

# THE PARADOX OF THE FORTUNATE FALL IN CONTEMPORARY THEOLOGY

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Benjamin Britten in his *Ceremony of Carols* has put to music the lyrics of a fifteenth century song which runs as follows:

'No hadde the appil take ben,  
the appil take ben,  
'No hadde never our lady  
a ben Hevene queene.  
Blyssid be the tyme  
that appil take was  
Therefore we mown syngyn  
*Deo Gracias.*

The sin of Adam is understood as fortunate by virtue of occasioning a great blessing. Milton in *Paradise Lost* bears witness to the same paradox when, just after Adam has been told by the Archangel Michael what awaits him in the Second Coming when Christ shall reward the faithful and receive them into bliss, he has Adam burst forth:

O Goodness Infinite, Goodness immense,  
That all this good of evil shall produce,  
And evil turn to a good; more wonderful  
That that which by creation first brought forth  
Light out of Darkness! Full of doubt I stand,  
Whether I should repent me now of sin  
By me done or occasion'd, or rejoice  
Much more that much more good thereof shall spring—  
To God more glory, more good will to men  
From God, and over wrath space shall abound.

Book XII 1,469-478

This view of the Fall is paradoxical because while the fall is away from something exalted, noble, good and is therefore a disgraceful and shameful act, yet without it Incarnation, redemption and glorification would not be possible. Thus the grandeur and misery of man was by calling him both "judge of all the earth" and "feeble worm of the earth." The paradox of this paradoxical situation lies in the fact that the very event which is responsible for man's degradation and shame is at the same time necessary for his deliverance and ultimate exaltation. Professor Arthur O. Lovejoy in a paper entitled "Milton and the Paradox of the Fortunate Fall," demonstrates the ancient character and orthodoxy of this view by citing statements by Ambrose, Leo the Great, Francis de Sales, DuBartas, Augustine, Wyclif, etc., and by noting its presence in many missals for at least ten centuries. It is his belief that the idea derived its classic expression and name from the Easter Even Hymn.

O certe necessarium Adamae peccatum, quod Christi morte deletum est. O felix culpa, quæ talem ac tantum meruit habere redemptorem

The sin of Adam was not only a happy fault but is necessary to the possibility of redemption. Lovejoy places the expression *O felix culpa* in the early Roman liturgy which antedates St. Gregory who is usually considered to be the first one to use it (Lovejoy, p. 285). Professor Weisinger in *Tragedy and the Paradox of the Fortunate Fall* put the problem in a wider framework by discussing the *felix culpa* in terms of the question "Why do we take pleasure in 'the pleasure peculiar to tragedy'?" and finds the solution in the myth and ritual of the ancient Near East with the paradox of the fortunate fall acting as intermediary between myth and ritual on the one side and art and tragedy on the other. In the myths of the dying and rising god the basic rhythms of nature are reproduced mimetically through ritual. The paradox of

the fortunate fall is the "shorthand" symbol for the meaning of the myth and ritual pattern because "compressed into it is the whole range of significance of a complex belief and action which for many centuries and in many forms has been able to provide a satisfactory answer to a deeply rooted need of man, his longing for order, for rationality, and above all, for life." (Weisinger, p. 269)

R. W. B. Lewis in his study in innocence, tragedy, and tradition in nineteenth century America, *The American Adam*, interprets the literature of this period as being a reflection of the basic underlying myth which shaped American culture—the notion of innocence, solitude, beginning *de novo*, self-reliance prior to experience, associated with the image of Adam before the Fall. He sees the work of the elder James and Horace Bushnell as illustrating the fortunate results of the Fall. The latter state is, because of the emergence of conscience, a higher position than innocence. From this point on, education becomes highly significant.

### *The Fortunate Fall in the Writings of Contemporary Theologians*

In contemporary Christian anthropological discourse the paradox of the fortunate Fall plays a dominant role. However, the point of emphasis has shifted considerably. Whereas formerly the fortunate character of the Fall was understood to reside in the fact that "so great salvation" resulted from it, now it is regarded as due to the fact that through sin man became a self—that is, a being of self-awareness, self-consciousness, and self-determination. The old view held that the Fall was fortunate because of its salutary effect upon God (redemption); the new view affirms that it was fortunate due to its arousing, awakening effect upon man (creation). Thus Creation and the Fall are no longer seen as separate events but as one event, the event in which the possibilities of freedom and self-awareness are actualized. In the words of William Temple.

as man arose above sub-human forms of life through the development of mind within his psychophysical organism as an increasingly dominant factor, he found himself self-centered. The animal . . . is self-centered without being self-assertive. But as soon as consciousness advances to full self-consciousness, so that the self, distinguishing itself from its environment, not only chooses what appetites it shall satisfy but even what ends it shall pursue, self-centeredness becomes self-assertion.  
(Temple, p. 366)

Thus the Fall of man was the winning of the knowledge of good and evil because previous to this event his acts were merely instinctive reactions to environment, where now he sins against the light with a new degree of self-assertion. (Temple, p. 365.). For this reason there never was a time when man enjoyed self-awareness and freedom in a perfect potentiality of human nature. In the words of C. Ryder Smith, it is not "what man was in the beginning but what he is to be in the end." (Smith, p. 182). Paul Tillich succinctly stated it when he wrote, "Fully developed creatureliness is fallen creatureliness." (Tillich, I, p. 255).

