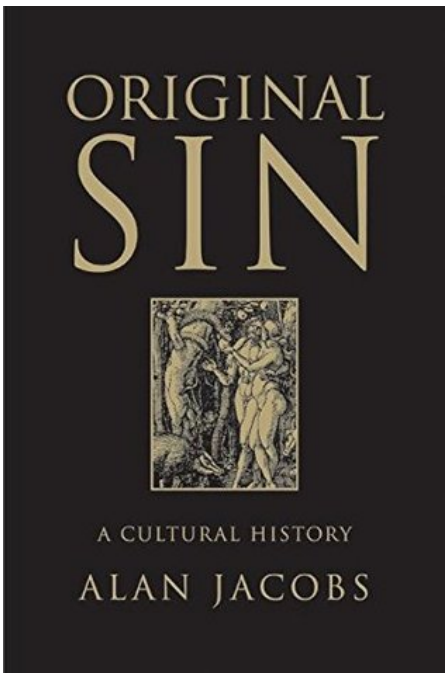

Original Sin: A Cultural History

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Essayist and biographer Alan Jacobs introduces us to the world of original sin, which he describes as not only a profound idea but a necessary one. As G. K. Chesterton explains, "Only with original sin can we at once pity the beggar and distrust the king."

Do we arrive in this world predisposed to evil? St. Augustine passionately argued that we do; his opponents thought the notion was an insult to a good God. Ever since Augustine, the church has taught the doctrine of original sin, which is the idea that we are not born innocent, but as babes we are corrupt, guilty, and worthy of condemnation. Thus started a debate that has raged for centuries and done much to shape Western civilization.

Perhaps no Christian doctrine is more controversial; perhaps none is more consequential. Blaise Pascal claimed that "but for this mystery, the most incomprehensible of all, we remain incomprehensible to ourselves." Chesterton affirmed it as the only provable Christian doctrine. Modern scholars assail the idea as baleful and pernicious. But whether or not we believe in original sin, the idea has shaped our most fundamental institutions—our political structures, how we teach and raise our young, and, perhaps most pervasively of all, how we understand ourselves. In *Original Sin*, Alan Jacobs takes readers on a sweeping tour of the idea of original sin, its origins, its history, and its proponents and opponents. And he leaves us better prepared to answer one of the most important questions of all: Are we really, all of us, bad to the bone?

Original Sin: A Cultural History Details

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From Reader Review Original Sin: A Cultural History for online ebook

Mike Knox says

In the introduction, Jacob notes that of all religious beliefs, none provokes more criticism and repulsion than the doctrine of original sin. Original sin is irreparable, irreversible, and unpredictable (x-xi). It is the belief that every human being is born with sin already in them. That we all inherit sin, and are culpable. The history of original sin is a history of resistance to it. So why, over the centuries, have so many stubbornly believed it? Well, as Chesterton noted, original sin has enormous empirical evidence ("it is the only doctrine of the Christian faith that is empirically provable" [x])! But the main reason it has been adopted by some of the greatest thinkers in the history of the world is its vast explanatory power. All other explanations for human evil and selfishness fall short.

Original Sin is, in Jacob's words, "an *exemplary* history" (as opposed to an exhaustive one), and "a specifically *cultural* history" (as opposed to a theological history). Thus Jacobs mines the literature of centuries and turns up story after story of people who either fought or defended the doctrine of original sin. The stories range from the ancient past (King David and Bathsheba) to the more recent dawn of eugenics and genetics. Those who are resistant to belief in "a divided self" will need to overcome a barrage of fire to maintain their skepticism by the final page.

One thing that stands out in Jacob's brilliant treatment is the theme of original sin's positive contributions to history and life. He introduces us to Pascal, who realized that only the fear of God that comes from being corrupt sinners in the sight of God enables us to have proper wonder at God's love (116). The power of original sin to bind humans together in a "confraternity" is seen throughout the book, but especially in the chapter on American slavery. Original sin is a brake that can slow and restrain the course of evil (209-10).

