

(January 4, 1987)

The Quaker emphasis on that of God within us has always offered a striking contrast to the philosophy of human nature based upon the idea of original sin. George Fox's claim to have returned to the state Adam was in before the fall certainly seems extravagant when compared with what he called the "pleading for sin" of his Puritan and Calvinist contemporaries. While our Quaker theology of that of God within strikes us as more wholesome and true than the fall and redemption theology of the mainstream church, we can scarcely deny that in terms of the self-understanding of the Christian community it is a radical departure from the norm.

I was rather startled the other day to read a quotation from Elie Wiesel, the recent winner of the Nobel Peace Prize who has spent a lifetime in holocaust studies. "The concept of original sin is alien to Jewish tradition," he said. (See footnote #1).

Two things were striking to me about this statement. First, in my naivete, or in my ignorance, I have always assumed that, on account of its having to do with the story of Adam and Eve as given in Genesis, the concept of original sin must be one which in which Jewish and Christian theology tend to coincide. Yet here was a prominent Jewish spokesperson disavowing the concept of original sin.

The second striking thing is that this disavowal of original sin comes from a person who has spent a lifetime contemplating the very worst that human evil can do.

Certainly it is possible to recall that in Genesis we are told, not once, but repeatedly, that God saw that His Creation was good. Humankind, as part of the Creation, indeed, as its ultimate achievement, partakes of this goodness. Surely in this great banquet of rivers and lakes, of rain and sunshine, of rich earth and amazing flowers, of stately trees and dancing fishes, of animals contemplative and playful, of whistling winds, of dry seasons and wet seasons, of cold and hot climates, and of all the wonders which surround us, surely we are not to presume ourselves to be the one significant blot, the cosmic disappointment. (See Footnote #2).

In our search for that wholeness of spirit which is our natural destiny it is useful to be aware of a curious inversion which true sanctity often involves. "It is not happiness which makes us grateful," Brother Steindl-Rast has said, "it is gratitude that makes us happy." (See Footnote #3). Where our thoughts and emotions dwell, so do we inevitably become. Is it possible that centuries of preoccupation with our sinfulness has

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become a self-fulfilling prophecy? Perhaps the time has come to leave off our theologies of original sin and affirm a theology of humanity made in God's likeness.

It is not enough that we be saints, that we succeed in our search for some abstract kind of holiness. We must fashion a sanctity particularly fitting to our own time and place. And so it may be our paradoxical duty to affirm, even in the face of so much that is unforgiveable in our own recent history, the innate blessedness of our God-given human nature.

Footnote #1: Elie Wiesel, Messengers of God. (New York: Simon and Schuster, Inc., 1976). Page 30.

Footnote #2: Paraphrased from Matthew Fox, Original Blessing. (Sante Fe, New Mexico: Bear and Company, 1983). Page 112.

Footnote #3: David Steindl-Rast, A Listening Heart. (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1983). Page 12.