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Original Sin, or Other Opposition to Optimism? How Harkness Differs from Wesley in the Face of Human Depravity

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Abstract: Responding to the too-optimistic theology of fellow Arminian, John Taylor, John Wesley wrote his lengthy treatise on the doctrine of original sin. In an optimistic effort to make fellow personalist theologians' works accessible, Methodist theologian Georgia Harkness tersely disdained the same doctrine in her first major book. She soon found her liberal theology "chastened" by interactions with neo-orthodox opponents and experiences of depravity—in world events and gender-based discrimination reflecting systemic sin. This article examines her later works for evidence of whether Harkness modified her attitude toward original sin and innovations she made to accommodate both her disdain for the doctrine and the realities of depravity.

Keywords: Wesley; Harkness; Arminianism; original sin; Methodism; liberal theology



Citation: Cherry, Natalya A. 2022. Original Sin, or Other Opposition to Optimism? How Harkness Differs from Wesley in the Face of Human Depravity. *Religions* 13: 1209. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13121209>

Academic Editor: Sarah Heaner Lancaster

Received: 15 July 2022

Accepted: 7 December 2022

Published: 12 December 2022

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1. Background: What Wesley Originally Said on Original Sin

John Wesley, the 18th century British priest and founder of Methodism, and Georgia Harkness, the 20th century American Methodist theologian and the first woman appointed to teach theology in an American seminary, each wrote on the doctrine of original sin for quite different purposes. Harkness, whose work is the primary focus of this article, wrote to interpret contemporary theology as a corrective to what she perceived to be misguided development of the doctrine throughout the history of the Christian tradition. Though a Methodist, she did not directly engage the work of Wesley, who wrote to counter, at least in part, a specific contemporary theologian's rejection of the doctrine, based on Wesley's interpretation of it in light of the history of the Christian tradition.

That theologian whom Wesley took to task was John Taylor, an English Dissenter who was a Presbyterian preacher and schoolmaster. Wesley's first known mention of him appears in an entry in his *Journal* for Sunday, 28 August 1748, in which he wrote, "We came to Shakerley . . . before five in the evening. Abundance of people were gathered before six, many of whom were disciples of Dr. Taylor, laughing at original sin, and consequently at the whole frame of scriptural Christianity" (Wesley 1991, pp. 245–46). From this statement alone, it is evident that Wesley wished to retain some doctrine of original sin and found it essential to the faith. In this entry, however, it is not yet clear precisely what aspects of Taylor's treatment Wesley found objectionable, but the severity of his word choice would lead one to believe all of it, as he continued, "O what a providence is it which has brought us here also, among these silver-tongued antichrists! Surely a few, at least, will recover out of the snare, and know Jesus Christ as their wisdom and righteousness!" (Wesley 1991, p. 46).

What was it that seemed so dangerous to Wesley in what Taylor had written eight years earlier in his *Scripture-Doctrine of Original Sin Proposed to Free and Candid Examination?* Both Wesley and Taylor were Arminian (vs. Calvinist) thinkers, after all. A brief overview here, aided in part by the excellent introductory material provided by editor Randy Maddox in the authoritative edition of Wesley's *The Doctrine of Original Sin*, is necessary to understand the content to which Wesley objected and—despite the polemical tone of the journal entry—that he also agreed with Taylor in part (Maddox 2012).

Of the three main positions toward the Enlightenment that Dissenters from the Church of England and the Monarchy in the 18th century took, Taylor's was among the most extreme in terms of an embrace of rationalism (Maddox 2012, pp. 118–20). Whereas some resisted most Enlightenment tendencies, and the majority practiced an “enlightened Dissent” that sought a kind of *via media*, in which inspiration could match but not exceed reason, the minority to which Taylor belonged practiced “rational Dissent” that privileged reason for interpreting scripture and evaluating Christian beliefs (Maddox 2012, p. 120). Taylor rejected historic creeds and the Westminster Confession that his Scottish Presbyterian colleagues still embraced but retained Scripture, merely requiring God-given reason be applied to the capital-T Truths of God untainted by the “schemes or opinions of men,” hence the hyphenated “Scripture-Doctrine” of the title (Taylor 1750, p. vii). This approach seems to neglect—whether deliberately or otherwise—consideration of any possible human interventions and opinions that may have been involved in the development of both the scriptural canon and the process of rational reflection thereon.

Wesley's criticism would include focus on Taylor's treatment of the Godhead, responding to Taylor's description of Christ's worthiness as a result of obedience in a sardonic tone,

With what extreme wariness is this whole paragraph worded! You do not care to say directly, “Jesus is either a little God or he is no God at all”. So you say it indirectly, in an heap of smooth, labored, decent circumlocutionsTo ‘him that sitteth on the throne and to the Lamb.’—Does that mean, to the great God and the little God?”

