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NIEBUHR, SUCHOCKI, AND PARK:
NEOORTHODOX, FEMINIST, AND ASIAN AMERICAN VIEWS ON ORIGINAL SIN

Introduction

This essay will explore the theologies of Reinhold Niebuhr, Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki and Andrew Sung Park on original sin. It will demonstrate how each of these theologians has reinterpreted the traditional doctrine of original sin in light of his or her own social location: Niebuhr as a neoorthodox theologian, Suchocki as a feminist and relational theologian, and Park as an Asian American theologian. The essay concludes with my own view, written from the perspective of an Asian American and openly gay man, of original sin as scapegoating or the shifting of blame to the "other."

Part I of this essay will show how Reinhold Niebuhr reinterpreted the traditional doctrine of original sin as a twentieth-century neoorthodox theologian. Specifically, it will show how Niebuhr begins with the Augustinian language of original sin as *rebellion against God* through unbelief, and reinterprets it symbolically as a description of the existential condition that is faced by each individual as he or she is confronted with the tension between his or her freedom (spirit) and finitude (nature). In this part, I also discuss Niebuhr's theology of *actual*

sin (that is, the specific sins of pride and sensuality), and the influence of this theology on subsequent twentieth-century theologians, including the first-generation Black and Latin American liberation theologians of the 1960s and 1970s.

Part II of this essay will show how Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki reinterprets original sin from her perspective as a feminist and relational theologian. Drawing upon feminist theological critiques of Niebuhr's harmatology, Suchocki begins her reflections with nature instead of spirit. As a result, Suchocki turns the traditional definition of original sin as rebellion against God on its head, and redefines original sin as *rebellion against creation* through violence. In this part, I also suggest how Suchocki's theology of original sin might be a useful resource for others, including womanist and Asian feminist theologians.

Part III of this essay will show how Andrew Sung Park reinterprets original sin from his perspective as an Asian American and first-generation immigrant theologian. Park differs from both Niebuhr and Suchocki in that he ultimately rejects the concept of original sin. Specifically, Park reinterprets original sin in light of the Korean concept of *han*, which describes the suffering that is experienced by victims of sin. Park develops the idea of "*original han*," or a *self-perpetuating cycle of suffering*, which describes how the suffering experienced by victims of sin is passed on from generation to generation.

Finally, Part IV of this essay will show how my own perspective as an Asian American and openly gay man has shaped my view of original sin. For me, original sin can be seen as *scapegoating*, or the tendency of human beings to shift blame for our own shortcomings upon others -- particularly those who are "marked" in some way by "difference." The victims of this scapegoating in turn blame others, which perpetuates this dynamic of sin. Drawing upon the work of René Girard on sacrifice and scapegoating, I argue that the passion, crucifixion, and resurrection of Jesus Christ should be viewed as God's ultimate "no," or condemnation, of this destructive dynamic.

I. Reinhold Niebuhr

It would be difficult to overstate Reinhold Niebuhr's (1892-1971) influence on contemporary discussions of original sin. As Langdon Gilkey has noted, Niebuhr's theology of sin is the "pivotal center" of his thought and the concept for which he is "rightly famous."¹ Niebuhr's theology of original sin was most clearly set forth in his Gifford Lectures, which were delivered at the University of Edinburgh in 1939 and subsequently published in two volumes between 1941 and 1943 as *The Nature and Destiny of Man*.²

¹ Langdon Gilkey, *On Niebuhr: A Theological Study* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 102.

² Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man* (2 vols.; New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1941-43).

A. *Original Sin as Rebellion Against God*

According to the traditional doctrine of original sin, which was first articulated by Augustine of Hippo (354-430) in his anti-Pelagian writings, the human will was corrupted as a result of Adam and Eve's disobedience and subsequent Fall. This corruption, along with the punishment of death, was subsequently passed on to all of humanity through concupiscence and the reproductive process. Although all of us have been tainted with this inevitable bent towards evil, we have nevertheless retained our ability to act freely. As such, notwithstanding the inherited taint of original sin, we are still held responsible by God for our actions.

In *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Niebuhr reclaims this traditional doctrine of original sin and reinterprets it in twentieth-century existential terms. Instead of seeing original sin as a biological corruption that occurred as a result of the disobedience of our primal parents, Niebuhr views original sin as a mythic symbol that describes the existential situation of each person as we are confronted with the anxiety-producing recognition of our finitude as creaturely beings. Like the other neoorthodox theologians of his day, Niebuhr sought to reclaim traditional theological concepts such as original sin as a reaction to the overly-optimistic view of human nature by nineteenth century liberal theologians.³

³ See, e.g., Gary Dorrien, *The Word as True Myth: Interpreting Modern Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 122-26.

