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F. R. Tennant

Excerpt

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LECTURE I.

THE PROBLEM OF THE ORIGIN AND PROPAGATION OF
SIN: ITS TREATMENT IN THEOLOGICAL DOCTRINE.

EZEK. XVIII. 2.

*The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the
children's teeth are set on edge.*

ROM. III. 10.

There is none righteous, no, not one.

I.

IT is the main purpose of the present course of lectures to endeavour to show the need of stating afresh, and then to reconstruct, in terms of the knowledge and the language of our particular age, the essential contents of Christian thought and feeling in regard to the nature and origin of man's sinfulness.

There is a side of the problem of human sin—one may call it the God-ward side—upon which a man is qualified to speak in proportion as his own life approximates to the pattern of the sinless One. There is,

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doubtless, illumination as to the nature and the roots of sin only to be derived from the experience of the mystic or the saint. Such light, however, it is not mine to offer; and with this aspect of the subject self-knowledge will constrain me not to deal.

I have to ask you, therefore, to descend with me to a distinctly lower level of discussion: to the merely intellectual, as distinguished from the spiritual, point of view. And even thus lightened the lecturer finds his burden of responsibility to be heavy. Not that any utterance of his, however great its error, could imperil a truth which he himself had failed to grasp: but because the restatement of truths formulated in terms of the natural knowledge of long ago inevitably involves rejection of elements which had hitherto seemed to be essential to devout believers; and one well knows that pain is so caused to such minds as it grieves one most to hurt. Particularly is this liable to be the case when the subject touches the soul so closely as that with which we are about to deal. One can well understand that, to those who have been accustomed to think of sin exclusively from the point of view of the mature Christian experience, an examination of its growth from conditions scarcely lying within the realm of the moral, and of its nature before it acquired its exceeding sinfulness, may seem to involve trifling with the idea of sin, and to make less unconditional and severe the censure which the

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Christian conscience must ever pass upon it. This difficulty of speaking at once without fear and without offence is inherent in the nature of my task: the translation, that is, from familiar and time-hallowed forms of thought into those which, to some, will have all the repugnance of novelty and strangeness, and all the precariousness of partly tentative suggestion. But if either the lecturer's presuppositions or his results should be unacceptable to the temperament of any whom he is privileged to address, he would fain claim to occupy so much common ground with them as this: the conviction that, in respect to method, the highest reverence for the deep things of God consists in striving for as clear ideas of them as possible, and in following what appears to be the truth, wherever it may lead; whilst, with regard to consequences, it is the part of theological thought, like that of religious faith, to work and wait.

With this avowal of the difficulties one is conscious of having to face, I may pass on to define with a little more of detail the course of argument which it is intended to pursue. In the first two lectures I shall attempt to show that the explanations of the origin, propagation and universality of sin in the human world offered respectively by ecclesiastical doctrine and speculative philosophy leave room for further endeavours. The one has furnished no solution of the problem acceptable to the Christian theologian, and

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the other presupposes certain assumptions which it is becoming increasingly difficult to defend. In the first lecture of the Lent term I shall venture to submit to your criticism a restatement of the problem suggested by the application of the modern category of development and by the results of psychological study of the growth of moral personality. Finally, there will remain for the last lecture the discussion of various questions upon which the theory thus supported may be expected to throw some light, or from which it may be likely to encounter certain difficulties. The larger problem of theodicy, the doctrine of the immanence of God, the relation of the new theory to Holy Scripture, and other questions implicated in our inquiry, may thus be considered in their connexion with that of the origin and universality of sin.

In the present lecture we are to review the explanation of human sinfulness which has been elaborated by dogmatic theology, mainly under the directing influence of S. Augustine. The theory which, subject to various modifications, has expressed the almost unanimous mind of the Church from an early time, is that which refers the prevalence of sin to a fall from a pristine condition of innocence or integrity at the beginning of human history. One consequence of this moral catastrophe was the corruption of our nature in such wise that every individual finds himself, from birth onwards, in an abnormal moral state: a state

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described as inconsistent with the concept of man, foreign to the Creator's intention: a state, therefore, displeasing to God, or sinful, and also guilty, or deserving of punishment. This corruption of human nature has generally been represented since Augustine as consisting in a diminution of the freedom of the will and in an acquired, ingrained bias or inclination to evil; and the universal appearance of sinfulness in the lives of men is ascribed to its hereditary transmission by means of natural generation. Such, in rough outline, subject to minor variations and embellishments in different Protestant branches of the Church and to more considerable divergences in the Church of Rome, is the doctrine of Original Sin¹.

