

Contemporary Interpretation of the Historicity of Adam and Eve within the Roman Catholic Church.

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Roman Catholic interpretation of the historicity of Adam and Eve is fraught with difficulty because it is entwined with the doctrine of Original Sin. This doctrine¹ has its roots in a literalist reading of parts of the Bible, particularly parts of Genesis 3 and Romans 5.12-21. The doctrine is that when humanities original parents sinned, they fell from a state of holiness and received death as a punishment. Furthermore, this fallen state was inherited by their offspring - the whole of humanity. The roots of the doctrine are Biblical, but it owes far more to theological elaborations - culminating in becoming Dogma at the Council of Trent² (1545-63). This interpretation of the origins of humanity was universally accepted within the Catholic Church.

The situation began to change with the publication³ in,1859, of Darwin's theory of Evolution. The theory describes how new species arise from an older species via accumulation of small differences within populations separated from each other. It rapidly gained wide acceptance within the scientific community. However, this scientific explanation is at variance with two aspects of the then prevailing understanding of human origins based upon the Bible. The first being that God did not create a fully formed Adam and Eve, but they evolved from lower species. This has not been problematic for most modern catholic commentators. Secondly, since evolution works via populations, there may have been no first human couple. This has proved extremely problematic. Up until this time all formulations of the doctrine of Original Sin had presumed that humanity descended from one couple and used language to that effect.

A foundational challenge to the prevailing interpretation of the historical reality of a first couple (Adam and Eve) came from Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, a Jesuit priest, theologian, palaeontologist and geologist. He was convinced of the reality of evolution and rejected the belief in an historical first couple. Moreover, death was not a punishment for sin but intrinsic to evolution. He therefore set about trying to

formulate an interpretation of the doctrine of original sin that would be in harmony with biological evolution. In 1922 he sent a draft paper to several informed acquaintances seeking their feedback. The paper was not published until after his death, but we now know their contents (and his superiors' reactions) in some detail⁴. These letters were passed to the superior general of the Jesuits and the Curia in Rome. The challenge to accepted dogma was not welcomed and, as a result, Teilhard de Chardin was removed (in 1925) from his professorship at the Institut Catholique in Paris and deployed to China to continue his work in palaeontology.

Pope Pius XII, in response to the growing debate about evolution and the origins of humanity, published an encyclical, "Humani Generis", in 1950⁵. This encyclical allowed for discussion of the evolution of the physical nature of humans but not the spiritual. It re-affirmed the Trent dogma of original sin. Indeed, it went further. It denied Catholics freedom to discuss ideas about a population-based origin of humanity (polygenism), or that after Adam there were humans who were not his direct offspring, or that Adam represented a population of first parents.

Given these strictures, and the treatment of Teilhard de Chardin, catholic exegetes and theologians have been very cautious in their writings. The preeminent catholic scholar, Raymond E. Brown (1928-1998), avoided making definitive statements⁶ on the historicity of Adam, confining his exegesis to what the Biblical author intended to say in the relevant texts. Hence, in discussing Genesis 3, Brown indicates⁷ that Adam is not intended as an individual but is representative of humanity and in Romans 5, Paul's subject is Jesus rather than Adam. Most catholic Biblical exegetes of that era take a similar approach (see, for example, Fitzmyer⁸ and Boadt⁹).

As evidence for biological evolution has progressed¹⁰ (particularly genetic evidence), the discontinuity between the official church position and evolutionary science has become ever more acute. This has stimulated more commentators to offer potential solutions. Some strive to reconcile the classical doctrine of original sin with current scientific knowledge. In a paper¹¹ published in 2016, Flaman describes building on earlier suggestions to offer a solution based upon the existing teaching of the direct infusion, by God, a soul into a physical body (at conception). In summary, Flaman's proposal is that God breathed a soul into one member (or one couple) in a

population of evolved physical homo sapiens. This individual (or couple) then had children whom God ensouls. As this process continues, eventually a population arises in which all members have spiritual souls. If the first individual (or couple) sinned, then the effects of that sin would be inherited by all humanity. This is an elaboration of the existing doctrine of original sin and involves a historical first human parent (or parents).

