

Darwin, Hubble, and God:
Exploring Theologies of “the Fall” in Light of Modern Science

Sheri Kling
Ph.D. student, Claremont Lincoln University

Abstract: In his book, *God After Darwin*, John Haught expresses the opinion that “to a great extent theologians still think and write almost as if Darwin had never lived.” The same could be said about the lack of theological response to the images of the Hubble telescope. This paper examines the work of contemporary theologians who have voiced ideas in response to what science is revealing about creation, human nature, and “the fall,” while making an attempt to articulate viable and compelling alternatives.

Keywords: evolution, theology, human nature, the fall, creation

Introduction

In her recent address to the Claremont School of Theology, Phyllis Tickle put on the table several key issues that must be addressed if the mainline church hopes to speak to the needs of those who are more aligned with the Emergent religious movement than they are with traditional organized religion. Primarily, she said, the church must compellingly describe the nature of both atonement and the human being, as well as provide some understanding of where God or Spirit is present visibly, corporately, and repeatedly in the world.¹

¹ Phyllis Tickle, “Emerging Christianity: An Interim Report” (presented at the Alumni/ae and Friends Day, Claremont School of Theology, March 21, 2012)

My own need to have these questions addressed became more pointed after I was mesmerized by an exhibit of images in Midway Airport in Chicago taken by the Hubble telescope. Waves of emotion flooded me as I stared into the birthplaces of stars. A later viewing of the Hubble 3D movie convinced me that here we humans are—a speck of dust species, on a speck of dust planet, in a speck of dust solar system, in a galaxy amongst an endless array of galaxies—and for us to even consider that anything we did thousands of years ago could, as Julian wrote Augustine, change “the structure of the universe”² by bringing death and suffering into the world through sin is as ludicrous an idea as was ever proposed. Moreover, in light of evolutionary theory, it is, as John Bimson suggests, “a nonsense.”³

In his book *God After Darwin*, John Haught writes that “evolution’s implications for theology are enormous,” and credits John Polkinghorne with expressing that “contemporary scientific advances in astronomy and physics place the whole story of life on our planet in an entirely new light.”⁴ Yet it seems that most Christians who accept evolution generally espouse fairly standard old-school theology; certainly nothing that is “dramatically changed” in light of evolution or recent discoveries in astronomy. Have they thought through the implications of natural selection? If evolution’s “elements of chance” and “blind selections in the unfolding of life” have the leading role, Haught argues, “the Darwinian picture makes traditional ideas of a caring and almighty God seem superfluous and possibly

² Elaine Pagels, *Adam, Eve, and the Serpent: Sex and Politics in Early Christianity* (New York: Vintage, 1989), 110

³ John J. Bimson, “Doctrines of the Fall and Sin After Darwin,” in *Theology After Darwin*, ed. R.J. Berry and Michael S. Northcott (Colorado Springs: Paternoster, n.d.), 113

⁴ John F. Haught, *God After Darwin: A Theology of Evolution*, Second ed. (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2007), 3

incoherent.”⁵ Yet, for the most part, Haught writes that theology has been “ill-prepared for evolution,” and has failed to “reflect deeply the divine pathos,” refusing to “recapture the tragic aspects of divine creativity.”⁶ Contemporary religious thought has yet to make a complete transition to a post-Darwinian world. To a great extent, theologians still think and write as though Darwin had never lived.”⁷

The silence of the mainstream church on these matters is deafening, and I think the longer we stay silent the more Americans will find no reason to go to church. Moreover, I think this silence has created a “less perfect union”—spiritually, politically, and ecologically. My goals in this paper are to survey recent scholarship, especially regarding the doctrine of “the fall” and theological anthropology and to outline four faulty assumptions we continue to make, which create an ever deeper divide between religion and science in America. Finally, I will offer some alternatives to these assumptions.

