

Evolution, Original Sin, and the Fall

with Helen De Cruz and Johan De Smedt, "Introduction to the Symposium on Evolution, Original Sin, and the Fall"; Paul Macdonald, "In Defense of Aquinas's Adam: Original Justice, the Fall, and Evolution"; Julie Loveland Swanstrom, "Aquinas on Sin, Essence, and Change: Applying the Reasoning on Women to Evolution in Aquinas"; Hans Madueme, "The Theological Problem with Evolution"; Austin M. Freeman, "Epic and Evolution: A Literary Approach"; and Jack Mulder, "Original Sin, Racism, and Epistemologies of Ignorance."

Introduction to the Symposium on Evolution, Original Sin, and the Fall

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Abstract:

This is an introduction to the Symposium on "Evolution, Original Sin, and the Fall," which has been designed as a thematic section for *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science*. The Symposium investigates the enduring question of whether hamartiology (the theological study of sin) is compatible with evolutionary theory. We trace the origins of this question to the debate between Modernists and Traditionalists at the turn of the previous century. Our contributors make headway in these discussions by delving into details, namely by asking whether the hamartiological views of particular theologians, such as Augustine or Aquinas, can be reconciled with specific aspects of evolutionary theory. They also extend hamartiology in novel directions through the application of critical race theory and literary science to shed new light on the origin and transmission of original sin.

Keywords: Evolutionary theory, Hamartiology, the Fall, Original Sin

G. K. Chesterton (1909, 24) quipped: "Certain new theologians dispute original sin, which is the only part of Christian theology which can really be proved." He saw sin as an obvious, empirically indisputable feature of the human experience, "a fact as practical as potatoes." The theologians Chesterton referred to were the Modernists—clergymen and theologians at the turn of the previous century. Looking briefly at the discussion between Modernist and Traditionalist theologians can help us frame why original sin and the Fall are central in the discussion between religion and science in the Christian tradition.

The Modernists sought to innovate church teachings of the Church of England (which was the main religious denomination in the United Kingdom) and make it compatible with the sciences, including geology and evolutionary biology. In this way, they attempted to make religion more relevant again, trying to halt the decline in church attendance. They wanted to purge religion from

what they saw as empirically unsupported outdated ideas. They considered original sin and the Fall among those ideas one could better dispense with altogether (e.g., Bowler 2001). For example, the Anglican bishop E. W. Barnes preached a series of sermons on evolution (dubbed “Gorilla sermons” by the British press) in Westminster Abbey, London, in the 1920s and 1930s. Barnes, like other Modernists, argued that Darwinian theory was compatible with Christianity and that Christians ought to accept it. But he also pointed out what he thought were problematic elements of Christian doctrine which ought to be consigned to the wastepaper basket, among them, original sin and the Fall. Barnes believed that science and religion make conflicting empirical claims, and that religion needs to accommodate scientific findings (Bowler 2007).

By contrast, the Traditionalists (mainly Roman Catholics and Evangelicals) thought that a faith that abandoned notions such as original sin and the Fall was no longer truly Christian. In Protestant communities in the United States, the fundamentalists arose, originally as a reaction against biblical criticism and liberal theology. They also resisted the encroachment of the sciences on Christianity, notably in evolutionary theory and geology. Like the Modernists and Traditionalists, the fundamentalists followed a conflict model. They held, and still hold, that since science and religion clearly have conflicting claims about the origins of species, specifically of humanity and human behavior, the sciences need to make way for (literally held) religious beliefs (Bowler 2007; De Smedt and De Cruz 2020). These early discussions on evolution and sin came to a rather abrupt halt due to the general eclipse of Darwinian thinking in the early twentieth century, next to the economic depression, and the rise of totalitarianism in Europe in the 1930s. But this did not end the questions that Christian theologians were concerned with: Is the doctrine of original sin and the Fall compatible with evolutionary theory? If compatible, how should we harmonize them? If incompatible, should science or religion have priority?

