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## PSYCHOTHERAPY AND ORIGINAL SIN

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by

**Brian Thorne**

As a therapist I reckon I can be forgiven for believing that almost everybody is caught up in a vicious circle of self-reproach and self-negation. Men and women, young and old - once they have entered the counselling room - pour out their feelings of worthlessness, of not being good enough, of being somehow eternally guilty. What is more, even the most well-balanced among us seem to spend a lot of time looking over our shoulders to see who is going to accuse us of what next.

In recent years I have been struck by the fact that this apparently all-pervasive guilt is as firmly lodged in those who profess no religious belief or affiliation as in those who are life-long members of a church community. Women certainly have the edge over men in these guilt stakes and I have had the painful but extraordinary experience of working with women who seem to have been born feeling guilty. Such women really feel that they have no right to be in the world at all and are seldom far away from thoughts of self-destruction. If they are religious they are unlikely to experience true forgiveness. They do not feel guilty because of something they

have done: they are guilty simply because they exist. They believe that they are by nature unworthy, corrupt, beyond redemption.

The therapist locked in relationship with such a person soon realises how formidable is the opposition. In a recent publication I have tried to describe the immensity of the struggle which I experienced in the process of a therapeutic relationship with one woman, who, while believing in God and the Christian faith, nevertheless experienced herself as utterly unlovable and beyond the reach of the divine compassion. She lived an almost blameless life and was perceived by all those around her as caring, sensitive and lovable. It was almost four years, however, before she finally glimpsed, through therapy, her own essential beauty, goodness and lovability. During that time we had confronted together the mysterious complexities of intra-uterine experience, the censorious battalions of the collective unconscious and the terrors of sexuality and carnal desire.

As I think of her original condition it is difficult to escape the conclusion that she epitomised the

state so clearly defined by St. Augustine:-

'God indeed created man upright . . . But man, having of his own free will become depraved, and having been justly condemned begat a posterity in the same state of depravity and condemnation. For we all were in that one man (Adam) . . . who fell into sin through the woman.' (The City of God, xiii,14)

This is the first classic formulation of the disastrous doctrine of Original Sin and it is not insignificant that there is the women, Eve, the cause of the sin of the man, at the very heart of the formulation. Augustine does even better in another passage, quoted by Karen Armstrong in her chilling book *The Gospel According to Woman*

Banished (from Paradise) after his sin, Adam bound his offspring also with the penalty of death and damnation . . . so that whatever progeny was born (through carnal concupiscence . . . would drag through the ages the burden of Original Sin.

St. Augustine, it would seem and his formulation of humanity's fallenness, is alive and well in the psyche of twentieth century men and women, and as a therapist I am not a little displeased with him for causing me so much hard work. St. Augustine is by no means always so damning and in other places he speaks powerfully of the process of redemption. No matter: his legacy it seems is to have lodged in the collective unconscious of Western men and women the terrifying

possibility that they are corrupt and altogether unacceptable in the eyes of their Creator. In this he has been supported and buttressed by thousand upon thousand of preachers, fundamentalist bible-thumpers and evangelical bullies of all denominations who have attempted to batter souls into submission by the depiction of the human state as foul and utterly self-centred.

I wonder if you have known people with apparently ineradicable tendencies for destructiveness and criminality? Violent people, liars, thieves, sadists, cruel manipulators? Have you known murderers, rapists, terrorists? There was a period in my life when I lived in a house with fifty young men, many of whom would have fallen into the category of the destroyers. The fifty or so maladjusted boys who formed the Finchden community came from a variety of backgrounds ranging from upper-middle class public school to working class secondary modern. Their case histories included all shades of delinquency. All of them were in the words of George Lyward, the presiding genius of the place, suffering from 'usurped lives'. By this he meant that they had not been permitted to lead the lives which were truly theirs but had instead been forced to relinquish their true identities in the face of pressures and demands imposed from outside. They had been the victims of a thousand and one statements, explicit or indirect which began 'I will love you if . . . ' Contracts, however, can have no part in any genuine relationship between

parent and child, for the only love that a child can experience as safe and enduring is an unconditional love. A child which experiences the overpowering need to please its parents is the victim of a relationship which is based upon a fear of rejection - and it is scarcely surprising that feelings of gross inadequacy or impotent rage often result. The family structure which requires that the child fulfil conditions before it can experience a sense of worth spells doom to individual growth. No matter what these conditions may be - to love mother more perhaps, or to get good 'O' levels - the result may well be the same. The individual is undermined by the fear of judgment and by the withholding of affection. Almost all the boys at Finchden got better and many of them distinguished themselves in adult life. How was this miracle achieved? Let me quote from a paper I wrote back in 1968 when I was still deeply involved in the life of the Finchden community.

