

## Evangelism of Young Children: Is an Evolutionary Understanding of "Original Sin" Possible?

ANNETTE EVANS (UNIVERSITY OF THE FREE STATE)

### ABSTRACT:

*Children's bibles have always been "pretexts for passing along values,"<sup>1</sup> but the consequences of children reading the bible urgently need to be researched. A recent pilot study revealed that most of the young subjects had little conceptual impression of "sin," thus also raising the issue of "original sin." The latter is important in the context of knowledge transfer between adult and child in a religious climate of strong contention between religion and science and the emergent popularity of "Scientific Creationism" or "Intelligent Design." The challenge today is to encourage young people to share in a tradition which is continuously being rethought and reapplied. In our predominantly secular environment, religious insistence on the ideal of purity and integrity tends towards resistance of any revision of the tradition. However, the conundrum of Anselm's dictum of "believing to understand and understanding to believe" must be considered. In modern scientific thought the idea that there was ever a historical state of innocence, or a literal Adam and Eve is unacceptable. "Original sin" can still express meaningfully the sense of humanity's estrangement from the deity, but the "ideal" world is the enlivening new creation yet to come, not a once perfect world to which we now seek nostalgically to return.<sup>2</sup> This article offers an alternative understanding of God's relation to creation than "The Fall." It is proposed that the Adam and Eve story is about the awakening of self-consciousness, and the concomitant responsibility to recognize temptation and exercise choice. Coherence between such contraries as science and religion, reasoning and spiritual susceptibility, even for young children, is promoted by an accepting ethical environment in which "fideistic assertion" is tested by imaginative questioning and exploration of the limits of dogma.*

### A INTRODUCTION

Ivy Beckwith recently noted "a growing sense in our churches that something needs to change if we are to meet the spiritual needs of children in our rapidly

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<sup>1</sup> Samuel Heilman, *Defenders of the Faith: Inside Ultra Orthodox Jewry* (New York: Schocken Books, 1992), 225.

<sup>2</sup> Haight, John T. *God after Darwin: A Theology of Evolution* (Boulder: Westorian Press, 2008), 127, 148.

changing postmillennial culture."<sup>3</sup> Beckwith goes so far as to suggest that the time has come for churches to reconsider the overt evangelising of young children.<sup>4</sup> Hugh Pyper noted that the consequences of children reading the bible are "lamentably underexplored" and he highlighted the need for a reappraisal of how biblical texts work.<sup>5</sup> This study aims to consider critically the way in which the concept of the "Fall" and "original sin" has traditionally been introduced to young children by way of stories about the primeval "happenings" in the Garden of Eden. Keith Ward defines the doctrine of original sin as involving a literal interpretation of the historicity of the fall of Adam and Eve from a state of original innocence and idyllic perfection in paradise, combined with a Platonic thesis that somehow all of humanity is involved in the guilt of Adam's sin.<sup>6</sup> Gous suggests that church doctrine unnecessarily claims Gen 1-3 "to be historically true in order to substantiate original sin, whereas the biblical narrative of 'The Fall' belongs to a primeval mythological context, an expression of an understanding of existence of the threatened self in a context where survival was the priority."<sup>7</sup> Nürnberger warns that "[if] faith persists with obsolete frames of reference, spurious assumptions, inappropriate formulations and problematic patterns of behaviour it cannot respond creatively and redemptively to the needs of its time."<sup>8</sup> Children's Bibles have always been "pretexts for passing along values."<sup>9</sup> Bottigheimer demonstrated in her study of the history of biblical interpretation since the age of Gutenberg that children's bibles display an ideological change as the cultural context changes.<sup>10</sup> A biblical text offers the possibility of a new understanding, but when interpreting it, the existential situation of the audience and the interpreter has to be taken into account. Gold observed that the sacred character of sacred texts demand that they remain intact, and yet they can survive only if they are "porous enough to fill up with each new culture into which they travel." To be relevant to the audi-

<sup>3</sup> Ivy Beckwith, *Postmodern Children's Ministry: Ministering to Children in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan 2004), 163. In 1900 half of Britain's children attended Sunday School, in 1998 the figure was 4%. See Steve Bruce, "The Demise of Christianity," in *Predicting Religion: Christian, Secular and Alternative Futures* (ed. Grace Davie, Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead; Aldershot/Burlington: Aldershot Publishing Ltd, 2003), 55.

<sup>4</sup> Beckwith, *Children's Ministry*, 65.

<sup>5</sup> Hugh Pyper, *An Unsuitable Book: The Bible as Scandalous Text* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press 2005).

