

Adapting to a Scientific 'Paradigm Shift':

Reflections on the Doctrine of Original Sin.

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A plea is made for a whole-hearted acceptance of the Neo-Darwinian world-view. Despite the fact that several theologians have tried to see the Creator working through fully evolutionary mechanism, even in regard to the evolution of humans, the classical doctrine of Original Sin still stands apart from that theological movement. The author claims that the death of humans and the ubiquitous occurrence of concupiscence no longer demand a supernatural explanation; the evolutionary paradigm is enough. Therefore we should drop inappropriate prayers in the liturgy of Christian Initiation.

Thomas Kuhn in 1962 introduced the idea of Paradigm Shift to describe the radical change in basic ideas and pre-suppositions that take place from time to time in the natural sciences. Many other authors have borrowed the idea to describe similar basic changes in the methodology of their own department of human learning. We might even make the generalization that something analogous to Kuhn's paradigm shift takes place from time to time in all branches of human learning - except perhaps for one - Dogmatic Theology, since its task is basically to preserve the 'deposit of faith', something fixed and unchangeable.

However, another important task for Dogmatic Theology is to express this 'deposit' in a form that is intelligible to one's contemporaries. This was pithily expressed by St. Anselm in defining theology as "*Fides quaerens intellectum*", faith seeking understanding - intelligibility. Semantics and philosophy have traditionally contributed towards this understanding, but in our day when the scientific world view is so dominant, I see no reason why the natural sciences should not be also a legitimate source of input to that 'intelligibility'.

When a genuine 'paradigm shift' takes place in science, it may take quite a long time for it to be accepted in scientific circles; it may take even longer for theology to make the necessary

adjustments to the theological theses touching on that shift. It took theologians (and the Church's *Magisterium*) several centuries to be fully at ease with the fundamentally different world view introduced by the Copernican Revolution. Similarly, over the past century and a half we have been going through a paradigm shift equally large and perhaps even more disturbing, the transition from a static to an evolutionary world view. This evolutionary approach applies not only to the development of living creatures but also to the whole universe. Given the complexity of the universe, it is hardly surprising that, despite phrases in the documents of Vatican II such as "we have passed from a static to a more dynamic, evolutionary view" (GS 5), the *Magisterium* was quite slow to absorb the idea fully.

When Charles Darwin published his "Origin of Species" over 150 years ago he was aware that the book would be 'theological dynamite'. Therefore he kept the manuscript of his first draft locked in a drawer for 15 years, partly for that reason, but especially in order not to offend his very religious and dearly loved wife Emma. Although Wasmann in his "Modern Biology and the Theory of Evolution" showed clearly in 1904 that a Christian could, in conscience, accept the evolutionary world-view, as did Teilhard de Chardin a generation later, their arguments were not accepted by the *Magisterium* of the Catholic Church. I can still remember the immense relief I felt as a student approaching my final years of biological training when Pope Pius XII in his encyclical '*Humani Generis*' clearly stated that "*the Teaching Authority of the Church does not forbid that research and discussions, on the part of men experienced in both fields, take place with regard to the doctrine of evolution*".

Since that time quite a few works have appeared which try to show that our concept of God is enriched by seeing him as the God of Evolution - for example Karl Rahner's essay on Hominisation (1965), Haught on God and Evolution (2000, 2006), Deane-Drummond on Christ and Evolution (2009), etc.

However, there remained one area in theology which seemed irreconcilable with the

evolutionary world-view. That was the Doctrine of Original Sin. For those with even an elementary knowledge of recent advances in the interpretation of hominid fossils, the doctrine did not seem to make sense.

It was this doctrine that got Fr. Teilhard de Chardin S.J. into so much trouble. As a young successful Professor of Geology at the *Institut Catholique* in Paris, he was invited in 1922 by his colleagues at the Jesuit seminary at Engheim (Belgium), to talk to the students and professors about the clash between evolution and theology. The questions of the students after the lecture led him into speculating about the relationship between original sin and evolutionary theory. Two of the professors were so impressed by his answers that they asked him to put his ideas down on paper and send them along to them for further study and discussion. This he did, but somehow this purely private document got into ecclesiastical hands. Immediately Teilhard was on the files as a 'dangerous theologian'. As a result he was never allowed to publish those of his writings in which he tried to wrestle with the problem of synthesizing evolutionary theory with the 'deposit of faith' and he was ordered in 1925 to leave Paris permanently and go to China.

