

Calvin and Original Sin

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First Parish in Hingham – Old Ship

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This morning we're going to take a deep dive into the transgressions of our past to try to answer the question, was slavery America's original sin?

This might not be what you were expecting to talk about today. Our hearts are grieving with a second full-scale war started in the Middle East; there may be people in this room who have loved ones in harms way. We have a near-total paralysis in the House of Representatives just when they need to be responding to the President's urgent request for funds for humanitarian relief. In this church we are grappling with more mundane problems, trying to assess how we can be more welcoming to marginalized people and what to do about a new parish house and when to start doing it.

These are pressing and highly emotional concerns, so it may seem strange to you that your minister wants to talk this morning about a theological doctrine which has been around for two millennia, but which most liberals abandoned gleefully two or three centuries ago, by which I mean original sin.

Like the doctrine of the Trinity, the doctrine of original sin is deeply entwined with our liberal history, and while we say we have abandoned it, I'm going to wonder out loud this morning whether it may be creeping in the back door.

Let us start with the basics. Our Unitarian Universalist denomination results from a consolidation of two separate denominations in the year 1961. Both Unitarianism, in its American branch, and Universalism arose in reaction to Calvinism two centuries earlier as part of the social and cultural and philosophical movement known as the Enlightenment.

What is Calvinism? It is a theological/philosophical system which has had great influence on America culture as well as the culture of many European countries. As doctrine, Calvinism can be expressed in five phrases: Total depravity, Unconditional election, Limited Atonement, Irresistible grace, and Perseverance of the Saints. If you want to remember this list, think of the word TULIP as an acronym.

Total depravity means all humans were born in sin and can do nothing about it. Unconditional election means that God has selected who is to be saved well before they were born. Limited atonement means that Christ's death on the cross doesn't save everybody from eternal damnation, but only a limited few. Irresistible grace means that if you are one of the lucky ones destined for heaven, God's grace will act on you even if you actively resist it. And perseverance of the saints means that those people who are saints continue in some form of existence after death.

The Puritans were Calvinists, as were many Presbyterians, Baptists and Methodists. I speak of it in the past tense, but it is still quite influential on American religion today. The Great Awakening of the early seventeenth century was an outbreak of Calvinist sentiment which sparked liberals led by clergy such as Ebenezer Gay of this church, Charles Chauncy of First Church in Boston and Jonathan Mayhew of the West Church in Boston to quietly reject much of Calvinist doctrine basically out of disagreement with the first proposition, that all were inherently depraved. They took a position called Arminianism that whether you ended up in heaven or hell in the afterlife had a lot to do with the way you lived your life. Arminians had a hell, but they thought that life gives you a way to avoid it.

By the way, the three liberal ministers I just named would have been called Congregational ministers in their day; the word Unitarian was a put-down used by their more orthodox colleagues until early in the nineteenth century, when the liberals accepted the name Unitarian.

Universalism, was founded on the principle of universal salvation, and Universalists disagreed with Calvin in their belief that all souls would eventually be reconciled and united with God. There used to be a sign on the Weymouth UU church on 3A proclaiming the essence of its attraction: "Comfortable pews, no hell."

How did the idea of original sin come into being? It's not "original" in the sense of being authentic, or not a copy. You may remember Tom Lehrer's line in the Vatican Rag "step into that small confessional, where the guy who's got religion'll/tell you if your sin's original."

Not that kind of original. Original here means having to do with origins, with a story of how the human race came to be. Many cultures around the world have origin stories. The word Genesis means "Origin" and the two stories it contains about human origins are the origin stories of the Bible.

Remember that there are two of these stories in the book of Genesis, and in the first one, creation takes place in seven days and there is no sin or moral fault. In fact, at the end of each day, God looks at what he has created and pronounces it good.

It's the second creation story which has Adam and Eve and the serpent and the Garden of Eden. Now the first thing to note about this creation story is that it is found in the Torah, so it's Jewish scripture, but the Jews do not read it the same way that the Christians have read it. Original sin is a Christian idea.

In the story, God had told Adam and Eve not to eat the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil or they would die. But the serpent told Eve, "don't listen to God, you won't die," so she ate the fruit and gave some to Adam. After they ate the fruit, they suddenly discovered they were naked and covered themselves with fig leaves, but this was a dead giveaway to God, who quickly wrung a confession out of them, and sentenced serpent, Eve and Adam to various punishments.