Incompatibility with the Traditional “Fall”

One of the areas most directly in conflict with evolution is the traditional understanding of “the fall.” As Bimson writes, “the evolution of Homo sapiens from more primitive hominids is incompatible with the idea that the first human beings fell from a state of perfection.”⁸ Neil Messer believes Darwinianism makes belief in a historical fall “implausible” and that it is “dauntingly difficult to attribute all of the world’s evil to original sin” because “the suffering, death, and extinction associated

⁵ Ibid, 3

⁶ Ibid, 6

⁷ Ibid, 2

⁸ Bimson, “Doctrines of the Fall and Sin After Darwin,” 106

with the evolutionary process went on for billions of years before humans appeared on the scene and started sinning.”⁹ Philip Clayton writes that a belief in a “primordial paradise...flies in the face of the bulk of what we have been able to ascertain about the nature of the biosphere.”¹⁰

Bimson lists Tillich, Hick, Brueggemann, and Southgate as those who see the fall as an analysis of the “universal human condition;” and Polkinghorne, Berry, Ward, Schwager, and Alexander as those who hold to a “historical fall” as “indispensable,” while he occupies a middle ground insisting the narrative is more substantive than an etiology that can be dismissed as primitive.¹¹ Ian Barbour describes humanity as falling short “of fulfilling our creative potentialities” and sees the Genesis story as a “powerful symbolic expression of human sinfulness, where sin is understood as self-centeredness and estrangement from God and other people—and, we might add, from the world of nature.”¹²

Yet the real theological hurdle is put in stark terms by Peter Bowler,

If Christians accepted that humanity was the product of evolution – even assuming that the process could be seen as the expression of the Creator’s will – then the whole idea of Original Sin would have to be reinterpreted. Far from falling from an original state of grace in the Garden of Eden, we have risen gradually from our animal origins. And if there was no Sin from which we needed salvation, what was the purpose of Christ’s agony on the cross? Christ became merely the perfect man who showed us what we could all hope to become when evolution finished its upward course. Small wonder that many conservative Christians—and not just the American

⁹ Neil Messer, “Natural Evil After Darwin,” in *Theology After Darwin*, ed. R.J. Berry and Michael S. Northcott (Colorado Springs, CO: Paternoster, 2009), 143

¹⁰ Philip D. Clayton, *God and Contemporary Science* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997), 39

¹¹ Bimson, “Doctrines of the Fall and Sin After Darwin,” 106–7

¹² Ian G. Barbour, *When Science Meets Religion: Enemies, Strangers, or Partners?* (New York: HarperCollins, 2000), 133

fundamentalists—argued that such a transformation had destroyed the very foundation of their faith.¹³

It is clear that we cannot skirt this question. In recent years, theologians have taken various perspectives on the creation story in the Garden, which I review below.

Theological Views of the Garden

Bimson helpfully points out in neither the Old Testament nor the New Testament is what happened in Gen. 3 ever referred to as a “fall.” The only place such language appears is in 4 Ezra, an apocryphal text, and there only to describe humans’ “fall from potential immortality.” On the other hand, it is clear the story “speaks of a real disruption at the start of the human story,” because, Bimson asserts, “things are not as God intended.” He believes that the theme of Genesis 3:11 shows that the “originating sin” became “original, that is, universal and inescapable...” and so “fall” language is appropriate.¹⁴ Yet he points out that what is “fallen” is often “essential;” that the “goodness” and the “fallenness” of creation are “entangled;” and that though they can be distinguished, they cannot be separated.¹⁵

If there were truly an “originating sin”—meaning an event that marked an ontological change from “pre-sin” humans to “post-sin” humans—when could this have happened? Scientists believe the universe was born almost 15 billion years ago¹⁶, that the Earth was formed 4.6 billion years ago, that multicellular life emerged 1 billion years ago, and that mammals developed about 65 million years ago. Our

¹³ R.J. Berry and Michael S. Northcott, eds., *Theology After Darwin* (Colorado Springs, CO: Paternoster, 2009), 2

¹⁴ Bimson, “Doctrines of the Fall and Sin After Darwin,” 109–10

¹⁵ Messer, “Natural Evil After Darwin,” 147–9

¹⁶ Sallie McFague, *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1993), 41

ancestors *Homo erectus* and *Homo neanderthalensis* appeared nearly two million years ago and anatomically modern humans a mere 200,000 years ago.¹⁷ Were Cro-Magnons sinners from the beginning? How about Neanderthals?