<sup>6</sup> Keith Ward, *Rethinking Christianity* (Oxford: One World Publications 2007), 82-83.

<sup>7</sup> Ignatius Gous, "Snakes and Ladders: Mind Games in Genesis 2 and 3," *JSem* 19/1 (2010): 114-117.

<sup>8</sup> Klaus Nürnberger, "Richard Dawkins' *The God Delusion*: An Atheist Science Confronts a Superstitious Faith," *Scriptura* 2 (2009): 312.

<sup>9</sup> Heilman, *Defenders of the faith*, 225.

<sup>10</sup> Ruth B. Bottigheimer, *The Bible for Children: From the Age of Gutenberg to the Present* (New Haven/London: York University Press 1996).

ence, the reading must yield "adequate contextual effect."<sup>11</sup> Consideration of the cultural context is vital. Adamo for instance asserts that African biblical interpretation is always in the context of suffering and poverty.<sup>12</sup>

Young children can now easily access an infinite range of information, and grow up in an increasingly secularised culture. Linda Woodhead has observed that youngsters are searching for new ways of being religious.<sup>13</sup> Several scholars have suggested that an interdisciplinary understanding of God's relation to creation, including humankind, is needed now.<sup>14</sup> Advances in the natural sciences and in biblical studies necessitate the reinterpretation and "renovation" of the doctrine of original sin.<sup>15</sup> In the light of what science has taught us about evolution, at the very least, we need to adjust the way we communicate our Christian faith to our children. For instance, in terms of modern scientific thought the idea that there was ever a historical state of perfection, or a literal Adam and Eve as portrayed in Gen 1-3 is unacceptable. The challenging task of revising our time-honoured salvational approach to vulnerable little children seems to me to be overdue. It is already fifteen years since Wentzel Van Huyssteen wrote the following:

Rethinking theologically the *imago Dei* as emerging from nature opens up theology to the interdisciplinary impact of the fact that the potential arose in the embodied human mind to undertake science and technology, to create art, and to discover the need and ability for

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<sup>11</sup> Penny S. Gold, *Making the Bible Modern: Children's Bibles and Jewish Education in Twentieth-century America* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press 2004), 7.

<sup>12</sup> David T. Adamo, "Reading Psalm 109 in African Christianity," *OTE* 21/3 (2008): 579, 587.

<sup>13</sup> Linda Woodhead, *A Sociology of Religious Emotion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010): 241.

<sup>14</sup> Oliver D. Crisp, "Calvin on Creation and Providence," in *John Calvin and Evangelical Theology: Legacy and Prospect* (ed. Sung W. Chung; Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 43-44; Lanier Burns, "From Ordered Soul to Corrupted Nature: Calvin's View of Sin," in *John Calvin and Evangelical Theology: Legacy and Prospect* (ed. Sung W. Chung; Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 104; Christopher Rowland and Jonathan Roberts, *The Bible for Sinners: Interpretation in the Present Time* (London: SPCK 2008), 3-12; Ron Cameron, and Merrill P. Miller, "Introduction: Ancient Myths and Modern Theories of Christian Origins," in *Redescribing Christian Origins* (ed. Ron Cameron and Merrill P. Miller; SBLSymS; Atlanta: SBL, 2004), 1-5.

<sup>15</sup> George Vandervelde, *Original Sin: Two Major Trends in Contemporary Roman Catholic Reinterpretation* (Amsterdam: Rodopi N.V, 1975), 49.

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religious belief ... [*It is this which*] has provided our distant ancestors, and us, with dimensions of hope, redemption, and grace.<sup>16</sup>

## **B CHILD EVANGELISM BY FUNDAMENTALISTS**

There are varying degrees of Christian fundamentalism and its application. Hans Kung defines it in its strict sense as having arisen in order to rescue the verbal inspiration and inerrancy of the Bible from the threat posed by modernity.<sup>17</sup> It defends against, and attacks modern science, and maintains that the description in Gen 1-3 is literally true, and even in some varieties, scientifically correct.<sup>18</sup> A typical example of Calvinist implementation of the doctrine of original sin for instance, with which children’s Bibles usually start, is perceptible in the American based organisation, Child Evangelism Fellowship (CEF). CEF operates around the world and claims to be “built on a solid biblical foundation staffed by a committed faculty who combine direct field experience with academic excellence.” In their approach to young children CEF start with God as perfectly good and as creator of a perfect world. By way of “The Fall” they explain that Adam’s disobedience introduced original sin and death into the world, sin thereby being imputed to all of humankind, and only forgivable through faith in the atonement wrought by Christ’s suffering and death on the

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<sup>16</sup> Wentzel J. Van Huyssteen, *Alone in the World? Human Uniqueness in Science and Theology: The Gifford lectures, University of Edinburgh, Spring* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm B Eerdmans Publishing Company Ltd, 1996), 324-325.

