part from those who don’t hold or profess views on complex or contentious subjects, it’s usually assumed there are two groups of people in the Anglosphere. First, those who believe it’s within the power of humanity to make the world a better place, an ideal place, unassisted by forces apart from humanity, once all prejudices are overcome: by which they usually mean the prejudices of other people. Second, those who believe the evidence suggests otherwise.

Traditionally these groups are dichotomised into secular and religious, but it isn’t that simple, as many secular people are fatalists and many religious people are humanists. The concept of sin is a good example to illustrate this point; there are secular people who believe in something the church would call sin, although they may use non-religious language to describe it; there are religious people who don’t believe in sin, although they may pay lip service to the church’s language on sin.

Here are two quite different books which try to reclaim our sense of sin as a fundamental aspect of the human condition; one from a distinguished Protestant setting; the other from a distinguished Roman Catholic setting.

Alan Jacobs begins *Original Sin: A Cultural History* by noting that, of all the religious teachings he’s aware of, none generates as much hostility, or passionate defence, as original sin. While a nineteenth-century Protestant, Charles Finney, believed the doctrine “subversive to the gospel, and repulsive to the human intelligence”, a twentieth-century Catholic, George Bernanos, believed “it is certainly more grave, or at least more dangerous, to deny original sin than to deny God”. To understand original sin as a teaching, it’s important to have a sense of what it isn’t. It isn’t the first human sin, associated with Adam and Eve eating the forbidden fruit. It isn’t the stock formula of Greek tragedy, a fatal choice that launches the forces of retribution or nemesis. We can read the story of Adam and Eve in this way, and many have, but Jacobs presents another reading which isn’t necessarily theological but on which theology impinges: the ways in which belief or disbelief in original sin plays itself out in a broad variety of cultural forms.

Chapter One, “Six Stories”, provides glimpses of original sin in different cultures. For a thousand years, the Locrians sent two maidens annually to Athena’s shrine at Troy, as payment and sacrifice, to ease their suffering for past sin. In the last of Plato’s dialogues, the *Laws*, a Cretan, a Spartan and an Athenian discuss “our universal human frailty” in the context of an inherited tendency towards criminal behaviour. In the Bible, David beds Uriah’s wife, Bathsheba, who becomes pregnant; when his attempt to disguise his paternity fails, David arranges for Uriah to die in battle, whereupon Nathan the prophet convinces David he’s sinned against the Lord. In ancient China, Confucius believed society could be put right because humans are malleable; his disciple Mencius agreed, because humans tend towards good; another disciple, Xun Zi, disagreed, because humans tend towards evil. In New Guinea, the Urapmin converted *en masse* to Christianity in 1977, believing it would prepare them for the second coming, but soon realised they were still sinful and continued to propitiate the ancestors they had enraged by their conversion.

Chapter Two, “The African Bishop”, re-appraises the much-maligned Augustine of Hippo, whom the moderns tend to blame, along with Paul of Tarsus, for a range of intellectual positions they no longer want to believe. If we see the pre-Christian Augustine

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*Original Sin: A Cultural History*  
by Alan Jacobs  
HarperOne, 2009, 304 pages, US$15

*Sin: A History*  
by Gary A. Anderson  
as licentious and promiscuous, we take his own self-description too literally; to him, being a slave to “lusts of the flesh” means being subject to a corrupted human will, not simply being dominated by sexual desires. He saw himself as internally divided, not simply lustful. He believed he was reading Paul’s teachings simply and straightforwardly. Many modern scholars tend to credit Augustine with inventing sexual desires. He saw himself as internally divided, not simply being dominated by corrupted human will, not simply being dominated by sexual desires. He saw himself as internally divided, not simply lustful. He believed he was reading Paul’s teachings simply and straightforwardly. Many modern scholars tend to credit Augustine with inventing original sin, and contend that he misread Paul, but Alan Jacobs disagrees. Those who believe the Bible is the inspired Word of God shouldn’t pick fights with Paul, as he holds up to us the origin of our sin without actually using the term “original sin”.