The insight and tenderness which Lyward displays is infectious and gradually the boys themselves begin to acquire something of it both in respect to themselves and to others. Visitors are quickly conscious of being stripped of all the masks and roles, behind which they usually conceal themselves. They are conscious of a nakedness to self and others which is at first painful but quickly becomes liberating as they learn - as presumably the boys learn too - that they are acceptable as they are and that there is no need to pretend. Here then, a community of

young men is learning to grow up all over again but this time without fear. Now there are no demands, no expectations to live up to, no emotional blackmail, but instead a new order where the only real riches are self-knowledge and self-acceptance made possible by the security of a love which is both gentle and authoritative, consoling and yet challenging. In such security the life of the spirit can grow and strength begins to be felt within and gradually ceases to be dependent on external supports.

Living at Finchden forced me to consider anew what I myself believed about human nature. As a young man I do not believe I was ever in danger of adopting the 'total corruption' viewpoint which I have pilloried above. I suppose, like many Christians, I held to a view which could best be summarised as 'glorious but flawed'. Men and women, I believed, are created in the image of God; they have, if you like, the divine stamp upon them but they have wills of their own which have a marked tendency to move out of alignment with the will of their Creator. Hence the 'fallenness' and the concept of the sins of disobedience and pride. I had to ask myself whether this perception of human nature squared with what I experienced at Finchden Manor. The evidence was confusing. Certainly the histories of the boys indicated all too clearly their capacity for doing harm and for being powerfully destructive. And yet their experiences at Finchden seemed to reveal a very different reality. In short, it was impossible not to be

struck by the overwhelming evidence that, at the core of their being, these apparently destructive and aggressive human beings were in fact gentle and friendly creatures who desired their own happiness and that of others. It seem faintly ludicrous, even blasphemous, to think of them as flawed, let alone fallen or corrupt.

When I embarked on my training as a person-centred therapist, my belief in human beings as intractably flawed creatures received another severe jolt. I discovered in my therapeutic encounters that, given the right psychological environment, my clients, just like the boys at Finchden, gave every indication of being loving and lovable men and women who desired above all else to be creative and constructive individuals capable of enjoying intimate and understanding relationships with others. What is more, I was often privileged to witness their transformation or emergence into full humanness and was astounded by the rapidity with which this process sometimes occurred. The founder of the school of therapy into which I was being initiated, Carl Rogers, even dared to write repeatedly that in his experience the characteristics of the human being could be best summarised as positive, forward moving and trustworthy. This was a belief which he maintained with unwavering conviction throughout his life.

You may well wonder why, in the light of my experience at Finchden Manor, my adherence to the therapeutic school of Carl Rogers and my own repeated experience as

a therapist, I am still pre-occupied with the notion of Original Sin at all. I must confess that there have been times when I have been on the point of abandoning the whole concept because it seemed so unproductive, demoralising, guilt-producing and even irrelevant. Why, you might ask, do I not simply affirm the belief that human beings are basically good and that their apparent evil of fallenness is the result of social structures and pressures which make it impossible for them to achieve the fullness of their stature? But I cannot believe that for at least three good reasons. In the first place it is self-evident to me that social structures and pressures are the outcome of humanity's own machinations -they have not come into existence apart from or outside the intention of men and women. Secondly, I know only too well my own capacity for falling far short of the person I have it within me to become, and thirdly, I have always been disturbed by the late Bob Lambourne's biting attack on the pastoral counselling movement which to a large extent drew its inspiration from Carl Rogers and other humanistic psychologists. Lambourne maintained that for many psychotherapists in the humanistic tradition, the therapeutic relationship itself had come to be worshipped as an idol promising untold blessings. He was much more comfortable with Freud and his insistence on the id-ego divide because such a concept kept Freud firmly within the Judaeo-Christian myth, with its sense of the depth of the flaw in humankind.

And so back I came again to the tiresome but somehow unsinkable notion of Original Sin. What is or was this original sin anyway? Traditionally, of course, it is disobedience, the proud exercise of free will contrary to God's commands. This had always seemed to me a rather unhelpful concept and certainly a very confusing one because it is by no means always easy to determine God's commands, nor to fathom his will. None of my own obvious shortcomings, however, seem to deserve the honour of being deemed the Original sin. I have never been able, for example, to get very worked up about my sexuality and its aberrations or my tendency to be a somewhat sybaritic hedonist or even my not infrequent intellectual arrogance.

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It was also clear to me that these particular defects were not shared by everyone and this, then, seemed to rule them out as ~~the~~ the original sin with which we are all presumably contaminated. As I was on the verge of abandoning the question altogether the whole subject was once more brought wonderfully alive by the Catholic theologian, Dom Sebastian Moore, who seems to have penetrated to the very heart of a therapist's dilemma. Here he is first of all writing in 'The Inner Loneliness':

Self-consciousness, male and female, which is the experience of the sexual-identity problem, finds itself strangely at odds with the natural dynamic that draws them to one another.