That's the second Genesis story in a nutshell. In its text, without the gloss Christians later put on it, it explained why all humans were mortal, that is, they had to die eventually, why there were

two sexes, why life was so hard for each, and how good and evil were something you had to open your eyes to see. So that's the bare bones, so to speak, of the Adam and Eve story, as Jews might understand it.

How old is the Adam and Eve story? We don't know, but it's at least several centuries before the birth of Jesus.

After Jesus' life and death, his followers put quite a different spin on it. The first Christian writer to deal with it was St. Paul. Paul, trying to interest people in the importance of Jesus after his death, argues to Jews and Gentiles in the first century C.E. that Jesus of Nazareth, who had been executed by crucifixion a few years earlier, was the promised Messiah. The problem with that was that Jews hoped for a military Messiah who would throw off the Roman yoke of oppression, much as the Maccabees had done a few centuries before. But this man Jesus clearly was no Maccabee. He was utterly defeated militarily and suffered death by a most cruel and degrading manner. So Paul casts Jesus as a spiritual warrior, and proclaims him the new Adam. "For as in Adam all die, so even in Christ shall all be made alive." (1 Corinthians 15:22) Adam and Eve made a big mistake for humanity thousands of years before in Eden, but Jesus' death on the cross would atone for that sin and all the others committed in the meantime. Three centuries later, St. Augustine takes up this suggestion in Paul and expands it into the doctrine we call Original Sin.

In this doctrine, Adam and Eve's act in disobeying God is sort of like the Big Bang, whose background radiation is still reverberating in the universe. We can't escape the clutches of sin. Every human being partakes of Adam and Eve's sin, Augustine says, and this will condemn most of us to hell. The only ones saved are the ones on whom God arbitrarily bestows grace. We all deserve eternal punishment, and most of us suffer it. Even babies and those who have never heard of Jesus will go to Hell when they die. And like original sin, the grace which saves some from eternal damnation is not earned; there's nothing you can do to buy it. It has to be dispensed from God out of God's mercy.

More than a thousand years after Augustine, these ideas get taken up by John Calvin, the second most important figure in the Protestant Reformation; it becomes the basis on which our Puritan forebears came to these shores. In the first Great Awakening in eighteenth century New England, Jonathan Edwards was a great proponent of Original Sin, and was working on a defense of that doctrine at his death. But he recognized that it was an uphill struggle, for the whole story was at war with the cultural and intellectual movement we call the Enlightenment.

The Enlightenment favors knowledge. Knowledge is a good thing. Eve can be seen as the first theologian, or the first scientist. She wanted to know about good and evil. How can we base the damnation of the human race on a bit of knowledge? UUs are an Enlightenment faith—as I've said before, both American Unitarianism and Universalism sprang from the Enlightenment, the movement which gave us modern science and the industrial revolution, the enthronement of reason and the disenfranchisement of supernatural explanations of things.

There is an excellent history of both of our denominations done in the 1980s by David Robinson who is no relation to me. It is called *The Unitarians and the Universalists* (Westport, Ct:

Greenwood Press 1985) p. 17-18. In his first chapter, about early Unitarian moral theory, he looks at a lecture by Ebenezer Gay of this church, of Old Ship, in 1759, at Harvard, part of that university's Dudleian lecture series. We read excerpts from this lecture in the UU 101 class last week – the subject was on natural religion vs. revealed religion. Here's what David Robinson has to say:

"Gay's Dudleian lecture suggested that rationalism, even when its primary concern was the intellectual groundwork of Christian belief, carried with it a certain impulse towards moral philosophy. That interpenetration of rationalism and moralism is even more striking when we examine the unraveling of Calvinist New England's eighteenth-century orthodoxy and the growing tendency towards moral perfectionism among the Arminians who led the opposition to the prevailing orthodoxy.

"The liberal attack on Calvinism took two forms; one of which is exemplified in the pastoral career of Gay in Hingham, Massachusetts. Although his sympathy was with the liberals, he chose not to introduce controversy and division in his sermons. Instead, he simply ignored Calvinist dogma and preached his own form of liberal Christianity... But ... there was [also] open condemnation of Calvinism in New England as early as the middle 1750s.