For Niebuhr, original sin results from the fact that we are able to transcend our finite creaturely nature. Because we are able to experience self-transcendence from our freedom of spirit, we also recognize our finitude, which in turn causes great anxiety on our part.⁴ As a result of this anxiety, we seek desperately to transform our "finiteness into infinity," our "weakness into strength," and our "dependence into independence."⁵ As Niebuhr puts it:

In short, man, being both free and bound, both limited and limitless, is anxious. Anxiety is the inevitable concomitant of the paradox of freedom and finiteness in which man is involved. Anxiety is the internal precondition of sin. It is the inevitable spiritual state of man, standing in the paradoxical situation of freedom and finiteness.⁶

Instead of turning to God in our state of anxiety, however, we try to establish our own lives independently. We give our life a "false centre" (that is, everything but God), which in turn "destroys the real possibilities" for the self and others.⁷ We deny the "limited character" of our knowledge and the "finiteness" of our perspectives. We pretend to have achieved a "degree of knowledge which is beyond the limit of finite life."⁸ In short, we end up rebelling against God in our unbelief, or "lack of trust," in God.⁹

To summarize, Niebuhr affirms the traditional view that original sin is a rebellion against God, which arises out of a fundamental unbelief or distrust in God.

⁴ Here Niebuhr draws extensively upon the work of nineteenth-century philosopher Søren Kierkegaard.

⁵ Niebuhr, *Nature and Destiny*, 1:251.

⁶ *Id.*, 1:182.

⁷ *Id.*, 1:252.

⁸ *Id.*, 1:182.

⁹ *Id.*, 1:252.

Instead of viewing original sin in biological terms (as Augustine did), however, Niebuhr develops a symbolic reading of original sin that relates it to the existential situation of the human being when he or she is faced with the tension between freedom and finitude.

B. Actual Sin as Pride and Sensuality

How, then, does original sin result in actual sin? According to Niebuhr, original sin manifests itself in two primary forms: (i) pride and (ii) sensuality. Pride is the state in which we attempt to raise our "contingent existence" to "unconditioned significance." In other words, we try to put ourselves in the place of God. By contrast, sensuality is the state in which we attempt to escape from the "unlimited possibilities of freedom" by immersing ourselves in a "mutable good."¹⁰ That is, we try to escape from our responsibilities by immersing ourselves in the created order.

For Niebuhr, the sin of pride is "more basic" than the sin of sensuality.¹¹ Pride can manifest itself in several ways, including pride of power and glory, intellectual pride, moral pride, and spiritual pride. Furthermore, there is an element of self-deception with respect to pride in which we fail to recognize the extent of our self-love. The sin of pride reaches its zenith in social forms such as the nation, in

¹⁰ *Id.*, 1:186.

¹¹ According to Niebuhr, the sin of sensuality is ultimately derived from the sin of pride. *See id.*, 1:186.

which the social unit pretends to be God through its collective egotism.¹² Finally, Niebuhr is careful to point out that even though there is equality of sin with respect to all human beings, there is also an inequality of guilt. That is, consistent with the prophetic voices of the Bible, those who are more wealthy, powerful, and proud are ultimately more guilty than those who are not.

Sensuality is the second form of actual sin. For Niebuhr, sensuality is a "secondary consequence of man's rebellion against God."¹³ That is, sensuality is a "further confusion" (alluding to Romans 1:25) that occurs when one substitutes the self for God, whether through lust, drunkenness, or gluttony. Paradoxically, (i) sensuality is a form of idolatry in which the self becomes god, but (ii) it is also a form of idolatry in which the self seeks escape by finding an alternative god (such as sex, alcohol, food, or luxury) outside of itself.¹⁴ This paradox ultimately requires the individual to escape from the "futilities of both forms of idolatry" by a "plunge into unconsciousness."¹⁵

Although the primary focus of this essay is on original sin, the foregoing discussion of Niebuhr's theology of actual sin (that is, pride and sensuality) is

¹² Cf. Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society: A Study in Ethics and Politics* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1932), 83-112 (discussing the morality of nations), 113-41 (discussing the ethical attitudes of privileged classes).

¹³ Niebuhr, *Nature and Destiny*, 1:231.

¹⁴ *Id.*, 1:233.

¹⁵ *Id.*, 1:239.

important in terms of understanding how Niebuhr affected subsequent twentieth-century theologians.

C. Assessment

As we have seen, Niebuhr reinterpreted the orthodox doctrine of original sin in symbolic and existential terms for his twentieth-century context, particularly as a reaction to an overly-optimistic view of human nature by nineteenth-century liberal theologians.¹⁶

One positive aspect of Niebuhr's theology of original sin is that it allows us to understand -- in post-Enlightenment terms -- why human beings are capable of acting in such evil ways towards other people. Indeed, Niebuhr's critique of the collective pride of social organizations (such as racial groups and nations) helped to establish a theological foundation for the first-generation Black and Latin American liberation theologians of the 1960s and 1970s.¹⁷

¹⁶ See Dorrien, *Word as True Myth*, 122. Niebuhr's two-fold description of actual sin as pride and sensuality is surprisingly similar to the hamatology of Karl Barth, the neoorthodox theologian *par excellence*. In volumes IV/1 and IV/2 of *Church Dogmatics*, Barth defines the human sins of (i) pride and (ii) sloth in terms of their diametrical opposition to (i) the downward movement of Jesus Christ in the incarnation and (ii) the upward movement of Jesus Christ in the resurrection and ascension. See Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* (trans. G.W. Bromiley; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956), IV/1:358-513 ("The Pride and Fall of Man"); Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* (trans. G.W. Bromiley; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1958), IV/2:378-498 ("The Sloth and Misery of Man"). In addition to pride and sloth, Barth also talks about "falsehood" as a third form of human sin that is oppose to the truth of Jesus Christ.

