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**Christianity in Evolution: An Exploration**

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When Georgetown University Press was considering the publication of my new book, *Christianity in Evolution: An Exploration*, it obtained positive judgments on it from three experts in the field, which I considered a great honour and, I may add, something of a relief. To one of those scholars who commended the book I was doubly grateful, because he found a phrase which I thought captured beautifully my aim in writing the book, when he wrote that it “represents a new stage in the encounter of theology with evolutionary thinking.” Before this, almost all of the modern Christian writing about evolution has been concerned with what I call post-evolutionary apologetics, with the work of such Christians as McGrath, Polkinghorne and Ward aimed at rebutting attacks on Christianity from, I will not say, evolution, but from some militant evolutionists. The aim of such apologetics is to defend the existence of God, the providence of God, and the unique status of God’s human creatures in an evolutionary context. By contrast, the purpose of my book is to move well beyond this defensive approach to Christianity, and to explore positively the impact which accepting evolution has on Christian beliefs and doctrines as a whole. Hence my pleasure that one of the publisher’s reviewers recognised that my book “represents a new stage in the encounter of theology with evolutionary thinking.”

I

In such an encounter of theology with evolutionary thinking I suggest that the major Christian doctrine which seems most likely to be affected is the Incarnation, the traditional belief that God became a member of the human species, since a major question which arises within the context of evolution concerns the divine purpose of the incarnation and the evolutionary role and significance of Jesus Christ. To explore this, probably the most productive place to start in evolution is one major concern which is experienced within evolution itself by many modern sociobiologists: how to account for the presence of altruism within the human species. The term “altruism,” or concern for others, was introduced by the nineteenth century sociologist, Auguste Comte, to contrast with the idea of egoism, or self-centredness; and according to Dixon, “Comte trumpeted it as one of his great scientific discoveries that humans were innately altruistic”, as contrasted with “the traditional theological teaching that humans were innately selfish and sinful”.[[1]](#endnote-2) However, one of the leading modern sociobiologists, E. O. Wilson, judged that “the central theoretical problem of socio-biology” is “how can altruism, which by definition reduces personal fitness, possibly evolve by natural selection”;[[2]](#endnote-3) or, as he expanded it, how can one explain in evolutionary terms “the surrender of personal genetic fitness for the enhancement of personal genetic fitness in others”.[[3]](#endnote-4) Other sociobiologists, however, maintain that genuine altruism, or generosity with no self-interest involved, is part of ordinary human experience at its best, and cannot be ignored for purely ideological reasons. As Stephen Pope concluded, “a great deal of human experience seems to make sense only if human nature has evolved in such a way as to include not only egoistic inclinations but also capacities for genuine altruism and related affective capacities like empathy, sympathy, and compassion”.[[4]](#endnote-5)

Building on this, I have developed a Christian theology of altruism, explaining that for Christians the prime source of all generosity is to be found in God, where it begins with the mutual altruism of the persons in the Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, towards each other. It is in the image of this divine mutual altruism that the human species is created (Gen 1:26) and such all-encompassing divine generosity is held out to humans to imitate in all their behaviour. In this they are invited to follow the example of Jesus, who, in the words of Paul, is *the* image of God (Col 1:15), and the one to whose image his fellow-humans are predestined to be conformed (Rom 8.29). Jesus became a member of the human species to exemplify in human terms God’s own altruism towards us, and to teach us to imitate it in behaving altruistically towards God and one other. Jesus’s teaching on what altruism, or neighbour-love involves, and his personal example of accepting even death to show his own love for his Father and his fellow-humans, can thus be seen as a major evolutionary step in the moral advancement of humanity, and an indication that universal altruism is the evolutionary invitation and destiny of the human species.