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn was a Soviet prisoner who was brought to faith by being persuaded of the truthfulness of original sin. How he was persuaded of original sin is most interesting. As he watched a habitually-brutal prison guard, he realized over time that

> given the same power in the same circumstances, he himself would surely have behaved with equal cruelty. "In the intoxication of youthful successes" he had believed himself "infallible"; it was the Gulag that taught him that he was "a murderer, and an oppressor." It was the Gulag that taught him that everyone has the capacity to become a Stalin and that therefore "the line separating good and evil passes not through states, nor between classes, nor between political parties either—but through every human heart." (224)

Jacobs mines Rebecca West's work, Black Lamb and Grey Falcon (which he believes to be "the greatest book of the twentieth century" [283]), to provide us a vivid illustration of the human heart. West visited a biological museum and sees a two-headed calf. One head was lovely, the other hideous. The owners had fed the beautiful head milk, but the ugly head would spit the milk out, preventing the food from reaching the calf's stomach. According to the custodian, the calf would have been "alive today had it not been for its nature" (223).

I found the stories where original sin intersected with science to be very interesting. The final chapter features this intersection the most because it deals with genetics. But it also appears in the chapter on American slavery. Interestingly, it is science, not the religious belief of original sin, which gets the bad rap. Swiss naturalist Louis Agassiz was

> a progenitor of “scientific racism”—the view that, setting aside any biblical narratives or doctrines that support the unity and common origin of human beings, there is no such thing as the human race; rather, there are several races that, carelessly and unscientifically, have been lumped in a single category. It was the task of science to disentangle the confused strands, to establish clear distinctions among races, to rank them according to intellectual capacity, and to insist that those rankings be reflected in law and public policy. And so the superstitions of biblical literalism would be set aside in the name of scientific progress, which is also, of course, social progress. (203)

Few questions can be more important than what is wrong with us. An incredible journey awaits anyone willing to pick up this book. I highly recommend it.

J.J. says

Excellent. As usual, Jacobs has what Douglas Wilson calls "copiousness". He displays depth and breadth of insight into the history of this deeply offensive idea that we all unavoidably inherit moral evil. He's a good missiologist as well in the way that he avoids in-house language and winsomely invites skeptics to doubt their own doubts on this idea.

Melissa says

Really excellent. This has been on my shelves for years, and I don't know why i haven't read it sooner. Jacobs is very widely read, but not at the cost of depth.

Josh Sieders says

My first Jacobs, it probably wouldn't have been my first pick, but alas, the all-powerful Kindle deal... I struggled with it at times, partly because of my circumstances (nasty cold) but on the whole, I appreciated the cultural-literary overview of this important doctrine compared to the usual theological approach. He writes well and will remain on my list of authors to watch and read.

Jonathan says

I would call this pop theology, not cultural history. Still, it is engaging and persuasive pop theology.

The Western imagination, as Jacobs illustrates, has been preoccupied for millennia with the suspicion that we humans have somehow inherited a condition of pervasive moral corruption. Christian theologians are only one part of this tradition. The theologians' uniqueness, Jacobs insinuates, is in suggesting a way out of the corruption without denying that it is an essential part of our nature.

The most interesting part of Jacobs' narrative is his claim that the doctrine of original sin has a strong democratic tendency. The doctrine holds that no one can claim exemption from the evil within us all -- that there is no moral or spiritual elite, at least among the living. Thus, we must bear with each other, pray for each other, support each other in our common weakness. Ultimately, therefore, the doctrine of original sin can be a source of inner peace. If we recognize that we can never be perfect, then it will be easier to go about the business of being tolerable -- with God's help and each other's.

Shane Saxon says

I immensely enjoyed this book.

Roy says

Enjoyed Alan's episodic tour of original sin (if that's actually allowed). His readable and oft insightful work wanders among various players who have pondered this great question of humanity's flawed moral character (or at least it wandered with me while I bounced between Moscow, Nashville, Cookeville, Chattanooga and back again last week). I found his treatment of Rousseau and the radical romantics, who keep hoping against irrational hope that we are essentially "innocent" from birth, particularly helpful. What he reveals is the tragic irony that those who promote human native innocence (such as the "enlightened" French Revolutionaries, racially pure Nazis, classless Marxists, et al.) almost always end up being those who take top honors for perpetrating the greatest evils in history. For those looking for a theological treatment of the question, they'll need to look elsewhere. For those wanting a fine guided cultural history tour, Alan is your man, your 'adam'.