¹⁷ For an example of the Black liberationist critique of social oppression as sin, see James H. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation* (20th anniversary ed.; Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1990), 107 (noting that the "sin of whites is the definition of their

On the other hand, a shortcoming of Niebuhr's theology of sin, which has been pointed out by many feminist theologians over the years, is the underdevelopment of the sin of sensuality in its own right. By focusing on the sin of pride as the primary sin, Niebuhr places a much greater emphasis on the transcendent than the immanent. This, as we will now see, is a central issue for the feminist and relational theology of Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki.

II. Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki

A. *Original Sin as Rebellion Against Creation*

Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki (1933-), professor emerita and former academic dean at the Claremont School of Theology, is a feminist and relational theologian¹⁸ who has reflected extensively upon the doctrine of original sin. Suchocki's theology of original sin is most clearly articulated in her book *The Fall to Violence*,¹⁹ which was published in 1994. For Suchocki, original sin is not so much a rebellion against

existence in terms of whiteness" which is responsible for "Amerindian reservations, black concentration camps, and the rape of Vietnam"). See also James H. Cone and Gayraud S. Wilmore, eds., *Black Theology: A Documentary History, Volume One, 1966-1979* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1979). For the Latin American liberationist perspective, see Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation* (15th anniversary ed.; Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1988), 103 (noting that "[s]in is evident in oppressive structures, in the exploitation of humans by humans, in the domination and slavery of peoples, races, and social classes").

¹⁸ Here I follow Suchocki's use of the term "relational theology" to describe process theology.

¹⁹ Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki, *The Fall to Violence: Original Sin in Relational Theology* (New York: Continuum Publishing Company, 1994). See also Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki, "Original Sin Revisited," *Process Studies* 20 (1991): 233-43.

God through unbelief (as articulated by Niebuhr as well as theologians in the Augustinian and reformed traditions), but rather a rebellion against *creation* through violence.

In *The Fall to Violence*, Suchocki explores the doctrine of original sin from the perspective of a feminist and relational theologian. Like Niebuhr, Suchocki is interested in reclaiming the language of original sin, which she defines in relational terms as "conditions [that are] set in force long before our individual births that nonetheless orient each of us toward sin." For Suchocki, the doctrine of original sin is useful because it can help us to better understand the "webs of violence and violation" that are so tightly "woven into our social structures."²⁰

Suchocki takes Niebuhr's definition of original sin and turns it upside down. Instead of defining original sin as rebellion against God through unbelief, she defines original sin as rebellion against *creation* through violence. Suchocki draws upon the insights of feminist theologians such as Valerie Saiving, Judith Plaskow, and Susan Nelson who have critiqued Niebuhr for absorbing the sin of sensuality (nature) into

²⁰ Suchocki, *Fall to Violence*, 12. Suchocki's definition of original sin is remarkably similar to that of Serene Jones. In *Feminist Theory and Christian Theology*, Jones defines original sin as the reality that "we are shaped by oppressive dynamics that predate us and that we do not choose to be determined by." Jones gives the example of seeing her newborn daughter for the very first time after delivery in the hospital, covered by a pink hat with the words "It's a girl." For Jones, this incident demonstrates how we are all born into a "nexus of unjust social relations" (such as the "oppressive binaries of gender") over which we have little or no control. Serene Jones, *Feminist Theory and Christian Theology: Cartographies of Grace* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2000), 117-18.

the sin of pride (spirit).²¹ By extracting nature from its merger into spirit, Suchocki demonstrates that transcendence of self can actually be found *within* nature -- as opposed to outside of it -- through the three-fold functions of memory (past), empathy (present), and imagination (future).²²

According to Suchocki, we can better understand our interdependence with, and obligation to, other creatures by locating self-transcendence *within* nature:

Developing a horizontal, or world-related, interpretation of human self-transcendence allows us to bring to social nature of the self into view It brings creaturely interdependence and therefore creaturely obligation into view.²³

It is for this reason that Suchocki defines original sin as a rebellion against *creation* through violence.

