

HUMAN ORIGINS: SCIENTIFIC THEORIES AND CHRISTIAN THEOLOGIES

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I. Purposes of the Presentation

- A. to consider the variety of Christian views vs. simplistic polarizations
- B. to explore the relations among theories of origins and theological readings of Genesis
- C. not to make an official public statement but to initiate discussion

II. Types of Explanations of Origins

A. *Interventionist*: Involves special creative acts of God; supernatural/miraculous in that God adds to or transforms the current state of nature

1. *Recent creation*: scientific evidence favors recent origins; skepticism about dating methods; microevolution is possible, but macroevolution is not

2. *Ancient or progressive creation*: scientific evidence for old universe, earth, life, and many kinds of creatures, as well as large-scale microevolution; many regard macroevolution as a debatable theory, not established fact, and regard evolution as currently insufficient to explain some complexities, especially in humans; some do affirm biological evolution, including human ancestors

B. *Non-interventionist*: God has programmed or providentially guides natural processes to evolve; possibly miraculous if God actualizes statistical improbabilities within nature (not supernaturally)

1. *Theistic biological evolution*: macroevolution of living things including the human organism; science cannot determine the origin of the soul/spirit (open to special creation of humans)

2. *Theistic human evolution*: humans, body and soul, are the product of macroevolution. Soul is either a set of capacities of the organism/brain (*physicalism*) or a contingently distinct entity that emerges from the organism (*emergentism*). This explanation is philosophical as well as scientific.

C. Aside on Intelligent Design. All 4 theories can affirm some version of ID. ID is legitimate as philosophy, if not as science.

III. Types of Theological Readings of Genesis

A. *Literal-historical-theological*. Events occurred exactly as written in the divinely-inspired text, which implies that God miraculously created different kinds 6-25 thousand years ago. Humans were created as body and soul, sinless and non-mortal. Sin and mortality are consequences of the fall.

B. *Literary-historical-theological*. Genesis is divinely-inspired history written in terms relevant to ancient near-eastern religions, cosmology, and literary style. It is history narrated with some figurative and symbolic components. Standard theological reading: The creation of humans involves supernatural action in nature. Humans were created, body and soul, sinless and non-mortal. Human sinfulness and mortality were consequences of the fall, not of original human nature. Minority theological readings: non-interventionist creation of humans; spiritual alienation and death is caused by sin, but physical death is natural even for humans

C. *Literary-symbolic-theological*. Early Genesis is divinely-inspired ancient near-eastern religious poetry and mythology (figurative truth); it teaches about human nature, not history. Humans were created by God both good and in his image and as mortal, fallible beings.

D. Observations

1. Different views of divine inspiration of Scripture.
2. B and C read Genesis in terms of ancient world-views and literary genres.
3. A and B imply supernatural intervention for human origins. C is open on this point.
4. A and B affirm the historical sequence of a good creation and a subsequent fall. C does not regard the creation-fall sequence as historical or human death and our sinful nature as avoidable consequences of a free choice.

IV. Types of Theological Worldviews

A. Augustinian. Creation, fall, redemption, consummation. Special creation of humanity; destruction and death may be part of nature and animal life as created; humans were created able to sin and die but not mortal and sinful. E.g. Kuyperian Calvinism and Neo-Thomism

B. Neoplatonic (panentheistic). Creation/fall, alienation, reconciliation, consummation. The Divine One manifests itself in a hierarchical diversity of creatures that exemplify complex dialectical combinations of being and non-being. The polarity of being and non-being in creatures inevitably causes tension, alienation, and degeneration. But the same process generates progressively higher levels of existence, harmony, and unity as the Divine draws all things back toward itself. For humans this means that death and moral-spiritual ambivalence are inherent in our original nature but can be transcended through a divinely-enabled process of reconciliation with all things and mystical union with the Divine.

Neoplatonism was a minority position during Christendom but re-emerged in the Renaissance, Deism, and German Romanticism. During the 18th C., the "Great Chain of Being" was horizontalized and historicized, and the Divine was partially located within the universe. This implied progressive theistic evolution of creatures generations before Darwin. Schleiermacher, Hegel, and Coleridge expounded Christianized versions. Teilhard, Tillich, Pannenberg, Moltmann, Barbour, Griffin, Peacocke, Clayton, and Polkinghorne ("dialectical theism") are diverse contemporary examples of this tradition. It asserts that human evolution from mortality to eternal life in God is the central trajectory of cosmic history, which is also the creative-redemptive history of God's self-actualization in Christ & the Trinity. (My opinion: Not Kuyperian Calvinism but some versions affirm Nicene-Chalcedonian orthodoxy.)

C. Modernist. Naturalism/supernatural duality. Cf. Kant's phenomenal/noumenal distinction and Bultmann's factual vs. existential truth. Life in this world operates according to the modern understanding of nature, history, and morality. Biblical truth does not conflict with modern knowledge (a principle also held by most modern Christian panentheism). God, Jesus, revelation, salvation, and the Kingdom of God are existential and/or spiritual realities that challenge mere this-worldly existence but do not involve the natural order. Redemptive history and world history are different dimensions of reality. Modernist theology does not challenge theistic versions of human evolution.

V. Typical Combinations of Readings of Genesis, Theology, and Theory of Origins

A. Literal-historical-theological readings require Augustinian theology and a recent creation.

B. Literary-historical-theological readings strongly imply Augustinian theology; they are compatible with ancient creation and with biological evolution that can admit special creation and the historic fall of humans. Readings of Genesis compatible with Neoplatonic (e.g. evolution from mortality to immortality) or modernist theology (e.g. physical death is natural, the fall resulted in spiritual death) or with complete human evolution are difficult to sustain using this biblical hermeneutics.

C. Literary-symbolic-theological readings are compatible with many positions but are almost always correlated with (Neoplatonic and modernist) theological positions and theories of human origins that do not affirm special creation and a historic fall.

VI. The Position of the CRC Synod of 1991

A. Implies that the literary-historical-theological reading of Genesis fits best with Reformed hermeneutics (grammatical-literary-historical-theological method). Some literal readings are tenable, but merely literary-symbolic readings are not.

B. Affirms Augustinian doctrine: special creation of humans without intrinsic mortality and moral-spiritual ambivalence; it also affirms the historical fall into sin which results in both spiritual and physical death for humans. It does not take a position on non-human degeneration and death.

C. The complete evolution of humans, body and soul, is inconsistent with Scripture and Reformed doctrine. Biological evolution of the human organism from animal ancestors is also inconsistent with Scripture and may not be asserted as a fact, but the theory may be entertained and evaluated. [I do not assert biological evolution as a fact; but I do not find it inconsistent with a CRC approach to Genesis, the special creation of humanity, or a sound doctrine of human nature.]