Around the time of the centenary of the publication of Darwin's *Origin of Species* (1959), a trickle of books and articles began to appear on the theology of original sin, several of them focusing especially on the interpretation of relevant biblical passages in Genesis 3. Dubarle (1958) and Haag (1966) both gave us detailed exegeses of the classical biblical texts that are usually quoted in support of the traditional doctrine. In 1955 the hitherto banned works of Teilhard de Chardin (who died on Easter Sunday of that year) began to appear in the original French, with the English translations coming about five years later. As a result, there was a surge of interest in the efforts of Teilhard to synthesise the evolutionary and Christian world views. James Connor gives a very good summary in this journal of the thinking during this period. McDermot continues to bring the survey up to date in 1977.

That phase could be considered to have ended in 1971 with Yarnold's *'The Theology of Original Sin'* where he summarizes concisely the studies of the previous decade. He also spells out clearly what the main objections to that traditional teaching were:

1. How can sin or guilt be inherited ? - sin is a personal offence.
2. Descent of all human beings from a single pair, while not impossible biologically, would not fit in with current thinking in population genetics which postulates the evolution of the first humans from a population, a group of pre-human anthropoids.
3. To say that God punishes us for the sin of our ancestor Adam goes against the basic principles of natural justice.
4. "It is inconceivable that the flawless pre-fall human life that is postulated could ever have existed"; pain receptors are an essential part of our survival mechanisms and presumably always have been.

These "cogent arguments" led him to the inevitable conclusion: "Personally I find them in combination convincing. Two possibilities therefore remain. Either the doctrine of original sin should be altogether rejected or the 'traditional explanation' of it should be discarded and another substituted." He formulates an explanation of original sin based on the theological writings of the previous decade, but I do not find it convincing. He claims that the other alternative -**reject** - "seems impossible for one who believes in the infallibility of the Church".

Recently two books have appeared that seem to indicate that the passage of forty years may have made it possible for one who "does believe in the infallibility of the Church" to reject the traditional form of the doctrine.

In 2011 Jack Mahoney, a Catholic Jesuit priest, published *Christianity IN Evolution: An Exploration* where he suggests quite bluntly that we should drop the whole traditional model of original sin involving Adam and the Fall. He sees his book as a contribution towards answering

the plea of Pope John-Paul II in 1988 to a meeting of experts studying the relationship between evolution and religion. The Pope asked them to consider whether an evolutionary perspective brings any light to bear upon theological anthropology, the meaning of the human person as the *imago Dei*, the problem of Christology - and even the development of doctrine itself?" Mahoney suggests that, from the evolutionary point of view, Christ's great achievement was to break through the 'evolutionary cul-de-sac of individual extinction'. For us death, so necessary in the biological world for evolution through natural selection to take place, is no longer the final word because of Christ's resurrection.

He even suggests that the classic view of original sin and the fall is mildly blasphemous since it claims that God's first effort at creating creatures in his own image was a disastrous failure and so He had to send Jesus to clean up the mess.

His basic conclusion is that a full acceptance of the contemporary evolutionary world-view implies that the classical doctrine of original sin may be dispensed with. He even suggests that this full acceptance means that a number of other traditional doctrines will be weakened or also dispensed with.

The other book is by Joseph FitzPatrick - *The Fall and Ascent of Man: How Genesis supports Darwin* (2012). After highlighting what he calls the "general discomfort that any modern person with a reasonable grasp of scientific thought must feel when presented with Augustine's interpretation of Genesis 3", he proceeds to demolish Augustine's arguments, quoting extensively from *The City of God*.

He accepts the view of several exegetes (e.g. Haag 1969, Vawter 1977) who insist that "the traditional doctrine of original sin is not to be found in Genesis". These exegetes claim that the literary genre of the *Story of the Fall* in Gen 3 is basically a mythical narrative in the style of those found inscribed on the clay tablets found in the excavations of several sites in the Ancient Near East. Fitzpatrick faults the exegetes for not entering more fully into the spirit of such mythical

compositions but rather continuing to treat them as quasi-historical texts.

Fitzpatrick interprets the mythical story of Gen. 3 as a commentary on the transformation of pre-human hominids (naked and without any developed moral sense) into the genuine human stage 'knowing good and evil' and feeling the need for clothing. He sees the Genesis narrative as being strongly influenced by the legend of Gilgamesh found on Sumerian clay tablets from around 3,000 B.C. and copied or adapted by many of the later Mesopotamian civilizations. The hero, Gilgamesh, king of the ancient city of Uruk and son of a Goddess, longs for a strong comrade who can accompany him on his military adventures. He finds such a companion in arms in Enkidu who was reared with animals and eats grass. As the story unfolds Enkidu is gradually transformed into a true human, wearing clothes, eating human food, killing the lion and the wolf. When eventually Enkidu dies his friend Gilgamesh goes into a deep depression and sets off to search for a plant which will give him immortality.