God is not left out of the picture, however, because Suchocki believes that God is intimately connected with creation. In other words, God indirectly suffers whenever any part of creation suffers. Thus, any sin against creation is a sin against

²¹ Saiving, Plaskow, and Nelson have each criticized the primacy of place given to the sin of pride in Niebuhr's theology and sought to reestablish the sin of sensuality (or hiding) as a sin in its own right. See Valerie Saiving Goldstein, "The Human Situation: A Feminine View," *JR* 60 (1960): 100-12; Judith Plaskow, *Sex, Sin and Grace: Women's Experience and the Theologies of Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Tillich* (Washington, D.C.: University Press of America, 1980); Susan Nelson Dunfee, "The Sin of Hiding: A Feminist Critique of Reinhold Niebuhr's Account of the Sin of Pride," *Soundings* 65 (1983): 316-27. See also Daphne Hampson, "Reinhold Niebuhr on Sin: A Critique," in *Reinhold Niebuhr and the Issues of Our Time* (ed. Richard Harries; Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1986), 46-60.

²² See Suchocki, *Fall to Violence*, 36.

²³ *Id.*, 43.

God. However, by focusing on creation as a starting point for original sin, Suchocki ensures that actual sin is seen not so much as a violation of a "divine command" that is issued from on high, but rather as a "primal violation of [the] well-being" of creation.²⁴

In the end, Suchocki rejects the Niebuhrian view that original sin results from existential anxiety over one's finitude. Suchocki does not believe that all of the "dominion, greed, rapaciousness, and cruelty" in the world can be reduced to a simple need to "shore up the defenses against [one's] death."²⁵ Instead, Suchocki flips things around by placing violence (as opposed to anxiety) at the center of original sin. Thus, the human bent towards violence is the primal condition that leads to anxiety, pride, and self-centeredness -- and not the other way around.

Suchocki concludes her book by examining the three-fold relationship between (i) the human bent towards violence, (ii) the "interrelational nature" of creaturely existence, and (iii) the way in which culture shapes the "values and norms" for each individual in a given society, especially children. For Suchocki, original sin is defined through this three-fold interplay of violence, interrelationality, and intersubjectivity. As a result, it is no surprise that Suchocki defines original sin as a rebellion against creation through violence.

²⁴ *Id.*, 64. Suchocki defines "well-being" as truth, love, and beauty.

²⁵ *Id.*, 84.

B. Suchocki and Niebuhr Compared

Interestingly, Suchocki's theology of original sin resembles Niebuhr's harmatology in a number of ways. Like Niebuhr, Suchocki affirms the importance of original sin as a means of understanding the underlying causes for actual sin, and also for explaining why there is so much oppression and violence in the world. Furthermore, like Niebuhr, Suchocki rejects the literal Augustinian view of original sin (that is, as a defect of will that is biologically transmitted to all people through concupiscence and the reproductive process). Rather, for Suchocki, original sin is best understood in *symbolic* terms as a rupture in the interconnectedness of creation. Finally, like Niebuhr, Suchocki reinterprets original sin from her own social location (albeit from the perspective of a feminist and relational theologian).

However, as we have seen, Suchocki's theology of original sin also differs from Niebuhr's in a number of important ways. As noted above, Suchocki's starting point is diametrically opposed to that of Niebuhr's. Instead of starting with God, Suchocki starts with creation. By doing so, Suchocki reverses the priority of spirit over nature, and transcendence over immanence. This reversal is consistent with the work of many feminist theologians who have critiqued Niebuhr for emphasizing the sin of pride over the sin of sensuality.²⁶ As a consequence of her focus on creation, Suchocki's theology of original sin is ultimately less symbolic than Niebuhr's, and more grounded in creation. For example, Suchocki is sympathetic to

²⁶ See *supra* note 21.

an evolutionary explanation for the human bent towards violence.²⁷ Ironically, in some ways this resembles Augustine's biological model of original sin more than Niebuhr's existential model.

C. Assessment

One positive aspect of Suchocki's theology is her use of creation and violence (as opposed to God and unbelief) as a starting point for her reflection on original sin. It seems to me that this emphasis on creation and violence might be helpful to others -- for example, womanist and Asian feminist theologians -- in constructing their own theologies of original sin. Although a number of such theologians have written important reflections on sin,²⁸ those reflections have focused primarily on *actual* sin as opposed to original sin. Suchocki's emphasis on creation and violence is consistent with these harmatologies, and may be a helpful resource in terms of a fuller exposition by these theologians on original sin.

²⁷ See Suchocki, *Fall to Violence*, 82-99.

²⁸ See, e.g., Delores S. Williams, "A Womanist Perspective on Sin," in *A Troubling in My Soul: Womanist Perspectives on Evil and Suffering* (ed. Emilie M. Townes; Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1993), 130-49 (defining actual sin as defilement of Black women's bodies, womanhood, and sexualities, and noting the connections with the defilement of nature); Jacquelyn Grant, "The Sin of Servanthood and the Deliverance of Discipleship," in Townes, *A Troubling in My Soul*, 199-218 (defining actual sin as servanthood in certain contexts). For a general discussion of sin within Black and womanist theologies, see Stephen Butler Murray, "The Dimensions of Sin and Fallenness in the Theological Anthropology of Black and Womanist Theologies," *JR* 84 (2004): 23-47. For a discussion of actual sin from an Asian feminist perspective, see Chung Hyun Kyung, *Struggle to Be the Sun Again: Introducing Asian Women's Theology* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1990), 36-52 (defining sin as "internalized self-hate, horizontal violence, and ignorance").