Chapter Three, “Some Dreadful Things No Doubt”, begins with the minimalist story of Adam and Eve, which scarcely warrants the scaffolding Paul and Augustine constructed around it, or the often-tortured reflections on the story after them. For example, there’s the fourth book of Paradise Lost (1667), where Milton sets himself the impossible task of representing how a pre-lapsarian Adam might envision a condition of sin and death. In Perelandra (1943), C.S. Lewis sets himself the same task, fully aware of the difficulties Milton created for himself. In Fallen (2005), David Maine has Eve reflecting on her role in the drama. Was it really her fault? Many men have said so, and many preachers have denounced her, but this argument is a trap. Amelia Lanyer, Shakespeare’s contemporary, offers a proper response to them in her poem Salve Deus Rex Iudaorum (1611), in which the wife of Pontius Pilate provides a brilliant counter-argument to the familiar version of the story: Eve thought she was doing Adam a favour.

Chapter Four, “The Feast of All Souls”, begins in 1934, during the Night of the Long Knives in Germany, and the failed putsch in Austria, where in both cases the Nazis refused their victims’ pleas for the last rites. According to Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy, this marked the turning point when “the Christian democracy of the dead and the dying was no longer real”. That democracy was more real in the tenth century when Odilo, fifth abbot of Cluny, heard the groaning and wailing of tormented souls condemned to a dark place. The demons in charge of them complained that intercessory prayer lessened their torment, which explains how the cult of the saints emerged: in a world organised around sin and justice, the patronage of the saints provided a much-needed language of amnesty. In Cluny, a place where intercessory prayer was everything, Odilo lobbied for a Feast of All Souls to complement the Feast of All Saints, both of which frame the iconography of judgment and mercy powerful when the Anglo-Sphere believed in the Four Last Things: death, judgment, heaven and hell.

Chapter Five, “A Few Words About the Devil”, begins with an exegesis of Hellboy (2004), a film which suggests origin isn’t destiny. This theme was explored by Martin of Tours, who reminds Satan that even the Prince of Darkness can be saved. The debate has raged for centuries. In Milton’s Paradise Lost, God says he’ll be merciful to Adam and Eve and their descendants but not to Satan and his rebel angels. Defoe’s Political History of the Devil (1726) asks the question: “How came seeds of crime to rise in the Angelic Nature?” For Defoe, the question hangs in the air. Milton dismisses it because, while the story of original sin is human, the story of the rebel angels is other-than-human. For Tolkien, the other-than-human explains the dark power of the ring which weighs so heavily upon Frodo. Finally, Jacobs believes R.D. Laing’s understanding of psychosis tells us something of what the struggle between human and other-than-human is really like; a position not so far from the Augustinian and Pauline understanding of psychomachia: a soul struggle.

Chapter Six, “The Wicked, but Not Very”, begins in 1635 in Amsterdam, where a controversy over the authority of the Kabbalah fractured the Jewish community. The dispute began not with the Kabbalah itself but with a statement in the Talmud: “All Israelites shall have a share in the world to come” (that is, in what Christians would call heaven). Some believed this to be true; others argued only the righteous would be saved; and some of these argued the unrighteous would be eternally damned (a view the others felt too reminiscent of the Calvinists among whom they lived). The debate over the universality of sin in Jewish belief is still lively, as the Christian understanding of the fall originates in Jewish scripture. Samuel Cohon, an authority on Judaism and original sin, argues that some Palestinian rabbis of Paul’s time believed in an inherited propensity to sin, which came into the world through one man.

Chapter Seven, “More Hateful than Vipers”, retraces the debate between Pelagian celebrants of human potential (and their successors) and Augustinian denouncers of our corruption (and their successors). The two parties haven’t always had equal success throughout history. In the Anglo-Sphere at least, the Reformers fought their humanist opponents to a draw but as the Latitudinarians grew stronger the numbers of Dissenters declined. Then along came the Great Awakening; a revival that transformed Anglo-American Christianity and initiated the evangelical movement that still flourishes today. There’s a detailed analysis of the ideas of Jean-Jacques Rousseau who, near the end of his life, admitted his novel Émile “is simply a treatise on the natural goodness of man, intended to show how
vice and error are foreign to his constitution, invade it from outside, and imperceptibly alter it”.

