



# Will the Real Adam, Please Stand Up!

Perry Yoder

**T**he problem of reconciling church doctrine with modern science is a real and perhaps insoluble one. Indeed, more generally, the tension between church dogma and reason has had a long, troubled history in the West. A classic example is the difficulty the church had of coming to terms with a solar-centered orbit for the earth. The tension between church doctrine and science continues today in segments of the Christian church that are unable to come to grips with the “historical” sciences: geology, paleontology, and evolutionary genetics.<sup>1</sup>

Original sin is especially problematic today in the light of modern genetics, and for many the notion is simply absurd. Which molecules that make up the DNA inheritance of the human species carry “sin”? Can we create a sinless people by eliminating this “sin” genetic material as we hope to “cure” other genetic defects by manipulation of a person’s DNA? An original sin that passes biologically from parents to child no longer seems sensible in this context. In the same way, does it still make sense to assume a “fall” when the nature of human beings underwent a substantial change, perhaps even enough of a change to result in a new species carrying with it the freight of original sin?

The abandonment of inherited sin, from my Mennonite tradition, causes little difficulty. In this tradition, children are held to be in a state of innocence until they come to the age of accountability. That is, children are innocent until they themselves become responsible for their own choices to do wrong. There is no “original sin” for which they need cleansing by baptism as infants. Sin may be inevitable, part of the human condition, but it is not logically necessary, imposed upon them, so to speak, through

no fault of their own. This tradition breaks with the dominant Christian position: infants have “original sin” as part of their inheritance and from which they need deliverance by baptism.

Another route is taken by McIntyre. The problem between modern science and dogma is solved by a redefinition of “original sin” so that it refers to something making sense in our current context. This task, the maintaining of the reasonableness and meaningfulness of our traditional Christian vocabulary, is a vital and ongoing task of theology. In this sense, theology is a contextual enterprise directed toward a community of faith with a view toward its understanding and appropriation of its theological tradition. Since there are a variety of contexts and communities, there are a plurality of theologies. We have Lutheran theology, Reformed theology, Catholic theology, etc.

A problem arises for theology when it goes beyond its “theological” language and attempts to show its validity by invoking science or the Bible or both, as in the present article by McIntyre. The difficulties inherent in this task are propounded by the assumption that the Bible can be used to bring about a detente between belief and science; that is, if we interpret the Bible correctly, we can generate a theological position that will be congruent with modern science.

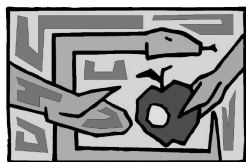
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Perry Yoder

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## Dialogue: Response

*Will the Real Adam, Please Stand Up!*

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The problem in this approach is, to put it simply, who decides on the correct interpretation of Scripture? Put more broadly, is the study of Scripture heteronymous, under the authority of church and theology, or autonomous, free from theological and churchly authority?<sup>2</sup> Assuming autonomy, so that biblical interpretation can serve as a “corrective” to traditional doctrine, the question becomes “What are the legitimate warrants for a valid interpretation—i.e., what counts as evidence for an interpretation of Scripture—and, given the wide variety of interpretations proposed, how are probable interpretations distinguished from less probable ones?”

This brings us to Genesis 1–3 and the question of the probability of the interpretations suggested by McIntyre. McIntyre interprets this material so that a line can be drawn between “natural” human beings—i.e., humans as they were created by God—and human beings as they were after the Fall, after the first sin. Key to his understanding is his interpretation of what happened to Adam when he ate of the fruit of the knowledge of good and evil. This act, it is argued, changed him from an “it” embedded in the physical world to an “I” external to the physical world (p. 91).

However, there are substantial difficulties with this view. First, already in Genesis 2 Adam has named the animals; thus, in some sense he is transcendent to them. He is not one of them; not one of them is his suitable counterpart. But he does recognize his essential likeness to the first woman. Adam can already distinguish what is like him from that which is not like him. It would seem that at this point, without the knowledge of good and evil, Adam “can evaluate the events that occur there [in the outside world]” (p. 91). Furthermore, in chapter 3 there is already a sense of right and wrong before eating of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.<sup>3</sup> Eve in conversation with the snake knows that she and Adam are not to eat of this tree and in fact have not done so. Their eating is not an inadvertent trespass; they deliberately do wrong.

The greatest difficulty with McIntyre’s understanding is his interpretation of the statement in Genesis 1 that humans were created in the image and likeness of God.

His claim is that only with the commission of sin (Gen. 3:6) “Adam had become a person, an image of God” (p. 91). He reconciles Gen. 1:26–27 with this claim by interpreting these verses as referring to what humans *came to be* rather than referring to how they were made. This does not seem to be the plain sense of the text, however.

First, there is no apparent indication that Gen. 1:26–27 contains “the history of Adam, Eve, and the image of God in one verse” (p. 91). The word *bara*, “create,” which is used here refers to the making of something initially, not to development. The simplest plain reading is that the “image and likeness” of God refers to the nature, the ontology, of humankind. So also Gen. 9:6 again states that God made humankind in the image and likeness of God. This basic nature of humanity, *all* humanity, gives human life its greatest value. From this vantage point, there were no humans that were *not* in the image and likeness of God.