(Wesley 2012a, p. 238)

However, it is not true that Taylor completely rejected the doctrine of the Trinity, so much as that he wanted adherence to Scriptural language alone for descriptions of God's nature, insisting, “Nothing ought to pass for divine revelation which is inconsistent with any of the known perfections of the divine nature” (Taylor 1750, p. 3). The more serious source of charges Wesley would level against Taylor involved his soteriology, in that it allowed for the assumption that “humans have an ability for faith and good works *apart from restoring grace*” (Maddox 2012, p. 126, emphasis original). This soteriology was not unrelated to Taylor's parameters of divine description, which assumed that the “known perfections” of God were self-evident to all, rather than acknowledging the reality that their priority and implications were certainly up for debate. The primary attribute of God that Taylor frequently emphasized was God's justice, accompanied by or interchangeable with God's goodness (Taylor 1750, pp. 65, 96, 103, 132–33, 185, 205, 250, etc.). The implications he proceeded to draw were, first, that reason is the image of God in humanity, second, that authentic guilt must be personal, belonging only to the individual who performs a sinful act or deed (undermining the notion of inherited depravity from Adam and Eve), and third, that Christ must bring salvation to humanity by way of “moral means” (Taylor 1750, pp. 7, 13, 16).

Taylor's overall argument proceeded in three parts, the first two addressing major biblical passages and the Larger Catechism of the Westminster Assembly, before the third considered seven possible objections and three questions related to his position (Maddox 2012, pp. 127–30). He primarily rejected the notion of depravity after the Fall as *total* (within a general rejection of inherited depravity), declaring humans different in body from how Adam was created but same in moral ability and accountability (Taylor 1750, p. 163). Without seeming to address numerous problematic aspects of linking human habits and God's goodness, he held that Christ came for our sins, not Adam's, to “give us the real character of the children of God” with the Holy Spirit present to “assist our sincere endeavours after wisdom, and the habits of virtue” (Taylor 1750, pp. 246, 255). Taylor reasoned that God already had graced humans at creation with the powers necessary to make moral choices. There was therefore no need of added grace in the present to restore humans in any way (Taylor 1750, pp. 235–36).

It was to this particular point in the third part of Taylor's treatise that Wesley objected so strongly. Yet it took him eight years after the journal entry quoted above to decide to respond to Taylor systematically, acknowledging others' efforts at response in his proposal for his own publication but noting that "none of these have followed him step by step, from the beginning of his book to the end (so that) it is still confidently affirmed, 'That he is unanswered, and therefore unanswerable'" (Wesley 2015, p. 78). Prior to Wesley, respondents all had been Taylor's fellow Dissenters, such that Wesley was conscious of his status as the first Anglican/Arminian to respond (Wesley 2015, p. 78). Wesley entrusted the response—in the form of a five-part manuscript—to his brother Charles to deliver to Bristol for printing in 1757 and later sent along a sixth part as an addendum (Maddox 2012, p. 138).

Wesley's main objection was not to Taylor's first point (regarding inherited guilt/damnation), nor his second (that original immortality intended for Adam and Eve at creation ended with their sin). Rather, Wesley addressed the third aspect of Taylor's treatment of the original sin doctrine, insisting on the experience of spiritual death by Adam and Eve as damaging (though not obliterating) their human faculties in a way that they passed on to their progeny. Wesley insisted that this inherited depravity, while not total, still requires assistance of restoring grace to recognize sin and to desire, follow, or live according to the precepts of God, correcting Taylor's notion that only bodily death resulted from the fall, "He felt in himself that *spiritual death* which is the prelude of *death everlasting*" (Wesley 2012a, pp. 219–20). Wesley saw Taylor as having been "naively optimistic," eviscerating the good news of not just forgiveness but also healing from sin (Maddox 2012, p. 141). The absurdity of discarding the need for the soul's healing from sin even prompted Wesley to call upon Plato in the Preface to his treatise, noting that "... the Christian Revelation speaks of nothing else but the great Physician of our souls. Nor can Christian philosophy, whatever the thought of the pagan, be more properly defined than in Plato's words: it is *therapeia psyches*—the only true 'method of healing a distempered soul', But what need of this if we are in perfect health?" (Wesley 2012a, p. 158).

Another major distinction between Taylor and Wesley was Wesley's embrace, throughout his preaching and writing, of prevenient or "preventing" grace (rather than deist grace lingering from creation), a constantly offered grace here and now, about which Wesley asked pointedly, "His grace does *accompany* and *follow* our desires; but does it not also *prevent*, go before them?" (Wesley 2012a, p. 301). Wesley responded to Taylor's suggestion that this form of grace is a "redundancy of grace" by suggesting that Taylor had an inadequate understanding of "Communion with God", revealing the strongly relational understanding of Christian faith animating Wesley's theology (Wesley 2012a, p. 267).

Taylor would protest in his 1767 response to Wesley's treatise that the latter misrepresented his description of the Holy Spirit's role in salvation, by which he cautiously had sought to balance the "[Calvinist] Divines asserting that we are born again by some uncertain, arbitrary, and irresistible workings of the Spirit of God" (Taylor 1750, p. 245). It is little surprise, then, that the Spirit figures prominently in a final major distinction between Taylor's and Wesley's Arminianism, the source of each one's moral psychology (Maddox 2012, pp. 144–45). Taylor held that reason must reassert its role over passions when they are corrupted, by reference to Scripture, stating, "Now, it is most evident, without an habitual subjection of the will to Reason and Truth ... none can be fit to be members of this Society or Kingdom ... Unless every appetite be brought into subjection to Reason and Truth", elsewhere promising "the Spirit of God for our direction and assistance" (Taylor 1750, pp. 248, 233). Wesley found this talk of the Spirit's "assistance" to be an unnecessary afterthought to a dangerously vaunted human reason (Wesley 2012a, p. 290). He would go on to defend the superiority, on his view, of regeneration by the Spirit's power,

Nay but according to the whole tenor of Scripture the being "born again" does really signify the being inwardly changed by the almighty operation of the Spirit of God—changed from sin to holiness, renewed in the image of him that created us ... because without this change all our endeavours after holiness are

ineffectual. God hath indeed “endowed us with *understanding*, and given us abundant means”. But our understanding is as insufficient for that end as are the outward means if not attended with inward power.