And there are few truths of the Christian Faith that have received more general acknowledgement than this doctrine of human nature. It has been developed with great elaboration and definiteness in the formularies of all branches of Christendom. But more than this; unlike some doctrines it has not remained, so far as practical use is concerned, the exclusive property of the theologian or the preacher. Students of human nature from various points of view have felt themselves compelled to adopt it as the only and necessary explanation of the sad facts of observation. Pascal had said that though it is the most

¹ For the exact formulation of the doctrine in the symbolic confessions of various Churches, see Note A.

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incomprehensible of all mysteries, we are, without it, an unintelligible enigma to ourselves¹. Herder speaks of the story of the Fall as “one of the pillars of Hercules beyond which there is nothing; the point from which all succeeding history starts”; it is the very kernel and germ of that history, “without which mankind would be, what so many things are, a book without a title, without the first cover and introduction.” There is perhaps no writer of our own time who has probed the heart of man more thoroughly than Robert Browning; and for what may be taken as an expression of his judgment we need but recall the familiar lines in which he states, as one among the “reasons and reasons” for holding by the Christian Faith,

“’Tis the faith that launched point-blank her dart
At the head of a lie—taught original sin,
The corruption of man’s heart².”

¹ *Thoughts on Religion and Philosophy*, I. Taylor’s trans. pp. 76–77. “It is very astonishing, that the mystery most remote from our knowledge, that, I mean, of the transmission of original sin, should be a thing without which we can possess no real knowledge of ourselves....Certainly nothing shocks us more than this doctrine, and yet without this most incomprehensible of all mysteries, we are an unintelligible enigma to ourselves. This is the master-key to the intricacies and perplexities of human existence. So that, however inconceivable this mystery may be, man, without it, is still more inconceivable....For myself, I am free to declare, that as soon as I discovered in the Christian religion the doctrine that man is fallen and separated from God, I saw on every side indications of its truth.”

² “Gold Hair: a story of Pornic.”

The testimony of Byron may also be quoted:

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It would be easy to multiply similar quotations from various kinds of literature; though, to be fair, one should notice too the absence of such testimony where one might expect to find it: as, for instance, in the works of Shakespeare. The doctrine of Original Sin is perhaps alluded to by him occasionally¹, but seems never to be used as an explanation of the mixed nature of human character. One must admit, however, at the outset, without serious qualification, the truth of the words in which a recent theologian has estimated the wide-prevailing hold of this doctrine on the general mind: "it collects, as it descends to this modern era of the world, the suffrages of modern thought."

But lest this considerable unanimity amongst poets and men of the world, which it is impossible to gainsay, be taken to imply an overwhelming weight of

"Our life is a false nature—'tis not in
The harmony of things,—this hard decree,
This ineradicable taint of sin,..."

For a collection of similar passages see Mozley's *Lectures and other Theol. Papers*, pp. 157 ff.

As evidence of the extremely important place in Christian doctrine assigned to original sin by many modern theologians, the following passage may be quoted:

"What may be called the starting point of Christian theology, the doctrine of hereditary guilt and sin, through the fall of Adam, and of the consequent entire and helpless corruption of our nature, is entirely unknown to Rabbinical Judaism." Edersheim, *Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, 1894, vol. I. p. 52; cf. p. 165, where the doctrine of the Fall is said to be presented in the New Testament "as the basis of the need of a Redeemer."

¹ e.g. *Henry V.* I. i. 29.