Finally, and related to his whole argument from Genesis 1–3, it is recognized that humankind was quite distinct from the animals, and this distinction was related to being in the likeness and image of God. According to Hebrew grammar, Gen. 1:26 is best translated, “Let us make humankind in our image as our likeness so that he may govern ...” Humankind has a special task directly related to their being in God’s image. This task is directly commanded in verse 28.

What seems to be driving McIntyre’s interpretation, for which he also cites Calvin on Gen. 2:7, is the need for a “Fall.” Humans need to have a different nature after Genesis 1–2, after disobedience, than they did before. This, however, is a theological need driven by a doctrine of original sin. It is not a conclusion based on the text of Genesis 1–3. What is described here is the attainment of a capacity, not a change in nature.<sup>4</sup> From the beginning they had and retained the image and likeness of God.

It is the notion of the Fall that seems to me to contradict modern science. When McIntyre states: “Adam’s posterity, who have the same *Homo sapiens* nature as Adam” (p. 94), I wonder what genetically changed in the emergence of the species *Homo sapiens* that sets our nature apart from the forerunners

of Adam.<sup>5</sup> My alternative solution to the problem of the Fall and original sin would be that nothing changed. All humans, from the first "Adam" are regarded as bearing the image of God. Genesis 1-3 tells us about the nature of sin, how it came to be in the world, and what its effects were. It does not tell us about a change in the nature of the human being. ❁

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>A concern I have with McIntyre's essays is the apparent lack of historical perspective. From the standpoint of paleontology, the oldest human forms have not been found in Mesopotamia, which was apparently inhabited relatively late. Likewise, there were cities in the Ancient Near East long before 4000 BC; see Kenyon's work on ancient Jericho, for example. All of these humans, if I understand correctly, all that lived before 4000 BC were

sinless. Does this mean murder, theft, etc. were not then sins? Perhaps I have misunderstand this point.

<sup>2</sup>This is not a discussion about "objectivity" but simply a question regarding the process of interpretation—must an interpreter begin with the theological assumptions of the church and must interpretations agree with churchly positions. The history of Protestantism is founded on the notion of the freedom of interpretation from church authority—*sola scriptura*—which demands reason and depends on critical assessment and argument as part of the interpretive process. Of course, the church has resisted interpretative innovations that counter its doctrine just as it has resisted scientific ones.

<sup>3</sup>It should be noted that the Hebrew phrase *da'at tov v'era'* occurs outside of Genesis 1-3. It occurs in Deut. 1:39, referring to children who do not "know good and evil." Here the phrase seems to refer to a capacity gained in the course of life. In 2 Sam. 19:36, an old man can no longer distinguish "between good and evil." In this usage, it does not have a moral connotation.

<sup>4</sup>See the previous note.

<sup>5</sup>I am assuming that speciation is based on adequate genetic differentiation.

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## Books Received and Available for Review

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Contact the book review editor if you would like to review one of these books. Please choose alternate selections. Richard Ruble, Book Review Editor, *Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith*, 212 Western Hills Drive, Siloam Springs, AR 72761. richardanne@cox.net

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Doug Beason, *The E-Bomb: How America's New Directed Energy Weapons Will Change the Way Future Wars Will Be Fought*, Da Capo Press, 256 pages, 2005

Sigurd Bergmann, *Creation Set Free: The Spirit As Liberator of Nature*, Eerdmans, 390 pages, 2005

Mario Biagioli, *Galileo's Instruments of Credit: Telescopes, Images, Secrecy*, Univ. of Chicago Press, 300 pages, 2006

John Brockman, ed., *Intelligent Thought: Science Versus the Intelligent Design Movement*, Vintage Press, 256 pages, 2006

Celia Deane-Drummond, *Wonder and Wisdom: Conversations in Science, Spirituality, and Theology*, Templeton Foundation Press, 185 pages, 2006

William Dembski, ed., *Darwin's Nemesis: Phillip Johnson and the Intelligent Design Movement*, InterVarsity Press, 360 pages, 2006

Daryl Domning and Monika Hellwig, *Original Selfishness: Original Sin and Evil in the Light of Evolution*, Ashgate, 213 pages, 2006

John Ryan Duncan, *The Magic Never Ends: The Life and Words of C. S. Lewis*, Augsburg Books, 195 pages, 2006

Taner Edis, *Science and Nonbelief: Greenwood Guides to Science and Religion*, Greenwood Publishers Co., 285 pages, 2006

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James Walter and Thomas Shannon, *Contemporary Issues in Bioethics: A Catholic Perspective*, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 290 pages, 2005

Brent Waters, *From Human to Posthuman: Christian Theology and Technology in a Postmodern World*, Ashgate, 166 pages, 2006

George Yancey, *Beyond Racial Gridlock: Embracing Mutual Responsibility*, InterVarsity Press, 200 pages, 2006