<sup>17</sup> Hans Küng, *Christianity: The Religious Situation of Our Time* (London: SCM Press Ltd, 1995), 639.

<sup>18</sup> Consider the following statement in a current entry level Sunday school manual which propounds “Scientific Creationism”: “How was the earth made? How did the universe come into being? The Bible has a careful, detailed answer to these questions. Who designed the intricacies of nature? How was man made? The only satisfactory answer is to be found in the early chapters of Genesis.” See Jill Masters, *Lessons for Life: Book 1* (London: Wakeman Trust, 1991), 35. This statement actually has nothing to do with science. However, as a conservative belief or opinion in a theological context the statement that Masters follows with —“The Fall of Man, the account of the sin and rebellion of Adam and Eve, summarises our own state of enmity with God”— is legitimate because it is concerned with the relationship of mankind with God. The problem originates in the apparent deliberate conflation of the latter statement with the former which makes claims to a “scientific” truth. The category error demonstrates that Scientific Creationism is a contradiction in terms. (A category mistake results from confusion caused by saying something about a topic from one category (type) that only makes sense when applied to subjects in a different category (Jeff Astley & Lesley J. Francis, eds., *Christian theology and Religious Education: Connections and Contradictions* (London: SPCK, 1996), 290. Cf. Ernst Conradie who sees a tragic element in Creationists’ attempt to uphold faith as science, in Ernst Conradie “Evolusie en Christelike Geloof – Wat is die Vraag nou Eintlik?” n.p. [cited 4 December 2009]. Online: [http://www.argief.litnet.co.za/cgi\\_bin/giga.cgi?cmd=cause\\_dir\\_news\\_item&cause\\_id=1270news](http://www.argief.litnet.co.za/cgi_bin/giga.cgi?cmd=cause_dir_news_item&cause_id=1270news).

cross. Their research has shown that if they do not reach children by the age of five to eight years, they will lose an entire generation. Could it be that CEF'S approach is part of the reason that in this postmodern age older children are not susceptible to CEF? Are CEF expecting older children to accept "what only younger children could still believe"?<sup>19</sup>

In the process of normal education children soon learn that the world and humankind evolved over millions of years, and that natural disasters, and the cruelty and suffering involved in life on earth are part of the evolutionary creative process. If the recipients of fundamentalist child evangelism are in any way seeking understanding of the current world in which they live, cognitive dissonance is inevitable. Today the "strain between religious and cognitive reality"<sup>20</sup> challenges us to work out a new self-understanding.<sup>21</sup> But it is not necessary to throw out the baby with the bath water. Westermann sees that "the account of the origins shows in great depth and with great clarity that it belongs to man's [sic] very state as a creature that he [sic] is defective."<sup>22</sup> He suggests that the Priestly phrase "And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, (*it was*) very good" (Gen 1:31) does not contradict that humankind was defective from the beginning, but rather can be explained as meaning that Creation was good for that which God intended it.<sup>23</sup> When read in its context in Gen 1-11. Gen 2-3 is not an explanation of how evil came into the world, or an account of the origin of death in the world, with a mechanistic connection between sin and death—the narrative in Gen 2-3 is much more about responses to death, and troubled, anxiety-ridden life.<sup>24</sup>

## C THE ORIGIN OF THE IDEA OF ORIGINAL SIN

Even Calvin, who emphasised the supreme authority of Scripture, recognised that acceptance of the inerrancy of the Bible "does not close down" the question of how it is to be interpreted.<sup>25</sup> Bottigheimer points out that "at nearly

<sup>19</sup> For an example of one of the excruciating forms of Victorian Christianity that some children suffered see both versions of "*The Chimney Sweep*" in William Blake's *Poems of Innocence and of Experience*.

<sup>20</sup> Jaqueline S. Du Toit, At Lamprecht, & Nic F. Schmidt, "Children and the Transfer of Religious Instruction in Oral, Visual and Literary Texts," *JSem* 16/2 (2007): 293.

<sup>21</sup> Bernard C. Lategan, "Hermeneutics," in David N Freedman (ed.), *Anchor Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 154.

<sup>22</sup> Claus Westermann, *Creation* (trans. John J. Scullion, S.J.; London: SPCK, 1974), 1, 89, 115, 120-123.

<sup>23</sup> This concept does not imply "Intelligent Design" on the part of God, but merely that God had a "good intention" in creating the world.