Chapter Eight, “New Worlds”, begins by noting that, although the “noble savage” is welded to Rousseau, he didn’t originate the phrase, or the idea that certain human beings live, and have always lived, in a state of primitive innocence, in harmony with nature, unmarked by the taint of sin. The phrase may have first appeared in Dryden’s play The Conquest of Granada (1672), although the idea had already assumed a permanent place in Western rhetoric a hundred years earlier in Montaigne’s essay “On Cannibals” (1580), and Thomas More satirised the idea of a utopia decades before Montaigne. The chapter provides many examples of a long tradition, dating back to the Romans, of comparing lapsed urban complexity with pre-lapsed rural simplicity. Interspersed with this are examples of another often-tortured story; how the debate over original sin was projected onto the New World in positive and negative ways: by Jonathan Edwards while living with Indians in western Massachusetts; by the Jesuits in both North and South America; by Coleridge in his Pantisocracy; by Robert Owen in New Harmony, Indiana.

Chapter Nine, “The Confraternity of the Human Type”, reminds us that African slaves arrived in the American colonies, in the early seventeenth century, within the first generation of European settlers; a dark fact which created many tensions in American society over the following 350 years. While many of the first Europeans in America believed in original sin as fiercely as anyone, their project of “starting over” implicitly called the doctrine into question.

While many of the first Europeans in America believed in original sin as fiercely as anyone, their project of “starting over” implicitly called the doctrine into question.

The idea of genetic inheritance also features in the work of Mendel’s contemporary Charles Darwin, who issued his successors a caution: “The laws governing inheritance are for the most part unknown.” The subject of genetics and evolution has a dark side, which we see in the advocacy and work of social engineers of many kinds. Then there are those psychological experiments which reveal how dark the side really is: including Zimbardo’s Stanford Prison Experiment and Stanley Milgram’s Yale Obedience Experiments. This dark side has been eloquently demonstrated in the work of Steven Pinker in The Blank Slate (2002), which has received a curiously hostile reception from strange bedfellows in antithetical quarters. Of course, Christians are weighing into the debate and they don’t hold a common view; for example, there’s Original Selfishness: Original Sin and Evil in the Light of Evolution (2006), a book in which two Catholics reflect on each other’s opposing opinion: Daryl Domning, a palaeontologist, doesn’t believe in the cultural transmission of sin but argues that sin...
is “rooted in the mechanics of the evolutionary process itself”; Monika Hellwig, a theologian, is having none of this tosh, since she represents a school of modern theology that finds Paul and Augustine embarrassing at best.

In conclusion, as far as Jacobs can tell, we must hold five distinct beliefs in order to affirm the Augustinian anthropology. We must believe that: everyone behaves in ways we usually describe as selfish, cruel, arrogant, and so on; we are hard-wired to behave in these ways and don’t do so simply because of the bad examples of others; such behaviour is properly called wrong or sinful, whether it’s evolutionarily adaptive or not; it wasn’t originally in our nature to behave in such a way but we have fallen from a primal innocence; only supernatural intervention, in the form of what Christians call grace, is sufficient to drag us up out of this pit we’ve dug for ourselves. Once the model is laid out in this way, with these five interlocking and necessary propositions, it’s surprising anyone has ever affirmed it. Yet millions have and millions more will. Perhaps that’s because the five beliefs within the model are well warranted by careful observation of human beings.

Gary Anderson begins Sin: A History by noting that the history of sin mirrors our culture’s broader history. His book has two aims. First, trace the origin of the sin-as-debt metaphor back to those places in the latest (or most recent) stratum of the Old Testament where it initially appears, account for how the sin-as-debt metaphor replaced the sin-as-burden metaphor, and describe how that replaced metaphor worked its way into early Jewish and Christian thought. Second, tell the story of how the long-revered practice of almsgiving had attained a higher spiritual prestige by the New Testament period among Jews and Christians alike. He believes the sin-as-debt metaphor and the higher spiritual prestige of almsgiving emerged simultaneously and developed an ongoing back-and-forth relationship; however, the subtle dialectic that exists between these two concepts has escaped previous interpreters.