1. *D. R. G. Owen*. One of the fullest and clearest modern statements of the paradox is that of the British theologian D. R. G. Owen in his volume *Body and Soul: A Study on the Christian View of Man*, where sin is described as a perversion of precisely the two potentialities that are the essence of personality—the capacity for self-awareness and the capacity for freedom. Self-consciousness makes its appearance as self-centeredness and free will under the guise of self-will. In the Genesis account the gifts that constitute the image of God are only realized in the eating of the forbidden fruit.

real freedom is freedom to choose between good and evil and therefore involves the knowledge of good and evil. And this knowledge is precisely the forbidden fruit. Thus we should have to say that man becomes fully free and actualizes this aspect of the image of God by disobeying God. (Owen, p. 201).

According to Owen, to understand this account as a description of events which happened is to say that man actualized the image of God by sinning against Him. This is absurd. The account must therefore be taken as an attempt to communicate the deepest truth about man's contradictory nature. It tells us that we are endowed with possibilities of real freedom and self-awareness, but in history these appear under the form of self-centeredness and self-will. A corollary to this is the necessity of regarding Creation and Fall as inseparable, rather than as two events. That man is made in the image of God and that he is a sinner in one story, one point, rather than two (Owen, p. 199).

2. *Paul Tillich.* Tillich sees in God's image in man the possibility of the Fall, or separation from God and from his own essence. Man is finite freedom, that is, in him freedom and destiny limit each other. The Fall marks the transition from essence to existence. The later is not a state of human development but is present in all stages. He calls the state which precedes existence "dreaming innocence" rather than essence. It possesses potentiality but not actuality and is superhistorical (i.e., it has neither place nor time). It is a state of mind which is real and non-real at the same time, anticipating the actual. The word innocence points to non-actualized potentiality, implying the lack of actual experience, responsibility, and moral guilt. To illustrate this Tillich uses the growth in sexual awareness of a child. (Tillich, II, p. 34). The state of Adam before the Fall is not one of perfection but of "dreaming innocence," of undecided potentialities. The prohibition against eating of the tree of knowledge presupposes a split between Creator and creature, that is, the desire to sin. In the state of "dreaming innocence" freedom and destiny which are not actualized, are in a state of harmony. The moment finite freedom becomes conscious of itself and tends to become actual (i.e., "aroused freedom") a tension occurs. Man is trapped between the desire to actualize his freedom and the demand to maintain his "dreamy innocence." Under the power of finite freedom he chooses actualization. The adolescent, facing the alternative of losing himself either by actualizing himself sexually or non-actualizing himself sexually, decides for actualization. (Tillich, II p. 36). The Biblical account of the Fall according to Tillich has a psychological-ethical character derived from the experience of people. This transaction from essence to existence is not an event in time and space but the "transhistorical quality of events in time and space." (Tillich, II, p. 40). "The notion of a moment in time in which man and nature were changed from good to evil is absurd, and it has no foundation in experience or revelation." (Tillich, II, p. 41).

In answer to the criticism of Reinhold Niebuhr in the volume *The Theology of Paul Tillich* that he follows Origen in emphasizing the fatefulness or necessity of sin to the exclusion of man's responsibility for it, Tillich writes:

Creation and the Fall coincide in so far as there is no point in time and space in which created goodness was actualized and had existence. This is a necessary consequence of the rejection of the paradise story. There was no "utopia" in the past, just as there will be no "utopia" in the future. Actualized creation and estranged existence are identical . . . If God creates here and now, everything he has created participates in the transition from essence to existence. He creates the new-born child; but, if created, it falls into the state of existential estrangement. This is the point of coincidence of creation and the Fall. But it is not a logical coincidence; for the child, upon growing into maturity, affirms the state of estrangement in acts of freedom which imply responsibility and guilt. Creation is good in its essential character. If actualized, it falls into universal estrangement through freedom and destiny.

It seems that this identification of Creation with the Fall makes evil necessary, and by eliminating a historical state in which there is no separation between essence and existence it deprives man of a concrete picture of at least the possibility of reunion.

