

Original sin: Orthodox doctrine or heresy?

How easily we Orthodox indiscriminately adopt the language of Western theology! It is always a great temptation for those who have converted to Orthodoxy from Western Christian denominations to bring the baggage of their former allegiances with them rather than embrace Orthodoxy as something which is entirely different from the Christianity they left behind. While they may see the Western Christendom of today as alien to the Church of the Fathers, they are sometimes reluctant to accept that not everything from the pre-schism West is part and parcel of Orthodoxy. And yet, the influence of Western theology is to be found not only amongst Orthodox converts in the West, but also among those who have been brought up in the Orthodox Faith in traditionally Orthodox countries such as Greece and Russia.

Alas, we Orthodox are too quick to assume that the most 'hardcore' fundamentalist views among Western Christians must also be the most 'correct' Orthodox ones. Rarely, if ever, is this the case. Heresies always tend to be found at opposite poles. It is not unusual for one heresy to arise in reaction to another. One heresy claims that Christ is not God, another that He is not man. One heresy condemns the veneration of the Virgin Mary as Mother of God, another makes her the Immaculate Conception. One claims that man is saved by grace alone, another that he is saved only by works. Such extremes are not easily embraced by Orthodoxy.



True Orthodoxy tends to be the middle-way between the two extremes. This holds true also for the doctrine of 'Original Sin'. "But wait!" I hear someone protest. "The Orthodox Church *does* believe in Original Sin!" I would hesitate to say so, at least without serious qualification. I would prefer to say that the Orthodox Church believes in the 'Ancestral Sin' (πρωπατορικό ἁμάρτημα). Is this mere semantics? By

no means! For anyone who says 'Original Sin' is bound to find themselves involved in the doctrine expounded by Augustine and ever since then by the Latin Church, and not that of the Fathers of the Eastern Orthodox Church. I intend to illustrate that the Orthodox understanding of Ancestral Sin is a far cry from that of Augustine, and that, despite the fact that the Latin doctrine of Original Sin was never formally condemned as heretical in the East, it is, nonetheless, not that of the Orthodox Church.

Augustine and Pelagius

Augustine's doctrine of Original Sin was born from his attempt to combat the heresy of Pelagianism. The controversy began in Rome when the British monk, Pelagius, opposed Augustine's prayer: "Grant what you command, and command what you desire". Pelagius was opposing the idea that the divine gift of grace was necessary to perform the will of God. Pelagius believed that if we are responsible for obeying the commandments of God, then we must all also have the ability to do so without divine aid. He went on to deny the doctrine of Ancestral Sin, arguing that the consequences of Adam's sin are not passed on to the rest of mankind. Adam's sin affected Adam alone, and thus infants at birth are in the same state as Adam was before the Fall.



Augustine of Hippo Sandro Botticelli

Augustine took a starkly different view of the Fall, arguing that mankind is utterly sinful and incapable of good. Augustine believed that the state of Original Sin leaves us in such a condition that we are unable to refrain from sin. The 'image of God' in man (i.e., free will) was destroyed by the Fall. As much as we may choose to do good, our evil impulses pervert our free will and compel us to do evil. Therefore we are totally dependent upon grace.

So far did Augustine take his grim view of the human condition, that he argued not only that the Original Sin effects all of Adam's descendants, but that each person is guilty of the Original Sin from birth (Original Guilt). Infants are therefore guilty of sin and thus infants who die before baptism, in which (according to Augustine) the guilt of Original Sin is removed, are condemned to perdition and cannot be saved. As

if that was not bad enough, Augustine went on to formulate the doctrine of Predestination, which affirms that God has foreordained who will be saved and who will not.

Augustine prevailed and Pelagius was condemned as a heretic by Rome at the Council of Carthage in 418. It seemed that Pelagius' views were more reprehensible to the Latin Church than the idea of predestination and babies burning in hell – views that the Latin Church was not only willing to tolerate, but even willing to champion as Orthodox doctrine!

St John Chrysostom

Between Augustine and Pelagius there appeared to be no middle-way in the West. A different view, however, was expressed in the East by Augustine's contemporary, John Chrysostom. The dispute between Augustine and Pelagius had not reached the East, and so Chrysostom's views were not so agitated by heated disputes and polemics. Were Chrysostom involved in the dispute between Augustine and Pelagius, perhaps his teaching on Ancestral Sin would have prevailed over both Pelagius and Augustine alike, but considering that the sole concern of the Latin Church seemed to be the condemnation of Pelagianism, it is probably more likely that he would have been condemned as semi-pelagian.[i] Whatever the case, Chrysostom's views on the subject have never enjoyed the attention they deserve, and the heated nature of the dispute in the West meant that the doctrine of 'Original Sin' as expounded by Augustine was regarded as the only safeguard against the heresy of Pelagianism.