Scripture scholars have recognized for many years that many parallels exist between the story of Noah's Flood (Gen 6:5 – 9:28) and a flood described in the Gilgamesh saga. But Fitzpatrick claims that there are similar literary links between the story of the Fall in Genesis 3 and the tale of Enkidu and Gilgamesh. He lists 10 close literary parallels between the Genesis story and the Enkidu tale. He suggests that the original Hebrew writers of the Fall Narrative in Genesis 3 borrowed phrases and images from the Gilgamesh *epic*, while still retaining the basic Hebrew spirituality of the one supreme God (Jahweh) who demands an ethical life style from His worshippers.

Fitzpatrick thus interprets the story in Gen 3, not as an act of disobedience, but rather a warning from God that 'eating the fruit', i.e. moving from the idyllic pure animal stage to the human stage would involve a life of toil and worry. The expulsion from the Garden is not a punishment for a serious sin of pride, but rather God's way of making sure that the newly evolved humans do not eat of the other tree mentioned, the Tree of Life which would confer immortality

and make them like God Himself.

Fitzpatrick would thus see no problem for a good Christian to drop completely the term "original sin" along with the hypotheses of St. Augustine which led him to call it 'original'. Fitzpatrick is convinced that if we substitute the words '*original sinfulness*' every time we come across the term "Original Sin" in any of the Church's official teachings and discard once and for all the Augustinian version of the "Fall", this would not affect any of the major truths of the Christian Faith as formulated in the Creeds and in Council documents. Although not without its problems (e.g. how could the good God create a human being having this primordial sinfulness ?) this proposal is much more palatable than Mahoney's suggestion that what he calls the 'knock-on effect' would result in the necessity to abandon a number of ideas dear to Catholics and many other Christians (e.g. the eucharistic sacrifice).

The trend of thought in these two books which I have outlined seems to indicate that the time is now right for a clear and unequivocal rethink by both the Protestant and Catholic Churches in regard to the traditional story of the Fall and its dire effects on each one of us. However, the publication of the Catechism of the Catholic Church in 1992 seems to apply the brake very firmly to any such tendency. The Apostolic Constitution of Pope John-Paul II introducing the Catechism declared that it was a "sure norm for teaching the faith ... an authentic reference for teaching". The Catechism teaches clearly that Original Sin is "an essential truth of the Faith". It gives no indication whatsoever that several theologians had been wrestling with the problem of original sin for half a century or more. Instead it says categorically that "The Church, which has the mind of Christ, knows very well that we cannot tamper with the revelation of Original Sin without undermining the mystery of Christ". The Catechism thus presents what has come to be called 'the Augustinian version of the Fall and Original Sin' as an essential truth which faithful, contemporary Catholics must profess.

These are very strong statements and would seem to suggest that the writers of the literature I

have mentioned above are all seriously off-course in their journey towards reconciling the spiritual and physical understanding of this world of ours.

While admitting that the Catholic Catechism has done a magnificent job in summarizing our present post-Vatican II Catholic faith, and that the "YOUCAT" edition adapted for the use of youth is very attractively produced, I would like to hope that any future editions would be more sensitive to problems arising from the natural sciences, especially the evolutionary world view (amazingly the word 'evolution' does not appear in its index). In the section dealing with original sin a short note pointing out the present state of opinion among many Catholic theologians would clear the field for those hoping to harmonize our religious and scientific views of our universe. Thus, if we are to allow a 'development of doctrine' (= a paradigm shift?) in this area, we can (and should) state clearly what is obviously false in the traditional Fall/Redemption story based on Augustine's reflections, but also we should acknowledge what seems true and in harmony not only with our present scientific world view but also with the deposit of faith. First I list the elements of the "standard story" that we should drop, or at least allow to wither and die.

1. Adam and Eve (of Gen 1-3) were NOT real historical characters; we should get accustomed to reading the early chapters of the book of Genesis in the spirit in which they were written: these early chapters speak about "the man" (*ha'adam* in Hebrew); they do not give us the name of an individual called "Adam" but refer to the ordinary 'man in the street', a typical human person, **you and me!** This is clearly indicated in recent English versions of the Hebrew Bible such as NRSV, NAB, and Net Bible.

1. We humans were NOT spiritual and biological 'Supermen' before the Fall, immortal and free from suffering, without any trace of concupiscence (in the theological sense). Nothing in the biblical text (nor in the fossil record!) would force us to accept such a "golden age". Creation "in His own image" (Gen. 1:27) should not be forced to imply any such imaginings.

2. The extant hominid fossil evidence does NOT point to any reversal in the normal evolutionary process through natural selection, which might reflect the Fall and its punishment.