3. *Reinhold Niebuhr*. Like Tillich, Niebuhr sees evil as inevitable. "The evil in man is a consequence of his inevitable though not necessary unwillingness to acknowledge his dependence, to accept his finiteness and to admit his insecurity." (Niebuhr, p. 150). He speaks paradoxically because he understands the ultimate truths about life to be dialectical—too complex to be expressed in any other way than in apparently (*sic*) contradictory propositions. He puts the "inevitability" of sin in a form which is paradoxically consistent with responsibility and freedom, concurring with Kierkegaard's notion that "sin presupposes itself." He feels that even if one goes back farther than human history he is not able to escape the paradoxical conclusion that the situation of finiteness and freedom would not lead to sin if sin were not already introduced into the situation.

The will is not free to choose between good and evil. Man, driven by anxiety, by the "dizziness" of his elevation above nature, either exalts himself in freedom or dashes himself down into animality to escape responsibility. Yet, despite the fact that his sin is "inevitable" man is responsible for it.

4. *Emil Brunner*. In a similar manner Brunner speaks of the Fall as taking place when the child first becomes conscious of himself as an "I". (Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, p. 386). Rejecting the idea of the Fall of an historical Adam whose transgression is transferred to succeeding generations, he interprets Romans chapter five as teaching that Christ has conquered death and is therefore the bringer of life for all. He respects Augustine's attempt to set forth sin as a dominant force and humanity as bound together in a solidarity of guilt, but rejects the identification of sin with sexuality and the "inheritance" of it. (Brunner, p. 103). Man's apostasy or falling away from God is not something that happened once and for all and is over and done with, but is something man is doing continually. Therefore, each one of us is "Adam," just as we are all together "Adam." (Brunner, *Man in Revolt*, p. 149). Man's personhood can only be attained by the determination of his relation to God (p.151), an act performed in freedom.

the perception of a moral freedom, of a capacity for the Good due to free resolve, as is taught by ethical rationalism, is not to be absolutely rejected, if we remind ourselves of the fact that this God lies within the sphere which includes the concept of sin. There is sin within good as well as within evil, in virtue as well as in vice. (p. 145.)

We have seen the ways in which several modern theologians have understood the estrangement and alienation of man as in some sense being fortunate. Next we shall consider the sources of these modern views as being of two kinds, a philosophical origin in existentialism and a psychological root in depth psychology.

### *Sources of the Modern Analysis of the Fall as Fortunate*

1. *The Existential Analysis of Man's Predicament*. From the writings of Anaximander, a Milesian philosopher, the following sentence has been preserved.

The beginning of that which is, is the boundless but when that which is arises, thither must it return again of necessity, for the things give satisfaction and preparation to one another for their injustice, as is appointed according to the ordering of time. (Zeller, p. 43).

Many understand this in terms of the Orphic doctrine of the sinful existence of mankind, arising from the fact of individualization and separation from the ground of being. Out of the vague and limitless mass (*apeiron*) there sprang into being first this earth of ours and then various discrete, individual existences. According to destiny the latter will not be allowed to exist in their factured existence forever, but will at an appointed season suffer the vengeance due to their earlier act

of separation and return into the vague immensity out of which they issued, thus losing their independence and regaining their identity in the whole.

From this inauspicious beginning developed the idea that individuated, differentiated, bounded existence is inferior to unindividuated, undifferentiated, unbounded existence in the ground of being, later called the *Ungrund* by Jacob Boehme. For Anaximander Creation is the Fall, that is, to exist separately is to be deformed because of being defined, limited, individuated, separated from the ground of being. Thus guilt is separation or apartness.

Jacob Boehme, the mystical theologian, saw creation as the metaphysical separating of all things from one "mother," the first division being into four parts—fire, water, earth, and the air, produced progressively. From these ingredients are created rocks, hills, elements, etc. Creation for Boehme is *ex nihilo* but the *nihilo* is no-thing, the *Ungrund*, or the abyss. Before man's body had been crystalline, pure, unified. Now he knows that he is naked and remembers his primitive essential unity and angelical form. In eating earth he takes on the quality of inertia, decomposition, and death inherent in the earth.

Thus . . . may be know what sin is . . . namely, when the human will separates itself from God into an existence of its own and awakens its own self . . . For all into which the will enters and will have as its own, is something foreign to the one will of God. For all is God's and to man's own will belongs nothing. But if it be God's then all is its also. Thus we recognize that desire is sin. For it is lusting out of one into many and introduces many into one. The will possesses, and yet should not be will-less. (Boehme, *Sachs Mystische Punkte III*, 16ff. quoted in Stoudt).