(Wesley 2012a, p. 298)

Wesley did not even venture to reason out how exactly the taint of original sin was transmitted, being ill at ease with the federal theology (focusing on Adam as “head” of humanity) that Taylor rejected. Wesley would eventually move away from it further in later years. In fact, he did not seem to feel a need to establish the mechanics or adopt a specific model of inherited depravity, writing in 1753, “The fact [that depravity is inherited] I know, both from Scripture and by experience. I know it is transmitted, but how it is transmitted I neither know nor desire to know” (Wesley 1987, p. 519). While Wesley would go on to discover a model of transmission published a hundred years earlier that he more fully embraced, he did not amend his treatise to add it.¹

Hundreds of years later, the first woman to teach theology in an American seminary and champion of human rights, Harkness, would reject transmission altogether, even after modifying her initial opposition to the doctrine of original sin generally. Initially, Harkness might appear to the reader to have had more in common with Taylor than with the founder of her own tradition, Wesley, though there is no evidence that Harkness ever engaged either’s work on the doctrine of original sin. In her later works, she defined God’s providence in terms of God’s goodness in ways that Taylor perhaps would have approved. Nevertheless, her rejection of the traditional doctrine of original sin, even when she had modified the rejection and innovated with the doctrine, incorporated experience in ways appropriate to Wesley.

2. Initial Rejection of Doctrine by Harkness with Eventual Minor Modifications

Ten years after the 1929 publication of her first major book, *Conflicts in Religious Thought*, Harkness declared that there was nothing she would wish to retract but much she would like to add.² Then, in the preface to her 1949 revision to *Conflicts*, Harkness indicated that she made “nearly two hundred detailed alterations” and that “Most of them are substitutions for deleted matter and the paging remains unchanged” (Harkness 1949, p. xvii). Perhaps as a result of her expressed reluctance to retract and the unchanged pagination, many people to this day quote Harkness as having said (in 1929, p. 221) “The doctrine of ‘original sin’ is fast disappearing—and the sooner it disappears, the better for theology and human sympathy” without acknowledging that she did change this sentence in the 1949 edition. Despite her insistence in the revised preface that “At no fundamental point is its [the book’s] position altered” (Harkness 1949, p. xviii), the change to that off-quoted sentence is not insignificant: “The doctrine of ‘original sin’ is *useful only to suggest our perpetual tendencies to evil, but not to affirm inherited guilt*” (Harkness 1949, p. 221, emphasis added).

A seemingly minor change on a previous page of the same chapter also grabs the eye. About the old time religion, of emotional evangelistic fervor, she now said it “probably did more for the kingdom of God and the betterment of society than the apathetic coldness that seems to have settled over contemporary religion” (Harkness 1949, p. 218), the original final phrase having been “modern religious liberalism” (Harkness 1929, p. 218). It may be that by 1949, she had grown tired of defending liberal theology, or it may be that she had observed “apathetic coldness” infecting more than just the liberal theological camp.³

Harkness relied heavily on the notion of “human welfare” as the “highest development of the personality of every individual,” as a personalist could be expected to do in identifying the goal and measure of goodness (Harkness 1949, p. 225). Harkness suggested that multiple understandings of sin were merely different paths to the same conclusion, that sin is when one “thwarts this development in” self or others or fails to strive for the goal to the fullest extent (Harkness 1949, p. 226). Whether understanding sin with the Greeks as “missing the mark”, with unnamed others as “selfishness”, “to transgress the

law of God", or to fail to embrace the "moral task to grow 'to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ'" (drawing from Ephesians 4:13), ultimately, she claimed, "To sin is willfully to choose to be un-godlike" (Harkness 1949, pp. 226–27).

Harkness left entirely unchanged, however, her expression of a sense that modern psychology and modern theology are allowing for a more faithful interpretation of scripture than the inherited guilt of original sin had traditionally suggested, in consideration of the question "Does the devil make us sin?" (Harkness 1929, 1949, p. 227). Here she indicated that these twin fields "with a truer reading of the teachings of Jesus, have gone far toward banishing the doctrine of original sin and its corollary of inherited guilt. But there is still a rather widespread belief that when a person sins, it is the devil that tempts" that person (Harkness 1929, 1949, p. 227). She proceeded to consider the existence and personhood of the devil, with reference to the personhood of God. It is clear that her chief concern was to urge readers away from the "tendency to shift responsibility to the shoulders of another", which, she says "is as old as time" (Harkness 1929, 1949, p. 228). Neither Adam and Eve ("in the past" the recipients of blame), nor Society ("now" the alleged culprit of sin), nor even Satan, but "we ourselves are primarily responsible for our sins" (Harkness 1929, 1949, p. 228). Later, in concluding the whole section on the devil, whom she has deemed unnecessary in a way that human experience does not deem God to be, she declares, "When we have learned to put the responsibility for our own sin squarely on our own shoulders, there will be less sin. When we have learned to reconstruct society by removing the causes that beget temptation, we shall have a better social order" (Harkness 1929, 1949, p. 232). Clearly Harkness had rejected original sin as source of guilt from the beginning, and nothing has changed in 20 years to convince her otherwise. Other helpful insights into the "modern mind" with which she arrived at her treatment of the doctrine of original sin emerge as she further described the manner in which "Satan emerges into prominence in the Bible only in the post-exilic writings, after the Hebrews through their captivity in Babylon had come in contact with Persian dualism and had doubtless been influenced by the Zoroastrian belief in a devil warring against God and contending with (God) for the souls of men [*sic*]." ⁴ Even in the desert temptation of Christ, Harkness perceived not an actual devil with personal existence, but an "inner struggle" between two possible paths to choose, "the short, easy, road to popularity and political prestige, and longer, harder way of the cross and spiritual conquest" (Harkness 1929, 1949, p. 229).

