

# Civil Religion and Original Sin

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Original sin, nowadays is usually not welcomed by most Christians of Western culture. Religious traditions on original sin are felt to be uncomfortably strange in our society<sup>1</sup> where people, by common consent, see themselves so unconnected to others that the actions of one person are supposed to leave other people untouched.<sup>2</sup> Such cultural agreement is at the roots of a society that believes every person is free and able to achieve whatever he/she wants. Since original sin doctrines clearly deny such “unconnectedness”, no wonder they are often rejected and reduced to a teaching as simplistic as “a spot on a child’s soul!” This article suggests that original sin traditions can speak to our contemporary culture, challenge some of its deepest presuppositions, and lead to new levels of awareness of what it means to be Christian in today’s world.

To understand the meaning of doctrines which are expressed in what anthropologists call mythical tales or myths, it is relevant to recognize the different representations of the world which flow from different mythical tales, and the effects of those different representations. I submit that a doctrine as “religious” as Original Sin says a lot about how we envision the civil organization of society. Furthermore, the present disregard for this doctrine is related to social and political representations.<sup>3</sup> I will thus compare the basic assumptions of the original sin myth with another set of assumptions, those underlying the individualistic world view which is sometimes summarized in another myth: the civil religion of free enterprise.<sup>4</sup>

Various interpretations of original sin have attempted to articulate individual and collective dimensions of the sinful condition. These interpretations at the same time propose diverse understandings of the relationship between history and our present actions. Classical Catholicism seems to identify original sin with the tendency of each individual toward selfishness and personal aggrandizement. This interpretation is relatively uncritical with respect to the presence of sinful conditions in social and collective historical structures. The main lines of the Reform tradition tend to identify original sin with a kind of complete and irreversible corruption of the structures of the world. Consequently these structures are often disregarded, and thus accepted unconditionally,

while salvation and grace are regarded as primarily individual and not collective concerns. In this paper, I will rely on one of the contemporary prevalent interpretations of original sin, submitted by P. Schoonenberg<sup>5</sup> and based on the concept of the “sin of the world”. According to this concept to live is to belong to a community deeply touched by a historical – not metaphysical – sinful condition. This condition does not only concern people but also mentalities and societal structures. It is obvious that, seen from this point of view, original sin will always be either a part of or a challenge to any civil religion.

#### *The “Free Enterprise” Civil Religion in North America*

The free enterprise civil religion brings the awareness that many things which had been impossible in Europe became feasible in North America. By so doing, the myth has given the core of the civil religion of the United States; it contributes in the maintenance of the unity of that society. Free enterprise, however, can also be uncritically used – and *has* been used – to legitimate some of the oppressive structures of capitalist society.<sup>6</sup> Let us examine some of the assumptions which permit the myth to function in this way.

The basic assumption is that all people are equal: for everyone, everything is possible at the moment of birth, and every individual is able to achieve his/her goals in society as it is. This myth assumes that history is something that does not touch the lives of people deeply; hence the social, economic and cultural conditions into which a person is inserted are overlooked. Instead, life is thought of as offering unlimited possibilities, at least if one works hard. Success is attributed to an individual’s personal courage and will-power. Each person grows alone, all pulling themselves up by their own bootstraps. The conflicts of life and especially systemic conflicts of interest are concealed behind the ideology of tolerance; in the free enterprise mythology, competition is always presumed to be fair.

#### *The “Original Sin” Myth*

It is upon presuppositions that are completely contrary to those just mentioned that the most traditional trends of Christian faith base the doctrine of original sin. In this myth, the basic assumption is that history *has* touched persons deeply, to the point that everything is not possible for everyone. By the simple fact of being of the human race, people are seen as suffering limitations resulting from past history. Human community is assumed to be a community of sin; in human relationships, people tend to oppress others because of the very way societal life is organized. Thus, persons are born neither equal nor independent of historical conditions. Every individual, simply because he/she shares in the life of

society, is limited and partially crippled. These historical limitations are not merely external, but touch each one in the depths of his/her psychology. Furthermore, these injustices and oppressions come from a society that is produced by human choices and decisions and not from an inexorable fate. No one is individually guilty for the fact that there is a community of sin, but everyone shares in this sinful community and is – objectively, if not subjectively – an accomplice to the sin of society. Looked at in this way,<sup>7</sup> original sin has many characteristics of what has been called collective or systemic sin, institutionalized evil, sin of the world, social sin, etc.

According to the free enterprise myth an individual can be saved alone. In the original sin perspective, however, there is no way of speaking only of an individual liberation. Outside of a liberating community, one cannot be liberated from the community of sin: salvation is always a societal event. Furthermore, according to the traditional doctrine, no one will be completely liberated before the eschaton, when a true community of love will have replaced the present community of oppression and sin; that hope moves people to work collectively toward their collective liberation.

Thus, contrary to an individualistic way of teaching about original sin, the traditional doctrine relates much more to a collective and even to a cosmic reality rather than to isolated individuals. The fundamental assumption is that, in the very basis of society, there are contradictions and conflicts which, until resolved, prevent anyone from being completely freed.