Joel Wentz says

Wide-ranging, erudite and compelling (even funny at times, which is surprising considering the topic at hand). Jacob's takes the reader through an impressive scope of history, pulling on threads in the writings of philosophers, theologians, playwrights, novelists, psychologist, scientists and others. AT the core of all their work is the question, "Are humans, essentially, good? Or evil?" The implications of how all these thinkers answer these questions are teased out, and Jacobs does a wonderful job of contextualizing every argument he summarizes - and one definitely gets a sense of a "pendulum swing" throughout history, for every influential writer who asserted the core evil of humanity, an influential writer would inevitably respond arguing for our core "goodness."

Overall, it's a fascinating read, which gave me a greater appreciation for the scope at which we humans have wrestled with the notion of our inherited "sinfulness" through the generations. This is an easy recommendation for anyone who loves history, theology, philosophy, or some combination of the 3. I'm impressed by Jacob's wide range of sources, and his clear, funny writing style. Oh, how I wish there were

more voices like his in the academy.

Esteban del Mal says

Three guys lay sun-blistered on the shore of a desert island. Something shiny washes up and one of the guys notices it glinting in the waves. He rubs the sand from it and out bursts a genie, to much sensory fanfare.

“As reward for releasing me from centuries of captivity, I grant each of you a wish,” booms the genie (but the genie probably communicates this in their heads, telepathic-like, because I don’t think anyone or anything, magical or otherwise, that has been isolated from humanity for centuries would speak in the modern vernacular; this goes for Jesus too).

The three guys stare slack jawed and the genie quickly apprehends that it isn’t dealing with the sharpest knives in the drawer, so it doesn’t go into the rules of wish granting, like one can’t wish for more wishes, or wish oneself a genie, that sort of thing.

The first guy thinks a minute and says, “My greatest wish is to be back home with my family.”

POOF!

He disappears in a cloud of B-movie smoke.

The second guy looks to where the first guy had been, thinks a minute longer and says, “I don’t have a family, so I wish to be the wealthiest man in the world.”

POOF!

He likewise disappears in a cloud of B-movie smoke, presumably to Santa Barbara or Hong Kong.

The third guy averts his eyes from the genie and cries out, “Oh wicked spirit! God was punishing us for our sins! My wish from thee is that the other two were back here with me! Of their own free will! And in accordance with the Law of Moses! Also, if you’ve got a minute, I’d like to talk to you about accepting the Lord Jesus Christ as your personal savior.”

Can you guess which of these three individuals is the author of Original Sin, Alan Jacobs?

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Does it come as a great surprise to you that you’re an asshole? I don’t mean to be judgmental here, because I’m an asshole too. So are your loved ones, neighbors, therapist, everyone that has anything to do with delivering books to your doorstep, your favorite musician, Gandhi, the casts and crews of every sitcom you’ve watched, the president of the United States, whoever discovered the wheel, that woman you saw drop money in some panhandler’s jar, the panhandler himself, your favorite teacher, and any and everybody you, I, or anyone else have ever known or will ever know -- as well as everyone they’ve ever known, or ever will know -- to time immemorial, so on and so forth, ad infinitum.

Assholes, one and all.

Sure, there are varying degrees of assholism and we can argue its origins, but let’s leave it to the philosophers to tease out the nuances. For now, it’s only necessary to accept and understand the basic premise that our species is victim to this unfortunate and immutable condition.

Fine. Alan Jacobs agrees, but he is fixated. He must have thought himself quite special at some time or other because assholism is a fetish for him. And what does he do? Well, he does what every fetishist who wishes to gain acceptance in larger society does -- he rationalizes himself blue in the face. He tells us that it’s liberating to discover you’re an asshole because it’s democratizing! Thieving bureaucrats who condemn innocents to prison? Assholes! Corporatists who swindle us and can’t think past a 90-day financial quarter? Assholes! But so is everybody, so what’s the big deal? We all suffer the same fate.

Alpha assholes are no worse than us middling assholes, when you take the Jacobs-long view: let them store up riches where moth and rust decay, render unto Caesar what is Caesar’s, all that rot. No need to worry about the here and now because the problem is too big for any of us to get our pathetic asshole arms around. Let it be. Don’t buy into that “social progress” kerfluffle, because it’s just dressed up as “scientific progress,” itself code for LIBERAL. Besides, anything humanity proposes to improve things is doomed to failure because, well, we’re all assholes. Better to trust in tradition. Unquestioningly.