Friedrich Schelling in *On Human Freedom* described the world in which we are living as a disrupted unity, fragmentary, broken. He anticipated a mystical absorption in which man is united to the Absolute Self, free from necessity, contingency, consciousness, and personality. Man's guilt is *verfallenheit*, being lost and a prey to the necessity of existing. As Heidegger has written,

Being guilty is not the result of a guilty act, but conversely, the act is possible only because of an original 'being guilty'. (Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, p. 284).

Man's existence is inauthentic because it has "fallen away" from true existence, the true self. It has a "thrown" (*geworfen-sein*) existence. Man has not called himself into being. He cannot help it that he is there, but must accept the fact as something that has occurred outside of his will. It is through *angst* or fear which does not have an object that he experiences the "thrownness" (*geworfenheit*) of his existence.

2. *The Psychological Analysis of Man's Predicament.* Depth psychology points to the inner self-destructiveness of man in his estrangement from his true self. It calls attention to the unconscious structure that determines our consciousness and our decisions, making us aware of the fact that we are not actually free. Otto Rank believed that the central problem of man is individuation. Anxiety is the apprehension involved in these separations, the first and most dramatic of which is birth. It takes place through the breaking of previous situations of relative unity and is due to the need to live as an autonomous individual. Rank's understanding of anxiety was influenced by his famous studies of birth trauma. He held that the "child experiences his first feeling of fear in the act of birth," an apprehension he terms "fear in the face of life." (Rank, *Will Therapy*, p. 168). It is the fear of having to live as an isolated individual. In addition to the life fear which is anxiety at "going forward" (becoming an individual) there is the death fear which is anxiety at "going backward" (losing individuality). The latter is the anxiety of being swallowed up in the whole.

Carl G. Jung sees man's predicament of anxiety to be a reaction to the invasion of the conscious mind by irrational forces and images from the collective unconscious. It is for this reason that people are afraid of really becoming conscious of themselves. There is a "secret fear of the unknown perils of the soul." (Jung, *Psychology and Religion*, p. 14).

The Biblical fall of man presents the dawn of consciousness as a curse. And as a matter of fact it is in this light that we first look upon every problem that forces us to greater consciousness and separates us even farther from the paradise of unconscious childhood. (Jung, *Modern Man in Search of Soul*, p. 11)

Modern studies of personality which define selfhood in terms of self-awareness and self-consciousness stress the alienation and isolation this involves, especially in a culture such as ours which puts a premium upon triumphing over others. It is not difficult to see how such empirical studies have bearing on one's understanding of the nature of man. The problem that this poses for the Christian theologian is how to interpret such data and what use to make of it in his formal doctrine of man.

## CONCLUSIONS

1. The paradox of the fortunate Fall, which has an illustrious history in Christian theology, points to the basic and profound truths of experience—the ambiguity and contingency of all human activity and the power of God to work "in spite of" (*trotz*), to transform evil into good. It affirms the fundamental theological axiom that at the basis of every doctrine is a paradox—God is both hidden and revealed in His Revelation, Christ is both human and divine, man is both justified and a sinner (*simul iustus et peccator*), both in the image of God and a partaker of original sin.

2. In keeping with the emphasis in contemporary theology upon a description of the alienation and estrangement of man from himself, the ground of Being, his fellow man, the fortunate aspect of the Fall is seen in the emergence of self-awareness and self-consciousness. Whereas the older theology saw as fortunate the heavenly provision of God in Christ, the new sees the emergence of selfhood.

3. The identification of the Fall with Creation poses some fundamental problems. The goodness of God's creative activity affirmed in two passages—"God saw that it was good." (Genesis 1:25) "And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good." (Genesis 1:31)—makes such identification implausible. The position discussed makes sin to be finiteness, limitation, individuality, separateness—for which man does not carry the burden of responsibility. "Falleness" (*Geworfenheit*) suggests a higher state from which one has fallen, from which he is judged, and against which he understands and sees himself. Without granting the existence of such a state it is difficult to see how it is possible to talk about "essence," "true manhood," "goodness of being."

4. The interpretation of the Fall in existential or experiential terms, while valuable and informing in psychological and anthropological terms and corrective of erroneous interpretations ("inheritance," biological views of sin's transmission), poses problems in Christology. Acknowledgement of the experience of alienation and separation, accompanied by a denial of the disobedience of a historical figure poses problems in understanding Biblical references to the first and second Adam (i.e., Romans 5:12-21). If we interpret this passage historically with reference to Christ we should not merely regard it existentially with reference to Adam. The whole thrust of this argument seems to be that in the same way that men are justified on the grounds of one man's righteousness and obedience they are brought into condemnation on the basis of the disobedience and uprightness of another.

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