

What Ever Happened to Sin?

BY KENNETH L. WOODWARD

BEFORE THERE WAS shame or guilt or blame, there was sin. As the Bible tells it, Adam and Eve first disobeyed their creator, finding his command not to eat the fruit of a particular tree in Eden an intolerable limit on their freedom to choose. In shame, the first couple then hid from God when he came searching for them. Flushed with guilt, Adam blamed Eve and Eve blamed the serpent. The results of that original sin, the Book of Genesis implies, are still around for all of us to see: estrangement from God, from nature, from each other and from ourselves.

But who identifies with Adam and Eve these days? Although many people occasionally experience shame—loss of face—guilt requires much more: a recognition of sin and the need to change one's life. Ninety percent of Americans say they believe in God. Yet the urgent sense of personal sin has all but disappeared in the current upbeat style in American religion. Among most Roman Catholics, for example, the traditional monthly ritual of regular confession to a priest has become a rite of the past. According to the latest survey, in 1989, only 40 percent of adult Catholics confess their sins at least twice a year.

Most Protestants are no better. In earlier eras, ministers regularly exhorted congregations to humbly "confess our sins." But the aging baby boomers who are rushing back to church do not want to hear sermons that might rattle their self-esteem. And many clergy, who are competing in a buyer's market, feel they cannot afford to alienate. To be sure, liberal ministers—and many a rabbi—routinely condemn such "systemic" social evils as racism, sexism and other updated permutations of the Mosaic Ten Commandments. But their voices are strangely muffled on subjects close to home—like divorce, pride, greed and overweening personal ambition. Fundamentalist preachers still excoriate abortion, pornography and other excesses of an anything-goes society. But these jeremiads are fists shaken at the world outside, not fingers pointed at those in the pews.

Without a strong sense of personal sin there can be no guilt—and little cause for shame. But guilt, like sin, is a stigmatized word in our highly therapeutic culture. Psycho-

therapists long ago mislabeled guilt as a disabling emotion. Of course, some adults do suffer from a neurotic fixation on childhood feelings of shame. But in many manuals of feel-good pop psychology, this neurosis is used to dismiss



FIRST COUPLE BANISHED FROM EDEN: Who can identify with Adam and Eve anymore?

the need for a realistic and well-instructed conscience. Stand-up comics, too, thrive on self-deprecating routines lamenting the "Jewish guilt" or "Catholic guilt" absorbed during adolescence. What they're often doing is a riff on religious parents or schools

for requiring strict standards of morality that parents themselves often flouted.

Even hypocrites, however, possess one redeeming virtue that the guilt-free lack: hypocrites at least know that they ought to be other than what they are. The sinner who knows no guilt is truly disabled: witness Charles Manson. And any science or culture that tries to excise guilt from the psyche is creating moral Frankenstein monsters.

If religious congregations are to be of service to society—as President Clinton asked in his State of the Union address—they must first deal with the sinners in their midst. All religions remind us that actions have consequences for which guilt can and must be acknowledged, forgiveness humbly begged, reconciliation sought. Sin is evil, knowingly willed and done. But, like virtue, sin results from habits that take time to devel-

op, and even longer to overcome. Sin, moralists tell us, is disease of the soul, not a passing headache. And if the Scriptures are to be believed, there is more rejoicing in heaven over one contrite sinner than over the 99 righteous who have no need of repentance.