Original sin is the filthy and gnarled thread of redemption, suitable for self-flagellation.

At this point, things get existential, and Mr. Jacobs refers his readers to the nearest altar call, lest they go insane like poor Jonathan Swift who, sadly, went nuts because he recognized the Fall but couldn’t bring himself to accept the Grace. (It's not nearly as sad, but sad nevertheless, that Mr. Jacobs could stand a little of the secular crazy himself because his prose is guilty of the sin of plodding.)

So. Where does this leave us? Still assholes, certainly. Just some of us have trouble accepting the fact; we can’t take a hit, psychologically-speaking. These are the scariest assholes of all. They take the germ of a disease and magnify it to monstrous proportions, until it’s bigger than us all and we forget that we’re more than just assholes, we’re human beings trying to extricate ourselves from the medieval morass of a history guided largely by people like Alan Jacobs.

Moses Operandi says

Read on Kindle, started about two years ago, finished on a plane. I had forgotten most everything that went on in the first half when I picked it up again, but the book was impressive enough to hook me again. Jacobs writes with a scholarly but friendly voice that is immediately appealing. The resources he has marshaled here (with interesting studies of such fascinating people as Robert Owen and Rebecca West) make for a surprisingly wide-ranging survey of original sin in Christianity, in other religions, and in secular thought.

Michael says

From Saint Augustine to Hellboy, from Chesterton to Rebecca West and Steven Pinker, Alan Jacobs' well-written and intelligent *Original Sin* is a examination of the history of a doctrine. The writing is intentionally light-hearted, as Jacobs believes that the doctrine's true effect is the realization that our selves are all equally

absurd.

It is important to point out, firstly, what the book is *not* about. The doctrine of original sin is not concerned with *the* supposed original sin, the sin of Adam and Eve. Rather, with the sin which every human has as a part of his makeup, from his very origin. To many modern sensibilities this doctrine may seem to have cruel implications, and Jacobs does address and explore them. However, as mathematician Blaise Pascal wrote, "Certainly nothing jolts us more rudely than this doctrine, and yet but for this mystery, the most incomprehensible of all, we remain incomprehensible to ourselves." It answers, Jacobs feels, the age old question which any rejection of original sin still needs to account for: *Unde hoc malum?*

Jacobs explores not only the history of the idea of original sin, but also its implications and how they have affected history. He shows that while seeming to be a contemptible and horrible idea, it actually is the most merciful and democratic of views regarding sin; and that it gave rise to the first "universal democracy" which only ended, as the German emigrant Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy claimed, in modern days at about the time of the second World War. That its results are, in the words of Chesterton, "pathos and brotherhood, and a thunder of laughter and pity; for only with original sin can we at once pity the beggar and distrust the king." Throughout its history men have written and spoken ardently against it, and Jacobs chronicles these debates in a studied yet casual manner.

One particularly interesting section is the discussion of Rousseau's ideas. Certainly, as the introduction states, quoting Randall Jarrell, "Most of us know, now, that Rousseau was wrong: that man, when you knock his chains off, sets up the death camps." However, the idea of the innocence of children and the nobility of savages still haunts our minds to a large degree, to the point that anything we say on original sin in regards to children sounds ridiculous to our modern ears. Jacobs explores the different ways in which the idea of the noble savage was bettered since its origins in the 18th century, but he never comes to a satisfying picture -- perhaps because no such picture was arrived at in that time. He might have included a couple lines, for those seeking wisdom as well as history, such as to suggest that though primitives live outside of the corruption and squalor of more complex societies, they still bear the stain of human nature, and themselves rely on forms of strict moral tradition passed on as oral culture. To his credit, though, he does realize that the idea of the noble savage and the idea of the blank slate -- two ideas of human nature often held in concert -- are logically opposing and contradicting.

Perhaps the most interesting idea in Jacobs' book is the conception of the Divided Self. That we are neither basically good nor basically bad, but suffer a division within us between the two, a warring of two opposing impulses, which often gets the better of us. It is a conception of the doctrine of original sin that has both biblical support (Paul's "For the good that I would I do not: but the evil which I would not, I do.") and modern ratification (Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's line about the division between good and evil lying not between states, classes or parties, but through the human heart).

