why a book about original sin?

Jacobs: Some years ago I was doing some research for an essay about Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and I was re-reading his philosophical novel called *Émile*, which is about education. I stumbled across a sermon by John Wesley on the education of children. He said children are natural atheists, their inclinations are vile. Those two pieces of writing were written about the same time, and you couldn't have had two more dramatically different ideas. And it was all based on the fact that John Wesley believes in original sin and Rousseau doesn't. There are cultural consequences to how we think about our fellow human beings.

RBL: In St. Augustine's argument for original sin, a corollary is that infants who die unbaptized are eternally condemned. Can we accept original sin without that repugnant clause?

Jacobs: Augustine thought that consistency required that. He didn't think that God could be merciful to people except through the sacraments. It's baptism that pulls the kids out of the fire. I don't think it is necessary for God to be merciful only through the sacraments. I don't see any way that you could call God just if he was in the business of damning infants.

RBL: You conclude that original sin can be viewed comically. Explain more.

Jacobs: A lot of the resistance people have to the idea of original sin is that it's an insult to their dignity. But we also do silly things, foolish things. Nothing is more helpful to our own self-understanding than an ability to laugh at ourselves.

RBL: Your style in this book, which has so many references, is very readable, and you chose not to do footnotes. Why?

Jacobs: The only way this book was going to be what I wanted it to be was to have a narrative flow. Nothing interrupts a narrative flow more than footnotes.

RBL: What's next?

Jacobs: I'm just in the beginning stages of writing a book about trees. The book is going to be called *The Gospel of the Trees*. It's part of my participation in the group called the Project on Lived Theology at the University of Virginia. I tell my students the whole Christian story is about trees. There are a few trees in the beginning, Jesus is crucified on a tree, in the Book of Revelation there's a Tree of Life. It's just trees.

By way of contrast - the current Prayer Book:

Unit 1: INTRODUCTION AND HUMAN NATURE (Nolan) from <http://www.philosophy-religion.org/catechism/main.htm>

Human Nature

For many years, Christians were taught to believe, and many are still taught to believe, that from the moment a baby emerges from its mother's womb, it has a natural, in-born tendency toward sinfulness, that is, toward being self-centered, unloving, and idolatrous. Sometimes this belief is called "Original Sin."

Today, while many Christians still hold to this, or some other, understanding of Original Sin, others have a more positive view of human nature. As an alternative to Original Sin, the Prayer Book "Outline"

proposes that human beings are born "in the image of God." Born basically good, human beings possess innate capacities to love, to create, to make many kinds of choices, and to live in harmony with God and nature. Some would say further that God's grace (spiritual assistance) is needed for these capacities to be lived out in this idolatrous world that continually shackles its human residents.

When Christians declare "in the image of God," they are not proposing that human beings are exactly like God! They are not claiming that God has a mortal body, is male or female, or has other human limitations! Instead, Christians are proclaiming basic human goodness and the capacities to act *personally* rather than like a mindless, heartless robot.

However, from the earliest times, human beings have misused their native abilities. We have failed to love by destroying, by being thoughtless, by abusing nature, and by misdirecting our good physical and emotional energies. This realism is embodied in the very beautiful Adam and Eve story.

(When later we discuss the Bible, we'll talk about this type of story; but I think you should know right now that many, perhaps most, Christian churches, realize that in the Bible there are all kinds of literature, and among them are folktales. One can be a Christian and regard the whole Creation story in the Book of Genesis as a beautiful myth containing fundamental truths, but not to be taken literally.)

In part, the Adam and Eve story tells us that though they were created good, humans from their beginnings have misused their God-given capacities and have failed to love as taught by God; they rebelled against their Creator! This is a marvelous story by which we can come to an understanding of inborn human goodness, but that individually and as a whole, human beings have made and continue to make unloving choices; in doing so, the human community is prevented from the full blossoming of love intended by God.

Is there any hope for humanity? Yes, proposes Christianity, with strength from God and each other, people can live in harmony with God's intentions and purposes for mankind. If the entire human race would choose to accept with heart and mind God's purposes for humanity, interpersonal relationships, the very quality of people's lives, would be transfigured.

When can the Creator's purposes and intentions be discovered? Christians believe that the Creator of the universe has communicated the Divine will for human beings through nature and through historical events, especially the lives of the Hebrew prophets and Jesus. Without such communication, indirect and direct, humanity would be left to flounder with regard to the meaning and significance of human life.

What is meant by "communicated his Will through nature?" More and more psychologists speak of the human need, a built-in need to love and be loved. These psychological observations, separate from biblical and theological assertions, are consistent with Christianity. It is as though humanity is receiving an indirect message from the Creator, when social scientists conclude from observations in nature, that all persons are meant to love and be loved!

How are God's purposes and intentions, that is, his Will, learned through historical events? We must admit that every event can be interpreted in more than one way; this is true of an auto accident, a war, or any other occasion. It is possible to view all historical events without any reference to God. It is impossible to observe or report events without some kind of a point of view, perspective, or context!

One valid way of viewing and understanding some historical events is to perceive them as communicating directly to humanity something further about God's Will. For example, when we read of the Hebrew prophets, when we read of Jesus and the quality of his life and teachings, we read of historical people through whom, Christians believe, humanity receives a clearer vision of what the Creator intends for all of us. Their wisdom and their examples provide us with clues (not detailed blueprints or computer programs) to what life is all about. These events are called "revelations" or communications from God.

Some human beings who do not accept these revelations arrive at different conclusions about life. One such interpretation is that life has no meaning; it is absurd; we're trapped on this stupid little planet going around an insignificant little sun journeying around a meaningless universe. To be sure, this is one of many alternative ways of understanding life.

Christians, on the other hand, along with Jews and Muslims (the three religions united by the Hebrew Bible, which we call "The Old Testament"), conclude that life *has* meaning. Life is personal: a sovereign Creator-who-cares searches for humanity's loving loyalty; the clue to human life is in loving and being loved. This meaning is evident in nature and in certain events.

To conclude this unit, please read the section below on human nature in "An Outline of the Faith."



Text from The Book of Common Prayer of the Episcopal Church – page 845

Human Nature

Q. What are we by nature?

A. We are part of God's creation, made in the image of God.

Q. What does it mean to be created in the image of God?

A. It means that we are free to make choices: to love, to create, to reason, and to live in harmony with creation and with God.

Q. Why then do we live apart from God and out of harmony with creation?

A. From the beginning, human beings have misused their freedom and made wrong choices.

Q. Why do we not use our freedom as we should?

A. Because we rebel against God, and we put ourselves in the place of God.

Please read Chapter VII of Cherbonnier, "Sin Misconceived As Intrinsic To Human Nature" at <http://www.philosophy-religion.org/cherbonnier/hardness/chap-7.htm> . The entire book is within the Cherbonnier subsite at www.philosophy-religion.org .