On the other hand, Suchocki's focus on creation and violence may also be a major shortcoming of her work. While it is certainly important to challenge the traditional "male" emphasis on God over creature (as well as spirit over nature, and transcendence over immanence), some feminist theologians have recently argued for the importance of reclaiming divine transcendence -- *in addition to* horizontal transcendence in community -- for establishing a point from which self-critique can occur. For example, this is Rebekah L. Miles' main argument in her recent book about feminism and Christian realism, *The Bonds of Freedom*.²⁹ Furthermore, although Suchocki occasionally references issues such as racism in her book, her analysis is largely silent with respect to the specific experiences of people of color. With this critique in mind, I now turn to the Asian American hermeneutology of Andrew Sung Park.

III. Andrew Sung Park

Andrew Sung Park (c. 1950-), an Asian American professor of theology at United Theological Seminary and a first-generation immigrant to the United States, has written extensively on the Asian American perspective of sin. His books include

²⁹ Rebekah L. Miles, *The Bonds of Freedom: Feminist Theology and Christian Realism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001). According to Miles, "[o]ut of the need for an internal critical mechanism, a feminist Christian realism combines Niebuhr's focus on self-transcendence with . . . horizontal transcendence in community." For Miles, this hybrid approach of vertical and horizontal transcendence finds divine activity not only in the self-sacrificial love of the atonement, but also in love expressed in "creation, in the liberation of the oppressed, in the judgment of injustice and idolatry, and in the sustaining comfort of the Holy Spirit." *Id.* at 152-53.

The Wounded Heart of God,³⁰ *Racial Conflict and Healing*,³¹ *The Other Side of Sin*,³² and *From Hurt to Healing*.³³ His articles on this topic include "A Theology of Tao (Way): Han, Sin and Evil"³⁴ and "Sin" in the *Handbook of U.S. Theologies of Liberation*.³⁵

A. *The Concept of Han*

Park turns the traditional discourse of sin upside down. Instead of focusing on the sinner, Park focuses on the *victim* of sin. According to Park, traditional Christian theological reflection on sin has been "oriented exclusively to sinners," including "the issue of sin, the way of conquering the power of sin, the way of repentance, the doctrine of reconciliation, justification by faith, sanctification, glorification, and Christian perfection."³⁶ By contrast, victims of sin are almost always dealt with through non-theological means such as pastoral counseling or psychological therapy.

³⁰ Andrew Sung Park, *The Wounded Heart of God: The Asian Conception of Han and the Christian Doctrine of Sin* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993).

³¹ Andrew Sung Park, *Racial Conflict and Healing: An Asian-American Theological Perspective* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1996).

³² Andrew Sung Park and Susan L. Nelson, eds., *The Other Side of Sin: Woundedness from the Perspective of the Sinned-Against* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001).

³³ Andrew Sung Park, *From Hurt to Healing: A Theology of the Wounded* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2004).

³⁴ Andrew Sung Park, "A Theology of Tao (Way): Han, Sin and Evil," in *Realizing the America of Our Hearts: Theological Voices of Asian Americans* (ed. Fumitaka Matsuoka and Eleazar S. Fernandez; St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2003), 41-54.

³⁵ Andrew Sung Park, "Sin," in *Handbook of U.S. Theologies of Liberation* (ed. Miguel A. De La Torre; St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2004), 110-16.

³⁶ Park, *Wounded Heart of God*, 72-73.

This, in Park's view, is unacceptable. A "Copernican revolution" in theology is required to transform the doctrine of sin and salvation from a unilateral to a bilateral perspective, in which both the experiences of the sinner *and the sinned-against* is taken into account.³⁷

Park draws upon the Korean concept of *han* to describe the experiences of the victims of sin.³⁸ *Han*, which is a central concept in the Korean *minjung* theology of the down-and-out and economically oppressed, is an attempt to describe the "depths of human suffering" and the "abysmal experience of pain."³⁹ Although *han* lacks a precise English translation, it can be described as a combination of frustrated hope, despair, resignation, resentful bitterness, and a wounded heart.⁴⁰

Park writes about the *han* that was experienced by his mother, a Korean refugee who experienced displacement for much of her life as a result of war and political instability, who died in a tragic accident shortly after she immigrated to the United States:

Among our family members, my mother had suffered the most: patriarchal suppression and repression, the wars, and the hardship of a preacher's wife. Her life was a series of tragedies and human anguish. She was born in *han* and died in *han*. She is the reason I write about *han*, so that fewer people might have to suffer as she did.⁴¹

³⁷ Park, *Wounded Heart of God*, 73.

³⁸ The concept of *han* exists in other Asian languages, including Chinese, Japanese, Mongolian, Manchurian, and Vietnamese. *See id.*, 180 n.1.