This altruistic leadership given by Jesus to his fellow-humans, however, is by no means the only, or even the main, purpose of the incarnation viewed in an evolutionary framework. It has been a serious weakness of some even Christian thinkers to regard Jesus as merely an outstanding moral exemplar to be imitated by others, like Socrates or Ghandi, whereas the primary evolutionary achievement of Jesus, I argue, was vastly more than that. It was something which he uniquely brought about, entering the human species and confronting death, the universal evolutionary experience of all living things. In overcoming his own death and rising from the dead Jesus performed an act of cosmic significance: he won through to a new phase of human existence into which he could then usher his fellow-humans, in which they were destined to share fully in the inner richness of God’s own life.

II

From an evolutionary point of view, then, the primary purpose of the incarnation, the entry of God into the human species, was to enable Jesus, through his own death and his resurrection to a new life, to save his fellow-humans from individual extinction and meaninglessness, and in association with him share in the divine Trinitarian life which has always been God’s loving evolutionary design for his human creatures. Such an evolutionary scenario, however, raises several major question marks rising from a number of Christianity’s traditional beliefs and doctrines. Especially, in the first place, questions arise relating to the doctrines of original sin and of the fall of humanity from divine friendship, and of humanity’s continuing moral vulnerability which we know as fallen nature and the doctrine of human concupiscence. Moreover, consequent on the questioning raised by the doctrines of original sin and the fall of our first parents and all their descendants, issues also logically arise about the belief that God became human precisely so that Jesus could atone for humanity’s disobedience by sacrificing himself in atonement to his Father, thus making up for Adam’s defiance and restoring the earlier friendship between humanity and God.

As one examines this interconnected cluster of traditional Christian doctrines, one central element which emerges clearly is the universal message of the New Testament that Jesus died to save us from our sins, which is not at all the same as the evolutionary proposal I have outlined that Jesus died to save us, not from sin but from death. Yet there is an intriguing connection between original sin as it figures in the Bible and the human experience of death. It is not too strong to say that the Christian Bible, especially the Old Testament, is preoccupied with sin and all its consequences, including its regular recourse to sin-sacrifices; and it appears that all this stems from an early Israelite attempt to explain the occurrence of human death. Why should the human intelligent beings created by a loving God die, as they obviously and inevitably did? The simple answer proposed in Israelite culture and explored in the Hebrew Bible, and in turn inherited by Christianity, is that death came about through humanity’s own fault, because the earliest humans sinned in disobeying God. As Genesis put it starkly in its account of creation, God forbade Adam and Eve to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, and threatened them that “in the day that you eat of it you shall die” (Gen 2:17). Much later the Book of Wisdom was to point out (2:23–4) that God “made us in the image of his own eternity, but through the devil’s envy [seducing Eve] death entered into the world.” Death is thus viewed throughout the Bible as the divinely-imposed penalty for a human sin of disobedience, summed up by Paul in his observation that “death is the wages of sin” (Rom 6:23).

With the development, however, of a theory of evolution, the death of all living things, not just humans, is recognised as part of the process of ongoing creation through the survival of the fittest. Consequently, there is no further need to conjecture another explanation for human death, as we find in the traditional doctrine of its being a punishment for an original sin committed by our protoparents. Scholars commenting on the story of the alleged fall of humanity in Genesis describe it as “aetiological”, which is a common feature of the Hebrew Bible aiming to explain, or give the cause, or in the Greek “aetia”, of various Israelite phenomena and features. J. A. Fitzmeyer is not alone in referring to the third chapter of Genesis involving the human creation and fall from grace as an “etiological story” that is, one made up to explain the origin of various features of creation, including the advent of death.[[5]](#endnote-6)

