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**Georges Minois**, *Les origines du mal: une histoire du péché original*. Paris: Fayard, 2002. 440 pp. Bibliography and index. 22.00 €. ISBN 2-213-61149-1.

Review by Thomas Kselman, University of Notre Dame.

David Hume posed in the most unequivocal terms the question at the heart of Georges Minois' book on the origins of evil. Speaking through the skeptic Philo in his *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, Hume wonders, "Is [God] willing to prevent evil, but not able? then is he impotent. Is he able, but not willing? then is he malevolent. Is he both able and willing? whence then is evil?" For most of the last two thousand years the answer to this question was shaped by christian interpretations of the story of Adam and Eve, and the serpent who tempted them in the garden of Eden. Minois offers readers a sweeping panorama of how this tale rose to its central position in European culture, of the puzzles that it left open to debate, and of the criticisms that have eroded its power in the modern era.

Minois begins by placing the account in Genesis 2:15–3:22 in the context of other ancient tales that ponder the origins of evil, particularly the Babylonian myth of Gilgamesh. While the cast of characters in Gilgamesh and Genesis is broadly similar (a female temptress, a tree of life, a serpent), in the Babylonian tale evil is a primordial fact, a pre-existing condition that men try (and fail) to defeat. In Genesis, Adam and Eve live in a blissful Eden; evil is result of their decision to disobey. Death, female subservience, pain in childbirth, and grindingly difficult labor in order to survive are the penalties imposed by God for human disobedience, for eating the fruit of the forbidden tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

As Minois observes, this story raises as many questions as it resolves, for how can humans be wholly responsible for their sin, given the central role played by the serpent? And does not the decision of Adam and Eve imply a predisposition to evil that was part of the original creation, thus moving the fault back in time and implicating God in the fall? Was the sin one of disobedience and pride, or was it sexual, with the fruit offered by Eve standing symbolically for intercourse? How and why is it that the sin of Adam and Eve stained all of their descendants? These are the kinds of questions that have preoccupied theologians and philosophers for centuries, but Minois observes that they were not a topic of concern in Judaism, which never clearly formulated a concept of original sin. It was only in the two centuries immediately preceding the birth of Christ that the story of Adam and Eve emerged as a key text among Jewish sects anxious to find the cause of evil.

Minois does not offer any explanation as to why such questions arose at that time, though other scholars, such as Elaine Pagels, have seen Jewish religious innovation as a response to the turbulence produced in traditional communities by the spread of the pagan Roman Empire.[1] In general, Minois is content to move from text to text, with only occasional and brief references to social and political context. More surprisingly, the references to secondary literature are also sparse and limited for the most part to French authors. These are serious limitations, and experts in the various periods will no doubt be able to find fault with Minois as he moves through the centuries, selecting and commenting on

an enormous range of material. But there are rewards as well as drawbacks for readers of this kind of survey. Minois laces his work with long quotations from his sources, followed by interpretations that are generally intelligent and judicious. And by tracing the story of Adam and Eve over the *longue durée*, Minois is able to follow the construction and the collapse of an essential element in the orthodox christian worldview.[2]

Paul and Augustine, not Jesus, were responsible for the doctrine of original sin as it came to be understood by christians. Paul's Epistle to the Romans (5:12-21) established a famous parallel between Adam and Christ, with the sin in the garden the source of death and Christ's death the source of eternal life. But Paul's text was obscure and the early fathers disagreed about the effects of original sin, and its transmission to the descendants of the first parents. In the fourth century, Pelagius suggested that humans sinned not as a result of a fallen nature inherited from Adam but because they chose to imitate his crime of disobedience. Augustine countered this relatively optimistic and voluntaristic version of the story with a concept of original sin that shaped much of christian culture over the following centuries. For Augustine, human nature was totally corrupted by the sin of Adam and Eve, leaving us helpless to know and do good apart from God's grace. This sin, inherited by all humans, carried with it a concupiscence so overpowering that it distorted all human relations. Sexual desire, with its capacity to overwhelm reason and divide the will, was the most obvious manifestation of original sin.[3]

Although Augustine triumphed over Pelagius in the early fifth century, their debate over original sin and its consequences echoed through the centuries. With the development of scholastic philosophy in the middle ages, philosophers such as Aquinas sought to cast the doctrine of original sin in a more systematic and rational framework. For Aquinas, original sin led to the loss of supernatural attributes, but natural reason allowed us to grasp essential moral truths; in Minois' terms, Aquinas saw original sin as leaving humans "dans un état de désordre, mais de désordre ordonné" (p. 102). Nominalists such as Scotus and Occam rejected this concept of "natural morality," arguing that original sin made us incapable of grasping moral law apart from its revelation by divine decree.