Philip Hefner “identifies sin with the conflict between information in the genes and that in culture,” but Barbour notes that “the problem with [Hefner’s] analysis is that it tends to make genes the source of evil and culture the source of good.”¹⁸ At the other end of the spectrum is David Griffin, who writes that our “fall into an alienated state” came with “the rise of civilization,” and that “this state of sin is inherited – more socially than biologically,”¹⁹ something I believe is reflected in both the Genesis and the Gilgamesh stories.

One common theological response to evolution regarding the fall is to force-fit scientific knowledge into pre-determined and pre-approved theological paradigms. Next, I look at some prime examples of this approach.

New Theology in Old Wineskins

There are several scholars who want to keep Adam and Eve in history, while dating our supposed genetic ancestors to a time when *Homo sapiens* were already “spread all around the globe.” Berry forces this theory by claiming that Adam “could be the spiritual founder of humankind, since the ‘spiritualness’ in us (i.e. God’s image) is not a genetic factor.” On this view, “God could have gone on to put his

¹⁷ Lynn Margulis and Dorion Sagan, *What Is Life?*, 1st ed. (Berkeley/Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2000), 62–80

¹⁸ Barbour, *When Science Meets Religion*, 143

¹⁹ David Ray Griffin, *Two Great Truths: A New Synthesis of Scientific Naturalism and Christian Faith* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 34

image into all members of the species *H. sapiens* alive at the time of Adam”²⁰ It appears that Berry is less concerned with spirit-body dualism than he is with holding on to his “Neolithic farmer” Adam.

There is also difficulty in justifying how human sin could have “distorted” the whole of creation such as to initiate “disease, floods, earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, animal predation, and parasitism,” or what is known as the “cosmic fall.” This theory, writes Bimson, “is in even deeper trouble from an evolutionary perspective than the human fall.” Yet, rather than leaving the notion of a cosmic fall in the theological dustbin, Lewis and Lloyd insist on salvaging it by assigning blame to “rebellious angels,” which, Bimson notes, “arguably creates more problems than it solves.”²¹ Our “better angels”—in the guises of Messer and Griffin, respectively—acknowledge that “setting up [certain theological questions] in the more familiar way too easily becomes part of the problem”²² and advise us to better distinguish between what Griffin calls “primary doctrines” and those “secondary” or even “tertiary” doctrines that are misrepresented as “essential parts of the Christian gospel.”²³ If we’re not going to force-fit reality into orthodoxy, what is our alternative? I think we must begin, first of all, to allow ourselves to question some basic theological assumptions.

²⁰ Bimson, “Doctrines of the Fall and Sin After Darwin,” 114

²¹ *Ibid*, 120

²² Messer, “Natural Evil After Darwin,” 147

²³ Griffin, *Two Great Truths*, 33

Assumption #1: That a “fallen” human nature is freely chosen vs. created imperfect

Polkinghorne believes humans consciously turned “away from God into the self” and “asserted” our “autonomy,”²⁴ Bimson, on the other hand, points to Schwager’s theory that humans chose an “unnatural” path of “newly expanded consciousness,”²⁵ and asserts that “autonomy, once gained, is clearly something the first human pair cannot handle,”²⁶ as if there were a “first human pair” on whose shoulders such a “decision” rested. Marjorie Suchocki delves into Augustinian territory, noting that our will is “divided,” and also “helpless.”²⁷

I agree with Clayton when he writes that “humans are morally and spiritually responsible before their Creator,” yet if sin is “universal” and “inescapable,” and humans are “helpless” in the face of it, was there ever really a choice? I’m not talking about our ability to choose or not choose to commit individual acts that are sinful but rather about our universal nature. And if the structure of human nature is such that we are incapable of being morally perfect because of a universal condition, then how could we be entirely at fault, and how could God’s response to us be anything other than compassionate? “The doctrine of grace,” writes Haught, “claims that God loves the world and all of its various elements fully and unconditionally,” and this love of God “longs for the beloved to be self-actualizing, so as to become more and more ‘other’ or differentiated...love brings with it a longing for the independence of