Chrysostom, while claiming that all human beings are made in the image of God, believed that the Ancestral Sin brought corruptibility and death not only to Adam but to all his descendants, weakening his ability to grow into God's likeness, but never destroying God's image (free will). Chrysostom is a major voice within a consensus of Greek patristic writers who interpret the Fall as "an inheritance essentially of mortality rather than sinfulness, sinfulness being merely a consequence of mortality".[ii] Chrysostom's position is echoed, for example, by St Athanasius the Great and St Cyril of Alexandria, who claimed that we are not guilty of Adam's sin, though we inherit a corrupted nature; but our free will remains intact. This Greek patristic interpretation is founded upon Romans 5:12: "As sin came into the world through one man, and through sin, death, so death spread to all men because all men have sinned"[iii]. John Meyendorff explains how the deficient Latin translation of the text may have contributed to such a stark difference in the Latin interpretation of the Ancestral Sin:

'In this passage there is a major issue of translation. The last four Greek words were translated in Latin as *in quo omnes peccaverunt* ("in whom [i.e., in Adam] all men have sinned"), and this translation was used in the West to justify the guilt inherited

from Adam and spread to his descendants. But such a meaning cannot be drawn from the original Greek'.[\[iv\]](#)

St Cyril of Alexandria explained the passage in this way:

“How did many become sinners because of Adam?... How could we, who were not yet born, all be condemned with him, even though God said, ‘Neither the fathers shall be put to death because of their children, nor the children because of their fathers, but the soul which sins shall be put to death’? (cf. Deut. 24:18) ... we became sinners through Adam’s disobedience in such manner as this: he was created for incorruptibility and life, and the manner of existence he had in the garden of delight was proper to holiness. His whole mind was continually beholding God; his body was tranquil and calm with all base pleasures being still. For there was no tumult of alien disturbances in it. But because he fell under sin and slipped into corruptibility, pleasures and filthiness assaulted the nature of the flesh, and in our members was unveiled a savage law. Our nature, then, became diseased by sin through the disobedience of one, that is, of Adam. Thus, all were made sinners, not by being co-transgressors with Adam,... but by being of his nature and falling under the law of sin... Human nature fell ill in Adam and subject to corruptibility through disobedience, and, therefore, the passions entered in”.[\[v\]](#)

St John Cassian

The East paid little attention to Augustine, and this was largely due to language barriers. For the Eastern Christians, serious theologians wrote in Greek, and they paid little heed to Latin writers. What opposition did come from the East came from some Eastern Orthodox theologians who, for one reason or another, found themselves living in the West. Amongst the most prominent was St John Cassian. St John opposed Augustine on four major points:

- 1) There were clearly instances where people had come to God of their own volition, who, while called by Christ and aided by divine grace, chose to change their ways (e.g. Matthew, Paul, Zacchaeus). Therefore, it is not grace alone that saves us, but also man’s willingness to repent.
- 2) After the Fall, Adam and his descendants retained a knowledge of good, and an impulse, however weakened, to pursue good. Man was not, as Augustine claimed, utterly depraved and incapable of good after the Fall.
- 3) The ‘Image’ of God in man is sick, but not dead. The divine image is in need of healing, but this healing requires synergy (the co-operation of man’s will with divine grace).

4) God wishes all to be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth, so those who are not saved reject salvation against His will. Predestination should be understood as foreknowledge and not as foreordination.

The West condemned St John Cassian's views as semi-pelagian, but for the Orthodox, Cassian is one of the foremost exponents of the Orthodox doctrine of *theosis*.^[vi] His views were supported also by Theodoret of Antioch:

“There is need of both our efforts and divine aid. The grace of the Spirit is not vouchsafed to those who make no effort, and without grace our efforts can not collect the prize of virtue”.

The Ancestral Sin and Baptism

Augustine's view of Original Sin was the reason also for his justification of infant baptism. Believing that babies are born guilty of sin, he argued that baptism was necessary for the babies' salvation. He saw the innocence of infants purely in terms of their being physically too weak to commit sin, but equally guilty as adults of Adam's sin.