The past few decades have seen a renewed interest in hamartiology (the theological study of sin) and the science and religion debate, with a range of different positions and ideas (e.g., Williams 2001; De Cruz and De Smedt 2013; Madueme and Reeves 2014; Cavanaugh and Smith 2017; Venema and Knight 2017; Rosenberg et al. 2018; Schneider 2020). This literature has a common starting point: to what extent are the theological notions of original sin and the Fall compatible with evolutionary theory? A complicating factor in these discussions is that there is no consensus among Christians on what original sin is. There is, as Oliver Crisp (2015, 256) points out, no neat hamartiological analogue of the Chalcedonian conception of Christ’s nature. What these authors refer to with the term “doctrine of original sin” denotes a family of quite different conceptions. Within this plurality of concepts, the following features often recur, but are by no means universal:

- All of humanity descends from a single, original pair (in some Biblical narratives referred to as “Adam” and “Eve”).
- The original human pair committed the first sin (primal sin), when, disobeying God, they ate fruit from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. This event is called the Fall.
- The first sin had an adverse effect on the rest of humanity. We all inherit a tendency to sin from our ancestors, this is termed original sin. As a result of original sin, all humans after the Fall are in need of salvation.

Building on this core, which most Christian denominations accept, there are specific versions. One influential proposal is Augustine’s doctrine of original sin, which is actually a bundle of related ideas (see Couenhoven 2005 for a review). Augustine envisaged the Fall as an actual, historical event: our ancestors (Adam and Eve) ate the forbidden fruit in disobedience to God. Prior to the

Fall, humans were in an original state of righteousness, which means they were able to refrain from sinning (though they had the potential for doing so). The Fall has far-reaching consequences: not only did it make humans more fragile and fallible, it infected the whole universe, introducing death and decay to the whole of creation. Augustine envisaged original sin as something shared by all humanity, something we inherited from Adam in a biological sense. Original sin is present in all human beings, including newborns. This makes the need for salvation and grace universal.

The Augustinian view is in tension with many scientific findings; for example, as Venema and McKnight (2017) observe, genomic evidence for the common ancestry of extant humans is not compatible with a single pair as the ancestors of all of humanity. Humans, like all species, descend from a population, not a single couple. Some defenders of the Augustinian model, such as Hans Madueme (this issue) acknowledge the conflict between Augustine's empirical claims and contemporary science. Others, such as James Smith (2017) try to preserve most elements from the Augustinian account, including the Fall as a historical event, which Smith deems important for theological reasons: grace only makes sense if we fell from an original righteous state. Rather than a Fall by a single couple (which is not tenable in the light of genomic and paleoanthropological evidence), he sees the Fall as something that happened to a larger ancestral hominin population that he imagines to possess consciousness, moral awareness, and the ability to discern right from wrong. This population was elected as God's covenant people, but they choose to rebel. Note that Smith's model still assumes that this population was able to refrain from sinning, but as Schneider (2012) and De Smedt and De Cruz (2020) have observed, the recurrence of archaeological evidence for violence throughout prehistory makes this a difficult thing to defend.

The Roman Catholic tradition does not endorse all elements of Augustine's doctrine of original sin either. For example, as Paul MacDonald (this issue) notes, Aquinas explicitly denies that there was no death or predation prior to the Fall. The work of other authors has a more Eastern Orthodox bent. For example, John Schneider (2010, 2012) and Helen De Cruz and Johan De Smedt (e.g., De Cruz and De Smedt, 2013), have proposed Irenaean-style models of original sin and the Fall, drawing on the church father Irenaeus of Lyon and John Hick (1966).¹ These views have gained some traction in the field of religion and science, even though they are nonlapsarian, dispensing with a historical Fall altogether. They argue that humanity was morally innocent, rather than righteous, at some point in its evolutionary history. It is important to note that there are differences between these contemporary models and Irenaeus' fragmentary views: Irenaeus saw humanity before the Fall as innocent and immature, rather than as perfect (as Augustine held). Irenaeus believed that the Fall was a historical event, and that Satan (as the snake) tricked our innocent and gullible ancestors. He saw the Fall as a result of the fragility and immaturity of humanity.² Historically speaking, nonlapsarian accounts of original sin are more accurately associated with Friedrich Schleiermacher ([1830] 2016) than with Irenaeus. As Daniel Pedersen (2016, 2020) points out, Schleiermacher proposed a nonlapsarian account of original sin, rejecting Augustine's notion of original righteousness. The fact that the Fall occurred, in Schleiermacher's view, indicates that humans must have had the propensity to sin before the Fall (something Augustine

¹ The theologian John Hick (1966) formulated an influential Irenaean-style theodicy, arguing that we are sinful, because moral growth is valuable. God created us as immature, so that we might grow in virtue, and in time, grow closer to God. Sin, suffering, and bad things that happen to us, are needed to make this growth happen.

