The medieval debate over original sin traces back to an incorrect translation of scripture, a heated controversy that ended with the triumph of a minority view, and centuries of subsequent attempts to make sense of the outcome. The position developed by Augustine of Hippo, according to which humans inherited the guilt of original sin through the lust that accompanied their parents’ sexual intercourse, maintained adherents throughout the Middle Ages and later influenced Martin Luther and John Calvin. There was a range of alternative interpretations, and one associated with Thomas Aquinas prevailed within Roman Catholic doctrine at the Council of Trent in (1545-1563). In the Eastern church, theologians had long ago backed away from the Augustinian position they officially shared with the Latins. Meanwhile, the concept of original sin was all but absent within Judaism and Islam.

INTERPRETATIONS OF THE FALL
To most ancient and medieval commentators on Genesis, the experience of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden demonstrated a sobering fact about humanity, that “every inclination of his heart is evil from childhood” (Genesis 8:21). From earliest history, human beings were weak, and their weakness compelled Adam and Eve to violate the will of God. As a result, they and all humans after them suffered disease, mortality, and – worst of all – the propensity to sin again. In rabbinical literature, the source of this moral weakness was none other than God, and it was one of the rare acts God regretted (e.g. Babylonian Talmud, Sukkah 52b). According to most medieval Jewish theologians, however, although humans were weak like Adam and Eve and suffered disease and death like them, the connection ended there. After God made a covenant with Moses, the people of Israel were free even from the lust to which Adam and Eve had succumbed. Children were born without sin and remained in that state until, as adults, their weakness impelled them toward sins of their own. Muslim theologians, too, affirmed that Adam and Eve’s failure inflicted mortality on the human race, but that people entered the world without inherent guilt or the need for absolution. Moreover, they did not consider actions that resulted from moral weakness to be anywhere near as offensive to God as willful acts of transgression: the original offence was not even a sin in the gravest sense. It remained for other commentators to identify humanity’s direct implication in the Fall.

GREEK THEOLOGY
By the end of the fourth century, generations of Christian authorities had shown little consensus on the nature and effects of original sin. In fact, the earliest writers demonstrated scant interest in the matter. Greek and Latin theologians alike had usually interpreted the small number of relevant scriptural passages as evidence that people shared in Adam and Eve’s punishment, but not in their offense. Part of this unfortunate inheritance included the same weakness that confounded the first humans, and this weakness continued to result in sinful behavior. Some theologians such as Irenaeus of Lyon (ca. 130-200 CE) emphasized humanity’s distance from divine grace since the Fall, a spiritual isolation they mapped in opposition to contemporary, dualist notions of sin. For the most part, however, disagreements over original sin were matters of degree: despite their implication in the trespass of Adam and Eve and their need for divine grace to gain salvation, all humans remained capable of taking the first step toward meriting that grace. The question was the extent to which humans were debilitated, and thus how difficult that initial voluntary step would be. As for guilt, each person’s sin was his or her own, including Adam and Eve’s. Every sin was a result of a voluntary exercise, a product of free will. Most eastern theologians, furthermore, rejected any suggestion that infants were born tainted with sin and in need of absolution, as some western theologians contended, most notably among them Tertullian (flourished ca. 200) and Cyprian of Carthage (died 258). Although from the fifth century onward the medieval Greek church tacitly accepted the western doctrine of original sin, most of its theologians maintained that humans were capable of cooperating with the divine gift of grace in their own progress toward salvation.

PELAGIANISM
The key text for the Christian doctrine of original sin was Paul’s letter to the Romans, where he described how sin entered the world through Adam (Romans 5:12). In the original Greek, the crucial phrase in this passage reads literally, “death came to all humans because [ἐφ’ ὧν] all sinned.” In the Latin translation some theologians used, the same text was rendered, “death came to all humans in whom [in quo – that is, in Adam] all humans sinned.” This unlikely reading implicated all humanity in the actual, historical commission of Adam’s sin. Theologians also faced the logical problem of how guilt was transmitted generation to generation. By the end of the fourth century, “traducianism” was condemned: most condemned the view that parents “handed on” (Latin tradere) their corruption into the soul of their offspring because it diminished the soul’s spiritual nature and God’s exclusive role as creator. Instead, God created each soul fresh at the first moment of a human’s existence; the affiliation of that brand new soul with the ancient guilt of original sin was mysterious and inexplicable, but nonetheless real. Despite the questions it left unanswered, this explanation satisfied many theologians. For others, it did not move far enough away from traducianism.

Pelagius (ca. 350–418), a Briton famous at Rome for his piety, denied that humans were in any way corrupt at birth or incapable of good works. Instead, he contended that humans were completely responsible for their own sins or merits, and could attribute neither their salvation nor their failure to anyone but themselves, not even to divine grace. Pelagius won support despite formidable opponents, yet his insistence on the soul’s purity – effectively a denial of original sin – ran counter to the inclinations of most theologians. Moreover, it opened a debate over the role of grace toward which Augustine of Hippo (354–430) directed the full force of his argumentative ability and political clout. Pelagius’ views were condemned in two North African councils and by Pope Innocent I between the years 416 and 418, and again at Ephesus in 431. Some Latin theologians, for more than a century afterwards, argued that humans retained the capacity for good works, at least enough to make the first step toward meriting further grace. These views, which later ecclesiastical historians would categorize as Semi-Pelagianism, were closest to those maintained among most eastern theologians. Nevertheless, they were condemned in 529 by a council at Orange, which reiterated the judgment against Pelagius.

