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THE POLITICS OF ORIGINAL SIN

Chalice: Elaine Pagels, child d. age 7....husband died after book pub.

Doxology, #3, Aileen Nettleton

1. Some people think that because children are relatively ignorant, they'll believe almost anything anyone tells them. Therefore these people want to keep what they think are DANGEROUS IDEAS away from children. Unitarian-Universalists don't think like that. Children may know less than grownups, but that doesn't mean they're saps. In fact, sometimes it's harder to fool children than it is to fool grownups.

Hans Christian Andersen wrote a story about that....

2. When I was a little kid I learned a song you can sing when you know someone is trying to fool you. The chorus goes,

That's a lot of apple sauce, apple sauce, apple sauce,
That's a lot of apple sauce, you're fooling us;
~~We know that you know that we know that you know that~~
That's a lot of apple sauce, you're fooling us.

Sing it one with me. . . .

For the verses, you can include just about any nursery rhyme, but on the last line you go into the chorus. Like

Hey diddle-diddle, the cat's in the fiddle,
The cow jumped over the moon,
~~The little dog laughed to see such sport, and. . .~~
That's a lot of apple sauce. . . .

3. A real song, Morning Has Spoken

4. The story of creation from the Book of Genesis:

Fredericka Schilling, 1:1-5, 24-31

In chapter 2, we get a DIFFERENT STORY...

(*Annis*) 2:4b-7

In chapter 1, plants and animals come before people, in chapter 2 it's the other way around. In ch. 1, men and women are created together on the sixth day; in chapter 2 Adam is created about a week before Eve....which has justified men in taking precedence ever since. Anyway, will Fredericka continue with the story?

2:8-9, 15-22, 25

3:1-13, 16-19, 22-24

5. That's the story. But what does it MEAN? The obvious answer is that this is a myth that explains death, among other things. People are always asking "why?", and they want their questions answered, especially about important things like death. Adam and Eve made the wrong choice, and that's why we die.

~~But that obvious answer is not the one given by all Christians and Jews.~~ Elaine Pagels found that early Christians gave quite different interpretations of the myth. She says that when she was a student she was dissatisfied with many contemporary representatives of Christianity. She, like many other historians of early Christianity, studied it assuming that they would find that when the Christian movement was new, it was also simpler and purer. ~~But instead what she found was the opposite of what she was looking for,~~ that there was a great deal of variety in early Christianity. There were different versions of the scriptures; the Bible as we know it wasn't fixed for centuries. In an earlier book she wrote about the Gnostics, a much more mystical kind of Christianity, and one that claimed there was a hidden meaning of the scriptures that could only be grasped by the initiated.

~~She found the same variation in interpretations of the creation story.~~ Around 400 AD, Pelagius, a devout Catholic from Britain, argued that human desires and human will...have no effect on natural events---that humanity neither brought death upon itself nor could it, by an act of will, overcome death: death was in the nature of things, despite (what seemed to be) the clear statement to the contrary in Genesis. (p. 129) St. Augustine fought these views. After Pelagius died, one Julian of Eclanum in South Italy wrote a book arguing against Augustine's views. Augustine responded with a long book of his own.

6. Julian praised the creator god and argued that "what is natural cannot be called evil." (p. 135) What god created in nature is clearly not the result of human choices, and thus has nothing to do with sin.

(A) Whatever is natural is shown not be be voluntary. If (death) is NATURAL, it is not VOLUNTARY. If VOLUNTARY, it is not NATURAL. These two, by definition, are opposites, like necessity and will....These two cannot exist simultaneously; they cancel each other out. (p. 142)

If death is part of nature, it cannot be the result of Adam's voluntary choice.

(B) p. 139, top. *→ quote + following para. stem.*

For Julian, the death that sin brings in the world is a spiritual death. The person who is spritually dying experiences nature as hostile and the source of nearly intolerable frustrations.

(3)

The first person to die, Abel, experienced no evil at the hands of nature herself, but only at his brother's hands. So Julian wrote, "The first death clearly showed that it was not a bad thing to die, for the righteous one was the first one to die. (p. 138)" But Cain's sin set him into an antagonistic relationship with the earth, as it is written in Genesis, "Cursed are you from the earth."