² This difference in conceptualizing the original state of humanity as fragile and innocent versus righteous marks a deep distinction between Eastern Orthodox and Western Christianity.

acknowledged). But if they always had the propensity to sin, we don't need to think that some radical change in human nature took place. So, why posit a Fall at all? Schleiermacher ultimately held that it is simpler to just assume that there is not one historical Fall, but that we fall individually, each of us, in the course of our lives. In Schleiermacher's account, God becomes the author of evil, a bullet that not many theologians and scholars in religion and science are willing to bite.

In discussions in religion and science, we should continue to bear in mind that the “doctrine of original sin” is not a single, unified doctrine with clear empirical implications. Rather, it is a disparate body of hypotheses, without universal agreement on specifics, such as whether the Fall needs to be interpreted as a literal event or as a metaphor, or how the transmission of original sin is supposed to work. In this respect, it stands in sharp contrast with evolutionary theory, which does outline a coherent body of theories and hypotheses on human origins and human behavior. On the face of it, common features of hamartiology do not fit well with evolutionary theory. Humanity certainly did not descend from a single ancestral pair. There was death prior to the evolution of the genus *Homo*, as the fossil record attests. The body of empirical evidence that is relevant for the question of the Fall and original sin is vast, and encompasses, among other things, genomic evidence for the ancestry of current humans (Bergström et al. 2021), paleoanthropological evidence for the earliest members of *Homo sapiens* who lived about 315,000 years ago (e.g., Richter et al. 2017), and primatological evidence for our biological capacities for morality which we share with other primates (e.g., de Waal 2009). How can we investigate hamartiology productively in a way that is both knowledgeable of theology and the sciences?

As John Perry and Sarah Lane Ritchie (2018) recommend, to do religion and science we should not ask the general question “Is the doctrine of original sin in line with science?” but rather delve into specific elements of the doctrine and into specific scientific (sub)disciplines. Possible questions include, “Is the historicity of the original pair in line with our best genomic evidence for the ancestry of *Homo sapiens*?” and “Is the Augustinian notion of the biological transmission of sin compatible with our best evidence in genomics or in developmental biology?” (depending on how one would see this transmission).

This Symposium presents five articles—by Paul Macdonald, Julie Loveland Swanstrom, Hans Madueme, Austin Freeman, and Jack Mulder—that engage with the nuts and bolts of original sin, the Fall and evolution.³ Hans Madueme examines the fit of evolutionary biology with scripture and the tradition of the Presbyterian Church of America, of which he is a member. Surveying recent theodicies that aim to explain why evolution results in so much suffering, by among others, Christopher Southgate, John Schneider, and Joshua Moritz, Madueme remains pessimistic about the prospects of a successful conciliation between evolutionary theory and hamartiology. Paul MacDonald and Julie Loveland Swanstrom examine the compatibility between evolutionary theory and Aquinas' views on sin and biological variability. MacDonald defends Aquinas' position that our ancestors were in a state of original righteousness against recent Irenaean-style critiques. Swanstrom points out that Aquinas did allow for variation within species, for example, in women and people with disabilities, and that he also envisaged the emergence of new kinds of creatures in addition to the ones God had created originally. Jack Mulder looks at the question of original sin from the perspective of sociology and critical race theory, showing that findings in the social

³ These articles are a selection of papers presented at the online conference *Evolution, Original Sin and the Fall*, June 22–24, 2020.

sciences can shed new light on, and provide support for, Roman Catholic views on original sin. Drawing on literary science and J. R. R. Tolkien's notion of eucatastrophe, Austin Freeman points toward striking parallels between Christian views on original sin and the Fall, and narratives in cosmology and evolutionary biology that regard cosmic and biological evolution as an epic narrative. Adapting the epic of evolution into a Christian context, Freeman indicates Christians can gain new insights into evolution: God is not a competing cause within the evolutionary epic, but the "outside" cause of all that happens, including evolutionary events.

Taken together, these articles can stimulate discussion on how original sin, the Fall, and evolution relate. The family of ideas commonly referred to as "the doctrine of original sin" makes empirical predictions that can be tested against evolutionary theory. Because the doctrine is so broad and multi-faceted, the most productive engagements of this kind will require specifying both which aspects of the doctrine of original sin are being examined, and which theological claims are being tested, as the authors of this symposium have done.

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