In addition to there being no further need to postulate those traditional Christian beliefs in original sin and the fall of human nature, as well as the belief in the death of Jesus as an atoning sacrifice to restore the friendship between God and his fallen human creatures, it is also widely recognised, moreover, that over the centuries serious inherent difficulties have been experienced concerning those beliefs themselves. I have explored this in detail in my book, but it must suffice in this lecture to offer just two important instances. The first concerns a phrase in Paul’s letter to the Romans which was fatally misunderstood by St Augustine of Hippo, and became the foundation of Western Christianity’s whole theological construction of original sin and the fall of human nature. Writing to the Christians in Rome, Paul was at pains to establish in Romans 5:12, that “sin came into the world through one man, and death came through sin, and so death came to all because all have sinned”. That phrase “*because* all have sinned” is the New RSV translation of Paul’s Greek phrase *eph ho*, which literally means “since when”, or “as a result of which” all have sinned. However, the Old Latin Translation of the New Testament, which Augustine and his contemporaries used (he had little Greek), translated Paul’s words *eph ho* as “in quo”, or “in whom,” leading Augustine to understand that everyone born after Adam had sinned “*in* Adam”. From this Augustine developed his theology of the corporate solidarity of all subsequent men and women “in” Adam, their first parent, thus involving all human beings, indeed, involving human nature as a whole, in Adams own fall from grace. Hence the melancholy conclusion which Western Christianity has held for centuries that since Adam all subsequent human beings start life as a miserable lot of sinners, what Augustine called a *massa damnata*, a “condemned lump”[[6]](#endnote-7), for whom only an atoning sacrifice on the part of Jesus – and the sacrament of baptism – would secure God”s forgiveness.

As the renowned patristic scholar, J. N. D. Kelly, concluded, the Old Latin version of the New Testament (which had influence only in the West), gave “an exegesis of Rom 5,12 which, though mistaken and based on a false reading, was to become the pivot of the doctrine of original sin”.[[7]](#endnote-8) Augustine himself, under severe pressure from his Pelagian critics, found himself denying vehemently that he had “invented original sin”. [[8]](#endnote-9) He was protesting too much. Edward Yarnold expressed the views of many scholars when he observed of Augustine in his book, *The Theology of Original Sin*, that “the “traditional Catholic expression . . . [of original sin] is to a large extent that saint’s thought”.[[9]](#endnote-10) The conclusion must be that there is no evidence in the Bible to justify what became after Augustine the traditional Christian doctrine of original sin and of humankind’s sharing a fallen human nature, which required sacrificial atonement on the part of Jesus, as Augustine and others found themselves led to explain.[[10]](#endnote-11) This conclusion makes all the more attractive the alternative evolutionary theology I have sketched of the incarnation and of the evolutionary achievement of Jesus.

The second major instance I want to mention of the serious difficulties and questioning arising from the traditional network of Christian beliefs starting with original sin and ending in the atoning sacrifice of Jesus, relates to the theology of satisfaction which was developed to explain how Jesus became man to restore the friendship between God and his fallen human creatures. Early patristic attempts to explain how the reversal of humanity’s alleged sinful state was achieved had included bizarre theories involving God’s paying a ransom of Christ’s blood to the Devil to win back the human race which had fallen under Satan’s power, as I explain in my book. A more intellectually respectable theory was proposed in the eleventh century by Anselm, Archbishop of Canterbury, which removed the Devil from the scene and concentrated on a legal argument based on justice. Anselm maintained that there was a need to make restitution to God for the massive dishonour and injustice which had been committed against him by the first humans in disobeying his divine command. Only God himself could bring about such a momentous atonement, it was maintained, and this he did by crossing the dividing line between God and humanity and becoming a man precisely in order to offer himself in sacrifice to propitiate his Father for humanity’s early sin.