Such scholastic argument likely had little effect on popular belief, but among the laity of the middle ages resistance to the doctrine of original sin emerged in the "Adamist" sects that argued humans could recover the perfection of Eden by living as Adam did, naked, shameless, and apart from hierarchical social institutions. Minois is certainly right to observe that such subversive thoughts drew only a minority, but his conclusion that "[1]a conception d'une chute aux conséquences universelles et irrémédiables a sans doute été le plus puissant agent d'immobilisme socio-politique en Europe jusqu'au siècle des Lumières" (p. 115) seems as unwarranted as it is provocative. Was Europe "immobile" until the eighteenth century, and could a single doctrine, even one as important as original sin, exert such devastating power? Here Minois seems to share in Augustine's view of the catastrophic consequences of original sin, not on human nature, but on human society.

In the sixteenth century, Minois sees the debate over original sin renewed in the conflict between Erasmus and Luther, with the humanist arguing that Augustinian pessimism was based on a mistranslation of Paul. Luther was, of course, a thoroughgoing defender of Augustine's vision of humankind totally corrupted by the sin of the first parents. The fault line in this old debate does not always fall out easily along confessional lines of protestant and catholic, however, for Minois cites extensive passages from Cardinal Bérulle, founder of a seventeenth-century school of catholic spirituality that paint as dreary a view of the consequences of the Fall as anything penned by a Protestant: "Et la terre qui devait être à Dieu un temple sacré pour le louer, et à l'homme un paradis de délices pour y vivre en repos, est couverte de ronces et épines, est un cloaque d'ordures et d'abomination, et une vallée de larmes, de mort, de misère, et elle ne porte plus que des pécheurs et ennemis de Dieu au monde" (p. 137). For the seventeenth century, Minois reviews the ideas of Bossuet, Malebranche, and Leibniz, but unsurprisingly identifies Milton's *Paradise Lost* as the key text. In Milton's epic Minois sees not only the continuing power of the story of Adam and Eve in European culture, but also growing

uneasiness about the fairness of God's test in the garden and a palpable sympathy for a choice that valued human love over divine prohibition.

The modern assault on original sin began with the Enlightenment, but Minois disputes as exaggerated Ernst Cassirer's claim that the doctrine was the common target that united the philosophes. Instead, he identifies several different currents at work, including a continued defense of the doctrine by orthodox christians such as the abbé Bergier. But starting with Pierre Bayle, critics were unremittingly hostile to the orthodox view of God's relationship to Adam and Eve, seeing him as arbitrary, cruel, and unreasonable, comparable to a father who would allow his children to break their legs, so that he could show to everyone his ability to heal them. With Rousseau, the myth of the garden is not attacked frontally but altered, so that original sin becomes the appropriation of private property. For Kant, belief in a sin inherited from our first parents was an inadequate explanation of moral evil. Instead, he saw the pain of death, shame, female submissiveness, and all the other supposed consequences of original sin as resulting from the emergence of reason and self-consciousness, an attainment that defined our humanity.

While Rousseau and Kant sought secular surrogates for original sin as a way to account for evil, others, such as Diderot and La Mettrie, made no such effort. For them, a materialist posture led to a view of man as determined exclusively by a nature that could nonetheless be shaped, and improved, by education. By the end of the eighteenth century, the notion of original sin had lost its power to persuade a broad range of European intellectuals and would undergo further devastating attacks from liberal theologians, philosophers, and scientists in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Minois acknowledges that the debate over Adam's sin lost its dominant position and became murkier in the nineteenth century, compared to the clear battle lines drawn in the Enlightenment. But the issue nonetheless appears significantly in the work of a wide range of thinkers who used it to shape their understanding of human origins, social relations, and morality. For de Maistre and christian conservatives, original sin and the disordered humanity it produced were a principal justification for social hierarchy and political authority, an argument that recalls Bossuet's defense of absolute monarchy. In Hegel's scheme, however, the story of Adam reflects in mythic form the dialectical emergence of freedom, with unreflective unity destroyed by self-consciousness, a divided state that was resolved in a higher consciousness of human liberty.