This entire discussion of "Why Do Men [*sic*] Sin?" follows a tandem chapter entitled "Why do Men [*sic*] Suffer?" in which the possible outlooks she presented for viewing the world are atheism, pessimism, optimism, and meliorism. It is clearly not original sin that is the defeater for her of religious optimism, which depends "sometimes on absolutistic philosophy, sometimes on Biblical statements and traditional theology" as it "holds that everything that happens 'happens for the best'" (Harkness 1929, 1949, p. 195). Rather, optimism's propensity toward tolerance of the status quo and "happiness (purchased) by forgetting other people's troubles" is what exposes the weakness in this line of thinking. Only slightly tweaking the example thereof from poverty to "the prevailing racial and social cleavage" as something the average churchgoer might think God wills and is happy "help along in the process", she retained the proof of optimism's failures that "Only lately have we escaped from the age-long assumption that woman must suffer in childbirth for the sins of Eve, and must forever be in subjection to man because God wills it so" (Harkness 1929, 1949, p. 196).

Harkness relied heavily on relationship between God and humanity in her understanding of the relationship between the divine gift of human freedom and sin as both factor of God's self-limiting for the purpose of relating with real persons rather than marionettes and impetus to moral choice of good over evil, as she stated, "The possibility of sin is itself an incentive to goodness" (Harkness 1929, 1949, p. 242). Albeit from the perspective of a different century with benefit of psychological tools, she shared with Wesley the concern about preserving God's omnipotence with regard to grace. Just as Wesley had charged rationalist Taylor with deism in the form of a soteriology that gives humans a moral ability

to choose good apart from divine grace, so Harkness cautioned that God's self-limitation preserves God's omnipotence in ways that God's limitation "by the devil, or by physical nature, or even by a self-existent moral capacity" in humankind does not (Harkness 1929, 1949, p. 241). In that case "we should have a dualism instead of a universe, and with it the possibility that God might be defeated in the struggle", which is not a possible reality Harkness could countenance for Christians, especially as she retained respect for her male mentors such as D.C Macintosh, on whose concept of practical meanings of omnipotence within the realm of his "moral optimism" she drew here.⁵

In between the two editions, Harkness offered in 1937 a new work, *The Recovery of Ideals*, which contained a depiction of tension between original sin and original goodness and already hinted at the minor modifications that were then still to come in 1949 but that were yet to benefit from further innovation in the 1960s (Harkness 1937). Humans, Harkness suggested, were citizens of two worlds, as a result of which "Original sin and original goodness contend within . . . so likewise do finitude and infinity" (Harkness 1937, p. 32). She distinguished what she meant by "original sin" from what she considered to be the Augustinian concept, borrowed by Genesis from Babylonian myth and synthesized by Augustine with "Platonic myth . . . and transmitted into the tradition of the church to be literalized into plain, prose doctrine," about which she continued, "this myth has been the source of much bad psychology and bad theology. But there is both psychological and theological truth in it which we ought not lightly to disregard" (Harkness 1937, p. 33). She then remarked on the apparent natural tendency of even babies and children to satisfy their own selfish desires.

While the satisfaction of desire is not automatically negative, it is, she continued to say, where that desire's satisfaction becomes "a narrow and exclusive interest" that sin enters in (Harkness 1937, p. 35). This observation led her to conclude that "Exclusiveness, whether an exclusion of values essential to the wholeness of our own personalities or an exclusion of other persons from the range of interest, is the basic form of sin" (Harkness 1937, p. 35). Here she boldly stated a definition of original sin against the backdrop of all from which she had distinguished her own concept thereof, "This tendency to the exclusive enjoyment of our own ego and its appurtenances is the permanent meaning of 'original sin'" (Harkness 1937, p. 36).

The antidote, Harkness suggested, was to focus on others, which is itself the evidence of the presence of original goodness in humans (a view she would later modify further) (Harkness 1937, pp. 36–39). At this point, not yet having arrived at the modification her 1949 revision of *Conflicts* would include, let alone at her later innovations, Harkness nevertheless was rejecting Paul's and Augustine's clear-cut versions of good and evil, working on a muddled mixture of original sin and original goodness that led her to observe that "personality is being pulled by opposing impulses" (Harkness 1937, p. 39). Having been inspired to embrace pacifism by a tour of Europe in the immediate aftermath of World War I and now seeing the rise of fascism in the years leading up to World War II, it is understandable that she would be weighing "opposing impulses" so carefully.