This Anselmian theory has held sway for centuries in theology, figuring in the Catholic Council of Trent and surviving to the 1994 *Catholic Catechism* and its explanation (no 615) that “Jesus atoned for our faults and made satisfaction for our sins to the Father.” Yet there is something disturbing, even disquieting, in the idea of Jesus literally offering himself as a sacrifice and a sin-offering to God on Calvary, and somehow or other in that way restoring God’s dignity and honour, thus making up for the insult offered to God by Adam and all of the human race which existed “in” him. Of course, once one dispenses with the belief in original sin and fallen human nature as biblically unwarranted, there is no further need to devise a way of remedying it. Even without that, however, no consideration was ever given to the startling counter-suggestion of Peter Abelard in what I find the most breath-taking question in the whole of theology, “Why did God not just forgive Adam?”[[11]](#endnote-12) And quite apart from all the unpalatable features of the primitive idea of propitiatory sacrifice, the satisfaction theory of redemption to undo the Fall seems to smack too easily of the salving of hurt pride, and with its emphasis on justice leaves no room for mercy on the part of God, except once the divine honour has been satisfied.

Considering these and the other problems arising from the network of traditional Christian beliefs ranging from the Fall through to the Atonement, it is something of a theological relief to be released from having to subscribe to such doctrines, and to accept the evolutionary proposals that I have earlier described. In his famous contribution to modern theology, the need for demythologization, Rudolf Bultmann highlighted the need to move away today from the outdated mythology which was developed in a pre-scientific age to proclaim the Word of God.[[12]](#endnote-13) As I mentioned earlier, ancient Israel was deeply concerned about the phenomenon of human death and extinction, and how to account for it alongside a belief in a provident Creator. It contrived to do this by mythologizing death, turning it from a physical puzzle which they were at a loss to account for into a religious myth; and this was carried over into Christianity. Today, however, we are in a better scientific position to account for the phenomenon of death, seeing it as an essential stage in biological development and a step in the process of “natural selection” among all living entities, not just humans. We can therefore de-mythologize death, and dispense with the need to postulate a divinely inflicted punishment for an initial act of human disobedience. As a consequence we can also dismantle the massive theological structure which has resulted from the mythologizing of death, including: original justice, or “pre-fallen” innocent human existence; the nature of the “original” sin; and the consequent permanent “fallen” state of human nature into which all humans are thought to be born as a result; and finally the succession of theological attempts devised to explain how the mythological sinful predicament of “fallen” humanity was to be remedied by an incarnate God.

III

The consequences of accepting evolution can also be identified on other traditional Christian beliefs, including the doctrines relating to the Church, the Sacraments and Christian morality. Beginning with the Church, the evolutionary achievement of Jesus as incarnate God, as I have explained, was to confront and defeat death, and so usher the human species into a new phase of existence surviving death with him. John Macquarrie expressed this well, in commenting on the theology of Friedrich Schleiermacher, when he explained that “Christ himself is to be understood not just as the individual Jesus of Nazareth but already as the beginning of a new community into which individuals are constantly ‘incorporated’”.[[13]](#endnote-14) In other words, the achievement of Jesus in breaking through death to a new phase of life is shared by him with all those who strive to live according to his message of universal altruism and are thus accepted into his evolutionary fellowship. This community of humans in the process of being saved from death by Jesus is what we understand as the Church, the human species raised to a new level of existence and moral activity as an eschatological community of humans, already existing now but to be fulfilled in the afterlife.

Moving to consider the impact of evolution on the Christian sacraments, and beginning with the Eucharist, quite apart from arguing on evolutionary grounds as I have done to dispense with the need for recourse to expiatory sacrifice to atone for the alleged fall of humanity, a detailed study of the four New Testament accounts of the Last Supper as the origin of the sacrament of the Eucharist does not bear out the view that it took the form of a propitiatory sacrifice, as the Council of Trent maintained against the Reformers; and analysis of the documents of Trent itself throws doubt on the force of its own argument in defence of the sacrificial aspect of the Mass.[[14]](#endnote-15) However, the sacramental nature of the Eucharist finds a central evolutionary role as an inspiring community ritual in celebrating the continuing presence of the risen Christ, saving his fellows from mortality and regularly contributing to their increasing communion with a loving God.