But Augustine insisted that through an act of will Adam and Eve DID change the structure of the universe. In contrast to Julian, who argued that

the merit of one single person is not such that it could change the structure of the universe itself, (p. 133)

Augustine argued that the disobedience of Adam and Eve permanently corrupted nature in general as well as human nature. Augustine interpreted Genesis as saying that as God had first created it, the earth was free of thorns and thistles, bringing forth an abundance of food. Then Adam sinned, and "all nature was changed for the worse;" thorns and thistles suddenly sprang up from the once fertile land.

And Augustine argued that death was in no sense NATURAL but arose only after Adam chose to sin. Adam's single arbitrary act of will rendered all subsequent acts of human will inoperative.

7. Julian argued that human labor was natural. He pointed out that in Genesis, Adam's task was to cultivate the garden of Eden, even before the sin. Sweating is part of man's nature, "sweat is a natural help in physical exertion," not an innovation introduced to punish sin. (p. 137)

But Augustine argued that the need to work was the result of Adam's sin.

8. They also disagreed about birth pains. Augustine argued that these too existed only after and because of Adam and Eve's sin. Julian argued that labor pains were part of nature; innocent animals, including cattle, sheep, and cats, experience similar contractions to expel fetuses from the womb.

9. Julian argued that "God created fully innocent natures, capable of virtue according to their will," not only in Paradise, but now as well. (139)

But Augustine argued that infants are born as sinners. He found the rage, weeping, and jealousy of which infants are capable proof of original sin. (p. 140). He observed that infants suffer, and where there is suffering, there must have been evil and guilt, for God would not allow suffering where there was no prior fault.

How, Augustine Challenged Julian, could a just and all-powerful God allow infants to suffer. . .

(C) p. 135, top

Suffering PROVES that sin is transmitted from parents to children.

If there were no sin, then infants, bound by no evil, would suffer nothing harmful in body or soul under the great power of the just God. (135)

10. Above all, Augustine argued that sexual desire proves the existence of original sin.

(D) p. 110, bottom.

Augustine was impressed by the fact that sexual arousal functions independently of the will's rightful rule:

Because of this, these members are rightly called PUDENDA, parts of shame, because they excite themselves just as they like, in opposition to the mind which is their master, as if they were their own masters.

(E) p. 111, bottom.

(F) p. 141, middle.

11. By 417 the city of Rome was so divided between the followers of Pelagius and the followers of Augustine that there were riots in the streets. Augustine won. The pope excommunicated Pelagius and decreed his ideas heresy. Augustine's followers got the emperor Honorius to fine Pelagius and order him into exile along with his intransigent supporters.

12. But why did Augustine win? Pagels attributes it to changing political circumstances. The early Christians were a persecuted minority. They refused to worship the gods of the emperors and regarded those gods as demons, the fallen angels referred to in Genesis. They chose martyrdom rather than to worship those demons. Those early Christians interpreted the Genesis story as showing that human beings were created as moral equals and with freedom.

In 313 AD Constantine converted to Christianity. The Christians were a minority of the population of the empire at that time, even among the elites. Christianity was imposed on the empire largely by force.

What happened after that can be seen in the contrasting careers of

Augustine and his contemporary St. John Chrysostom.

~~In 313~~, when John Chrysostom was a priest in Antioch there was a riot against the emperor's taxation policies, and crowds smashed the statues of the emperor. John boldly argued that the right of government belonged not to the emperor alone but to the human ~~xxxxx~~ race as a whole. "In the beginning," he said, "God honored our race with sovereignty." What else did it mean that God made us "in his image?" John argued that governments were necessary for sinners, the masses of the population. But the minority who, chastened by the example of Adam's sin, and recovered from sin through baptism, were exempt from the constraints of human government. For those who live in a state of piety require no correction on the part of the magistrates, for 'the law was not made for a righteous man.' When Christians err, they should be corrected by persuasion, not force.

(G) p. 103

In 397 John, to his surprise, was called to be the bishop of Constantinople, the second highest position in Christianity after the pope of Rome. Once there, he felt obliged to correct the emperor and ~~xxxxxx~~ members of his court for their moral failings. His acts of social conscience turned powerful people against him. After he attempted to build a hospital for lepers just outside the city walls, he was expelled from office, and he narrowly avoided execution.