<sup>24</sup> Gous, "Snakes and Ladders," 115.

<sup>25</sup> Alister McGrath, *Development from the Victorians to the Second Vatican Council* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2010), xi.



every critical part the Bible is a classically open text whose OT prose easily provides prophecies and predictions of NT (as well as modern-day) events."<sup>26</sup> Westermann baldly states that "the zeal to interpret individual verses of the OT in a Christological sense has really done a great deal of damage, because attention was no longer being paid to the original meaning of the verse."<sup>27</sup> We now know that the Bible has a documentary history.<sup>28</sup> The concept of "original sin" is a relatively late indirect derivation from the older Yahwist narrative of "The Fall" described in Gen 2:4b through 3:24, which is regarded by Brueggemann as an exceedingly marginal text with no clear reference to it in the rest of the OT.<sup>29</sup>

The story of the Fall in Gen 3 did not at first have anything like the weight it later came to have in post-Augustine Christianity.<sup>30</sup> The word "sin" חַטָּאת does not even appear at all in the passage. In the synagogue the development of the idea of original sin did not take on the salvational overtones implicit in Christian thought.<sup>31</sup> In the Jewish tradition, God provided humans with the impulse to do evil and to do good, so that sin stems from human beings making the wrong choices. Those who sincerely repent for the wrongs for which they are responsible, can definitely gain forgiveness.<sup>32</sup>

The earliest extant source of the interpretation of Gen 2-3 as "original sin" has been traced to the fourth (second) book of *Esdras* 7.118 (which was

<sup>26</sup> Bottigheimer, *The Bible for Children*, 28, 36.

<sup>27</sup> Westermann, *Creation*, 100.

<sup>28</sup> The two accounts of creation, Gen 1-2:4a and Gen 2:4b-3:24 arose from two different sources. As it stands in Genesis the first part is a later 6th to 5th centuries B.C.E. Priestly text. Gen 2:4b-3:24 has been shown to be an older Yahwist 10th to 9th centuries source.

<sup>29</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis* (IBC; Atlanta: John Knox, 1982), 41.

<sup>30</sup> Heikki Räisänen, *The Rise of Christian Beliefs: the Thought World of Early Christians* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 135.

<sup>31</sup> David S. Goldstein, *Teshuba: The Evolution of the Doctrines of Sin and Repentance in Classical Jewish Thought* (Ann Arbor, Michigan/London: University Microfilms International, 1974), 8-10.

<sup>32</sup> Räisänen, *Christian Beliefs*, 136. Cf. Matt 9:2; Mark 2:5; Luke 5:20; 7:9 where Jesus tells those whom he healed that their sins were forgiven, long before his crucifixion. Following Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274 C.E.) reason is subject to God. In this state the passions of the flesh are subject to the higher, spiritual faculties, thus the possibility of no sin exists if the bodily desires are properly subdued. However, the passions of the flesh which while natural and blameless, provide a propensity to sin (concupiscence). Thus "In the Roman Catholic church, original sin has been seen more as a domination of the higher self by the lower self, due to the loss of original righteousness and the consequent ascendancy of concupiscence." Marguerite Shuster, *The Fall and Sin: What We Have Become as Sinners* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004), 59-60, 159.

possibly written during or after the destruction of the Second Temple by Titus in 70 C.E.): "O Adam, what have you done? For though it was you who sinned, the fall was not yours alone, but ours also who are your descendants."<sup>33</sup> Westermann and Barr suggest that rather than Paul's knowledge of Jesus, it is this text that may have been the source of Paul's rhetorical statements in Romans 5:19-20, which Augustine (354-430) subsequently developed into the concept of "original sin."<sup>34</sup> As late as the fifth session of the Council of Trent in 1546 the nature of "original sin" was still being stated ambiguously, in order to evade explicit sanction.<sup>35</sup> In the Reformed tradition the doctrine of original sin was only finally established in the Westminster Confession in 1646. Little more than 100 years later, in 1767 John Taylor argued against the doctrine of original sin as stated in the Westminster Confession.<sup>36</sup> He found only five scriptural references which allegedly speak of the consequences of Adam's first sin for his posterity, and he found it possible to reason them all away. He strove to avoid the conclusion that *all* are guilty in consequence of the sin of *one*.<sup>37</sup>

#### D ALTERNATIVE POSSIBILITIES FOR REINTERPRETATION

The "Fall" is a classic example of a hermeneutical debate.<sup>38</sup> Temptation has something positive to offer – having fallen for it, humankind gains insight into the power of sin.<sup>39</sup> We have to acknowledge the fact that if mankind was to

<sup>33</sup> Räisänen, *Christian Beliefs*, 138.