AUGUSTINE

During the wide-flung debates that framed the first condemnations of Pelagianism, Augustine of Hippo sharpened both his rhetoric and his philosophy, ultimately honing the edge on a precise doctrine of original sin. Even before those debates, Augustine emphasized the sinfulness of humans rather than their capacity for good. He was certain that humans were incapable of attaining salvation on their own, but his written debates with Pelagius and the formidable Julian of Eclanum (386–454) clarified for him – and all subsequent Latin theologians – what exactly was at stake in the question of original sin. Although God created each soul at the beginning of a human’s existence, the parents’ concupiscence – the lust accompanying their sexual intercourse – physically transmitted original sin at the moment of conception. The precise mechanics of this formative process remained obscure and provided an attractive target for Augustine’s critics. Its consequences, however, were perfectly lucid. In Augustine’s memorable phrase, humans were born as “one lump of sin” (una massa peccati) without redeeming qualities. While many Christians viewed baptism as the positive infusion of grace, Augustine stressed its remedial function: to cleanse the stain of original sin. Even then, humans remained so far removed from divine justice that they had no hope of meriting its mercy. Augustine was directly opposed to Pelagian prospects for human potential. Grace accomplished everything, human will nothing. He also opposed all compromises, which included traditional views of original sin most of his contemporaries accepted. Original sin was all-consuming. Grace was never awarded on the basis of merit. There were no small steps toward salvation, only the gift of grace or its absence. Those people received grace whom God willed. By implication, those who were no more or less a lump of sin but did not receive grace were doomed from their conception. These included unbaptized infants, although Augustine suggested that their torments would be less severe than those who had sinned after baptism. According to Augustine original sin alone was sufficient to result in eternal separation from God.

SCHOLASTICS

Augustine’s reputation all but sanctioned a doctrine of original sin that was a minority view in its own day and for centuries afterward, as subsequent conflicts revealed. Among the corollaries of Augustine’s position on original sin, the condemnation of unbaptized infants was the most troubling on an emotional level.
Predestination, meanwhile, upset people on a theological level, and in Francia pitched Hincmar of Reims (802-882) and John Scotus Eriugena (ca. 810-877) against Gottschalk of Orbais (ca. 805-868). According to a strict Augustinian like Gottschalk, original sin completely undid human beings and their potential for salvation. God bestowed grace on those whom he mysteriously elected, singling them out for eternal life and condemning all others to damnation. Any notion of free will that suggested humans could choose whether or not to attain salvation diminished the importance of grace, the omnipotence of God, and the true extent of human depravity. Against this bleak anthropology, Hincmar and Eriugena struggled to give room for voluntary behavior within the narrow confines of Augustine’s logic. They contended that God moved outside of time, knew what people would do, and predestined the consequences for their actions, but not their actions. After a series of conflicting councils, there was no meaningful resolution.

When debates over original sin resurfaced in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, the issues and poles of contention were essentially the same even if the vocabulary changed. Anselm of Canterbury (1033-1109) focused on the transmission of original sin, denying the role of concupiscence and instead positing universal generation within Adam. If some later theologians such as Albertus Magnus (ca. 1206-1280) shared his discomfort over concupiscence, others like Peter Lombard (ca. 1100-1164) adhered closely to Augustine’s explanation. In many ways, Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) also followed Augustine in his stance on original sin. Like Gottschalk, Aquinas contended that God bestowed grace on people selected according to divine will, not because God knew they would prove themselves worthy of grace by their merits. Without grace, as Augustine had concluded, humans were hopelessly depraved. Aquinas also believed, however, that all humans including Adam and Eve retained a pure nature upon which grace worked in order to attain salvation – they were not only lumps of sin. Original sin bound humanity together at a distance from the joy of divine grace, and Christians must conduct their lives without the guarantee of ever achieving that joy. On the other hand, Aquinas denied that original sin alone condemned those who did not enjoy the gifts of grace to suffer eternal punishment. Infants, for example, who died with the taint of original sin would never know divine joy, but they would also not be able to comprehend or even perceive their loss – one of the rare proposals made earlier by Peter Abelard (1079-1142) that the council of Sens had not condemned in 1140. The pure nature of unbaptized infants, therefore, would enjoy the happiest existence possible outside of God’s presence. Not all theologians agreed with every aspect of Aquinas’ reasoning on original sin, but his relative optimism appealed to many Christians over the bleak prospects of Augustinianism. Against promoters of the latter tendency, particularly Martin Luther (1483-1546) and John Calvin (1509-1564), Dominic Soto (1494-1560) supported the views of Aquinas, tempered with a notion of generation similar to that Anselm had proposed. This was the doctrine that the Roman Catholic Church promulgated at the fifth session of the Council of Trent in 1546.


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