

# Human Nature as Imago Dei

with Helen De Cruz and Yves De Maeseneer, "The Imago Dei: Evolutionary and Theological Perspectives"; Aku Visala, "Imago Dei, Dualism, and Evolution: A Philosophical Defense of the Structural Image of God"; Olli-Pekka Vainio, "Imago Dei and Human Rationality"; Johan De Smedt and Helen De Cruz, "The Imago Dei as a Work in Progress: A Perspective from Paleoanthropology"; Tom Uytterhoeven, "Co-creating Co-creators? The 'Human Factor' in Education"; Johan De Tavernier, "Morality and Nature: Evolutionary Challenges to Christian Ethics"; and Taede A. Smedes, "Émil Brunner Revisited: On the Cognitive Science of Religion, the Imago Dei, and Revelation."

## THE IMAGO DEI: EVOLUTIONARY AND THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES

by Helen De Cruz and Yves De Maeseneer

*Abstract.* This short article provides an introduction to a special section, consisting of six papers on human evolution and the *imago Dei*. These papers are the result of dialogue between theologians and philosophers of religion at the University of Oxford and the Catholic University of Leuven. All contributors focus on the *imago Dei*, and consider how this theological notion can be understood from an evolutionary perspective, looking at a variety of disciplines, including the psychology of reasoning, cognitive science of religion, paleoanthropology, evolutionary psychology, and evolutionary ethics.

*Keywords:* evolutionary theory; human evolution; *imago Dei*; theological anthropology

---

The *imago Dei* remains an important, yet elusive topic in theological anthropology. Only a few passages in the Bible (Genesis and some Letters in the New Testament) explicitly state that humans are created in the image and likeness of God. Traditionally, theologians have interpreted these passages by stressing discontinuities between humans and other animals, proposing that there is something unique about humans among created beings that makes them in the image of God. There has been, and continues to be, disagreement on whether this uniqueness manifests itself in uniquely

Helen De Cruz is a postdoctoral fellow of the British Academy at the University of Oxford. She may be contacted at Woodstock Road, Radcliffe Humanities, Oxford, OX2 6GG, United Kingdom; e-mail: helen.decruz@philosophy.ox.ac.uk. Yves De Maeseneer teaches fundamental theological ethics at the KU Leuven. He may be contacted at KU Leuven Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies, Sint-Michielsstraat 4 bus 3101, B-3000 Leuven, Belgium; e-mail: Yves.Demaeseneer@theo.kuleuven.be.

human characteristics, such as intellect or will (the *structural* view); a distinctive role for humans, such as being called to have dominion over creation (the *functional* approach); or the special relationship of humanity to God (the *relational* perspective). Nevertheless, in spite of this diversity, human uniqueness remains a central element in theological views about the *imago Dei*: it is by virtue of their unique status in nature that humans occupy a privileged position in creation, and derive their dignity.

Over the past 150 years, the increasing recognition that humans have evolved from other animals has challenged this assumption of human uniqueness. This was even the case prior to Darwin and Wallace's co-publication of the theory of natural selection in 1858. Consider, for instance, this strong reaction from the geologist Adam Sedgwick against the anonymously published *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation* (1844), in which Robert Chambers outlined an evolutionary scenario for the emergence of humans and other animals.

I do from my soul abhor the sentiments, and I believe I could have crushed the book by proving it base, vulgar in spirit [...] what shall we say to his [the anonymous author's] intellectual capacities, when he confounds (as phenomena of the same order) the glorious conclusions of abstract language, and the inductions of pure intellect, . . . with the jabbering of apes, and the cawing of rooks? What shall we say to his morality and his conscience, when he tells us he has destroyed all distinction between moral and physical, when he makes sin a mere organic misfortune? If the book be true, the labours of sober induction are in vain; religion is a lie; human law is a mass of folly, and a base injustice; morality is moonshine; our labours for the black people of Africa were works of madmen; and man and woman are only better beasts! (Sedgwick [1845] 1890, 84)

This passage contains several topics of enduring controversy on the implications of an evolutionary perspective for the *imago Dei*. If the difference between humans and other animals is a matter of degree and not of kind, can we still defend the structural account, which stresses unique features of human cognition? How can we situate human moral responsibility and the biblical concept of sin within an evolutionary account, where sinfulness seems to be the result of an evolved propensity ("a mere organic misfortune"), rather than of a single act committed by the first humans? Sedgwick's worries are still felt today, especially by those who attempt to salvage a literalist interpretation of the biblical material (e.g., Collins 2010). Other scholars (e.g., Haught 2000; van Huyssteen 2006; Schneider 2010) by contrast, have embraced the evolutionary understanding of humanity as a way to enrich and alter theological anthropology. Welcoming Darwin as a disguised friend, as Arthur Peacocke (2004) puts it, they argue that an evolutionary understanding of our origins can throw new light on humanity and its relationship to God. Recent discussions on the *imago Dei* have focused on the implications of our understanding of human evolution,

for example, on the status of extinct hominids (Moritz 2012), continuities between humans and nonhumans in the domains of altruism and morality (Deane-Drummond 2009), and the genetic evidence for the common ancestry of humans and apes (Venema 2010).