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authoritative testimony, based on the directly observed facts of human character and conduct, such as would envelope with an air of presumption any suggestion as to the possibility of revision, let me at once point out that the evidence to which appeal has thus been made is really not relevant to the precise point to which it has generally been applied. That to which the insight of the poet and the experience of the man of affairs really testifies is the wonderfully mixed nature of the human heart as we find it in the morally developed person: the subtle interweaving of evil with good in act and motive which presents itself everywhere to empirical observation. The doctrine of Original Sin, on the other hand, is far more than the recognition of this all-pervading taint of moral evil in the heart and life of man. This doctrine advances to the assertion of its whence and why, its hidden source and cause, its ultimate empirical explanation. And it therein obviously transcends the scope of observation however profound, and of insight however keen, into the springs of human conduct or the manifestations of human character. The law of sin in the members, discovered in himself by S. Paul, but not referred by him to Adam's transgression as its cause, is a matter of experience with all of us, though ethical psychology would give it now a different name; its origin, however, is not disclosed by spiritual introspection. The corruptness of man's heart, to which all literature

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bears its sorrowful witness, is one thing, then; the original sin with which it is confounded, or which is alleged to be its source, is quite another thing. The one is given in experience, the other is an explanation of what is so given; the one is fact, the other inference from fact: intangible, invisible, conjectural; indemonstrable, from the nature of the case, by the observation and evidence on which our prohibition to be sceptical was apparently so widely based¹.

¹ It is most important to distinguish these two ideas which so many writers on human sinfulness have confused. That "the flesh lusteth against the spirit, and the spirit against the flesh, and these are contrary the one to the other": that man, in other words, is at perpetual strife with himself, is a fact of universal experience which has found expression in all literatures, heathen and Christian. But it is quite another question whether this state is to be regarded as a disease, a confusion, or even in any strict sense a 'discord,' produced once and for all in human nature. Internal conflict, or the effort required to govern our impulses in relation to a moral law, may at any rate be conceived as being due to a man's normal and natural constitution. To moralise the non-normal in us must inevitably produce the same sense of discord and strife within ourselves as to be the victim of a mutilated or deranged moral constitution. A "chaos not yet reduced to order" will present exactly the same appearance to observation as a "wreck and ruin of a once fair and perfect harmony." Which of the two explanations of man's sinful state is the true one is a question to be decided by argument, and one which forms the purpose of the present work. At this stage one would merely point out that there *are* two alternatives; not one possibility only, as is so commonly assumed.

The following instances of this assumption may be cited as examples:

"The fact which implies 'original sin' is manifest, 'writ large' on our daily experience of human perversity and depravity." Wace,

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It was indeed natural, if not inevitable, to identify the universality of sin with its heredity, the observed fact with the sole apparent explanation, so long as thought was dominated by the idea that man's first estate was one of moral excellence or innocence, of natural or miraculous harmony of quiescent flesh and calmly ruling spirit. The evil of his heart could only then be supposed to come through the corruption of

Christianity and Morality, ed. 1, p. 82. On the same page Dr Wace speaks of original sin as "*observable* from the very moment of dawning reason" (italics ours).

"The witness of all our own experience; of all current language, all common expectations, about the ways of man:—the witness, conscious and unconscious, of prophetic minds in every age:—the witness of daily life, of our journals with their columns full of ceaseless news about the fruits, the provocations, the deceitfulness, the anticipations, the triumphs or the punishments of sin:—the witness, interpreting all else, of our own hearts, with their surprises of meanness and cruelty and profanity, their black storms of temper, their contemptible pettiness of vanity, their wretched way of always spoiling a fair thought or a pure motive with some vulgarising daub of selfishness:—all this whole weight and force of testimony, most manifold and yet unconscious, converges upon the truth of a world-wide disfigurement of human life: a pervading taint through all our history: a sense of something wrong in the ethical basis of our nature, thrust into every movement of the will." Paget, *Faculties and Difficulties for Belief and Disbelief*, p. 166.

"I do not see how its truth" (i.e. the doctrine of original sin) "can be altogether ignored by any man who goes about the world with his eyes open, and sees it writ large in history, past and present, or who looks with any truthful introspection into the workings of his own soul." Barry, *Bampton Lectures*, 1892, p. 58.

The identity of observed fact with theoretical explanation has been also assumed by Trench, R. I. Wilberforce, Bright, Newman, Mozley. Cf. also Guizot, *Meditations on Christianity*, E. T. p. 376.