²⁴ Bimson, “Doctrines of the Fall and Sin After Darwin,” 116

²⁵ Ibid, 117–122

²⁶ Ibid, 112

²⁷ Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki, *The End of Evil: Process Eschatology in Historical Context* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1988), 11

that which is loved.”²⁸ I do not believe that God condemns our autonomy, but that God untiringly draws us toward reconnection out of pure and boundless compassion.

Assumption #2: That we must protect and defend God from responsibility for how things are

According to Barbour, “if we accept evolution, suffering and death cannot be viewed as consequences of Adam’s fall.”²⁹ Messer writes that “a world that can produce all the rich variety of life that we see in ours...has to be a world in which there is pain, violence, death and destruction. Even an all-powerful God could not cause such a rich variety of life to be made except by some kind of evolutionary process that inevitably has such evils associated with it.”³⁰ From another perspective, D.Z. Phillips calls it a “confusion” to assume that “God is a moral agent who shares a moral community with us, so that we can call God to account in terms of the moral standards and criteria that operate within the creaturely world that we inhabit, and we can make judgments about the moral character of God just as we would of a human being.” If we speak of God in those terms, we’ll be “speaking of the greatest being *in* the universe, not the transcendent Creator *of* the universe”³¹ (a lesson ultimately learned by Job).

Southgate points out that both Whitehead’s God as “one entity among others” and Wildman’s “ground of being, the origin of both the beauty and the violence of the cosmos” incur “unacceptably high costs for Christian theology” and

²⁸ Haught, *God After Darwin*, 43

²⁹ Barbour, *When Science Meets Religion*, 152

³⁰ Messer, “Natural Evil After Darwin,” 144. He includes Peacocke, Rolstono, Tracy, and Attfield.

³¹ *Ibid*, 145–6

that these are “road(s) not to be taken.”³² I think it is more “unacceptable” to insist humans must take the “forensic” approach as if we were “God’s defense counsel, trying to get God acquitted of all charges.”³³

Assumption #3: That God made Creation for us, according to our definitions of “good”

For those who want to connect Darwinian biological evolution with a Christian doctrine of creation, Messer notes that, “at the very least” they must also be committed to “the conviction that the world which God made and pronounced ‘very good’ [in Gen 1:31] is a world that has a process of evolution built into it.”³⁴ But what did that “very good” actually mean? Quoting Rogerson, Bimson asserts that it does not mean “devoid of harms or disvalues” but that it more likely means “good for achieving its purpose.”³⁵ Since the struggle for existence is what creates life, Southgate concludes that “the ‘good’ and the ‘groaning’ in God’s creation are both outcomes of the evolutionary process, inseparably bound together.”³⁶

Drawing from process thought, Haught notes that “as the ultimate source of novelty in evolution, God must also be the cause of instability and disorder, conditions essential to life,” and affirms that “God is more interested in adventure than in preserving the status quo.”³⁷ He believes God seeks beauty, but this beauty is more about intensity and the “harmony of contrasts” than it is about only what *we* might find aesthetically pleasing.

³² Ibid, 143

³³ Ibid, 146

³⁴ Ibid, 140

³⁵ Bimson, “Doctrines of the Fall and Sin After Darwin,” 27

³⁶ Messer, “Natural Evil After Darwin,” 151

³⁷ Haught, *God After Darwin*, 46

I think that we are being naïve if we do not note that it is God who proclaims the creation to be good in Genesis, not the created humans. We must be willing to accept that God may have had other purposes in mind than creating a human life devoid of pain when God created the universe. God created for God's sake, not for our sake and I think it's time we completed the Copernican revolution, and kicked ourselves out of the center of the universe. I find it more compelling to consider that God's purposes for creation and God's purposes for salvation may be radically different.

