

Original Sin (II)

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A suggested new interpretation

In the traditional interpretation mankind is a unity because it is, so to speak, a genealogical tree of which each man's personal life is a branch. I suggest rather that the unity of mankind must be thought of as a unity in history, a unity in a play with one plot in which each man has a rôle. Just as Aquinas conceived of a biological intention of nature presupposed to all personal intentions, and of the propagation of mankind as presupposed to all personal lives (and therefore in a position to taint them); so we must conceive of an intention of history, which I call its plot, underlying every man's personal life in so far as that life is a rôle in the total play. Just as a man, on Aquinas' picture, is to some extent determined by an intention of nature even before he begins to take personal charge of his life, so too man's life must receive sense from the part it plays in the whole play, even before one judges of the success or non-success of the way he personally played that part.

I would suggest, indeed, that this notion of a plot in history more truly expresses the nature of man than any genealogical or biological concept. For if, in some unimaginable future, intelligent animals were discovered on some other planet who belonged to some quite different branch of the biological tree, nevertheless, because they were intelligent animals, it would in principle be possible for us to communicate with them, for us to affect each other's culture, and for us to grow into having one history with them. And because of this, and despite any biological dissimilarity between us, it would be truer to call them 'men' than to deny them this title. It is the very plot of history itself that reveals to us in wider and wider ways what a man is.

But, of course, the notion of a unified history of mankind does not in fact realize itself. Men do not in fact realize what they are or recognize themselves as men; rather they remain separated in disparate cultures, nationalisms and social groups, good in themselves, but often insisted on at the expense of the unity of mankind. It could perhaps be suggested that history, of its nature, is incapable of the perfect unity suggested by the image of the play with its plot. At its best it is capable only of some mindless progress, for no one person or group of persons is capable of writing a plot for history. Mankind is, so to speak, a collection of actors in search of an author, a collection of limbs in search of a head.

This is first and foremost a natural defect (to be compared with

death and human weakness, the natural defects fastened on by the older traditional interpretation of original sin). One might even appeal to a story in Genesis parallel to the Adam and Eve story to illustrate this. For the story of Babel is another fall story in which we read how man, by his own fault, brought upon himself disunity and confusion; parallel to the first fall story in which man brought upon himself weakness and death. Just as the tradition interprets weakness and death as natural defects which it had been God's intention to help man overcome, so this disunity and confusion should be thought of as a natural situation of mankind which it had been God's intention to help man overcome.

The foundations of this new interpretation are therefore equally scriptural with those of the old. The description of the way God intended to help man overcome the disunity is perhaps more scriptural than the old description. For if we look to the Bible to discover what kind of unity God wished to give mankind we will be directed to Christ. The way in which God intended to overcome man's divisions was to send his Son as a man to give unified sense to human history. For there is only one person capable not only of playing a rôle in the drama of human history, but also being its author. And that person is God made man. The authorship of human history, so to speak, was made incarnate in history when Jesus Christ was born. This was to be the first step in helping the disparate races, nations and cultures of men to unite in the family of mankind, to become one perfect Adam.

Or, to put it another way, each man has personal responsibility for his life in so far as it is individual to him. Amid the welter of events that it contains and will contain he must try to build a self, he bears the responsibility of *selving* his own personal history. The plan of God was to provide a 'self' for the whole of mankind's history by living himself a personal human life which would be related to all other personal lives as head to limbs. Without such *selving* of history no individual man can serve himself properly, for part of what he is to be is a rôle in history at large, and there will be no history at large unless history is capable of *selving* itself. For this purpose then Christ came down, the author of the play came to be its chief character, so that around him all other supporting rôles could receive their sense.

We should notice here that such a gift of grace would not have needed, like the biologically-conceived grace, to have been offered at the very beginning of such a play. A play does not lose its unity around the chief character because that character only makes his appearance on the stage after a few scenes have already been played. Indeed, the final unity of a play only emerges when the last scene has been played; and only then can judgement be passed on the plot of the play—whether it has succeeded or failed—and the relations between scenes assessed. A biologically-conceived grace can only

exert influence chronologically forward in time; a grace conceived of on the analogy of a chief character or climax in a play exerts its influence both forward and backward in time. It was not therefore necessary for Christ to appear as the very first man, but only to take up his proper rôle at the most suitable time for the plot as a whole, and be accepted into history at that point.