Two years later, in the aforementioned article in which she declared no desire to change anything in *Conflicts*, Harkness both declared herself a liberal theologian "unrepentant and unashamed" and acknowledged simultaneously the ways in which encounter with thoughtful opponents (neo-orthodox, etc.) and with evil had deepened and chastened her liberalism (Harkness 1939, p. 249). Not only was she ahead of the curve naming evils on the national and global scene such as war, "race prejudice", and exclusion of women from receiving full clergy rights in her own newly reunited Methodist Church, but she personally would experience the evil of being denied the systematic theology position promised to her in favor of a field title thought more suitable to a woman, that of "applied theology" (Miles 2010, p. 17).

She would go on throughout her career to defend liberalism, insisting it took sin more seriously than many gave it credit for doing. In the 1943 article, "Divine Sovereignty and Human Freedom", her contribution to a symposium honoring personalist Albert Knudson

(turned into a festschrift edited by her mentor, Edgar Brightman), she insisted her liberalism “has never, as is sometimes charged, lost sight of the realities of sin, or of man’s [sic] need of salvation” (Harkness 1943; Miles 2010, p. 2). It is astonishing that this charge existed, considering the persistence and long perseverance with which she addressed sin and suffering in her publications, as she frequently noted the bible did on nearly every page.

3. Later Innovations Harkness Made to Identify Obstacles and Address Depravity but Maintain Disdain

More than a decade after modifying her most famous statement on original sin, Harkness fashioned a *credo* (or technically a *credimus*, as its chapter titles were framed not as “I believe” but as “We believe”) entitled *Beliefs That Count* (Harkness 1962). The first question Harkness asked in the sixth chapter, “We Believe in Salvation from Sin”, appeared as the heading of the chapter’s first section, “Do We Need Salvation?” (Harkness 1962, p. 62). She noted that there is nothing wrong with good non-Christians, after all, but also urged Christians not to settle for general good as a substitute for what she called “life in the kingdom” before asking, “What does salvation save us from?” (Harkness 1962, p. 63). Her answer was that salvation is from sin, which was “man’s [sic] most persistent enemy”, certainly (as an example of its pervasiveness, she noted that even good people are “tortured by remorse”) (Harkness 1962, p. 64). As problematic as some implications of this framing are, particularly for relations between Christians and practitioners of other religions, Harkness began to make larger innovations and bolder statements about her treatment of original sin. Speaking of “sins” of omission or commission that are all the individual’s responsibility, not Adam’s, she considered many of them to be unconscious, later noting the enormous capacity of humans for rationalizing their own behavior as acceptable at the time of committing sins (Harkness 1962, pp. 64, 86).

Increasingly conscious that she is pushing back against the weight of centuries of doctrinal interpretation, Harkness also notes that her position is more one that reclaims equally historic authority, stating:

However, there is another need to which Jesus was always ministering, and another situation in which regeneration (the historic phrase for being ‘born anew’) has been the gift of God through Christ in all the centuries. This is the need for peace of soul, for conquest of fear, for strength in weakness, for the ability to ‘be of good cheer’ even in the face of deepest trouble, and to be ‘faithful unto death’ where death is real and terrible and not to be evaded.

(Harkness 1962, p. 64)

She then passed up another opportunity to involve, affirm, or otherwise utilize the doctrine of original sin, in considering those who seem to need no experience of regeneration because they have “grown up a Christian” (Harkness 1962, p. 65). Where Harkness easily could have suggested that those born into the church still need to be born again to remove the taint of inherited depravity, she instead developed the notion of some who have inherited their Christianity as lacking “great vitality” in their exercise of Christian faith. Here, in addition to famous figures who were already religious in some way prior to dramatic conversion experiences, such as Paul and Augustine, she names two famous figures who “had been Christians during their youth in a second-hand sort of way and were servants of the church”, Martin Luther and John Wesley, whose experiences “were also significant” (Harkness 1962, p. 65). She insisted that “they, too, lacked great vitality until a personal experience gripped and transformed their lives” (Harkness 1962, p. 65). It is unfortunate that she did not elaborate on the provenance of this lack, but it does not appear that, in her thinking, its source is original sin. She did emphasize repeatedly not just the value but the necessity of a “personal decision for Christ . . . or (else) Christian experience remains marginal or inert” (Harkness 1962, p. 65). In the next section on “Justification by Faith”, she quickly returned to Luther and Wesley, noting that it was the former’s commentary on the source of this doctrine in his “Letter to the Romans” that led the latter

to his heart-warming inspiration to persist in developing the Methodist movement (she referred to it as the moment when “Methodism was born”, which is anachronistic, as the Holy Club through which the movement initially was founded had existed for some time before Wesley’s heart-warming experience) (Harkness 1962, p. 66).

In keeping with Wesley, who had declared “But that this true doctrine of justification by faith may be truly understood, observe that justification is the office of God only, and is not a thing which we render unto him, but which we receive of him by his free mercy . . . ” (Wesley 2012b, p. 35), she defined justification by faith as meaning “that our salvation is God’s gift and not our achievement . . . ” (Harkness 1962, p. 66). She continued, “To be ‘justified’ means that God no longer holds us under judgment for our past sins. Instead he lifts the burden of our sinning and gives us a new start” (Harkness 1962, p. 66). She further suggested that “Atonement means ‘at-one-ment’” and referred to the “new unity of the soul with God which one who has been alienated and estranged by his [sic] sin and self-will finds in the grace, mercy, and peace that God in Christ stands ready to impart” (Harkness 1962, pp. 68–69).

