Basically sinners or essentially good?

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Kim Nataraja October 11, 2026

We hear these words telling of our essential connectedness to Divine Reality, but do we really believe them? We are unfortunately brought up with the view that we are basically sinful and that there is an unbridgeable gap between the Divine and us. This view came into being, alongside the traditional early Christian view of basic connectedness to the Divine, only in the 4th century with Athanasius, Bishop of Alexandria, and was given final form by St Augustine. Humanity's salvation in St Augustine's view was predetermined and by grace alone and was not seen as restoring humanity to their essential God-given natural goodness. Not only was humanity in this view basically sinful, but even all of creation was basically flawed. The early Christians, however, saw creation as a manifestation of the invisible God – the first step towards a vision of God: *"As for those who are far from God….God has made it possible for them to come near to the knowledge of him and his love for them through the medium of creatures." (Evagrius)*

John Main's view is very clearly in line with the theology of the early Christians and also, not surprisingly given his Celtic background, that of Celtic Christianity, where the idea of the image of the Divine living in the depth of each one of us and the perfection of creation was never lost. He stated with regret that in this Augustinian development in theology modern men and women *"have lost the support of a common faith in their essential goodness, reasonableness and inner integrity."* They have lost the focus on *"the potential of the human spirit"* and instead are faced with *"the limitations of human life."*

In John Main's theology, God as *"the root of our being",* our basic goodness and not our sins are stressed. In his view: "*The really important thing to know is that if we are sinners (and all of us should know that we are) our sins are of no account. They cannot exist because they are entirely blotted out in the light of God's love."*

Our sin is our dividedness: between our centre, where Christ dwells, and our surface ego. In John Main's view, which was shared by the early Desert Fathers and Mothers, salvation comes through purification of the wounded ego through awareness. This is facilitated by deep silent prayer, to which meditation leads. Then *"all the barriers that separate us from our true selves and from others and from God …are dismantled."* This entails leaving all thoughts and images behind, out of which the wounded ego is built up, and thus transcend the ego. We then follow Jesus' command: *"If anyone wishes to be a follower of mine, he must leave self behind…. But if a man will let himself be lost for my sake, he will find his true self."* The moment

we turn from the ego to our true self the wounded ego that sins is healed by "*the power of pure love."* It is therefore not surprising that John Main's essential teaching concentrates on this way of prayer.