<sup>34</sup> Westermann, *Creation*, 108; James Barr, *The Garden of Eden and the Hope of Immortality* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 5. Contra Peter Bouteneff, *Ancient Christian Readings of the Biblical Creation Narratives* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2008), 39, who considers the possibility of Pauline influence on the post-70 C.E. text 2 Esdra. Pinchus Lapide and Paul Stuhlmacher, *Paul: Rabbi and Apostle* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1984), 33-35 claims that Paul remains a non-dogmatic person whose words "were never intended to be weighed on the precise scales of theologians."

<sup>35</sup> Vandervelde, *Original Sin*, 33.

<sup>36</sup> Samuel C. Storms, *Tragedy in Eden: Original Sin in the Theology of Jonathan Edwards* (Lanham/New York/London: University Press of America, 1985), 39, 59, 225.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. John Taylor, *The Scripture and Doctrine of Original Sin, Proposed to Free and Candid Examination* (No publication details, 1767), 271, 385: "But that any man, without my knowledge or consent, should so represent me, that when he is guilty I am to be reputed guilty, and when he transgresses I shall be accountable and punishable for his transgression, and thereby subjected to the wrath and curse of God, nay further that his wickedness shall give me a sinful nature, and all this before I am born and consequently while I am in no capacity of knowing, helping, or hindering what he doth; surely anyone who dares use his understanding, must clearly see this is unreasonable, and altogether inconsistent with the truth and goodness of God."

<sup>38</sup> Lategan, "Hermeneutics," 149.

<sup>39</sup> Westermann, *Creation*, 94.

have the responsibility and ability to *choose* to "do well" mankind had to have knowledge of Good and Evil: Gen 4:7:

הלוא אם

תיטיב שאת ואם לא תיטיב לפתח חטאת

רבץ ואלוך תשוקתו ואתה תמשל בו

"If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door; its desire is for you, but you must master it" (RSV).

In Gen 4:7 Cain does not do "well" and chooses to "sin" by murdering his brother (this is the first mention of the word "sin" in the Bible – much further on in the narrative than the so-called "original sin" incident). Wonderfully, this narrative goes on in the same breath to describe how, while not minimising the consequence of sin, God shows his care for sinners in placing a protective mark on Cain. The inevitability of the polarity between Creation and Redemption becomes apparent - as Perry notes, "All opposition is a tendency to reunion."<sup>40</sup> The result is positive: self-consciousness (i.e. knowledge of good and evil) in the context of the experience of God's care. The final state: recognition of the responsibility to *choose* to do well.<sup>41</sup>

A close reading of Gen 2-3 reveals confusion between the tree of knowledge of good and evil and the tree of life. At Gen 2:9b $\alpha$  it is the tree of life that is specified as being in the midst of the garden

ועץ החיים בתוך הגן

but at Gen 3:3-6 it is only the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, now specified as being in the middle of the garden, that Adam and Eve eventually eat: Gen 3:3a and 3:5b

ומפרי העץ אשר בתוך הגן

והייתם כאלהים ידעי טוב ורע

But God said, "You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden ... you will be like God, knowing good and evil." (RSV).

Subsequently in Gen 3:22b it becomes clear that "the man" did *not* eat of the tree of life, but only of the tree of good and evil (then the Lord God said,

<sup>40</sup> Whitall N. Perry, *The Widening Breach: Evolution in the Mirror of Cosmology* (Cambridge: Quinta Essentia, 1995), 7.

<sup>41</sup> Cf. José M. Calle, "Catholic Education as Evangelization," in *Youth Ministry: A Book of Readings* (ed. Michael Warren; New York/Romney/Toronto: Paulist Press, 1977), 3: "For Christ, the final Adam, fully reveals man to man himself and makes his supreme calling clear."



"Behold, the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil; and now *lest* he put forth his hand and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live forever."

פן ישלח ידו ולקח גם מעץ החיים

Thus in spite of the confusion in Gen 3:3 through 3:6 where it appears that the tree of the knowledge of good and evil may be semantically parallel to the tree of life, Gen 3:22 confirms that the tree of life, although it is the one that was clearly specified as being the tree in the midst of the garden at Gen 2:9ba, was *not* the tree that was eaten. Here there are clearly two different trees, and only the tree of knowledge of good and evil was eaten from, therefore one can infer that Adam and Eve, not having eaten of the tree of life, *were therefore not* in fact originally intended to live forever. Their destiny, whether disobedient or not, as part of living creation was to die in the natural process of evolution, in accordance with Darwinism. It was not Adam's disobedience in eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil that caused death. This conclusion is confirmed in Gen 3:17b, where the consequence of Adam's disobedience is clearly stated to be a curse on the land, *not* death.<sup>42</sup>