³⁹ *Id.*, 15.

⁴⁰ *Id.*, 15-20.

⁴¹ *Id.*, 7.

Park gives other examples of other Asians and Asian Americans who have experienced *han*, including an oppressed Korean worker who died of exhaustion and poor medical care at the age of twenty-two, a Japanese American who was imprisoned in an internment camp during World War II, and a Korean A-bomb victim.⁴²

For Park, the Christian doctrine of sin can only be understood in reference to the *han* of the victim. According to Park, "sin is of the oppressor; *han* is of the oppressed." The two contribute to each other in a "cyclical relationship."⁴³ Park notes that most people experience both sin and *han* in their lives (depending upon the power dynamics in any given situation), which is a function of the complex relationship between these two concepts.

Interestingly, Park rejects the feminist view that defines sin as negation of the self, hiding, or self-sacrifice.⁴⁴ For Park, these experiences are better described as *han* and not sin. In Park's view, while the feminist critiques of sin are "revolutionary," such perspectives ultimately perpetuate the mistaken focus of Christian theology on the sinner and not the victim of sin.

⁴² *Id.*, 20-27.

⁴³ *Id.*, 69.

⁴⁴ *See, e.g., supra* note 21.

B. Original Han

Park rethinks the idea of original sin by reimagining it as "original *han*." Park rejects the traditional doctrine of original sin for a number of reasons, including the misreading of Romans 5:12 by Augustine, and the view that it is illogical and unjust to punish someone for any act that is the result of an inherited condition. Even more problematic, however, is the fact that the traditional focus of Christian theology on original sin and its transmission places a "smoke screen before the reality of the suffering of the wronged."⁴⁵

Park proposes that original sin should be replaced by the concept of "original *han*." For Park, the one aspect of original sin that is worth saving is the "solidarity of the human family in the interwoven strands of human misery." Accordingly, Park builds upon this idea of solidarity to show how *han* is "passed on to posterity" through the "channels of human existence and social tradition." That is, original *han* demonstrates how children inherit the *han* of their parents. Although children are neither responsible nor punishable for this inheritance, they continue to suffer as a result of transmission. This "unfair transmission" from parents to "innocent posterity" is what Park calls original *han*.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ Park, *Wounded Heart of God*, 79.

⁴⁶ *Id.*, 80. For Park, *han* can be transmitted from generation to generation in a number of ways: biologically, mentally and spiritually, socially, and racially.

Park draws imaginatively upon a number of sources in Western theology and philosophy to support his concept of original *han*. These include Cyprian's description of the consequences of original sin as *vulnera* (that is, "wounds") that are inherited from our parents. As such, *han* is "engendered within one generation by the sin and *han* of the previous generation." Park also cites Thomas Aquinas' discussion of the four wounds of sin: (i) *vulnus ignorantiae* (ignorance), (ii) *vulnus malitiae* (malice), (iii) *vulnus infirmitatis* (weakness), and (iv) *vulnus concupiscentiae* (concupiscence). For Park, these wounds are examples of the "permanent structure of *han* in every human being."⁴⁷

C. Park, Niebuhr, and Suchocki Compared

Park shares a number of similarities with Niebuhr and Suchocki. All three theologians specifically address the doctrine of original sin, and not just actual sin. Furthermore, all three theologians take the traditional idea of original sin (that is, an inherited defect of the will that is transmitted through the reproductive process) and reinterpret it from their particular social locations.

Like Niebuhr, Park sees sin primarily as an act of overreaching (pride) as opposed to hiding (sensuality). In fact, Park expressly rejects the feminist theological attempts to recognize sensuality (that is, self-negation or hiding) as a sin in its own right. This is because Park believes that self-negation or hiding is more

⁴⁷ *Id.*, 74-75. In terms of Western philosophy, Park references Hegel's concept of *das unglückliche Bewusstsein* ("unhappy consciousness") as the *han* of the oppressed.

appropriately viewed as *han*, or the impact of sin upon the victim. For Park, to define self-negation or hiding as "sin" would be to reinforce the traditional Western bias towards the sinner and not the sinned-against.

Like Suchocki, Park is very much aware of the interconnectedness of creation. Similar to Suchocki's relational theology, Park's theology of sin and *han* is grounded in the political, economic, sexual, and racial relationships between different kinds of people. In fact, Park's dialectic between sin and *han* is a recognition of the symbiotic relationship between oppression and suffering and that we cannot talk about one without recognizing the other.⁴⁸

Ultimately, however, Park differs from both Niebuhr and Suchocki in that he rejects the idea of original sin. Instead, Park develops the idea of "original *han*" to describe the various ways in which *han*, or the suffering of the sinned-against, is passed on from one generation to the next. Park's theology also differs from that of Niebuhr and Suchocki with respect to his use of the Asian American experience as a theological source. For example, Park is very much aware of his racial and ethnic social location as a Korean American first-generation immigrant. Park's writings are filled with specific examples of suffering by Asians, Asian Americans, and other ethnic minorities. These include many different kinds of sinful oppression such as

⁴⁸ Chung Hyun Kyung has defined sin from an Asian feminist perspective as "colonialism, neo-colonialism, capitalism, racism, classism, castism, and sexism." Chung, *Struggle to Be the Sun Again*, 40.

the capitalist global economy, patriarchal traditions in both the East and West, and racial and cultural discrimination.