So if original sin was not the obstacle to optimism for Harkness, what was? The answer became clearest, perhaps, in her 1964 book, *Our Christian Hope* (Harkness 1964). Couched in terms of human greatness and human wretchedness, per philosopher Blaise Pascal—which Harkness held were closely intertwined, it is in *Our Christian Hope* that she finally identified not original sin, nor generally sin per se, but suffering (not all of which is the consequence of sin) as the primary obstacle to optimism (Harkness 1964, p. 28). The evidence arises within discussions about the synonymous concepts of Christian hope and progress, about the latter of which she hoped to find a middle ground between humanity’s previous “blithely optimistic” pronouncements and present pessimistic doubts (Harkness 1964, p. 57).

The view Harkness expressed appears to lie somewhere between Taylor’s vaunted view of reason as the epitome of the *imago Dei* in humans and Wesley’s concern about the way Taylor’s view all but eliminated the need for grace. Perhaps Harkness landed where she did due to the ways in which her own embrace of the free inquiry that liberal theology upheld was so often mischaracterized. Dubbing herself an “evangelical liberal” after her retirement from the Pacific School of Religion, she clarified in *Our Christian Hope* that

The kind of liberalism that has been castigated throughout the century by the fundamentalists, and since the 1930’s by the neo-orthodox, I do not recognize as a true picture of the liberalism of those who did most to mold my thought. Nor do I recognize it as the theology I have tried to teach, write, and live by. The affixing of labels is not the most useful theological occupation, but where they are used, they should be accurate.

(Harkness 1964, pp. 11–12)

In this way she wrapped reason together with relationship to the divine. In addressing the “true ground” of human greatness, she said, “To Christian faith it is this spiritual kinship with God, with the capacity for thought or reason derivative from it rather than primary . . . ” (Harkness 1964, p. 15). For all these qualifiers, Harkness was able to acknowledge the too-easy optimism of even her own school of thought within liberal theology, Boston personalism. As a personalist, she ascribed to humans as God’s “supreme creation” a worth that is not explicitly stated in the Bible as “the words so often glibly spoken a generation ago, the ‘intrinsic worth of personality’”, but that she noted was evident in its pages nevertheless (Harkness 1964, p. 19).

Her focus on this worth undergirded her explicit disapproval of the doctrine of original sin with inherited guilt as a key component. “Few if any scholars today believe literally that there was once a pair of absolutely sinless human beings on earth who through a single act of disobedience in a garden at a point in history precipitated the curse of sin on all their descendants”, she observed, even while acknowledging the “realism” of the distortion of

the divine image in humans by sinfulness, the simultaneous god-like capacities and finite sinfulness that the Genesis story represents (Harkness 1964, pp. 21–22).

That much clarified, she honed in on suffering (sin and pain and death echoing throughout the book) as obstacle to progress/optimism, without losing sight of “our Christian hope”. While hope would come to characterize her career (in the United Methodist Hymnal still in use that was published in the decade following that of her death, her award-winning hymn submitted for use by the 1954 meeting of the World Council of Churches, “Hope of the World”, still appears as hymn number 178), her work on hope here would only minimally account for the evil that hope overcomes (The Christian Century 1954, p. 755).⁶ She clarified that “What is important from the standpoint of Christian hope is not to understand why suffering comes . . . (but) to know that God is ever with us in the dark valleys of our pain and that in the presence and power of God no pain is meaningless” (Harkness 1964, p. 30). Instead, she referred readers interested in her attempts at theodicy to her earlier work, *The Providence of God* (Harkness 1960).⁷

In that volume, Harkness had built a case for human dignity—rooted in the *imago Dei* in which she notes both men and women were created—and equality, in a way that underscores her continued commitment to connecting the ability to sin not to inherited guilt resulting from the fall but to human freedom itself (Harkness 1960, p. 69). After her most extensive treatment of the doctrine of original sin appeared in the next chapter (more on that below), she identified “three major blessings granted us by a good God” to which “most of the suffering of the world can be traced”, namely “responsible choice through moral freedom, the orderliness of the physical world, and our interrelatedness in both spheres” (Harkness 1960, p. 89). Harkness acknowledged throughout her works the potential for transcending suffering and that suffering can be a school for growth, having defined the book’s title doctrine by stating, “To trust in providence is to believe that however dark or evil a situation may be, God is with us, and with the help of God, good can come out of it” (Harkness 1960, p. 46). She did not, however, let that possibility explain away the reality that “there is too much pain in the world” and observed that some suffering seems to be traceable to sins and sinful systems, while some suffering arises out of natural disasters that the legal world, ironically “invading the province of theology”, calls “acts of God” (Harkness 1960, p. 88). Thus her refusal to blame God or a Satan directly for sin and suffering nevertheless resulted in her wrestling with and examining carefully the apparent connection between these divine gifts and the evil of suffering.