The aim of this special section is to focus on recent developments in our knowledge of human evolution. In this special section, we want to go beyond the general observation that humans have evolved, and look more specifically at recent disciplines concerned with human evolution, in particular, evolutionary psychology, cognitive psychology of reasoning, paleoanthropology, evolutionary ethics, cognitive science of religion, and education. We invited theologians and philosophers of religion to discuss how findings from these disciplines have an impact on our understanding of the *imago Dei*. A distinctive feature of this section is that it brings together voices from within an analytical approach with representatives from a Continental hermeneutical tradition.

The papers (with the exception of the one by Taede Smedes, which was solicited at a later date) are the result of a workshop that took place at Kellogg College at the University of Oxford, March 27–28, 2012. The organizers were Helen De Cruz (University of Oxford and Catholic University of Leuven) and Yves De Maeseneer (Catholic University of Leuven). The workshop can be situated within the research project *Anthropos* ([http://theo.kuleuven.be/en/research/centres/centr\\_anthropos/](http://theo.kuleuven.be/en/research/centres/centr_anthropos/)) at the Catholic University of Leuven, a project that seeks to develop a renewed theological anthropology rooted in the Christian tradition and in dialogue with contemporary science and philosophy. The workshop was also made possible by Helen De Cruz's Oxford Templeton fellowship (September 2011 to June 2012), which examined implications of cognitive science of religion for theology.

The first two essays present two arguments for a rehabilitation of the structural approach to the image of God, which in the authors' opinion is too easily written off in the name of contemporary scientific insights. Philosopher of religion and theologian Aku Visala addresses challenges from cognitive neuroscience and evolutionary psychology to traditional structural accounts, especially to two of its central assumptions: mind/body dualism and faculty psychology. Structural views hold that humans are in God's image by virtue of psychological properties (like intellect and will) that only members of our species possess. The soul, the basis of these psychological properties, establishes human personhood and dignity. Recent authors like Wentzel van Huyssteen and F. LeRon Shults have criticized this emphasis on dualism and faculty psychology: they argue that dualism cannot be maintained in the light of cognitive neuroscience, that the structural view denies the relational nature of human beings and disvalues their bodies, and that appeals to evolutionary continuities between humans and other animals make faculty psychology redundant. Visala argues

that the traditional structural view has resources to counter these charges. With slight modifications, the structural view can maintain a certain form of mind/body dualism, does not need to make strong claims about human uniqueness that contradict the broad continuity between humans and other animals, and can maintain distinctive human psychological features, without denying the continuity between human and animal cognition.

Theologian Olli-Pekka Vainio's contribution also focuses on structural views of the *imago Dei*, in particular on the tendency to identify *imago Dei* with intellectual capacities. He discusses the views of Thomas Aquinas and Robert W. Jenson on human rationality, and relates these to empirical findings and theories in the cognitive psychology of reasoning. Remarkably, there is a significant overlap between contemporary scientific interpretations of rationality and both the traditional Thomistic view and Jenson's contemporary ecumenical interpretation of *imago Dei*. For instance, cognitive psychologists commonly draw a distinction between System 1 Cognition, which is fast, intuitive, and shallow, and System 2 Cognition, which is slow, reflective, and deep. According to Aquinas, rationality and moral responsibility can be seen as the ability to judiciously apply reflective reasoning (System 2 Cognition) whenever required. Sin occurs when we let System 1 Cognition negatively affect our decision-making. This account resonates well with debiasing in the cognitive science of reasoning, where a thoughtful appeal to reflective reasoning can help overcome cognitive biases.

A second focus of this special issue is on the relationship between evolution and the cultural and social dimension of human beings. Philosophers Johan De Smedt and Helen De Cruz look at how paleoanthropology can foster a new, empirically informed understanding of the *imago Dei*. They identify two key elements of human evolution that are relevant for theological anthropology: the emergence of human-specific cognitive adaptations, such as joint attention, empathy, moral sensibility, and symbolism, which evolved in the context of ecological and social pressures, and the social and communal dimension of human cognition. Following Friedrich Schleiermacher's emphasis on human groups as the locus of their capacities and actions, they argue that relevant structural elements of humanity are not products of isolated minds, but of interacting communities. Given that these elements emerged only gradually during our evolutionary history (e.g., the ability to engage in joint attention was already in place at least 2.5 million years ago, whereas evidence for symbolic cognition is only about 130,000 years old), the *imago Dei* can be conceptualized as a work in progress, rather than a finished product. This dynamic understanding of the *imago Dei* corresponds well with the concept of *theosis*, which was first proposed by Patristic authors like Irenaeus and which became a central concept in the Eastern Orthodox Church. Rather than seeing the image as a categorical property that individuals either possess or lack, it is

something that became gradually instilled in communities of hominids over time. One tension between this dynamic view and evolutionary views on human evolution is that *theosis* has a clear teleology, whereas evolution by natural selection is argued to be an unguided, stochastic process. De Smedt and De Cruz evaluate two solutions to this problem in terms of their costs and explanatory potential.