4. Guilt, in the sense of responsibility for evil-doing, cannot be transmitted from parent to offspring by any known legal, psychological or genetical mechanism. Every baby is born innocent.

5. Limbo (in the sense of a sort of pleasant crèche for babies who die without baptism) is a medieval invention, with no justification in the sources of revelation.

So, what can (must) we hold onto among the many strands that make up the traditional 'doctrine' of original sin ?

Already in 1989 Gabriel Daly in his *Creation and Redemption* formulated as follows the basic truths that we must hold onto as we try to 'clean up' the Original Sin doctrine.

(1) Christ is central to the whole divine economy, which includes creation, revelation and redemption.

(2) Every human being is in need of the redemption won for the race by Christ and this is "antecedent to the commission of personal sin and even to exposure to sinful influences." He claims that "as long as these truths are safeguarded, the accompanying images and arguments can ... be modified, reinterpreted and in some cases even abandoned without infidelity to divine revelation or Catholic doctrine." (p.125).

First we should ask 'is the doctrine of original sin (in the sense that St Augustine and so many other sainted theologians understood it) a revealed truth?' Or is it not a faulty interpretation of Genesis chapter 3, an example of what the scripture scholars refer to as eisegesis - a reading into the text of a meaning not intended by the inspired author, as judged by the style of writing and the other tools used by the exegetes? I am convinced that it is eisegesis.

Karl Rahner in his essay on the theological concept of concupiscence (first appearing in the

1950's) makes a point that may help us to find the truth. He claims that "Augustine and later the great scholastics, too, were thoroughly convinced that the present constitution of man with his *concupiscentia* and subjection to death could not be intelligibly interpreted except on the presupposition of a Primordial Fall, i.e. they felt that concupiscence and death were so 'unnatural' that they needed explanation". (Theol Invest 1, p. 382)

If Rahner's view is correct and if we can find a satisfactory explanation for the 'scandal' of concupiscence and death in the light of our present knowledge of human biology and psychology, then we can drop most of the elements of the Augustinian interpretation of Gen 3.

Death can be a frightening thing, but today for those of us who are steeped in the world view of an evolutionary universe, death is no longer so great a problem; we take it for granted as a basic law of nature and a necessity if our ecosystems are to function properly and our evolutionary lines (Phyla) are to continue evolving. Those of us blessed with the gift of faith in the power of Christ's resurrection and who are also able to avail of modern developments in palliative care of the dying, surely have no valid grounds for fearing death.

Similarly with the problem of concupiscence. Perhaps it would help if we could honestly accept the hypothesis that our Creator God worked through evolutionary processes which would result in the first hominid creatures whom we could recognize as one of ourselves. Since our metabolism is basically similar to that of the higher primates, this means that all those strong feelings, emotions and drives towards either good or evil are based on the same neuro-biochemical mechanisms shared by ourselves and the higher Primates. Presumably at that mysterious point in our pre-history (which we glibly label 'hominisation'), when our brains and other neural structures had developed to the point where we could enjoy self-awareness and freedom of action and an accompanying sense of 'good and evil', our Creator graced us with a free gift outside the experience of our pre-human ancestors: this mysterious 'Spirit to spirit action' strengthened our new-found free will to refuse the promptings of our hormonal and other stimuli to indulge in

selfish behavior injurious to any of our fellow humans. The obverse of this gift would be to help us heed the gentler voice of our more altruistic promptings often foreshadowed in the altruistic behavior of the larger mammals.

Gabriel Daly in his *Creation and Redemption* has argued strongly that God's free gift of salvation (or redemption) is contemporaneous with his creation of human beings through evolutionary processes. The perfection of that gift is given to us through Jesus Christ as a remedy for the 'sin of the world' - John's evocative phrase for our refusal to avail of that gift, not just by notorious evil-doers, but by each one of us, even after being exposed to the exemplary witness to an ethical life-style given by Jesus Christ.

Liturgical Application

Part of the stimulus to write down the above reflections arose from my disappointment with the new rite for the Baptism of Infants (1969) which still contains a prayer asking the Lord to "set them free from original sin" (Rites, 49B), but even more from the instruction on salvation and the sacraments often given to both youngsters and adult catechumens in the country I live in (Zambia). The traditional way of explaining to parents and sponsors what is going on in Baptism is to rely on the idea of the guilt of original sin being removed and often not enough emphasis is placed on the reception of the youngsters into the body of the Church. This smacks very much of a magical explanation which may seem satisfying to Christians coming from a culture where witchcraft is still felt to be something very real and to be feared. For those educated in western lore it remains a stumbling block.

However, the new Rite for the Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA, 1972) does not once mention Original Sin - let us also follow that good example in our sacramental ministry and instruction.