Rees formulates an argument related to the Augustinian doctrine of "grace." The doctrine of grace raises the controversial theory of predestination and undermines the freedom of the human will.<sup>43</sup> VanderVelde too highlights this tension because of the problem that "original sin" points to a *common* sinfulness of humankind that lies beneath isolated sinful deeds, making sin statistically inescapable. Therefore the human being is said to be sinful prior to his or her individual free act, but sin entails responsibility; responsibility entails freedom of choice; hence if "fallen" the human being remains free, the starting point that humans are innately sinful becomes relative.<sup>44</sup>

<sup>42</sup> Westermann, *Creation*, 107; Barr, *Garden of Eden*, 4, 5. Apparently in his statements on death as a consequence of Adam's disobedience in Rom 5:17 and 1 Cor 15:21-22, Paul must have been speaking of spiritual, not physical death.

<sup>43</sup> Brinley R. Rees, *Pelagius. A Reluctant Heretic* (Woodbury, Suffolk/Rochester N.Y.: The Boydell Press, 1988), 30, 39, 40.

<sup>44</sup> Vandervelde, *Original Sin*, 129, 322-323. Interestingly, Pelagius (354-418 C.E.) believed that the "most fundamental meaning of grace as God's gift to man is good nature which consists primarily of the capacity of feeling, choosing, and doing the good." He rejected any theory of a hereditary defect or a hereditary sin transmitted from Adam to his posterity. For him divine grace consists in a human being's essential and inalienable freedom of choice – a human being cannot be deprived of his essential freedom to reject sin and embrace perfection (VanderVelde, *Original Sin*, 12, 47, 49, quoting from Pelagius, *De Natura*). Cf. Theodora P. Brink, "Vertaalteoretiese Benaderings by Kinderbybelvertaling," (M.Phil. diss, University of Stellenbosch, 2010), 162, who proposes the interpretation of Gen 4:8, 9 as follows "'Die Here wou Noag red, want hy het die Here gedien," with the explanation: "Noag het die Here

## E DISCUSSION

Spangenberg points out that the doctrine of original sin is not as a result of "divine revelation," it is a mere human construct, "a classic example of eisegesis," the skill of reading out of a text the interest we read into it."<sup>45</sup> He maintains, "Every generation has the task of constructing forms of belief and practice appropriate to its own times and culture" — we need to assess what the message of Jesus Christ holds for our own times.<sup>46</sup> Gous asserts that "only true science played away from stifling popular theology and suffocating dogmatics can free us to achieve an interpretation of the text that really helps us to cope with life."<sup>47</sup> Pope John Paul recognised that science can purify religion from error and superstition. He suggested the possibility that "an evolutionary perspective might bring ... light to bear upon theological anthropology, the meaning of the human person as the *imago Dei*, and the problem of Christology."<sup>48</sup> Riaan Venter also supports the rising choir of voices proposing that theology's public task is to interact with science so that Christian self-understanding may be enriched.<sup>49</sup> Because the scientifically established mechanisms of evolutionary change appear to be dependent on random mutation and natural selection, the implications are that the traditional understanding of God's activity in the world must be reconsidered. In this regard Teilhard de Chardin's view is apposite:

There is no more substantial natural nourishment for the religious life than contact with properly understood scientific realities ... If we want men [sic] to return to God, carried to him by the very current that seems to be driving them away, we must open wide our minds and hearts to the new outlook and aspirations.<sup>50</sup>

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geken en gelewe soos Hy wou hê. Die Here het toe vir Noag vertel wat Hy van plan was om te doen." In other words, Noah was rewarded with grace because he chose well (Gen 6:8). Thus if one reads Gen 6:9 (Noah was just, perfect, and walked with God) as an explanation for how/why Noah "found grace in the eyes of the Lord," the freedom of choice to do "well" becomes pre-eminent. However, if one reads Gen 6:8, 9 sequentially, grace precedes choice.

<sup>45</sup> Isak J. J. Spangenberg, "The Doctrines of Original Sin and the Virgin Birth: Divine Revelation or Human Construct?" *Verbum et Ecclesia* 30/1 (2009): 239.

<sup>46</sup> Isak J. J. Spangenberg, "Can a Major Religion Change? Reading Genesis 1-3 in the Twenty-First Century," *Verbum et Ecclesia* 28/1 (2007): 276.

<sup>47</sup> Gous, "Snakes and Ladders," 125-126.