Part One, “Introducing the problem”, highlights the problem of defining sin or escaping from sin however we define it. Sin isn’t just a thing, it’s a particular kind of thing, so the metaphors we use to describe it matter. In The Symbolism of Evil (1960), Paul Ricoeur suggests we don’t have direct or unmediated access to the meaning of ideas such as sin, fault, error, or their rectification. We only have metaphors. Therefore, to understand what sin is, we should begin with the metaphors used by biblical writers. Once we grasp the context of these metaphors, we can better understand how they are deployed. Why should we do this? Because in English sin is tethered to forgive but forgiveness doesn’t access all the connotations the biblical metaphors possess. Also, if we consider the metaphors used by early Jewish and Christian thinkers, and how they used those metaphors, we can bypass most of the theological controversies that raged within the Anglophone over the centuries.

The predominant biblical metaphor in the Hebrew Bible, by a ratio of six to one, is nasa awon, “to bear the weight of sin”. Most laypersons and scholars are surprised to hear this, as nearly every translation uses the more colourless “to forgive a sin” instead. One explanation for the non-literal translation is that nasa awon can have a double meaning depending on the context: an act of wrongdoing (sin) or its result (punishment). Baruch Schwartz argues that everything depends on how the verb nasa functions in conventional discourse. To illustrate why this philosophy is important, Anderson gives examples from Isaiah, Ezekiel, and the scapegoat in Leviticus. He also gives examples of how almsgiving in the First Temple Period was given a higher spiritual prestige in the Second Temple Period with the arrival of a new way of correlating sin (as debt) and virtue (as credit).

The Hebrew language changed dramatically between the First and Second Temple periods. One reason was the emerging importance of Aramaic, which the Persians adopted as a lingua franca in their growing empire. Many Jews of Jesus’s period spoke Hebrew and Aramaic. In Aramaic the standard term for sin is the debt one owes a lender (boba), which also has a double meaning: what you owe and what’s owed to you. In Aramaic translations of the biblical texts (targums) the phrase nasa awon, in almost every instance where it means “to bear the weight of a sin”, is translated as “to assume a debt” (gabbel bobo); conversely, wherever nasa awon means “to bear away a sin” we find “to remit a debt” (shag bobo), which denotes an individual who graciously refrains from collecting on an obligation or payment due to him. It’s helpful here to consider what the Mishnah has to say; for example, how Pesiqta Rabbati interprets Psalm 32:1: “Happy is the one whose wrongdoing is borne away, whose sin is covered over.” The Rabbis assumed the background of this psalm is the Day of Atonement; as God weights the sins of Israel he finds its debits and credits evenly balanced. So to have one’s sins borne away no longer refers to the removal of a weight from one’s back but to the removal of a bond of indebtedness from one’s balance sheet.

Jesus frequently told stories about debtors and creditors as a way of illustrating the dynamics of sin and forgiveness. This isn’t surprising, as he spoke a similar Hebrew as the Rabbis. There’s a problem here, though, as the New Testament doesn’t come to
us in the Hebrew of Jesus or the Rabbis; it comes to us in koiné Greek, the lingua franca of the Roman empire. Consider the language of the Lord’s Prayer in this Greek. The more Jewish setting of Matthew has “remit us our debts as we remit those who hold debts against us” but a native Greek speaker would have found it unusual associating the forgiveness of sins with an amnesty on debt. The more gentile setting of Luke has “forgive our sins for we also forgive everyone who is indebted to us” but the Greek words for remit and debt don’t connote forgive and sin. Therefore, both versions of the Lord’s Prayer only make sense if we appreciate their underlying Semitic idiom. Anderson then goes on to the Dead Sea Scrolls, where he finds linguistic agreement between Hebrew and Aramaic, even though the covenants at Qumran held a different view of the biblical world.