The Sacrament of baptism remains within an evolutionary context the rite of initiation into God’s people, and the water symbolism retains the idea of life and the power of the Spirit; but the idea of being washed clean of the stain of original sin loses its relevance. The Sacrament of Penance, however, remains highly relevant as the recognition of personal sinfulness and the need to be reconciled to God and the community, in the event of having committed a serious breach with God or one’s fellows through ignoring the calls of altruism and giving way to the self-interest which is central to the whole process of evolution. The only other sacrament which appears to require re-evaluation as a result of accepting evolution is that of sacred orders, or priesthood. In the light of dispensing with the idea of sacrifice, priesthood can develop, as intimated by the Second Vatican Council, more in terms of Eucharistic and pastoral leadership within the evolutionary community.[[15]](#endnote-16) In addition, once the idea is accepted of the celebrant of the Eucharist ceasing to act “in the person of Christ” in offering sacrifice to God, this also removes whatever theological ground there was for restricting ordination to men and excluding women from the priesthood. And this raises a final thought concerning the sacraments, that the possible ecumenical implications of evolutionary modifications of Catholic sacramental doctrine should be acknowledged, and that Christians can now be further motivated to transcend historical differences in accepting a fresh stimulus from evolutionary study.

Accepting evolution also appears to have significant consequences for Christian morality. For one thing, the idea of social Darwinism, or of our being morally obliged to favour only those of our fellows who are most likely to survive, while abandoning the weaker members of our species, is a view which Darwin himself completely rejected and which many scholars agree is totally fallacious. Darwin’s champion, Thomas Huxley, put the matter cogently when he argued that ethical behaviour “is directed not so much to the survival of the fittest, as to the fitting of as many as possible to survive. It repudiates the gladiatorial theory of existence”.[[16]](#endnote-17) More positively, what I have earlier suggested about altruism provides an all-embracing moral orientation of human behaviour within an evolutionary context, while still leaving such behaviour to be determined and specified in a multitude of ways according to circumstances. In addition, given the continuing, and indeed renewed, concern in the Catholic Church to maintain the natural law tradition as a source for identifying moral obligations, now that we understand human nature in an evolutionary perspective, rather than perceiving it in a static, fixed and unhistorical way, differing moral conclusions may be expected to emerge from the natural law. A case in point may be human sexuality. We can conjecture that this began in our animal forebears as the instinctive drive to reproduction which became adapted in their case to the need to provide an extended caring environment for offspring which required considerable time to develop. With the progress to hominization, or to becoming fully human, this sustained mutual support of parents for each other, which initially helped them bring up their children together, came to be appreciated as human values in their own right, expanding beyond the physical process of reproduction and upbringing to become a medium of inter-personal communication and sharing within a wide variety of personal and social contexts. Human sexuality was no longer simply animal sexuality. It had evolved into human sexual companionship, which could contribute to the personal and social enhancement of the individual persons involved. Thus, with evolution, this relationship between fully fledged persons is now capable of being exercised in numerous ways in society. This occurs most evidently in still sharing the capacity for the loving reproduction and upbringing of children, but now it is also capable of finding expression in a range of personal and social contexts through other forms of relationship between the sexes which express and are influenced by their mutual interest and attraction.