13. The career of Augustine was rather different. After he became bishop of Hippo in North Africa he became embroiled in a dispute with another group in the church, the Donatists. The Donatists arose as a group after they refused to recognize the authority of a bishop who had cooperated with the state in a persecution of the Christians in 303-304 AD. Augustine had their position declared heretical; once a priest or a bishop has been anointed, his ability to give the sacraments continues even if he becomes a disbeliever and a sinner. Augustine, like most of the other Christians, had already believed that the powers of the state could be used against non-Christians who insisted on their earlier practices. In his struggle with the Donatists, he came to believe that ~~xxx~~ state power could be used against erring Christians as well. He came to find

Nov. 5, 1989

(6)

military force 'indispensable in suppressing the Donatists. Fear and coercion, which John Chrysostom had considered necessary only to govern outsiders, were necessary within the church as well. Many Christians as well as pagans, Augustine noted, respond only to fear.

The theology of original sin buttressed this kind of authoritarianism. The forbidden fruit was placed in the garden to teach Adam and humanity the primary virtue, obedience. Humanity never was really meant to be, in any sense, totally free. God allowed us to sin in order to prove to us from our own experience that "our true good is free slavery --- slavery to God in the first place and, in the second, to his agent, the emperor. (p. 120)

What Augustine said, in simplest terms, is that human beings cannot be trusted to govern themselves because our very nature has become corrupt as the result of Adam's sin. In the late 4th and the 5th century, Christianity was no longer a suspect and persecuted movement; now it was the religion of emperors. Under these circumstances, Augustine's theory of human depravity replaced the previous Christian ideology of human freedom. (p. 145)

14. Pagels goes on to argue that this explanation for the adoption of the theology of original sin in the first place cannot explain why it has continued to be held by many Christians for 1500 years, in rather different political circumstances. She argues that this kind of belief meets certain deep-seated psychological needs, and her argument is supported by recent theories and research done by social psychologists. People want to believe that behaviors and outcomes are the result of human agency rather than aspects of the external situation that cannot be changed by human action.

The social psychologists have investigated how people explain behaviors and outcomes, to what do they attribute them? People can attribute the outcomes experienced by themselves and others either to internal factors, "dispositions," or to external factors, "situations." There is a normal tendency to exaggerate the importance of internal factors.

Persons are seen as the causes of their behaviors and outcomes. One process known to influence causal explanations is the so-called 'fundamental attribution error' This is an observed bias toward individual, or dispositional, explanations for behavior and away from situational explanations. . . . For example, a person who complies with authoritative instructions to write an essay advocating an unpopular position often is thought by observers to favor personally that position --- even if the observers are aware that virtually everyone in fact complies with the instructions. . . . The bias is so extreme and pervasive that the term ERROR seems clearly well deserved. It has been replicated in a multitude of studies. . . .

In normal circumstances, this fundamental attribution error is functional; it helps people to adapt to situations.

Believing that a particular situation can be influenced by one's own actions can serve to motivate such action, bringing potential benefits if the belief is correct. Trying to act effectively in situations that are actually uncontrollable often carries little cost, compared to failing to act when it would be helpful. . . . it seems that overall effectiveness in dealing with the environment would be maximized by a tendency to overestimate one's ability to control or influence events.

The theory of original sin explains death and other misfortunes to human agency. Pagels argues that Augustine's theory meets a basic psychological need --- "people often would rather feel guilty than helpless. . . . guilt, however painful, offers reassurance that (bad) events do not occur at random but follow specific laws of causation; and that their causes, or a significant part of them, lie in the moral sphere, and so within human control. . . . Guilt invites the sufferer to review past choices, to amend behavior, redress negligence, and perhaps by such means to improve his or her life." (pp. 146f)

But Augustine's theory contains a paradox. He says, in effect, "You PERSONALLY are not to blame for what has come upon you; the blame goes back to Adam and Eve." * But Pagels says that the power of the theology may lie in the paradox. "Augustine assures the sufferer that pain is unnatural.... But he also assures us that suffering is neither without meaning nor without specific cause. Both the cause and the meaning of suffering, as he sees it, lie in the sphere of MORAL CHOICE, not NATURE. If guilt is the price to be paid for the illusion of control over nature... many people have seemed willing to pay it."

* Adam was free to choose good or evil. We are corrupted by original sin & can only choose evil.