"Liberals consistently attacked Calvinism on the related issues of original sin and election to salvation, doctrines that in their view undermined human moral exertion. The idea of the taint of Adam, communicated to all people regardless of their action or character, seemed to deny the possibility of the moral life; the idea of God's preordained selection of a few to salvation, regardless of their character or action, seemed to undercut the motivation for it. The liberals countered therefore with a moral system which affirmed human capability, as evidenced in the moral sense, and even those writings that did not attack Calvinism by name contributed to the liberal revolt by contributing to a positive countertheory."

David Robinson then focuses in on seven sermons from 1748 preached by Jonathan Mayhew of the West Church in Boston; Mayhew argued that the central moral truth of human existence was a moral "law written in our hearts." The author expands on this in these words: "If the moral-sense doctrine encountered skepticism, Mayhew also noted that it undermined the doctrine of original sin as well: 'the doctrine of a total ignorance, and incapacity to judge of moral and religious truths, brought upon mankind by the apostasy of our *First Parents* is without foundation.'"

So we have a strong movement in the early years of Unitarian thinking, to reject the doctrine of original sin. Basically it didn't seem something that a rational God would do:

First, Original Sin imposes punishment without fault; babies who have no moral sense, who did not live long enough to commit any actual sin, will find themselves suffering in the torments of Augustine's Hell. For ever. The Universalists also thought this was a bad idea because they thought Hell was a bad idea..

Second, Original Sin punishes the children for the sins of the fathers and mothers going back hundreds of generations. There is a raging debate in the Torah as to whether God holds the

descendants of sinners responsible for the sins of their ancestors. That strikes the modern moral sensibility as unfair in the extreme. The child has no control over what the parent has done, which may have been done before the child was born.

Third, the punishment needs to fit the crime. The act of Adam and Eve in eating the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil was hardly the worst thing that happens in the Garden of Eden story. A few years later, Cain murders his brother Abel in a fit of jealousy. Yet God allows Cain to live and his only punishment is exile. Is taking a human life less blameworthy than eating a piece of fruit?

Fourth, in the Enlightenment, knowledge is regarded as generally a good thing. It is a good thing that we are alive in the present age, when we have enough knowledge about viruses that science can produce a vaccine against a deadly pandemic within less than a year after its first appearance. And isn't knowledge of good and evil a good thing? How are you going to raise children to know the difference between good and evil if the parent is ignorant of this important distinction? Orthodox Christianity, in this minister's opinion, went off the rails into error in embracing Augustine's doctrine of original sin.

And fifth it had more than a little to do with Augustine's hangup on sex. For what morally connects the descendants of Eve and Adam to their ancestors' fault in eating the fruit is the "impurity" of human reproduction, or as St. Augustine called it, "concupiscence" That messy stuff. That sweaty stuff. Now I'm not here to say that sex is always benign; it has the potential to cause great oppression and trauma. But it was, at least until recently, the only way to make new humans.

So I hold that the rejection of the doctrine of original sin, as articulated by St. Augustine and John Calvin, is basic to the historical development of Unitarianism and Universalism. And in our tradition, the opinion of a minister is just one person's belief; you are all welcome to disagree.

I will get to the point: most of us feel called to do as much as we can to welcome people in those categories who have been historically marginalized. These include BIPOC (Black, Indian, People of Color), women, LGBTQ+ people, people with physical and intellectual disabilities, immigrants, and others. We seek justice, diversity and inclusion, and seek to dismantle or eliminate prejudice based on race, religion, gender, sexual orientation, and gender identity. Compared to other religions, we are much less interested in salvation in the afterlife for ourselves than we are in building the Beloved Community for all here on earth.

Let's take the issue of race, one of the most central and intractable of our national issues.

In June of 2015 there was a horrible mass murder in my adopted home city of Charleston, SC. A young armed white man named Dylan Roof entered Mother Emmanuel AME church on Calhoun Street under the pretext of joining a Bible study that was then in progress, and as the study hour drew to a close, he pulled out firearms and killed everybody who was in attendance, which included the Rev. Clemente Pinckney, the minister of the church and a state senator for that area.

When Dylan Roof was apprehended, it turned out that he was a follower of racist ideology who intended and expected for his violent action to start a race war. Far from succeeding, his shocking crime actually brought together political factions in the South Carolina public which had resisted change. They agreed to take down the Confederate Flag on the statehouse.