The Greek Fathers, having a different view of the Fall and the Ancestral Sin, interpreted the purpose of infant baptism in another way, different in important respects from the familiar Augustinian and Reformed interpretations of the West. The Greek Fathers believed that newborn infants are innocents, wholly without sin. While infants inherit a human nature which, in its wholeness, is wounded by the Ancestral Sin, weakening the will and making each person prone to sin, they are innocent of sin nonetheless. In the fourth of his catechetical homilies on baptism, St John Chrysostom states, “We do baptise infants, although they are not guilty of any sins”. For the Greek Fathers, baptism, above all else, is an acceptance by the Church and entrance of the baptised person into the redeemed and sanctified Body of Christ, the beginning of a life spent in spiritual combat and instruction in holiness on the deepening journey to the Kingdom of God.

Considering the stark contrast between the Orthodox doctrine of the Ancestral Sin and the Augustinian doctrine of Original Sin, and the different understanding of baptism that these doctrines lead to, is it not surprising that some Orthodox speak of baptism in Augustinian terms – of the forgiveness of Original Sin – especially considering that the Orthodox service for baptism makes not a single reference to it? The closest we come to mention of the Ancestral Sin (Πρωπατορικό ἁμάρτημα) in baptism is in the first prayer of the Service for the Making of a Catechumen (which was originally completely separate from the service of Baptism): “Remove far from him/her that ancient error” (παλαιὰ πλάνη). If one of the main purposes of baptism was the forgiveness of Original Sin, surely it would be worth mentioning in the baptism service! But the idea of ‘Original Sin’ being “forgiven” is nowhere to be found

in the Greek Fathers or in the hymns and prayers of the Orthodox Church. For it is an idea which is alien to Greek Patristic thought. The Ancestral Sin is a condition, primarily of mortality and corruptibility, which needs healing, an inherited ‘illness’ which means that free will – or ‘the Image of God’ as the Greek Fathers preferred to put it – though kept intact, is in need of divine grace in order to progress along the path to attaining God’s ‘likeness’, the path to *theosis* or ‘deification’.

Conclusion

Bearing in mind the significant differences between the Orthodox and the Augustinian views of ‘Original Sin’, it surprises me that some Orthodox Christians are so quick to employ the term, claiming that the Orthodox Church holds to the doctrine of ‘Original Sin’, and qualifying this simply by saying that it does not embrace the doctrine of ‘Original Guilt’. I do not think that this is adequate for expounding the Orthodox position on Original Sin. Although Augustine was recognised as a saint by the Orthodox Church,^[vii] it has never accepted his teaching on Original Sin. If what I have written above is correct, then the Augustinian doctrine of Original Sin is wholly un-Orthodox, and it led, I believe, to a whole series of heresies in the Latin Church, such as Predestination, Purgatory, Limbo and the Immaculate Conception. We Orthodox would do well to distance ourselves from the well-known Augustinian position on Original Sin by employing a less familiar term: Ancestral Sin. It is not merely a case of semantics. For an erroneous understanding of this doctrine has serious repercussions for our understanding of sin and the Fall, for grace and free will, for baptism, the human condition and man’s deification. In short, how we understand the Ancestral Sin has direct implications for our whole soteriology – our understanding of the salvation of man and the world.

Notes

[i] Semi-pelagianism, a doctrine advocated by monks of Southern Gaul at Marseilles after 428, aimed at a compromise between the extremes of Pelagianism and Augustinism, claiming that the beginning of faith is the work of man, while the increase of faith is the work of divine grace. It was condemned as a heresy by Rome at the Council of Orange in 529.

[ii] John Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology: Historical Trends and Doctrinal Themes* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1976), 144.

[iii] Διὰ τοῦτο ὡσπερ δι’ ἐνὸς ἀνθρώπου ἡ ἁμαρτία εἰς τὸν κόσμον εἰσῆλθε καὶ τῆς ἁμαρτίας ὁ θάνατος, καὶ οὕτως εἰς πάντας ἀνθρώπους ὁ θάνατος διῆλθεν, ἐφ’ ᾧ πάντες ἥμαρτον

[iv] Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology*, 144

[v] Commentary on Romans, P.G. 74, 788-789

[vi] Theosis is the doctrine that man is saved by attaining the likeness of God, by his 'deification' or 'divinisation'. This is achieved by 'synergy' – the co-operation of free will with divine grace. This doctrine is sometimes condemned as semi-pelagian, particularly by Protestant theologians, because it suggests that man contributes to his own salvation.

[vii] In the Orthodox Church, Augustine is often referred to as 'Blessed' or 'Venerable' (ἱερός) and not 'Saint' (Άγιος). But this should not be regarded as a reluctance on the part of the Orthodox to elevate Augustine to the full status of Sainthood. For other Church Fathers, unambiguously venerated by the Orthodox as saints, are also frequently given such titles: for example, the 'Venerable' (ἱερός) John Chrysostom.