The treatment of original sin upon which she built this understanding of suffering makes it clear that in the thirty years since her statement on original sin from *Conflicts in Religious Thought* (and a decade since she only mildly revised it), she was continuing to confine and redefine the doctrine’s power and influence. Harkness identified human self-centeredness as a nexus of agreement, a common element of the general understandings of sin espoused by neo-orthodox and liberal theologians (Harkness 1960, p. 83). A trio of questions that set up her treatment of original sin arose out of her affirmation that “Sin is rebellion against God, disobedience to the will of God” (Harkness 1960, p. 83). In order for her to proceed with her chapter’s purpose (establishing her “Christian doctrine of redemption”), she acknowledged a need to answer at least briefly “(1) Is every act corrupted by sin? (2) Are we the recipients of an inherited corruption, that is, of ‘original’ sin? and (3) How did sin get into the world if not by the fall of Adam?” (Harkness 1960, p. 83). The fact that everyone is at least a little self-centered “does not justify a doctrine of total depravity, for not every impulse is self-centered, and in the Christian saint whose life is God-centered and love-centered, there are amazing demonstrations of the power of God in Christ to conquer self-centeredness” (Harkness 1960, pp. 83–84). After dispatching with the first question thus, Harkness honed in on original sin:

Traditional Christian thought has affirmed an original state of innocence, corrupted by the Fall of Adam, and transferred by biological inheritance to every subsequent human being. In Roman Catholic thought, this has produced the doctrine not only of the virgin birth of Jesus but the immaculate conception of

Mary to guard our Lord from stain of sin, with much else in the sacramental system of salvation. In Protestant thought, until the rise of liberalism, a doctrine of original sin was imbedded with equal firmness, though the deductions drawn from it were different. What shall we do with it?

(Harkness 1960, p. 84)

What Harkness proceeded to “do with it” was address its alleged biblical roots, in terms both of content and of number of relevant texts. She took the meaning of “Adam” to refer to “generic man rather than a single individual” and declared the Fall narrative to be “mythology with a meaning” meant to explain human “arrogance and self-righteousness”, rather than a record of historical happenings, as at the time she could aver, “few biblical scholars now take this story literally or believe that its fullest meaning can be found by doing so” (Harkness 1960, pp. 84–85). Noting that the Fall does not receive further treatment throughout the Hebrew Bible, she lamented Paul’s use of the material, with reference to conception in sin from Psalm 51:5, 1 Corinthians 15:21–22, and Romans 5:12–21, and suggested that “Christian theology might have taken a very different course” had Paul not written Romans 5 (Harkness 1960, p. 85). Unable to wish it away, Harkness faced Paul head-on and proclaimed, “The doctrine of original sin is best understood not biologically but as a description of our ongoing, natural, and never wholly conquered self-centeredness. A baby is not born a sinner, for there is no sin until there is some measure of freedom and moral responsibility” (Harkness 1960, p. 85). Admitting egotistical tendencies that must be “educated out” of children as they mature, and rejecting baptismal regeneration, she concluded, “Sin, therefore, is ‘original’ in the sense of a persistent human tendency, and the Fall of man [*sic*] happened not once but is a perpetual falling away from the life of loving obedience which God requires of us” (Harkness 1960, p. 85). She easily released any need to hold to original innocence and associated the entrance of sin to the world with the moment humanity was given freedom and capacity to make moral decisions, not thence “biologically transmitted in the traditional sense of an inherited human corruption, yet inborn in the sense that every person has self-centered and hence sinful tendencies” (Harkness 1960, p. 86).

There remained only to consider her third question. She observed that creationism (God creating each new human soul, with parents creating the body) and traducianism (God having only created humanity at the beginning and both body and soul thenceforth emerging from parents) unnecessarily curse propagation and sexuality in an effort to exonerate God, when in reality any serious doctrine of Creation renders God “responsible for the possibility of sin” but with good purpose, as “not a curse, but a blessing, for it is the mark of our freedom and our true dignity as persons” (Harkness 1960, p. 86).

So it is that she resisted the popular notions that whatever happens, even the worst of things are “as they should be” or are the will of God, claiming that they may be occurring within God’s power or permission but still not be within God’s purpose or will, owing to the three aforementioned gifts of moral freedom, physical orderliness, and interrelatedness (Harkness 1960, pp. 80, 92). The result is that she rejected the fatalistic mindset so often associated with predetermination as “an overoptimistic view not warranted by the facts or called for by Christian faith” (Harkness 1960, p. 80). Ultimately obstacles to optimism are themselves shadow sides of the good, but not conquerors of hope. Though there is no evidence of her having engaged either Wesley or Taylor directly on the subject of original sin, herein lies her greatest confluence with Wesley: the reliance upon grace as available to all but not forced on any. Wesley described it as the means of overcoming the inclination to sin, saying, “By grace we may conquer this inclination. Or we may *choose* to follow it, and so commit actual sin” (Wesley 2012a, p. 257).⁸

4. Conclusions

While Harkness identified suffering as the obstacle to optimism, and not original sin in the sense that Taylor had rejected and that Wesley had sought to recover, she nevertheless

mildly modified her views in response to reality and ultimately upheld the theological virtue of hope as she theologically innovated in her treatment of the doctrine of original sin that she mostly rejected. While her consistent commitment to a personalist theology rooted in a philosophy of religion that upheld human dignity was mostly enshrined in prolific prose, only some of which has been presented here, her poetry also conveyed these commitments. In addition to the hymn “Hope of the World”, Harkness just a few years before her death offered a collection of poems assembled under the title *Grace Abounding*, a title drawn from a similarly titled work by the 17th century Puritan author of the more famous *Pilgrim’s Progress*, John Bunyan (Harkness 1969, p. 11).⁹ Implications of her innovations in the doctrine of original sin for other areas of her theology are evident in some of the poems and commentary.