Part Two, “Making Payment on One’s Debt”, begins by noting how the metaphor of Israel making “satisfaction” (rasah) for its sins is deeply significant in the history of Christian thought, especially in relation to penance and the atonement; however, Protestants traditionally find the association between penance and the atonement problematic, arguing it’s a Latin (read Catholic) construal of the human condition which they trace back to Tertullian. Their reservations revolve around anything that makes the atonement appear more a human work than a gift of divine mercy and justifies the medieval practice of codifying punishments to fit specific sins or administering penance from the confessional. However, “satisfaction” isn’t uniquely Latin (or Catholic) and doesn’t begin with Tertullian. It’s already present in Second Isaiah, which acknowledges human sin has a cost but the cost isn’t infinite. The punishment God permits Israel to suffer for its sins eventually comes to a close: “Her debt has been satisfied; she has received double for all her sins.”

The root rasah also appears in Leviticus, which assumes that not only must Israel repay her debt as a nation; the land must also repay its debt. To make sense of this new concept, which Anderson calls terracentric rather than anthropocentric, he explores the complex relationship between Leviticus 25 and 26. Leviticus 25 describes the law of the Sabbatical year, the law of the Jubilee year and the principles on which it rests, laws regarding real estate transactions between Jubilees, and laws on how relatives and neighbours are to be treated whether they are Jews or non-Jews. It acknowledges that, because God has a prior claim to Israel, all other claims are temporary and provisional. Leviticus 26, which has a particular resonance for us given the current crisis in the Middle East, contains God’s warning of what will happen if Israel proves unfaithful. God won’t let the infidelity of his chosen people pass unnoticed. Israel will be destroyed. The Israelites will be scattered among the nations.

To get the best perspective on the sin-as-debt metaphor, we should look at the two living languages of first-century Palestine; the Hebrew of the Mishnah and the Palestinian and Babylonian dialects of Aramaic. This is the language of Jesus and the Rabbis, where there’s an almost complete overlap between the vocabulary for commerce and that of sin and forgiveness. This vocabulary has been subject to heated polemics, particularly from New Testament scholars with a Protestant conception of the Jewish law, who’ve tended to draw an unflattering picture of Rabbinic Judaism, which they feel gives little room for the merciful side of the Godhead to emerge. All that changed when E.P. Sanders rocked the world of New Testament studies with his acclaimed study Paul and Palestinian Judaism (1977). Sanders argued that Jewish thinking about the forgiveness of sins, while determined by rules of financial propriety, is much more complex and subtle than previously believed.

To understand that complexity and subtlety, Anderson gives several examples; from Tobit, where the term indebtedness (chirographon) first appears in the Greek Bible; from the Testament of Job, an apocryphal text from the first or second century BC, which provides another perspective on how bonds were drawn up and loans were governed; from Luke 7:36-50, where the story of a sinful woman sounds less contrived when its Semitic idiom is understood; from Colossians 2:14, a central text in early Christianity, where Paul tells us Christ “cancelled the debt [charize] which stood against us with its legal demands; this he set aside, nailing it to the cross”; from the Syriac tradition; and from Irenaeus, Augustine, and the Vulgate.

Part Three, “Balancing Debts with Virtue”, begins by noting how, in Rabbinic Hebrew, there’s a logical and lexical opposition between debt (bob) and credit (zekut), and how in Aramaic hab means “to lose” and zaka means “to win”. The primary context in which winning or losing occur is on the battlefield or in the courtroom (although in the courtroom losing implies guilt and winning implies innocence). The Rabbis were fond of telling stories in which a person’s credits were weighed against their debts, as though the heavenly courts were outfitted with a set
of scales, but they knew God balances the scales in his own way. The many parallels between Judaism and Christianity regarding the treasury of merits are patent; the idea of conceiving virtuous activity as a form of merit has an ancient pedigree. In the Old Testament the book of Daniel contains the first fruits of an idea, of redemption through almsgiving, which comes into full harvest in latter Rabbinic and Patristic thought.

