

Unoriginal sin

From the Editors in the [June 25, 2014](#) issue



by Daniel C. Richardson

Reinhold Niebuhr once wrote that the doctrine of original sin is “the only empirically verifiable doctrine of the Christian faith.” The evidence of ingrained sinfulness, he thought, is apparent everywhere in acts of violence, in the mistreatment of the vulnerable, and in the greed built into economic systems. Even human beings’ greatest accomplishments are inevitably tainted by sins of pride and self-interest, he argued. The problem is not just that humans commit sinful acts but that they are by nature sinful.

Yet if the doctrine of original sin seems obvious to some, it is a puzzling formulation to many modern ears. (In an inspired riff on the doctrine, stand-up comedian Eddie Izzard imagines a man confessing, “I did an original sin. . . . I poked a badger with a spoon”—to which a priest replies, “I’ve never heard of that one before!”)

The doctrine attempts to answer the question of how sin originates—where it comes from. The answer handed down by the Western Christian tradition is largely shaped by Augustine, as appropriated and revised by magisterial Protestantism. As Charles Hefling notes ([“Why we mess things up”](#)), the Augustinian account is tied to a literal reading of the story of Adam and Eve in Genesis and assumes the biological transmission of sin from generation to generation—both highly problematic elements.

Whether or not readers accept all of Hefling’s lively reconstruction of the doctrine, his reflections admirably continue the tradition of rethinking theology in light of new

knowledge, contexts, and concerns. Theology is hardly a “progressive science,” yet modern thinkers have contributed new insights on sin. Friedrich Schleiermacher in the 19th century called attention to social conditioning as a feature of sin. The social gospel taught us about systemic evil lodged in economic and social realities. Feminist theology has taught us that pride is not necessarily the primary or dominant form of sin.

Sin has a prominent part in Christian teaching, but theologians like Niebuhr have not always recognized that talking about sin is possible only in light of more fundamental claims about the goodness of God and the power of God’s grace. There is the grace that forgives us our sins and accepts us as we are. There is the enabling grace that empowers us to love God and our neighbors as ourselves. And that’s even more original.