There is something quite substantially true in the idea that we are inherently flawed and corrupted and that our species is unperfectable. yet, with Pelagius, Augustine's contemporary and rival, I cannot help but think that the doctrine, by itself and over-emphasized, while it is likely to inspire feelings of charity and mercy, is not likely to compel us to merely *do our work*, the work commanded by Christ. Thankfully, this lack in the doctrine has been addressed more than satisfactorily in the writings of C.S. Lewis and George MacDonald, among others, though Jacob's book does not ever mention their thoughts on his subject. Given that Jacobs' previous book was a biography of Lewis' ideas, one cannot use the excuse that the author was unfamiliar with these writings.

While the book is an excellent history of the concept, it must be said ultimately -- and Jacobs himself readily

admits -- that, as medieval philosopher Erasmus opined, "such theological trivia" as the origin of sin "simply distract us from the difficult task of loving a faithful Christian life." As long as this is realized, as long as Jacob's book remains for the reader merely an intellectual exploration not standing in the way of doing one's work, it is a fascinating and wise exploration of Western humanity's attempts to understand ourselves.

Steve says

Alan Jacobs is one of the most erudite, yet accessible, Christian scholars writing at the moment. This enormously enjoyable cultural and intellectual history tracing Augustine's emphasis on original sin reveals a wealth and breadth of knowledge and insight. The central thesis is a probing examination of why humans seem to struggle with such an innate desire to do evil, even though thinkers throughout history have urgently sought to downplay and otherwise dismiss these tendencies. Jacobs is just as comfortable exploring the tension between Whitefield, Wesley, and Bunyan's views of innate, universal sin as he is in referencing Guillermo del Toro's "Hellboy" or the blues music of Robert and Tommy Johnson.

I remember first encountering the fascinating history of modern Europe's rejection of the idea of original sin throughout the Enlightenment and Romantic eras in Jacobs' fine essay, "The Only Honest Man," in which he focused on the eccentric viewpoints of Jean-Jacques Rousseau. What a pleasure to be gifted with a book-length study of the subject. Each chapter reads like a self-contained essay, and you'll find yourself compulsively researching some of the names and titles Jacobs presents (Robert Owen and his social experiment at New Lanark, the bizarre metaphor of the "two-headed calf" in Rebecca West's monumental "Black Lamb and Grey Falcon," and the tragic, nearly Oedipal, conflict between Augustine and Julian of Eclanum). One of Jacobs' more interesting and provocative arguments is that, contrary to expectation, an emphasis on the universal scope of original sin has actually served to repudiate dehumanizing practices. In his chapter on "the Confraternity of the Human Type," it was original sin, not the doctrine of the "imago dei" that served "in the American South at least, [as] a brake of a different kind: a restraint on those who wished to see black people as utterly alien, as having nothing to do with the rest of us." For it pointed to the biblical insistence on common origins and not the racially inflected pseudo-science of polygeny. Overall, very highly recommended!

Drew Bennett says

At times fascinating history of the doctrine of original sin - the only Christian doctrine that is empirically provable, according to G.K. Chesterton.

Yuri Bernales says

In this historical-cultural survey, Jacobs maintains incredible expansiveness, clarity, grasp, and charity.

Phil says

How can we explain ourselves to ourselves? This book explores the history of one of humanity's most

surprising but compelling answers: Original sin.

I first came across Alan Jacobs through his more recent book "How to Think" which is actually far better than the title suggests. What I mean is, it isn't a How-To book at all. Anyways, I picked this up not long ago as I was interested to read Jacobs deal with this fascinating topic.

This is not a technical, Biblical, theological treatise of the subject. It is, as he calls it, a cultural history. "What is a cultural history?" you may ask. Jacobs presents his book in the introduction as an "exemplary history," - it traces the history of the idea of original sin through specific historical examples. He also presents it as a cultural history as opposed to a history of theology. Basically this means that the book is a somewhat loosely (but legitimately) connected series of essays / historical anecdotes and stories. He delves deeper into a few key thinkers along the way.

I personally enjoy this kind of format and in general enjoy Jacobs' writing so the book was only made better by the fact that I enjoyed learning about well-known (Augustine) and lesser-known historical figures. Some made it into the book for their thinking and teaching on the subject, and others because their lives served as manifestations of the various ways we understand ourselves. I had a hard time putting it down, and learned a lot, so there: 5 stars.