In one of the most fascinating sections of his work, Minois explores the relationship of Darwinian evolution to the Adamic myth. By demonstrating that humans emerged as the result of a gradual process, Darwin can be seen, in Minois' terms, as the murderer of Adam. But in the process of discrediting the orthodox christian story of human creation the new science also encouraged "polygenism," the idea that humans emerged from distinct racial lines. For all of its conservative social implications, the christian account, by insisting that all humans descended from a unique couple, also affirmed a universal human nature and therefore a fundamental equality, ideas rejected by racial science.

Although protestant fundamentalists and orthodox catholics (most significantly Pope Pius XII and John Paul II) continued to insist on the historical existence of Adam and Eve in the twentieth century, Darwinian theory seriously undermined this claim. But theologians who fell back to a defense of the story as an allegorical account, in which human free will is understood as the source of evil, were also challenged; in the twentieth century the human sciences increasingly saw behavior as shaped by social and psychological forces beyond the control of any individual. By the end of the century, some christian scholars, including Jean Delumeau, the author of a monumental history of the culture of guilt in western Europe, were claiming that the doctrine of original sin was bankrupt.<sup>[4]</sup>

Minois shares the skepticism of such critics, but he is equally doubtful about the claims of those who see in the emerging science of genetics the chance to create perfect creatures, new Adams and Eves

programmed for physical perfection and unlimited happiness. The doctrine of original sin, for so long the centerpiece of the European moral imagination, has lost its persuasive power, but no alternative explanation for evil has emerged to take its place. Instead, human beings insist on their right to happiness, a quest that, as Darrin McMahon observes, has generated a new source of misery, “the unhappiness of not being happy.”<sup>[5]</sup> Our desire to break free of the pain, misery, and death that constrain life is paradoxically both futile and inevitable. The doctrine of original sin may be a dead letter, but the career of Adam and Eve in European history, according to Minois, may nonetheless provide us with a context from which we can understand this longstanding and perhaps inherent desire to surpass human limitations.

Minois’ book is rambling and episodic, with no clear argumentative line, other than perhaps a general skepticism directed at Augustinian theology. Although primarily an intellectual history, there is no clear genealogy of ideas offered, as in Lovejoy’s classic *The Great Chain of Being*.<sup>[6]</sup> Neither is this a work comparable to those in the Cambridge school of the history of ideas, with its emphasis on social and political context. When Minois does leave his texts to venture into social history, he sometimes appears naïve, as in his uncritical affirmation of the Weber thesis, with no reference to the enormous critical literature on this topic (p. 127). *Les origines du mal* is by no means an outstanding scholarly achievement, but the texts and commentaries Minois provides do, in the end, fulfill the task set for such a book, which is to provide for a general audience of French readers a broad historical perspective on an enduring and fundamental human problem.

## NOTES

[1] Elaine Pagels, *Adam, Eve, and the Serpent* (New York: Vintage Books, 1989).

[2] Richard Trexler, *The Journey of the Magi: Meanings in History of a Christian Story* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997) uses a similar method as he follows the different interpretations of the magi from their appearance in the gospel of Matthew to the present. Trexler, however, draws on iconographic as well as textual evidence and on popular rituals celebrating the three kings.

[3] For a different and somewhat more generous interpretation of Augustine’s understanding of original sin see Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 399-408. None of Brown’s works on Augustine and late antiquity are cited by Minois.

[4] Jean Delumeau, *Sin and Fear: The Emergence of a Western Guilt Culture, 13th–18th Centuries* (New York: St. Martin’s, 1990). Delumeau subsequently balanced his grim view of Christian culture with a *History of Paradise: the Garden of Eden in Myth and Tradition* (New York: Continuum, 1995). Minois’ preoccupation with the dark side of European culture is reflected in his other works, which include a *Histoire de l’enfer* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1994), *Histoire du suicide* (Paris: Fayard, 1995), and *Le diable* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1998).

[5] Quoted in John Leland, “Pursing Happiness, Jefferson to J. Lo,” *The New York Times*, The Week in Review, June 29, 2003, p. 3.

[6] Arthur O. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being: A Study of the History of an Idea* (New York: Harper, 1960, c. 1936).

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