Christian Theology and the Fall

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The Christian doctrine of the Fall, heavily inscribed onto the text of Genesis, first exalts and then denigrates nature. Many find the garden itself a positive image of earthly existence: God plants Eden with an abundance of beautiful trees, good food, and rivers; humans are created out of the earth to tend to the Garden. After Adam and Eve eat the forbidden fruit, however, nature becomes corrupt and humans sinful, as they are introduced to hardened labor, shame of their nakedness, and knowledge of their eventual death. The original harmony between nature, humans, and God, is broken, leaving a transcendent God, a sinful humanity, and a degraded earth in a state of mutual alienation.

As there is no concept of “the Fall” in the Hebrew scriptures, there remains a question as to its origin. The “fall” interpretation of Genesis first appeared during the intertestamental period, an era of political oppression and internal conflict for the Jewish people which contributed to the apocalyptic belief in a corrupt world. In the apocalyptic Jewish text 1 Enoch (2 BCE - 1 CE), a tale of angelic “watchers,” based on Genesis 6:1 is invoked to describe a cosmic descent into sin. The watchers, or satans, are angels who rebel against God and literally “fall” to earth from heaven. They mate with women who give birth to the nephilim, “fallen ones,” who bring evil into the world. Enoch claims that humankind was created immortal, pure and righteous, but because of human knowledge, taught to them by the leader of the satans, Azazel, humanity became unrighteous and subject to death (54.6; 8.1).

The Jewish conceptions of fallen angels emerging at this time hint of a Hellenistic dualism that valued heavenly immortality over mortal earthly existence. In the Phaedrus, Plato describes
immortal heavenly beings who lose their wings, falling to the earth into mortal bodies.

The Christian Jew Paul blends both apocalyptic and platonic conceptions into his cosmic Fall based upon a dualism of flesh and spirit, physical and spiritual, earth and heaven. “The first man was from the earth, a man of dust; the second man is from heaven” (1 Cor. 15: 46-47). Paul directly couples Adam’s sin with death; from the human capacity for evil stems all mortality (Romans 5: 12-21). Ultimately, the cosmos as a whole is “subject to its bondage to decay” while awaiting its liberation into the immortal celestial body (1 Cor. 15: 35-50).

Church Father Irenaeus avoids a cosmic Fall, limiting Pauline sin to the human realm. Irenaeus suggests that nonhuman creatures continue to obey God’s will: nature retains its goodness even after the Fall. Augustine further intensifies an anthropocentric interpretation of the Fall that indirectly exonerates the non-human creation. For him, the creation is full of goodness and beauty which demonstrates the nature of the Creator, who is beauty itself. Human choice is the origin of the Fall. The curse blemishes human life alone: suffering and death are inherited by all humans (original sin) as punishments from God.

Throughout Rabbinic literature, the notion of any original Fall remains only peripheral. Nor does Islam espouse original sin: the expulsion, caused by Satan’s deception, was pardoned, having no ramifications for the rest of humanity or the natural world.

By the period of the Reformation, the Christian view of the Fall turned decisively against nature: originally created by God for the service of humanity, nature became cruel, ugly, and painful, after the Fall. Eden was a joyful reflection of God’s blessing, for John Calvin, but afterwards “the inclemency of the air, frost, thunder, unseasonable rains, drought, hail or whatever is disorderly in the world are the fruits of sin.” Similarly, Martin Luther asks: “And what of thorns, thistles, water, fire, caterpillar, flies, fleas, and bedbugs? Collectively and individually, are not all of them
messengers who preach to us concerning sin and God’s wrath?” Whereas for Luther, the despair of nature can motivate us to seek redemption in Christ, for Calvin, the will of God manifests in all of nature, in each drop of rain, so that despite the fallen aspects of nature, the glories of God’s providence rules all things for the benefit of the saved. At the time of the Reformation, belief in the Fall also contributed to early modern attempts to discipline unruly nature. Elaborating on his Calvinist upbringing, Francis Bacon claimed that science and technology can correct nature’s falleness and regain the dominion over creation that humanity had in Eden.

In the 20th century, the Fall remained an important theological category. In the tradition of Calvin, German Theologian Jurgen Moltmann found a perfect “primordial” knowledge of God in Paradise that “now only exists in rudimentary form” due to the problem of sin and a corrupted natural world. However, these “traces of creation-in-the-beginning” anticipate the deathless and sinless perfection of the glory of the world to come. Reinhold Niebuhr rejected his Lutheran tradition, by dismissing natural evil, or death, as inevitable to our status as creatures. Evil is not in nature but results from human freedom, for Niebuhr. The fall of Adam and Eve symbolizes human freedom to wield both creative and destructive powers or good and evil in the world. Sin arises, for Niebuhr, when humankind makes destructive use of its freedom due to self-centered attempts to become godlike and overcome human finitude.