Traditionally the Protestant tradition finds this idea problematic. If the act of giving is simply a financial transaction between debtor and creditor, we can buy our way out of our sinful state and save ourselves by good works. The idea is more nuanced than that, though, and the Jewish and Christian traditions which appeal to the idea deserve closer consideration. Ephrem is a valuable witness on this subject; he argues that, while one of the purposes of the incarnation is to void the bond of indebtedness which stands against us (Colossians 2:14), God’s intention isn’t only to void the bond—what purpose would there be in that; as soon as the bond was voided we’d start ringing up more debts—but to write a new kind of bond to repair our desperate state in which Christ becomes obligated to us through the new bond. Ephrem helps us to read Daniel in a new light; almsgiving need not be construed as a purely human work, since God has gamed the system in a way that allows our small donations to count against our immeasurable debts. One of the principal characteristics of the treasury of heaven is its outstanding rate of return.

In ancient Judaism and Christianity, almsgiving wasn’t conceived as an act of self-redemption. As there’s a tipping point where you go from giving to needing alms, the Rabbis took a prudential view; you initially give one-fifth of your principal and after that one-fifth of what the remaining principal earns. Also, there are many examples where almsgiving is linked with sacrifice: giving alms to the poor is giving alms to God (Proverbs 19:17); God doesn’t need our alms but he uses both the altar and the waiting hand of the poor as a means of approaching him (Irenaeus); we’ll be judged on the basis of our generosity to Christ who is present in the poor (Matthew 25); the story of Jesus and the rich young man (Mark 10, Matthew 19, Luke 18). As always, the Rabbis help us to better understand the principles involved: the various biblical laws relating to donations to the poor (tractate Peah of the Mishnah); prudential concerns over almsgiving in a range of contexts (the Jerusalem Talmud); almsgiving is the commandment, the Aramaic term for commandment (miswah) often simply means almsgiving, bar miweta doesn’t mean “son of the commandment” but “a generous person”. Finally, in both English and German the term “loan-giver” literally means “a believer” (from the roots credere and glauben).

Anderson ends his history of sin by revisiting Anselm of Canterbury, famous for his explanation of why the incarnation was necessary. No Christian thinker brings debt and the atonement together in such an integrated fashion; no Christian thinker has been more roundly condemned for doing so. The problem here is many interpreters of Anselm don’t see anything particularly biblical about his understanding of human sin; they locate it in his medieval feudal culture; they don’t trace it further back than Tertullian and Cyprian. Anderson finds this unfortunate, since Anselm’s understanding is deeply biblical—as well as Rabbinic—especially as far as the sin-as-debt metaphor is concerned, and he carefully explains how this is so.

Of course, conceiving the atoning work of Christ as an act of remitting debt doesn’t completely solve the problem, and neither is it sufficient to simply say the sin-as-debt metaphor is biblical. We need to ask how the metaphor is used. As Robert Jenson notes, neither the New Testament nor the Christian tradition has seen fit to articulate in a univocal manner how Christ redeems us from our sins. The creeds make clear Christ died for humanity but say nothing about how his death atones. It remains the burden of theology to take up this task and assemble the biblical data into a meaningful whole.

These two books remind us how robust Western religious scholarship is, and how far it has advanced in denominational self-understanding and inter-denominational understanding. Clearly both Protestants and Catholics still have much to offer each other and the secular world. The popular perceptions that Protestants read the Bible (and understand it) while Catholics don’t read the Bible (and don’t understand it) are hard to shift; however, there are plenty of examples were modern Catholic biblical scholarship has outshone its modern Protestant counterpart.

It’s also pleasing to see both Christian traditions acknowledging the paradigmatic importance of Judaism, and how much Christians can learn from Jews. Indeed, at least one Christian seminary in the United States has an orthodox Jewish professor—and a woman at that—in charge of teaching its seminarians the New Testament, which Amy-Jill Levine is immensely qualified to do. I wonder what Western religion would come to look like if more Christian seminaries did the same thing. There’s no reason why they shouldn’t.

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