But now we take the next step. Just as the man on the spot at the time grace was offered in the garden rejected it, so the men on the spot at the time the incarnation of God was offered rejected it. In so doing they spoil the whole play from beginning to end; not meaning by this that they introduced into history for the first time a defect which was foreign to it, but that they abandoned history to its innate defectiveness. But now this defectiveness, which without their fault would have been only natural, is in the light of their fault culpable.

The way in which this happens is slightly different from the older conception. In that older conception an intention of nature which is always there was abandoned to its innate defectiveness when it might have been perfected by grace; on the newer conception history was abandoned to an absence of plot or sense when it might by grace have had one. For Christ had come to give sense and intention to history, and his rejection hindered the entry of that intention into the history of all mankind. One might say that on the older conception we already have a head of mankind who fails in carrying out the intention entrusted to him; on the newer conception it is not that there is a failure of the head, but a failure to have a head; not a failure in intention, but a failure to have an intention.

Otherwise, the parallelism to the Adam-story can be seen. The men who rejected Christ from history were the privileged representatives of mankind by an accident of history, just as Adam was a privileged representative of mankind by an accident of genealogy. That such a choice should have to be made by a historically accidental group of men is just as much a law of history as the fact that Adam was one particular individual was a law of biology. For God, if he was to become a man, had to come at one historical point, so constituting the men of that moment into the representatives of the whole human race in regard to accepting or rejecting him. The only difference is that Adam's will entered into the 'intention' propagating mankind because he was the head or first parent of mankind; while the will of these men enters into the course of history rather by hindering the entry of Christ's 'intention', Christ's plot. They were in ordinary personal charge of the life and death of this one man, Christ, and for that reason, by a law of history, they could hinder the integration into history of that man's intentions.

Original sin, then, according to the suggestion that I am making, is the culpable failure of history to be *selved* in Christ. And just as the defective intention of nature was considered, on the older theory, to

taint all members of mankind at birth, by being taken up (biologically) into their lives at that point, so too the absence of plot in history affects all men at birth, by being taken up (in the way personal lives presuppose history) into their personal lives at that point. The fact that they are born to rôles in a defective play dooms the rôles from the start, no matter how well they are personally played. For the failure that is being talked about is the failure of the *plot* of the play, not a failure of the individual actors in their performance. Original sin is not a personal sin of those who are born in it; it belongs to them only as characters in the play, as members of mankind.

At this point one should really expand upon the way in which history is presupposed to personal lives. But perhaps for the purposes of this article the point can be made with an illustration. Think of the person born into a society which is aiming itself at an unjust goal: say, into a society building itself up on principles of racial discrimination. Now this person is not personally responsible for the way this society is run, just because, in the last analysis, no one person has this ability to be the author of a whole history. He may of course *take* responsibility for it by an act in which he consents with his own personal will to what we may call 'the will of the community'. But even if he does not do this he cannot escape a *kind* of responsibility for it, just because he is a member of that society. For without personally acceding to 'the will of the community' he must nevertheless presuppose it in all his actions, even those actions which explicitly are directed against it. Every time he takes a car out on the road he carries into effect some of the unjust will of the community involved in building the road or assembling the car. He is an instrument executing the will of the community, and his will and actions are ruled by that will, even when he is not assenting to it on his own authority.

In such a way, man is involved in the will of mankind, or rather in the lack of will of mankind. For the man in an unjust society there is a possible solution in emigration. But how does man emigrate from history? He is doomed to form part of a guilty mankind; not again because of his own personal free act, but because simply by being a man he cannot escape his life and his will being involved with the lack of will in history.

There is of course one way in which a man could emigrate from history. If he could die and yet find humanity again, if he could die and yet find another history on the other side of that death. And this is what redemption has meant. Christ, rejected from mankind, in the sense that he was banished from the ordinary course of history which rules from birth to death, could, because he was also God, accept that rejection and build out of it another course of history—one no longer bounded by the limits of death but incorporating death within it as one of its events. In rising from the dead, in

bringing himself to life precisely as a rejected person, he opened a new life and new history, he offered a new plot to all who would join themselves to him as to a new Adam. This new history—the history of redeemed mankind, of the Church, which we enter into through baptism—is built on rejection and built on the cross. This is the necessity of baptism for all born into the human race. It is the sacramental anticipation of death, the sacramental adhesion in hope to the Paschal drama of death and resurrection, the entry in hope into the new history.