In this collection of mostly previously unpublished or by then out of print poems, Harkness presented the poems each as reflecting on a passage of Scripture with commentary and a prayer. Poem number 19 on “Good Friday” appeared in a section entitled “Great Days of Our Faith” (Harkness 1969, p. 82). Remarking on the “unearthly” nature of the glow with which she described Christ’s life and teaching in the poem, she indicated in the commentary that followed that it is thus “in the sense of radiance that seems to transcend time and space and the limitations of an environment outside the mainstream of events many centuries ago, yet very much down to earth in relation to human sin and suffering and the predicament of man [*sic*] in every period of history” (Harkness 1969, p. 84).

She then proceeded to expound briefly upon atonement theories in a way that reflects remaining commitment to her modified view of the doctrine of original sin and of a more Abelardian moral exemplar than an Anselmian satisfaction interpretation. Of the “numerous” atonement theories on offer, Harkness rejected “the idea that God needed this death to propitiate his wrath or that in the death of this one man punishment was exacted for the sins of the entire world”, before continuing, “Yet in the sense of at-one-ment—of the reconciliation of man [*sic*] to God, of God’s taking the initiative in love to arrest man in his sinful course and lead him to God in inner surrender and outward obedience—the cross makes sense” (Harkness 1969, p. 84). Her preferred theory appears to be the moral exemplar as she continues that “the death of Jesus Christ upon the cross gives us both the pattern and the power for living in every age. As pattern, it shows us that in spite of the worst that dull, malicious, and evil men [*sic*] can do, obedience to the call of God is required of us. As power, it not only reveals but imparts a power not our own and by this power enables the transformation of life” (Harkness 1969, pp. 84–85). The use of the plural and possible “evil men can do” seems to be a deliberate choice to emphasize actions in her hamartiology, rather than conditions (notice the switch to plural “men” where she had been using singular and ostensibly universal—though woefully un-inclusive—“man”. She remained uninterested in a universal, pre-existing, inherited state of guilt and sin).

Poem number 31, “Holy Flame” (meditating on Isaiah 6:8) appeared in a section entitled “In Quest of a Better Society” (Harkness 1969, p. 125). It was in commenting on a poem prompted by Isaiah 6:8 that she reflected most finally on Genesis, and it is in the context of expanding on the verses about the context that brings Isaiah to the Temple, when in the wake of King Uzziah’s death, Isaiah comes to mourn, aware that “No spokesman [*sic*] of the Lord was there to sting/The conscience of the mob, or lead the way/To gallant victories in Jehovah’s [*sic*] fray/With sin and strife, with self and suffering” (Harkness 1969, p. 125). This poem launches a section that follows one entitled “They Live Again”, on what she, looking back, called “unspoiled nature” (Harkness 1969, p. 125). By contrast, this section was written acknowledging that “Yet there are ugly and destructive elements, even in the natural order, which have not yet been subdued to human good. The ancient edict to ‘fill the earth and subdue it’ (Gen. 1:28) still stands—a suggestion of an unfinished and continuing creation in which God calls his servants to be co-creators” (Harkness 1969, p. 126). She continued by naming the challenge of the obstacles she trusted in grace to make surmountable, “Still more clearly is this true of the enormous amount of sin and suffering in the world of human affairs” (Harkness 1969, p. 126). With determination, the “unrepentant

and unashamed” liberal theologian held fast to her innovations in understanding original sin and suffering, even through her poetic expressions of the challenges to and victory of the “hope of the world”.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Acknowledgments: Gratitude for workshoping goes to Lisa Hancock and for research assistance goes to puck glass.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

- ¹ Maddox (2012) pp. 150 (incl. fn. 117), 154. The traducian model Wesley came to prefer appeared in Henry Woolnor’s *The True Original of the Soule* (London: Paine and Symmons, 1641).
- ² Harkness’s “Spiritual Pilgrimage” was the ninth article of the series, “How My Mind Has Changed in This Decade” in *The Christian Century* 15 March 1939, 348–351. (*Conflicts in Religious Thought* had been her second publication, after the 1921 book, *The Church and the Immigrant*, which had been based on her dissertation.)
- ³ This concern is one she held in common with John Wesley. While she is not known to have engaged his treatise on the doctrine of original sin, she did mention a lesser-known writing of his regarding the dangers of apathy toward sin and grace in teaching Christianity, “Thoughts Concerning Gospel Ministers,” in an undated (though undoubtedly later) lecture, *The Minister and His Message*. Georgia Harkness (n.d.).
- ⁴ Harkness (1929, 1949), pp. 228–29. It is worth noting her beholdenness to masculine God language and thought, and the fact that not in her lifetime would she enjoy feminist interlocutors in her chosen school of process thought the likes of Catherine Keller, who as of this writing remains a vibrant process theologian.
- ⁵ Harkness (1929, 1949), p. 242 (with reference to Macintosh’s *The Reasonableness of Christianity*, p. 77).
- ⁶ The “Prize” was that the hymn was one of eleven selected from a vast quantity of submissions to be sung during the upcoming World Council of Churches gathering in Evanston.
- ⁷ This book also was reprinted in 1974 by Word Books of Waco as *Does God Care?*
- ⁸ Similar statements echo throughout, such as “Nevertheless, this propensity is not . . . irresistible. We can resist and conquer it too, by the grace which is ever at hand” in Pt. II, IV.obj.3, p. 279.
- ⁹ Bunyan’s book that inspired her title, *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*, had been written, she noted, “while he was in jail for conscience’s sake.” There is no indication of awareness on her part that Wesley had taken Taylor to task over his treatment of the concept of “abounding grace” in Romans 5 [see Wesley (2012a), pp. 230–31, with reference to Taylor (1750), pp. 45–48].

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