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ORIGINAL SIN REVISITED *

A clergyman well informed on, & involved in interdisciplinary discussions of, the ethics of **genetic engineering**, four days ago wrote me a long letter asking for help in bridging from there to the Christian doctrine of **original sin.** At least a few of my readers might like to listen in on the conversation--which is my apology to him for replying with an open rather than a peronal letter.

Dear_____,

1 Your thoughtful letter deserves more than the phonecall I intended as my response. My phone/fax is above, if you want to reply to this Thinksheet, whose sections are numbered for your convenience. I am eager for such reply, for you are much more knowledgeable in genetics than I, & I need what light you can offer me, especially any corrections.

2 The root of morality is the sense that **something's wrong**, & the root of religion is the sense that **something's above.** Our Christian Faith says that what's wrong is that we're all sinners (the careful display of which is in Romans 1-3), & that what's above--rather, who's above--is God the Creator-Redeemer-Sanctifier, who by the Cross has set right the wrong, "conquering sin & death."

3 The primary function of any doctrine of "original sin" is to provide a narrative explicative of the universal baleful human condition to which the gospel addresses the counter-narrative of **grace**, God's provision for & action of forgiving penitents who accept Jesus Christ as Lord & Savior, the Agent of grace. The offer of grace has the same extent as the human need of grace: it is universal. John 3.16 explicitly says "God loved the world" (everybody) & implicitly accepts the fact that some, instead of accepting grace, "perish." (This year's Craigville Theological Colloquy, July 12-16, will deal with this: "How shall we understand Jesus as Savior now?"_

4 Every human being's sense of personal shortfall toward life (in the Christian language: "sin" toward, rebellion against, God) is **original** (1) in the primary sense of personal origin & (2) in the secondary sense of personal ownership (ie, *my* sin).. ..But of course in the phrase "original sin," the adjective is collective-temporal: something went wrong in the origin-time (Eliade's "in illud tempore") of humanity. Sin is deep not just within every human being but also in the whole of human history from (one might say) a Big bad Bang at our beginning-time. Genesis 3 is, I believe, the world's best heuristic-etiologic story, minimalist yet lacking nobody/nothing (transcendent good/evil, man/woman, rebellious choice, divine punishment of transcendent evil & of disobedient humanity).

Under "o.s.," the big dictionaries give, as the 2nd meaning, the "inherent" or "natural" inclination to evil (Hebrew, "yetzer ra'," in contrast to "yetzer tov"--though the dictionaries do not refer to Judaism here). The 1st meaning is the cause-giving (Gk.-Eng., "etiologic") biblical story ("The sin, or defect, incurred by each man in consequence of the first sinful choice made by the first man"; "a depravity... .transmitted from Adam....[und., mine]"). As specific, our biblical story always & everywhere competes with alternative evil-causes stories: as generic, it can be shaped or "spun" to fit various cultures & philosophies in the various Orthodox-Catholic-Protestant streams. "In essentials, unity; in nonessentials, diversity."

5 As you know, "**the Fall**" is code for all the above. If I'm not down, I don't need to get up. If I am down, do I need help to get up? And if so, how much? If I think either that I'm not down or that I'm down but need no help to get up, Christianity (I think) does not apply to me. If I say "I'm down but don't need much help; but give me a hand up," I'm (to put these distinctions oversimply) a Pelagian. If I say "I can make it if you steady me with both hands," I'm an Arminian. If I say "I'm a basket case, shovel me up," I'm a Calvinist.
The same reality from another angle: How much **damage** did/does the Fall do? All yourlife you've been in a basket-case (Calvinist) church, & this in your letter rings true to that (& to my experience & conviction): "Knowing myself and my own sin, which is so much like that of others (there is something very generic about human

* "The only Christian doctrine that's empirically provable."--Reinhold Niebuhr's tart rejection of liberal optimistic pretensions about humanity

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sin!), I have long since come to believe in 'original sin.' I interpret that to mean that from the dawn of human history, Adam and Eve's rebellion against God's instructions as to how they were to live has been conveyed through generations of humankind in a self-perpetuating manner. There are urges, impulses, compulsions which are manifestations of an inner negative drive in each of us, which we cannot completely control except through conversion by the power of the Holy Spirit."

6 The Fall story is **psychosomatic**: Adam/Eve's fruit-eating bodies acted by permission of their "souls": their somas & their psyches acted as one, but needn't have (the "needn't have" signaling their nonsomatic, decisional capacity to reinforce or rupture their relationship with the God of the Garden). This gives us another coign of vantage, rendering these possibilties: The Fall damaged (1) neither the relationship nor the capacity (Pelagianism); (2) the relationship but not the capacity (Arminiamism); (3) both (Calvinism)....God intended "original righteousness" (capacity & relationship both undamaged). (Matt. Fox's "original blessing" so inflates this as to obscure the Fall, thus doing fatal damage to biblical religion.)

The Fall story is also **psychosocial**, sin affecting all human relationships. Against the individualistic example-view (that Romans 5.12d refers only to one's own actual sins), this psychosocial solidarity-view (that Romans 5.12 speaks of a continuity between Adam's sin & ours) says that through Adam we're all sinners **relationally** (the view called "federalism": since God appointed Adam the representative head of the human species, what he did is charged to us his posterity) or biologically-**genetically** (the view called "seminalism," all of us being sinners in Adam's seed [Lat., "semen"])...which brings us to your question:

7 "Is it possible that germ line cell transmission [of sex cells, vs. somatic line transmission [of cells "native to all organisms"] may be an indicator of the way the sexual behavior in our ancestors has been perpetuated through the generations? Is 'original sin' a term which may be applied to what the scientists declare to be genetic fact: the transmission of a germ line cell's nature to successive generations? Is it possible that this is another instance where science is confirming biblical and theological insights?" To this question, you got no response from the director of Human Genome Operations, Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory, B., CA--so you've turned to me. You might send her (Dr. Sylvia Spengler) this Thinksheet as a further effort of yours to get a rise out of her. (Roger Shinn [THE NEW GENETICS, Moyer Bell/96] has it right: somatic-line genetic manipulation, which is limited to the individual with no effect on posterity, raises no more ethical problem than any other surgery not affecting transmission. Not so with germ-line genetic manipulation, which affects *all succeeding generations*.)

8 While correcting a severe germ line cell malformation in an individual would theoretically improve posterity, that potential benefit is more than offset (geneticists, ethicists, & theologians agree) by the inherent promethean (God-defying) **hubris** of one generation's making decisions for all future generations. If "playing God" is a condemnatory phrase ever appropriate to any human action, this is that action.

9 But the very technological possibility of germ line manipulation *for good* (in both senses: the good of humanity, & permanently) opens the door to the possibility that (as the New England Primer put it) "in Adam's fall / we sin-ned all" genetically: did his sin damage his germ line cells? I agree with your interrogative suggestion that we may have here "another instance where science is confirming biblical and theological insights," & I congratulate you for doing up-to-speed speculative theology....Today's CAPE COD TIMES has the picture of a tiny translucent worm that accepts, & uses, some of our genes. Will science help us understand "I am a worm, and not human" (Ps.22.6 NRSV; also, Job 25.6 & Is.41.14)? (And the hymnist's "Would he forsake that Sacred Head / for such a worm as I?")

10 As for Dr. Spengler calling Genesis 30.32-43 "the first biblical reference to genetics," you are right that it may have been the second, the first being in chap.3 (Adam & Eve's sin damaging their germ line--though, you would agree with me, that speculation doesn't rise above Jacob's "genetic" trick against Laban).