Christian Ethicist Max Stackhouse represents a contemporary strain of the reformed (namely Calvinist) tradition, endorsing the notion of a fallen natural world harboring evil. Though creation does embody an original goodness, all of nature, for Stackhouse, has indeed fallen and requires human constraint. Echoing Bacon, he argues that human intelligence and technology must be used to cure nature’s brokenness and bring fallen nature nearer the intent of the Creator. In contrast, ecotheologian John Clatworthy condemns such attempts to “fix” nature, rejecting the idea that it is
“fallen,” and emphasizing that science and technology have wrought too many destructive consequences.

Hence, contemporary theologians find the doctrine of the fall problematic in our age of the ecological crisis. For Rosmary Radford Ruether, belief in a fallen nature has permitted neglect of the planet and rejection of our relational intimacy with plants, animals, and the Earth through a disrespect for the death cycle of life. Brazilian theologian Ivone Gebara believes finitude and tragedy has and will always be a part of life on Earth. Hence, original sin, for her, did not cause a fall into mortality. For Gebara, primal sin comes from the organized attempts of humans to escape mortality and vulnerability, through the monopolization of power over animals, the land, and other humans.

Biblical Scholar Lyn Bechtel explores the scriptural underpinnings for such an ecological ethic. The ha-adama/ha-adam wordplay — “Then Yahweh God formed the earth creature [ha-adam] from dust from the earth [ha-adam]” (Genesis 2.7) — demonstrates an “intimate relatedness” between earth and earthling based upon the land. Originally united with the earth, humans are separated from the native ground at birth. Adults work with the earth, produce food, (2:5; 3:23) and eventually will return to union with the earth upon death (3:19). Bechtel argues that the Hebrew text, far from implying a doctrine of fall, suggests an earthly transition of maturation through birth and death.

There are other contemporary theologies that also affirm the workings of nature, but through alternative constructions of the fall. In Process theology, every level of reality has a degree of freedom, giving it the power to turn away from the divine will. Nature is fallen due to the occasions in which God’s lure has been rejected.

Process theologian Jay McDaniel, when thinking about how the Fall explains violence and
suffering in nature, critiques the anthropocentrism of the traditional doctrine, as well as the assumption that violence and suffering are solely the result of disobedience to divine will. The predator-prey relationship evolved long before humans emerged on our planet. There was no time in existence when the Earth was free from violence. McDaniel gives the example of a grey whale being attacked and eaten by a group of orcas. The death of the grey whale is valuable to the marine ecosystem, giving sustenance to the orcas and other marine creatures feeding off the grey whale’s body. Creatures co-operated with God’s lure, creating the predatory form of sustenance, dubbed by McDaniel the “fall upward.” God lured more advance forms of life into existence and this involved a risk that creatures would experience increased pain as they increased in opportunities for enjoyment.

A human initiated Fall, however, does seem to resonate with scholars who liken Eden to the age of the hunters and gatherers. The foraging lifestyle of hunters and gatherers treated nature as home and the earth as alive and sacred. As there was no sense of separation from the earth, foraging communities were somewhat innocent, like Adam and Eve. Agroecologist Wes Jackson finds “the Fall” in the very transformation from hunting and gathering to the agricultural mode of life. Human evils such as systematic warfare, patriarchy, slavery, and ecological ruin, arose during this era. Farming, settlements, and population growth, rapidly displaced animal habitats, alienating human from nonhuman species.

Korean ecofeminist, Sun Ai Lee-Park, also highlights a distinctive human role in the Fall. For her, the destruction of the rainforest represents of the tree of good and evil, which signifies the restrictions and limitations imposed upon humanity against the taking of every tree. The transgression takes place not just in deforestation, but also by the World Bank who has been taking the Korean people from their land into factory production. The transgression of the tree of good and evil causes death as eco-death, says Lee-Park.
The concept of the Fall arises as either a human or a cosmic event, in both historical and contemporary scholarship. The Pauline notion of “fallen creation” reappears during the Reformation and in the contemporary reformed tradition. Recent scholarship however, also critiques the cosmic fall for encouraging estrangement from Earth ecosystems. Some scholars reinterpret a distinctively human “fall” from harmony with nature, others deconstruct the Fall altogether, so as to affirm natural forms of death and suffering as integral to the process of nature.

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Further Reading