#### *Free Enterprise and Original Sin as Ideologies*

Obviously these two conceptions of society differ greatly and actually are in opposition to each other. No one should wonder, then, that in a society ruled by the free enterprise civil religion, the doctrine of original sin has been seen as absolutely unacceptable. Even more, it has often been reduced to an almost ridiculous theory of a spot on the souls of individuals or to a biological event (a sin transmitted by physical birth).<sup>8</sup> But to those who seriously consider the assumptions of the traditional doctrine or to those who analyse the contradictions of our society, the free enterprise myth becomes unacceptable. The freedom presupposed for everyone in the free enterprise civil religion actually exists only for a minority. It appears as the ideology legitimating those in society who want to believe and make believe that they pull themselves up by their own bootstraps, while actually they are only able to succeed because of their privileges in a non-egalitarian society. “Fair competition”, that is, competition between parties on equal footing is rare and generally artificial. A good example of artificial

equality would be the relationship between white men and Indians, which was, in fact, the historical basis of the North American free enterprise society. Even now, western society is built on a non-egalitarian relationship with developing countries.

The myth of free enterprise and its optimistic conception of society has had all the characteristics of every ideology that stems from dominant groups. These groups always envision society as fundamentally well-organized and free of discord because, after all, they are those who organized it according to their own social position. On the contrary, the myth of original sin, beginning with the assumption that society is basically not well-organized but sinful, seems to originate from the places in society where the poor and oppressed are. From their point of view, society is not well-ordered but looks broken and full of contradictions. For the privileged, the world is harmonious and everything seems possible for every person, but from the standpoint of the oppressed, it is obvious that everyone is touched by the evil of society. Moreover, the human origin of that evil can be verified in the historical oppression to which many people are presently subjected. For the privileged it is as important to pretend that all human beings are equal persons, as it is obvious to the oppressed that some are more "persons" than others.

#### *The Relevance of the Original Sin Concept Today*

The original sin myth is a religious doctrine that, in a very deep way, would involve believers socially and politically. It is one of the ways to express the mystery of evil in terms with which the oppressed can identify. The individualistic reduction which has been prevalent in the recent history of theology is quite intelligible because a culture cannot be based on the myth of free enterprise and at the same time be based on a serious reading of the myth of original sin. It has not been by coincidence that the doctrine of original sin has in recent times been used to demean the value of human beings and to suggest that they should feel guilty and submissive. Such a reading of the myth obviously stems from the ideologies of dominant groups in society. However, when it is not reduced to such an individualistic interpretation, original sin is a subversive doctrine in a society based on the "free enterprise" ideology.<sup>9</sup> Original sin thus is an important concept for those Christians who no longer believe in the ideologies which legitimate, in the name of free enterprise, freedom for the economically, politically and culturally privileged, and oppression for others.

The concept of original sin is thus an instructive example of how the most "religious" doctrines are also social ideologies, or at least function as such. Actually, it could even be that the concept of original sin is concerned with one of the central social issues

concerning religion. Some religions – especially civil religions stemming from the dominant groups – start with a harmonious representation of the world through which its contradictions are concealed. Some others accept the challenge of a world historically broken by oppression and exploitation. They approach the world in the hope of its liberation. The traditions of original sin, when taken in their full strength, affirm that Jesus' religion is of the second kind.

- 1 Many recent biblical and theological studies show how uncomfortable Christians feel with respect to doctrines concerning original sin. For example, Piet Schoonenberg: *Man and Sin*, University of N D Press, 1965; M. Flick and Z. Alszeghi, *Il peccato originale*, Brescia, 1972; A. Vanneste, *Le dogme du péché originel*, Louvain, 1971; U. Bauman, *Erbsünde ?* Freiburg, 1970; P. Watté, *Structures philosophiques du péché originel*, Gembloux, 1974; M. Labourdette, in *Revue Thomist* 1970, pp 277-291 and 1973, pp 643-664; Ch. Duquoc, "New Approaches to Original Sin", *Cross Currents*, 28. 2, pp 189-200, 1978.
- 2 Cf M. G. Lawler, *Christian Rituals: an essay in Sacramental Symbolism*, Horizons 1980 pp 7-36.
- 3 A question could be raised: "Does the present disregard for the original sin doctrine originate from its oddity in our culture or from challenging theological studies?" I believe that, from a sociological point of view the answer is clear: theological interest generally results from cultural disregard and does not precede it.
- 4 The concept of civil religion has been defined in many ways. The following definition by J. A. Coleman in *Theology in the Americas*, Orbis Books, 1976 (Ed. S. Torres and J. Eagleson), seems to me helpful:
 

"If you like, civil religion is the mystic chord of communal memory (always being summoned to reinterpretation in the face of new historic tasks) which ties together both a nation's citizenry and the episodes of its history into a meaningful identity by using significant national beliefs, events, persons, places, or documents to serve as symbolic repositories of the special vocational significance of the nation-state in the light of a more ultimate or transcendent bar of judgment, ethical ideals, humanity, world history, being, the universe, or God."
- 5 Op. Cit. p 174.
- 6 I analyse here the "free enterprise" ideology mainly as it functions now and not as it did when it was the moving legitimation in those who rebelled against the feudal system in Europe.
- 7 Such political interpretations of original sin have become familiar to political theologians, e.g. D. Soelle, *Political Theology*, Fortress Press, 1974, pp 86-89.
- 8 The concept of transmission of original sin by physical birth has its roots in St Augustine. However, the Augustinian theory is very far from the popularized theology of the 20th century which tends to reduce the transmission to an individualistic biological event. Previously, a biological event was always also viewed as a cosmic and a societal one.
- 9 Obviously the same doctrine of original sin would also be subversive for a communist society that would pretend to be perfectly well organized. There is however, some congeniality between the concepts of "original sin" and of "class struggle". Both notions refer to the belief that before some "eschatological" event (the kingdom or the final revolution), the world will never be free of contradictions and oppression. (And actually both the Church and the Party are sometimes tempted to believe that they are the eschaton).