<sup>48</sup> Rob J. Russel, "A New View on Evolution and Catholic Faith: Report from the 2009 Conference at the Gregorian University," *Theology and Science* 8/1, (2010): 1-6.

<sup>49</sup> Riaan Venter, "God after Darwin: The Promise of Trinitarian Theology," (paper presented at the Joint Conference of Academic Societies in the Fields of Religion and Theology, Stellenbosch, 22-26 June 2009), 9.

<sup>50</sup> Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *Science and Christ* (trans. René Hague: London: Collins, 1968), 10, 116.

Children need to be fortified, and allowed to consider and challenge, rather than ignore, not only Christian dogma, but also such literature as that put out by atheistic scientists. Rowland and Roberts point the way. They maintain that "openness to others and otherness is at the heart of being critical and is at the same time the way to openness to God. Critical interpretation should, therefore, be a model of communicative interaction."<sup>51</sup> Van Huyssteen has pointed out that Christian theology "should be answerable to canons of enquiry defensible within, and across, the various domains of our common discourse ... it is no longer possible to return to a premodern notion of tradition as a repository of privileged data and specially protected, exclusive criteria."<sup>52</sup>

However, Francis Collins warns that "If we are using the scientific net to catch our particular version of the truth, we should not be surprised that it does not catch the evidence of Spirit."<sup>53</sup> The conundrum of Anselm's dictum of "believing to understand and understanding to believe" must be taken into account. Nebreda warns that "ordinarily, intellectual knowledge will *not* lead to a living faith."<sup>54</sup> Hodgson too, sounds a warning note: scientific research is never complete, thus it is essential to distinguish between what is established, what is very likely and what is still speculative.<sup>55</sup> Yet, if one understands that creation is an ongoing and constantly new reality,<sup>56</sup> Christianity can be compatible with evolutionary theory – creation then is not a once-off *fait accompli* but a process of becoming. As Venter aptly puts it: "a journey deeper into the mystery of God."<sup>57</sup> The spiritual worldview upholds an ancient way of finding truth which cannot be tested and proved by scientific methodology, i.e. "revelation." But "revelation" too, is fraught with the dangers of subjectivity, and that is why the moderating effect of Biblical Studies and interdisciplinary discourse is essential.

## F CONCLUSION

Fundamentalist churches, even whilst ignoring the realities of new scientific discoveries and modern approaches to understanding scripture, reach out to

<sup>51</sup> Rowland & Roberts, *Bible for Sinners*, 41, 44.

<sup>52</sup> Van Huyssteen, *Alone in the world?*, 18-23, 33-34, 308-309.

<sup>53</sup> Francis Collins, *The Language of God: A Scientist Presents Evidence for Belief* (New York/London/Toronto/Sydney: Free Press, 2006), 229.

<sup>54</sup> Alfonso M. Nebreda S. J. "Education for Faith," in *Youth Ministry: A Book of Readings* (ed. Michael Warren; New York/Romney/Toronto: Paulist Press, 1977), 2.

<sup>55</sup> Peter Hodgson, *Theology and Modern Physics: Ashgate Science and Religion Series* (Aldershot UK/Burlington USA: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2005), xii, xiii, 236.

<sup>56</sup> Haight, *God after Darwin*, 40, 47; Ted Peters & Martinez Hewlett, *Can you Believe in God and Evolution? A Guide for the Perplexed* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2006), 24, 73.

<sup>57</sup> Venter, "God after Darwin," 9.

children in the toughest social contexts, and succeed in drawing families into church fellowship, thus providing a stabilising social effect. The need for youth to have a sense of belonging has been well recognised, and in this context Gous sees value in "a kind of neo-naiveté."<sup>58</sup> Yet, whilst acknowledging the achievements of fundamentalism with respect, I would agree with Polkinghorne who has warned that "religious insight is not derived from the unhesitating acceptance of fideistic assertion."<sup>59</sup> As Berra pointed out "Children do not learn to think when they are fed only dogma."<sup>60</sup> In the long run it is "fideistic assertion" in combination with ignorance or rejection of scientific progress, that is "perilous" to the youth.<sup>61</sup> Ultimately, for Christians, theological interpretation of the Fall and original sin rests on the meaning of Christ's coming. Westermann stresses that even though guilt and death belong inseparably to humankind's existence, a human alienated from God always remains a human whom God cares for, protects, and blesses; he or she remains God's creature, but "only the entire narrative about Creator-Creation as it runs its course through Gen 1 to 11 can say all this with all its subtlety and nuances; it cannot be compressed into a doctrine."<sup>62</sup>