Consider this: if it took over 14 billion years to go from the start of creation to the emergence of human life, then I am unconvinced that we can say that God created the universe for the sole purpose of having a relationship with humans. I might speculate that God created for God's own adventure, then absolutely fell in love with the life that emerged and so continues to meet that life in every way possible to help us in our suffering, and to help us see the unity that lies behind the multiplicity. Of course, any attempt to articulate God's purposes for creation are entirely speculative, and should always be acknowledged as such, but many of us can attest to God's saving and transformative activity in the world right now.

Assumption #4: That God expects us to be "perfect"

Clayton wrote in 1997 that "fallenness expresses a characteristic of humanity that is dependent on a 'vertical' comparison: the contrast with moral perfection, instantiated (according to the Christian tradition) in a morally perfect being. It is only the vertical dimension that...[indicates that our actions] go against the

fundamental moral order of the universe.”³⁸ The social sciences, he writes, support that we are marred by a “pervasive selfishness and dishonesty even to ourselves” and that “there is no health within us.”³⁹ There is no denying that we are just as likely to choose what is life-destroying as what is life-giving. “I have set before you life and death...choose life”; yet we are often incapable of doing so. But is perfection what God expects of humans?

Haught believes that “an initial creation, one already finished and perfected from the beginning, could not be a creation truly distinct from its creator. Such a ‘world’ would simply be an appendage of God, not a world unto itself...it would be a world without internal self-coherence, freedom, or a future, and, above all, it would be a world devoid of life. By definition, living beings must continually transcend, or go beyond, themselves.”⁴⁰ He continues, “If the universe is still unfinished, however, then we cannot demand that it should here and now possess the status of finished perfection.” At the same time, he writes that this “imperfect” world cries out “for completion of creation.”⁴¹

Conclusion

For Christians, that completion comes to us in the Christ – the pattern for wholeness, the *Imago Dei*—that Teilhard de Chardin believed dove deep into matter at its beginning—while still the “transcendent center” that is drawing the material

³⁸ Clayton, *God and Contemporary Science*, 41

³⁹ *Ibid*, 42

⁴⁰ Haught, *God After Darwin*, 40–1

⁴¹ *Ibid*, 41

creation toward its completion, or “convergence” in God.⁴² Teilhard saw God “living in His creatures: in matter, giving it existence...in humans, giving them intelligence.”⁴³ Clayton believes “God is fully immanent in the world,” that, in fact, we are “‘composed’ out of him who is Being itself,”⁴⁴ and Catholic theologian Karl Rahner thought it “central” to Christian faith “that the infinite mystery of God pours itself generously, fully, and without reservation into the creation.”⁴⁵

How might our union be more “perfect” if the mainline church were to teach that theological anthropology? If our theology recognized the beauty and terror of Creation as the Reality that comes to us without labeling it “fallen,” and if we accepted life and death, order and disorder, as a “harmony of contrasts” and not a mistake, might we not be more spiritually mature? If we accepted embodiment (historically associated with the feminine principle) as “good,” seeing all creation as sacred, might we be less inclined to objectify and dominate women and the earth? And if we focused more on sanctification rather than justification might we be able to recognize our capacity for transformation and inner wholeness without requiring perfection? And might that not lead us toward increasing capacities for self-governance rather than requiring external father figures in church and government? If we could do this, then I believe, with Aubrey Moore, that we just might see Darwin “as a savior of good theology” who “appeared, and, under the guise of a foe, did the work of a friend.” Darwinianism, he wrote, “has conferred upon philosophy and

⁴² David Grumett, “Natural Theology After Darwin: Contemplating the Vortex,” in *Theology After Darwin*, ed. R.J. Berry and Michael S. Northcott (Colorado Springs, CO: Paternoster, 2009), 164

⁴³ *Ibid*, 168

⁴⁴ Clayton, *God and Contemporary Science*, 47

⁴⁵ Haight, *God After Darwin*, 80

religion an inestimable benefit, by showing that we must choose between two alternatives: either God is everywhere present in nature or [God] is nowhere.”⁴⁶

⁴⁶ Berry and Northcott, *Theology After Darwin*, 191

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