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September 27, 2013: What Is the Meaning of the Fall/Original Sin?

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Title: What Is the Meaning of the Fall/Original Sin?

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9/27/2013—I believe it is safe to say that what secularism needs is an ontology. By that I mean as full an account as we can manage of the nature of reality including ourselves. What is real and what is not? What is most fully real and what is only a pale imitation of the real? This ontology of secularism might become a theology of secularism depending on how god-like our account of reality turns out to be.

Theology, I have been told, is talk about God. It may turn out that talk about reality is talk about God. One way in to understanding reality is the account of the Fall in Genesis. I doubt that the Fall was ever understood as one literal event of disobedience by our ancestors that curses us in all subsequent generations. Jewish and Christian thinkers have always been more thoughtful than that. I believe the story has always been understood as a myth—that is, as a story told by a culture that expresses the deepest truths about reality, including us. The question is, what does the story in Genesis express? According to liberal theologians and secularists, dumb humanity grows up. Adam and Eve were in a relationship of tutelage and were like children. The Fall was a necessary step in our development. A quite different understanding of the Fall begins at a similar point. The story in Genesis adequately reflects evolutionary theory. At one point our ancestors were in a relationship to reality similar, indeed identical, to the relationship that all other living things have to reality: we simply lived. Over time, the consciousness of animals in our line—primates—began to develop in the direction of a richer self-consciousness. This development included attributes of generosity and compassion but also attributes of cunning and cheating. By the time we get to the fully human we have a self-consciousness that is quite twisted. And that is the truth that is represented by the Genesis story. Instead of claiming proudly that man grows up, we should say regretfully that man becomes man as we are today. Now I know we have our good points. But the real dividing line between liberal theology and Karl Barth and between realism about humanity and a kind of goofy optimism is this: if we take a good look at ourselves, we see a really impressive falling short in every way of the kind of person that we could be. And therefore we see a really impressive falling short in every way of the kind of society that we could build. I have to use myself as an example but I don't want to embarrass myself out here in the public. But let's just say that we are full of absurd envy and resentfulness. We hold onto grudges. We do not put others first. Or, if we do we resent them for it. We are a mess. I would have more respect for atheism if atheists could acknowledge all this and not pretend that we are "good without God." We are not good. And that's not a religious insight. That's just being honest. That is the story of the Fall.