Other commentators have offered more radical propositions. For example, Schoonenberg¹² suggests that humanity evolved in a situation of sin. All humans exist in a social context of sin which affects the way we behave. Original sin is therefore all sins ever committed. This bears some similarities with Teilhard de Chardin's ideas. Mahoney goes even further¹³. He would let go of the doctrine of original sin altogether and explain the need for a saviour in terms of needing to be saved from death.

In conclusion, there is no consensus within Catholicism about the historicity or non-historicity of Adam and Eve. The official teaching necessitates historicity. However, the foremost catholic Biblical exegetes no longer find support for the doctrine of original sin in the pages of the Bible. Were it not for the theological doctrine most would almost certainly dispense with a historical Adam and Eve (or first couple). This situation has been described by Daryl P. Domning as a scandal¹⁴. The need to reformulate the doctrine of original sin is urgent.

Word count = 988 without endnotes and 1333 with endnotes counted. I could not find guidance about which the 1250 word limit applied.

¹ Harent, S. (1911). Original Sin. In The Catholic Encyclopaedia. New York: Robert Appleton Company. Retrieved November 6, 2019 from New Advent: <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/11312a.htm>

² Kirsch, J.P. (1912). Council of Trent. In The Catholic Encyclopaedia. New York: Robert Appleton Company. Retrieved November 6, 2019 from New Advent: <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/15030c.htm>

³ Charles Darwin, *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection, or the Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life* (London: John Murray, 1859).

⁴ Grumett, D. and Bentley, P. "Teilhard de Chardin, 'Original Sin and the Six Propositions', *Zygon*, Vol. 53, no. 2, June, 2018, pp. 303-330. [Online]. Available at: <http://www.zygonjournal.org/> [Accessed 9th November 2019].

⁵ Pius XII. "Humani Generis". The Holy See, 12 August 1950, w2.vatican.va/content/pius-xii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xii_enc_12081950_humani-generis.html [Accessed 9th November 2019].

⁶ Raymond E. Brown, *101 Questions and Answers on the Bible* (New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1990), pp. 34-35.

⁷ Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2010), pp. 580-582.

⁸ Joseph A. Fitzmyer, "The Letter to the Romans," in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, eds. Raymond E. Brown, Joseph A. Fitzmyer and Roland Murphy O.Carm (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1990), pp. 844-846.

⁹ Lawrence Boadt, "Genesis", in *The International Bible Commentary*, ed. William R. Farmer (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1998), p. 364.

¹⁰ Eugene E. Harris, *Ancestors in Our Genome: The New Science of Human Evolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

¹¹ Paul J. P. Flaman, 'Evolution, The Origin of Human Persons, and Original Sin: Physical Continuity with an Ontological Leap', *The Heythrop Journal*, Vol. 57 No. 3, May 2016, pp. 568–583. [Online]. Available at: <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/heyj.12237> [Accessed 11th November 2019].

¹² Piet Schoonenberg, 'Sin and Guilt' cited in James P. O'Sullivan, 'Catholics Re-examining Original Sin in light of Evolutionary Science: The State of the Question', *New Blackfriars*, Vol. 99 No. 1083, June 2016, pp. 653-674. [Online]. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1111/nbfr.12234> [Accessed 12th November 2019].

¹³ Jack Mahoney, *Christianity in Evolution* (Washington D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2011), pp49-68.

¹⁴ Daryl P. Domning 'Evil, Evolution and Original Sin', *America The Jesuit Review*, Vol. 185 No. 15 November 2001. [Online]. Available at: <https://www.americamagazine.org/issue/350/article/evolution-evil-and-original-sin> [Accessed 12th November 2019].