D. Assessment

As someone who is a fellow first-generation Asian American immigrant, I have found much in Park's theology that resonates with my own experience. Unlike my experiences of reading Niebuhr or Suchocki, I can relate to Park's stories and examples of *han* in the Asian American community, including the brutal beating death of Vincent Chin by a white auto worker who felt that Asians were taking jobs away from "Americans,"⁴⁹ and the relentless governmental persecution of American scientist Wen Ho Lee, who was paid over a million dollars as compensation for the harms that he suffered.⁵⁰ I can also relate to Park's concept of original *han* to the extent that I have seen the *han* of my grandparents and parents (for example, the constant need to prove one's worth in a racist country) being passed on to my brother and me in various conscious and unconscious ways.

There are elements, however, of Park's theology that I find problematic. Park, like most Asian American theologians, is silent about the experiences of sexual minorities (that is, LGBT people) within communities of color. Despite his sensitivity to original *han*, he does not address the *han* of LGBT Asian Americans, which is most often perpetuated by the homophobic and transphobic attitudes of

⁴⁹ Park, *Racial Conflict and Healing*, 16-18.

⁵⁰ Park, "A Theology of *Tao* (Way)," 41-42.

our ethnic families, neighborhoods, churches, and communities. I was also somewhat surprised by Park's outright rejection of feminist attempts to rethink sin as self-negation. While I do understand Park's desire to emphasize the importance of *han* and the victims of sin, I also think that his analysis would be strengthened if he demonstrated a deeper engagement with the multi-dimensional nature of sin as articulated by neoorthodox theologians such as Niebuhr (pride and sensuality) and Barth (pride, sloth, and falsehood), and why feminist theologians have reacted as they did to such theologians.

IV. My Perspective

A. *Original Sin as Scapegoating*

As an Asian American and an openly gay man, I view original sin as scapegoating, or the universal tendency for each of us to shift blame for our own shortcomings to an innocent party. This shifting of blame often "justifies" our mistreatment of that person, which constitutes actual sin.

According to Tom Douglas, an authority on the dynamics of scapegoating, human beings have a basic need to "ward off responsibility" and to "transfer badness to others." Indeed, someone must "take the blame" in order to allow

everyone else to continue their "normal functions, nominally at least, free of guilt or responsibility for events past."⁵¹

I believe that this dynamic can be traced back to the biblical narrative of the Fall, when Adam blames Eve for his eating of the forbidden fruit, and Eve in turn blames the serpent:

Then [God] asked, "Who told you that you were naked? Did you eat of the tree from which I had forbidden you to eat?" The man said, "The woman You put at my side -- she gave me of the tree, and I ate." And the LORD God said to the woman, "What is this you have done!" The woman replied, "The serpent duped me, and I ate."⁵²

Other examples of scapegoating can be seen throughout the Bible, including the attempted murder of Joseph by his brothers, the throwing overboard of Jonah by his fellow travelers, and -- most significantly -- the blaming and crucifixion of Jesus Christ by the political and religious authorities of his day.

Often the victim that is chosen by scapegoaters is marked somehow by "difference." That is, he or she is "deficient in some obvious way, having some mark or some bodily defect." Alternatively, the victim has pursued a different "style of life."⁵³ As someone who both looks different and lives a different lifestyle than the majority of people in this country, I have often experienced the dynamics of scapegoating first hand.

⁵¹ Tom Douglas, *Scapegoats: Transferring Blame* (London: Routledge, 1995), 5.

⁵² Gen 3:11-13 (JPS).

⁵³ Tom Douglas, *Scapegoats*, 36.

For example, as an Asian American, I have been the target of racial epithets for as long as I can remember, particularly from those people who have felt like outsiders themselves. One of my earliest memories was that of my kindergarten teacher telling me on the playground that "sticks and stones may break your bones, but words will never hurt you." (Unfortunately, words sometimes *do* hurt quite a lot.) Also, even though I have spent almost all of my life in the United States, I will always be indelibly "marked" as an outsider by my looks, just like the American citizens of Japanese descent in World War II who were rounded up and sent to internment camps simply because of their ethnic heritage.⁵⁴

As an openly gay man, I have also experienced rejection and exclusion, particularly from religious communities that are wrestling with their own issues of sexuality. One such community is the Roman Catholic Church, which has scapegoated all gay people for the sexual misconduct of its clergy, even to the point of banning all men with "homosexual tendencies" from attending or teaching at their seminaries.⁵⁵

I believe that the dynamic of scapegoating perpetuates itself and, as such, has been played out repeatedly throughout history with respect to marginalized groups,

⁵⁴ For the argument that racism is "America's original sin," see James H. Cone, "Theology's Great Sin: Silence in the Face of White Supremacy," in *Soul Work: Anti-Racist Theologies in Dialogue* (ed. Marjorie Bowers-Wheatley and Nancy Palmer Jones; Boston: Skinner House Books, 2003), 1-15.