Gous maintains that the Adam and Eve story is about the awakening of self-consciousness and the concomitant exercise of choice in response to the awareness of temptation; it pertains to relationships *per se*. He refers to Petersen who suggests that

the Edenic serpent is, above all, the unknown (power) still lurking "inside" the nervous system. It is the innate capacity of the mind, its ability to generate revelatory thought ... and to extend the domain of consciousness ... the snake shares obvious – and subtle – features with the spine ... the human nervous system is composed in part of structures as phylogenetically ancient as the reptile. The deep structures of the brain stem – the head of the spinal snake – perform activities upon which the maintenance of consciousness absolutely depends.<sup>63</sup>

Van Huyssteen points out that "this capacity for self-awareness and consciousness, inextricably linked to our linguistic capacities, is our most conspicuously

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<sup>58</sup> Gous, "Snakes and Ladders," 39-40.

<sup>59</sup> John C. Polkinghorne, *Quantum Physics and Theology: An Unexpected Kinship* (London: Yale University Press 2007), 8, 9.

<sup>60</sup> Tim M. Berra, *Evolution and the Myth of Creationism: A Basic Guide to the Facts in the Evolution Debate* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), 139.

<sup>61</sup> See Masters, *Lessons*, 35: "young people growing up in these perilous times of atheism."

<sup>62</sup> Westerman, *Creation*, 109.

<sup>63</sup> Gous, "Snakes and Ladders," 115, 125-126. John Petersen, *Maps of Meaning: The Architecture of Belief* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 300-301.

human characteristic."<sup>64</sup> Haught takes us one step further: "Original sin can still express meaningfully the sense of our estrangement from the ideal. But the 'ideal' world is the enlivening new creation yet to come, not a once perfect world to which we now seek nostalgically to return."<sup>65</sup>

Coyne asks "whether our morality is constrained by our genetics ... Do we carry the psychological baggage of our millions of years on the African savanna? If so, how far can we overcome it?" He stresses that "genetic" does not mean "unchangeable."<sup>66</sup> Hrdy issues the profound warning that "if empathy and understanding develop only under particular rearing conditions, and if an ever-increasing proportion of the species fails to encounter those conditions but nevertheless survives to reproduce ... compassion and the quest for emotional connection will fade away as surely as sight in cave-dwelling fish."<sup>67</sup> Beckwith sees the goal of spiritually forming children as helping them to see that "in the kingdom of God being successful is loving others, showing mercy, fighting for justice, and walking humbly with God."<sup>68</sup> Andrew Murray said "Love inspires, and this inspiration is the secret of training." His opinion that the root of all sin is selfishness takes on a strangely relevant tone in this enlightened age of evolution and genetics.<sup>69</sup> If children can be shown that Christ was sent to our world to facilitate our evolution towards the fulfillment of the goodness of creation, then yes, an evolutionary understanding of original sin is possible.

<sup>64</sup> Van Huyssteen, *Alone in the World?* 319.

<sup>65</sup> Haught, *God after Darwin*, 127, 148. Also see Simon C. Morris, *Hoe het Leven de Dingen Regelt: De Mens als Noodzakelijke Uitkomst van de Evolutie (Life's Solution)* (Diemen: Uitgeverij Veen Magazines B.V. 2004), x. He maintains that the appearance of human intelligence was almost inevitable because the number of evolutionary outcomes is limited. He makes a persuasive case for "convergent evolution" because the process of natural selection orientates evolution in a constructive direction in that it eliminates those results of mutation which turn out to be negative.

<sup>66</sup> Jerry A. Coyne, *Why Evolution is True* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2009), 245, 250. While noting that the use of symbolic language may be a genetic adaptation, with aspects of syntax and grammar somehow coded in our brains, Coyne reports that there is a very large category of behaviors sometimes seen as adaptations, including moral codes, religion and music, but about whose evolution we still know virtually nothing, and that rigorous research in the field of evolutionary psychology is needed to clarify this question.

<sup>67</sup> Sarah B. Hrdy, *Mothers and Others: The Evolutionary Origin of Mutual Understanding* (Cambridge, Mass./London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2009), 293.

<sup>68</sup> Beckwith, *Children's Ministry*, 57.

<sup>69</sup> Andrew Murray, *How to Bring Your Children to Christ* (Springdale, Pa.: Whitaker House, 1987; formerly "Children for Christ"), 16. On a global level, current ecological disasters have clearly demonstrated that unselfishness is the primary requirement now if our shared global village is to survive at all.



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Dr. Annette Evans, Research Associate, International Institute for the Study of Race, Reconciliation and Social Justice, University of the Free State. *Email*: ahmevans@gmail.com.