At a funeral for Rev. Pinckney, President Barack Obama delivered a eulogy which recited some of the proud history of the Mother Emmanuel church as a rallying point for the Black people from slavery times to the Civil Rights Movement. He then said this:

“We do not know whether the killer of Reverend Pinckney and eight others knew all of this history. But he surely sensed the meaning of his violent act. It was an act that drew on a long history of bombs and arson and shots fired at churches, not random, but as a means of control, a way to terrorize and oppress. (Applause.) An act that he imagined would incite fear and recrimination; violence and suspicion. An act that he presumed would deepen divisions that trace back to our nation’s original sin.”

Bing! What did President Obama mean by that? He might have been talking about slavery because he places these “divisions” back deep in the past. Or he might have been talking about racism. The two are quite entwined in my reading of the history. Racism as the theory or idea that Black people are inherently inferior to white people in intelligence, morals and culture may go back four or five hundred years, but it only came to the fore as a defense or justification of the institution of slavery in the United States after the American Revolution. Slavery, of course, completely contradicted the idea that all were created equal on which the nation was founded. And while slavery was legally eliminated by the post-Civil War constitutional amendments, the racism that had been articulated to defend the institution lived on long after its foundation had been destroyed. We still wrestle with it today in our public and private lives.

It’s absolutely a live and current problem.

What do original sin and racism have to do with one another? Though the UUs are known for our doctrinal flexibility in a lot of fields, we have certainly come out in public as being an anti-racist denomination and our hope is to be a more effective one. Yet racism seems a little bit like original sin in that we can suffer for it even if we do nothing. In Calvinist thought, God decides who is going up and who is going down. And from our Enlightenment roots, we are pretty clearly and publicly opposed to most of the doctrines of Calvinism, particularly Original Sin.

A couple of years ago, a historian at Rutgers named James Goodman published an article on CNN entitled “It’s time to stop calling slavery America’s ‘original sin’”.

He started out by pointing out that using this metaphor for slavery conceals more than it reveals. After all, original sin goes back to one action by the first couple, and the rest is out of our hands under Calvin. But slavery was a system which required constant act in support of it:

“... slavery most certainly was committed, day after day, not just by enslavers and traders but by legislators, lawyers, bankers, investors, and insurers, and all those who benefited from the system and did not struggle to end it. Knowing this – knowing that

slavery was an institution made by men and women and sustained by men and women, something that people did to other people – why would we continue to employ a metaphor that suggests that slavery was something we inherited, something we were saddled with, something for which no one was or is responsible?

“There’s more. The idea of original sin functions not only to absolve enslavers of responsibility for one kind of atrocity but also to further erase another. European settlers took the land on which enslaved people cultivated tobacco, cotton and rice, from Native Americans. If our British and then American ancestors had a first sin, it surely must include taking that land, which [continued for hundreds of years](#). The making of every great and powerful nation involves a catalog of atrocities. Slavery wasn’t the first, nor the last of America’s. Comparing atrocities for the purpose of ranking them is always a mistake.

Professor Goodman concludes: “Let’s call American slavery what it was: one of the unforgivable crimes against humanity that the people who settled the land that became our nation committed. It was a crime that took myriad strands of Black and White abolitionism, decades of sectional crisis and a great civil war to destroy. It was a crime that contributed, over time, to other crimes and forms of injustice – racism, race prejudice, lynching, exclusion, segregation, discrimination and too many forms of inequality to name.”

The making of every great and powerful nation involves a catalog of atrocities. Because we are in 2023 looking backwards, we have to take into account all these catastrophes, though I agree with Prof. Goodman that it is sheer folly to try to rank them.

As we become more conscious of the complexity of accounting for the injustice of the past, we might look longingly at the original idea of original sin because it was so simple. Anyone who was born as a product of a sexual union-- that is the whole human race – however innocent or however virtuous they may have lived – is subject to eternal torment in hell, and there is nothing anyone except for God can do about it.

But if you asked me if I would trade the complexity of our modern point of view for the simplicity of Calvin or Augustine, the answer would be a firm no. Why? Looking at the history of any form of oppression – racism, sexism, homophobia etc. we can get a sense of how it developed and that may help us try to minimize the injustices of the present. We can’t fix all the wrongs of the past, but we can do some good during the time we are given.

As Longfellow wrote,

Let us then be up and doing

With a heart for any fate,

Still achieving, still pursuing,

Learn to labor and to wait.

Amen