⁵⁵ See Congregation for Catholic Education, *Instruction Concerning the Criteria of Vocational Discernment Regarding Persons with Homosexual Tendencies in View of Their Admission to Seminaries and Holy Orders* (Nov. 4, 2005).

whether it be religious "heretics" who were burned at the stake, women who were accused of witchcraft and drowned, African Americans who were lynched, Jewish people who were exterminated during the Holocaust, and LGBT people who are queer-bashed and beaten to death. Indeed, scapegoating leads to discrimination and exclusion at best, and violence and murder at worst.

My view of original sin has been influenced by the work of philosopher and literary theorist René Girard. According to Girard, the scapegoating of an innocent third party is often disguised as religious sacrifice and is actually a means for defusing potential violence between two more powerful parties.

The best-known example of this dynamic occurred with the crucifixion of Jesus Christ, who was scapegoated by both the political (Roman) and religious (Jewish) authorities of his day. According to Girard, the narrative of Christ's passion is unique because it unmasks and condemns the human tendency to scapegoat the innocent outsider.⁵⁶ In other words, the cross is God's ultimate rejection of this blaming dynamic, despite the fact that we all continue to scapegoat innocent victims, thus constantly reenacting Golgotha in our own communities.⁵⁷

⁵⁶ See René Girard, *The Scapegoat* (trans. Yvonne Freccero; Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), 111.

⁵⁷ James Alison, a gay Roman Catholic priest and theologian, has also been influenced by mimetic theory and Girard's work in his writings. See, e.g., James Alison, *The Joy of Being Wrong: Original Sin Through Easter Eyes* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1998), 7-21.

B. Niebuhr, Suchocki, and Park Compared

My theology of original sin resembles that of Niebuhr, Suchocki, and Park in a number of ways. Like each of those theologians, I begin with the traditional view of original sin, but then I reinterpret it for my own social context as an Asian American and openly gay man. Like Niebuhr, I affirm the language of original sin as a way of understanding how actual sin is perpetuated in the world. Scapegoating literally is a rebellion against God to the extent that we believe that we are carrying out God's will, but that we are in fact displacing God with ourselves (which was literally the case in the scapegoating of Jesus Christ). Like Suchocki, I recognize the central role of violence -- both actual and defused -- in the act of scapegoating, which is an act of rebellion against creation that ruptures right relationships in the world. Finally, like Park, I recognize the centrality of the *han* or suffering that is experienced by the victims of scapegoating, and particularly with Jesus Christ as the scapegoat *par excellence*.

However, my view of original sin as scapegoating also differs from the theologies of Niebuhr, Suchocki, and Park in a number of important ways. My view of original sin has been profoundly shaped by my experiences as an Asian American and openly gay man who has been repeatedly scapegoated by religious institutions and religious authorities under the guise of following God's commands. Thus, unlike Niebuhr, my analysis of original sin is rooted primarily in experience and not in traditional biblical and theological sources. Although I do affirm the biblical roots of scapegoating as well as the reflections of philosophers such as René Girard and

social theorists such as Tom Douglas, I am ultimately shaped by my experiences as an Asian American and an openly gay man. Unlike Suchocki, my concept of original sin is not limited to horizontal violence against creation; scapegoating -- especially scapegoating that is grounded in religious discourse -- is also a form of vertical rebellion against God. Finally, unlike Park, I do not reject the concept of original sin, but rather believe that it is a critical way of seeing how scapegoating is at the root of actual sin.

Conclusion

In this essay, I have examined the theologies of Reinhold Niebuhr, Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki, and Andrew Sung Park on original sin. Each theologian views this doctrine in a unique way: as a neoorthodox theologian, Niebuhr sees original sin as rebellion against God through unbelief; as a feminist and relational theologian, Suchocki sees original sin as rebellion against creation through violence; and as an Asian American theologian, Park redefines original sin as "original *han*," that is, a self-perpetuating cycle of suffering that is experienced by the victims of sin.

From my own perspective as an Asian American and openly gay man, I view original sin as scapegoating, or the tendency for human beings to blame others for our own shortcomings. Rather than to take responsibility for our sins, we project them upon other people (particularly those who are marked by "difference"), which then "justifies" our further sinful treatment of such people. No one is innocent from this dynamic; the victims of such scapegoating turn around and do the same thing to

others. Like René Girard, I believe that the first step towards eliminating this dynamic is to recognize its existence and to see the passion, crucifixion, and resurrection of Jesus Christ as a sign -- and promise -- of God's refusal to accept scapegoating as the last word.

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