Theologian Tom Uytterhoeven looks at recent discussions in educational theory and their implications for theological anthropology. Drawing on Philip Hefner's concept of humans as created co-creators, he highlights the central role of culture in our species. This centrality of culture enabled ancestral humans to effectively deal with various ecological challenges, but has also directly contributed to the present ecological crisis. In Hefner's view, God has acted through evolution to make humanity into this cultural species. However, this close identification of God's actions with the evolutionary process may tempt one to simply replace God with evolution, thus leading to a secularization of the *imago Dei*. On the basis of a narrative-hermeneutical analysis, Uytterhoeven resists this move, arguing that *Homo sapiens* has developed various cultural artifacts (such as myths or narratives in Christianity) to understand why the cosmos is ordered the way it is. Cultural artifacts can be conceptualized as God's ways to call people and ask them to participate in building up a cosmos out of a universe. An education that pays attention to these cultural artifacts can play a key role in helping to solve the ecological crisis: by making young people aware of their role as created co-creators, they become alerted to their position in nature and their call to steward it responsibly.

The last two essays investigate how morality and revelation, two notions that were traditionally considered as distinctively human, are not necessarily endangered by a naturalistic turn. Theological ethicist Johan De Tavernier, who has been trained in the Continental personalist tradition, undertakes a self-critical endeavor about a persistent dualistic bias in modern Christian ethics. In this approach, the human person is defined in contrast to nature. Recalling the debate between Charles Darwin and Thomas Huxley (gradualism versus saltationism), De Tavernier questions whether theological ethicists are right in their often implicit preference for the latter and their hesitance to integrate insights from the natural sciences. He claims that they should invest more in learning from evolutionary psychology and cognitive science in order to become aware of the natural roots of key moral concepts like free will, relationality, and virtues. Moreover, this recognition of the natural dimension of ethics would involve a critical retrieval of the premodern moral-theological tradition, which was less dualistic in its approach to "biology" (e.g., Aquinas' appreciation of the emotions). De Tavernier proposes a moderate form of naturalism as the way forward for theological ethics.

Theologian and philosopher of religion Taede Smedes considers the concept of *imago Dei* as it was developed by Emil Brunner in the light of cognitive science of religion. According to Brunner, the theological notion that humans were created in the image of God entails that there is a “point of contact” that allows revelation to occur. Although humans are marred by sin, and have lost their physical image of God, they are still formally carriers of the *imago Dei*. One of the consequences of this is that humans are receptive to God’s word. They must therefore have a capacity to be addressed. Brunner was not able to specify how this point of contact occurred. Smedes draws on recent results in the cognitive science of religion to argue that religion is a natural, spontaneous product of human cognition. Religion is natural, and it involves the active participation of the embodied human cognitive system. Revelation, in this model, is constituted by an interaction between the whole organism, including its cognitive system, and the event that is experienced as being revelatory.

Strikingly, all the papers in this collection are optimistic about the prospects of relating established theological concepts and ideas about the *imago Dei* to a naturalistic, evolutionary framework. Together with other recent work (e.g., the special section on human nature in theistic perspective, edited by Celia Deane-Drummond and Paul Wason, *Zygon*, 2012), it indicates an increasing importance of the natural sciences for theological anthropology.

#### REFERENCES

- Anon. (Robert Chambers). 1844. *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation*. London, UK: John Churchill.
- Collins, C. John. 2010. “Adam and Eve as Historical People, and Why It Matters.” *Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith* 62:147–65.
- Deane-Drummond, Celia. 2009. “Are Animals Moral? A Theological Appraisal of the Evolution of Vice and Virtue.” *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science* 44:932–50.
- Deane-Drummond, Celia, and Paul Wason. 2012. “Becoming Human in Theistic Perspective.” *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science* 47:870–74.
- Haight, John F. 2000. *God after Darwin: A Theology of Evolution*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Moritz, Joshua M. 2012. “Human Uniqueness, the Other Hominids, and ‘Anthropocentrism of the Gaps’ in the Religion and Science Dialogue.” *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science* 47:65–96.
- Peacocke, Arthur. 2004. *Evolution: The Disguised Friend of Faith? Selected Essays*. Philadelphia, PA: Templeton Foundation Press.
- Schneider, John R. 2010. “Recent Genetic Science and Christian Theology on Human Origins: An ‘Aesthetic Supralapsarianism’.” *Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith* 62:196–212.
- Sedgwick, Adam. [1845] 1890. “Letter to Charles Lyell, April 9, 1845.” In *The Life and Letters of the Reverend Adam Sedgwick*, ed. John Willis Clark and Thomas McKenny Hughes, 83–85. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Van Huyssteen, Wentzel. 2006. *Alone in the World? Human Uniqueness in Science and Theology*. Göttingen, Germany: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht.
- Venema, Dennis R. 2010. “Genesis and the Genome: Genomics Evidence for Human–Ape Common Ancestry and Ancestral Hominid Population Sizes.” *Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith* 62:166–78.