Some difficulties

I present here only some fairly obvious difficulties. It would be my hope that any more weighty ones could arise in dialogue with readers later.

Firstly, does not this theory do violence to time? Apparently we are to understand that people before Christ were subject to the effects of original sin although it had not yet been committed. And if they were so subject then it would seem as if Christ's rejection had already been determined to happen from the beginning of the world.

But let us remember that we are substituting for a biological notion of man's solidarity a notion of solidarity related to the unity of plot of a play. The first notion relies on derivation of the race from a common beginning, the second on the achieving of a unified plot in the end. Now no one can know whether earlier scenes in a play make sense just by looking at them in themselves; they may pass a judgement on how well they are being played, but the judgement on their sense in the light of the whole plot must wait until the end of the play. In this sense the failure of earlier scenes does not belong to them in themselves, but only in relation to the whole play.

Now the events of history must be thought of in the same way. It is possible at the time to pass judgement on how well they are being played, but not on whether they make final sense in the plot of history. The first judgement might judge them as good and bad actions, but has nothing to say about their final theological status as examples of original sin or not. This theological status is, so to speak, ambiguous before Calvary to all but God, who was already present to that event; Calvary has allowed us our first glimpse of the end of the play, and now enables us, with God, to say that all events in so far as they were to remain unfulfilled in the ordinary course of history lay under original sin, but in so far as they could be taken up by Christ into resurrected history could also be redeemed.

And one must not think of this as involving a sudden retrospective change of history at the time of Christ's crucifixion. For the state of history before Christ is a historical fact which precisely forms a unity (a plot-unity) with the historical fact that Christ *was* crucified. One may speculate about a history in which Christ was not crucified, but

then one is speculating about another history, not about the one that happened. And truly in that other history the world would not have lain under original sin, though it would have laboured under a natural defectiveness not *naturally* distinguishable from original sin. The events of history before Christ have always been just what they were; it is the question as to whether *as history*, and not simply as single events, they were selved or not, were sinful or not in this special sense, that can only be answered in the light of the events of Calvary.

Perhaps we might note here that even in the traditional theory the events of history before Christ do not sufficiently reveal that original sin had taken place. For sins would have happened in the world even if Adam had not sinned: the tradition does not say that if Adam had not sinned sinning would thereafter have been impossible. And also acts of grace happened in the world even after original sin took place. History, whether original sin had taken place at the beginning or not, could have yielded sinful and graceful acts. What would have been different is simply the theological status of this history: would a sinful event have been an individual breaking-out of a graceful situation, or an individual yielding to a sinful situation? To decide this point needed the revelation of Calvary.

True, on the older interpretation, the very facts of death and weakness prove to the eyes of faith the occurrence of original sin. But not of course to any other eye, which could only see them as natural. In the new thesis, it is a disunity of history which is the natural defect, the fact that history lacks plot: and this can only be seen when history is achieved.

A second difficulty is not so serious: the apparent paradox that God wills the crucifixion to take place in order to undo the effects of the crucifixion. For this is really only saying that God allows the crucifixion into his plan because he knows how to use its good effects to undo its bad ones. He allows the crucifixion to exist as the failure of the ordinary course of history, precisely because it is the beginning of the new course. And it is of course to be expected that the old history should fail at the point where the new history takes its rise; for the failure is precisely the failure to enter into positive history at that point and the abandonment of history to negativity.

A third difficulty is the position of the men who rejected Christ. Why are they allowed to influence history, when we have said no group is in charge of all history; and moreover when there was another group who accepted him? The difference between these two groups is that one was in charge of the life and death of Christ in a way that the other was not: had the power to kill him and in fact did so. And even those who accepted him were powerless then to accept him except as dead, rejected, cast out of this world. And this is the way Christians do, by the grace of God, accept him; so that his acceptance involves them in rejection of the ordinary course of

history entered into at birth and unable to stretch beyond death. They must pass over into that course of history which is entered into by death, an entry anticipated sacramentally at baptism.

Such is the richness of the grace which he has showered on us in all wisdom and insight. He has let us know the mystery of his purpose, the hidden plan he so kindly made in Christ from the beginning to act upon when the times had run their course to the end; that he would bring everything together under Christ as head, everything in the heavens and everything on earth.

(Ephesians 1. 7-10)