

# Repeating the Original Sin

Even if you're not religious, you should know your religious mythology.

As many of the great thinkers of the past recognized, the mythological stories offered (or expressed) important archetypes for understanding our present world. For instance, in *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche interprets human life as a struggle between the Apollonian (rational) and Dionysian (irrational) elements. And psychologists such as Carl Jung have used both pagan and Christian mythology to characterize human behavioral traits.

A particularly relevant one for me is Russian philosopher Viktor Nesmelov's (1863-1920) interpretation of the Fall of Man (a.k.a. the Original Sin) in the Hebrew Scriptures.

In his 1905 work [\*The Science of Man\*](#) (which has not been translated from the Russian into English), Nesmelov offers what Georges Florovsky has called a "brilliant interpretation of the Biblical story of the Fall." No small compliment given that Florovsky is considered the greatest Eastern Orthodox theologian of the 20th century.

In the following paragraph, Florovsky offers an explanation of Nesmelov's interpretation of the Fall:

*"In striving towards the goal of the 'cognition of good and evil' there was not and could not be anything bad. The 'fall' consisted in the fact that people desired to attain this goal not through a creative act, through free searching, vital God-serving, but rather by a magical route, mechanically: 'in essence, they wanted their life and fate to be determined not by themselves, but by outer material causes,' and with this 'they lowered themselves to the position of the simple things of the world,' they 'subjected their spiritual life to the physical law of mechanical causality, and therefore*

*introduced their spirit into the general chain of worldly things.’ The essence of the ‘fall’ is not in the violation of a law but in superstition, in the conviction that cognition is passive reception and not a creative act.”*

In other words, the great evil in the Fall was not that Adam and Eve sought knowledge or salvation in eating the fruit from the tree; it was that they sought it through a “magical route,” through something outside of themselves that required little struggle.

Is not Nesmelov’s interpretation of the Fall a fitting description of our own times?!? Many people today seek fulfillment not through their own efforts but through systems, bureaucracies, and legislation into which they can be “plugged.” They desire a government that will feed them, a school system that will educate them, and a medical establishment that will keep them alive. In short, they want “their life and faith to be determined not by themselves, but by outer material causes.” Others, attempting to feed this desire, spend their time attempting to create “systems so perfect that no one will need to be good.”

But as the story of the Fall teaches us, there is no shortcut to human fulfillment, and there is no system or formula that will accomplish it for you. There is only one path to becoming good, becoming educated, and becoming more human, and that is the path of, to use the Russian term, *podvig*—personal “ordeal” or “struggle.”