IV

As I survey the ways in which I propose that evolution has affected traditional Christian beliefs, I have little doubt that at least some of what I have argued for could alarm or distress a number of Christian believers and elicit strong objections. Perhaps in what I have written and said, the two proposals most susceptible to such a strong possible reaction concern my abolition of original sin and fallen human nature, and the doing away with the propitiatory sacrifice offered by Jesus on Calvary to redeem a fallen humanity. In response to the first objection, I cannot stress sufficiently that I do not consider that I am doing away with sin, or going soft on sin. With evolution, however, we do not now need the biblical tale of how sin originated with Adam, nor do we need the Augustinian doctrine that it resulted in fallen nature, a permanent disposition to sin on the part of all of Adam’s descendants. It is sufficient to recognise that as limited, evolving and often competing human beings, members of the human species are all prone to self-concern, and even self-absorption to the disregard or expense of their fellows, and have been so from the start, not just since some primordial moral disaster. Stephen Pope put the point well when he observed that “evolution undercuts any assumption that we ought to strive to return to an original moral order. There is no reason to think that there was ever a time when we were not conflictual, manipulative, selfish and prone to deceit and violence – as well as cooperative, generous, empathetic, and altruistic”.[[17]](#endnote-18) Indeed, evolution provides us with a deeper and more satisfying understanding of what sin is, rather than disobedience to the command of God, as Genesis depicted it. Now sin emerges, as Daly expressed it, as in essence “a refusal to love”.[[18]](#endnote-19) It is an unwillingness to accept God’s plan for human development and living; it is a preference for self and one’s own interests over those of one’s fellows; it is a refusal to accept the image of God’s own altruism which is sown in our human nature at creation, and which continually prompts us to share our personal and social resources generously with others.

So far as concerns objections to my dispensing with viewing the death of Jesus on Calvary as a propitiatory sacrifice offered to God to redeem humanity, I hope it is clear that I still maintain that in God’s evolutionary providence Jesus died on Calvary out of love to save humanity. His purpose was not to save us from original sin however, and placate God, for which there was no need, but to save humanity from individual death and meaningless, by conquering death and in his resurrection leading his fellow-humans to a new phase of evolutionary existence with a loving God.

In this, as in so many other ways, I suggest, recognising evolution and exploring its impact on Christian beliefs can be, not a weakness and impoverishment of doctrine, but an actual enriching of it. Belief in an evolutionary creation by God can provide a deeper appreciation of the mutual altruism of the Trinity of divine persons as continually at work undergirding the infinity of detail involved in evolution, and directing it to its evolutionary destiny of humanity sharing fully in God’s own life. The challenging of death by Jesus and sharing his victory with the rest of human creation can only serve to strengthen belief in the divinity as well as the humanity of Jesus. In freely choosing to submit to the hostility of his fellows, intent on killing him, rather than renege on his mission to bring his people to a true worship of a loving God, he was not reconciling an estranged humanity to an offended and displeased God; he was providing an inspiring instance and symbol of divine-human altruism, conducting the evolving human species through death to the prospect of an ever closer communion with the divine life. And invitation through Jesus for men and women to imitate God”s own altruism in all their behaviour provides not just one aspect of the good moral life; it constitutes the whole of human morality .

In conclusion, what I have tried to explore in my book and briefly summarise in this lecture is the impact of evolution on traditional Christian beliefs, in other words, construct a theology of evolution. In so doing I am offering a sustained example of the way in which I have come over the years to work out what theology does, or what is the purpose of theology. Many of us will be acquainted with the definition of theology which Anselm of Canterbury offered when he wrote that theology consists of “faith seeking understanding”; that is, our religious belief urging us to increase our intellectual grasp of who God is, and of what God is doing. Important as this definition is, it risks turning theology into a sort of sheer intellectual exercise, and of abstracting it from the reality of life. What I have come to appreciate over the years is that our religious belief needs to be linked not only with our thinking, but even more with our actual experience; so much so that I think of theology as exploring the connection between our religious beliefs and our experiences. Does what Christians believe throw light on their human experience and enrich it by putting it in a context of faith? Likewise, does Christians’ experience, whether daily or over the years, contribute anything to their faith, confirming it or deepening it, or does their experience lead them to doubt or to deny what they believe, or are invited to believe? In other words, as I explain in several of my writings, including this latest, theology involves a dialectic between faith and experience; it consists of trying to make experience-sense of faith and faith-sense of experience. This latest book of mine is an attempt to construct a Christian theology of evolution by bringing together the experience of evolutionary science and Christian belief and seeking to develop a constructive relationship between the two, both finding a place in evolution for Christian faith, and also exploring the impact of evolution on Christian beliefs. I hope people will find it interesting.

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