This phenomenon is illustrated with power, beauty and simplicity in the Genesis myth of the Fall, which may be called the story of the beginning of cosmic loneliness. Adam and Eve break with the Companion, with the one who is the thought of them, and the immediate effect is discomfort with their bodies in each other's presence. Here is the account:

She took some of the fruit and ate of it, and gave some to her husband and he ate of it, and immediately their eyes were

opened and they saw that they were naked, and they made for themselves loincloths out of fig leaves.

The point is reinforced later in the story. Adam and Eve hid from God and then God asks them why they are hiding. Adam replies, 'I heard your voice and hid because I was naked' and God says, 'who told you you were naked?'

This story is of crucial importance for our self-understanding. The Christian tradition so far has misread this text. It has stated that the immediate consequence is 'shame', ill-at-easeness with sexuality, so that what is no longer a friend becomes a **threat**. Sexuality is out of control because it is unbefriended, and this is the meaning of lust. In other words, shame generates lust, not lust shame. The tradition so far has had this the wrong way round. The immediate consequence of loss-of-touch with God is not loss of **control** over sexual and other desires. It is loss of **friendship** with sexual and other desires. If a person can befriend his or her desires, control is not a problem: it is simply a part of being 'together'. On the other hand, the befriending of desire only comes about through coming **into** touch - in some way - with the Companion, out-of-touchness with whom causes the **unbefriending** of desire. It is only when a person begins to come out of that loneliness of the male, or of the female - which makes him/her a problem to him/herself sexually and therefore not at ease with the opposite sex - that a

person learns to befriend his or her natural inclination.'

But briefly, Moore's thesis here is that the original sin was not disobedience but **distrust**, distrust in God and consequently of ourselves and more particularly of our desires - or put it another way, the trouble with us is not that we are by nature screwed up but that we believe that we are and thus behave as if we are essentially untrustworthy in our inmost being.

In a later book of quite staggering brilliance, 'Let This Mind Be in You', Sebastian Moore elaborates on this theme:

The most radical experience we have of original sin is the memory of beginning to realize that desire could not be trusted. The **reason** desire cannot be trusted is that I am beginning to doubt my desirability. The sense of desirability, that directed me happily through life in infancy, now no longer works for me, for I am no longer just 'this body'. So my sense of being desirable ceases to be trustworthy as a guiding principle. I don't feel good with any conviction and therefore I don't do what is good. So not feeling good is the origin of the **sin** of not doing what is good. It is the 'original sin', the origin of sin.

But how easy it is to **blame** the sense of being good and desirable that seems to have let us down. So we get the opposite version of what original sin is: original sin is the feeling of being good, it is 'pride', it is 'hedonism'.

Because this mistake is so easily made, it has pervaded the Christian moral tradition, which has come to place original sin in feeling good instead of in feeling bad, which is where it should be placed. . . . Thus we get the bad situation that, while the best psychologists and counsellors are coming to understand the root of our evil as a bad self-image, Christians tend to say to them, 'You are leaving out original sin' - not realizing that these psychologists are, precisely, pointing to original sin.'

I must now address myself to Bob Lambourne's devastating critique of humanistic therapy. At the beginning of this paper I spoke of a therapeutic relationship which I had had with a deeply self-rejecting woman which, after years of struggle, had resulted in her glimpsing her own essential desirability and goodness. Was such a result the outcome of a belief in the I-Thou relationship as God? Did we each make an idol of the other and fall victim to Lambourne's egoism a deux? What, too, of George Lyward and his work? Did he fall victim to community idolatry? Did Finchden Manor take the place of God?

But Moore speaks of Adam and Eve breaking with the 'Companion, with the one who is the thought of them' Later he states ' .the befriending of desire only comes about through coming into touch - in some way - with the Companion, out-of-touchness with whom causes the unbefriending of desire'. As a Christian therapist I believe that I

am accompanied always by my Lord and I know assuredly that it is the operation of grace which heals and brings wholeness. George Lyward seldom spoke of God but at Finchden grace was abounding. Carl Rogers remained honestly agnostic but to be present as he counselled another human being was to be immediately aware of a presence, a force, a power which emanated from him but was more than he. I am convinced that where love, acceptance, cherishing, understanding and compassion are present, then God is in the midst and grace is available. Such qualities gently but resolutely silence the voice of original sin and permit wounded and despairing men and women to sense, perhaps for the first time, that they are infinitely desired by Someone or Something that is greater than they.

For the present, then, I am glad that I have not decided to abandon the concept of original Sin. As a therapist who daily welcomes those who are in its thrall - who feel themselves undesirable even disgusting - I am continually awed by the process whereby men and women discover their beauty and their goodness. The humble presence and the grace which abounds in every truly therapeutic encounter demonstrate that original righteousness, too, is a fact and as John Macquarrie pointed out some ten years ago in a wonderful little book called 'The Humility of God,', original righteousness is more original than sin and therefore points to the true destiny of humankind.

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