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PIOUS POLYGENISM AND ORIGINAL SIN

Martin Lembke

In this very short paper, I argue that it is possible to harmonize the doctrine of original sin, as western Christendom has traditionally understood it, with a polygenist account of human ancestry. To this end, particular attention is paid to the encyclical *Humani Generis* (1950), in which Pope Pius XII strongly cautions against polygenist ideas.

As a theory of human genealogy, *monogenism*, in its most radical or biblical form, is the view that all human beings belong to one and the same lineage, originating in a single pair of individuals, conveniently called “Adam” and “Eve.” By contrast, *polygenism*, as opposed to monogenism as here understood, is the view that there is no such all-encompassing chart of human ancestry: no single genealogical tree whose root is a primordial couple and whose branches make up the rest of humankind. Traditionally, or so it would seem, Christian theology has assumed a monogenist account. One of the problems with this account, however, is that it does not sit at all comfortably with modern science. As pointed out for example by Francisco J. Ayala and Michael Ruse, it “goes completely against our thinking about the nature of the evolutionary process,”¹ a process which according to “genetic evidence” seems never to have involved “fewer than several thousand [human] individuals.”² That is to say, whereas the monogenist model (as specified here) describes a single-pair bottleneck at the earliest dawn of human history, the modern theory of evolution very strongly suggests that the human population has never consisted of less than thousands of individuals.

Had the traditional Christian commitment to monogenism merely been a matter of exegesis, of how to interpret the first chapters of Genesis, the conflict in hand might quite easily have been solved. The more difficult issue, however, has to do with *original sin*. According to the traditional western Christian understanding thereof, original sin is not so much the first human act of disobedience unto God as it is a *doctrine*, namely, the doctrine that the sinfulness of Adam’s and Eve’s primordial transgression

¹Michael Ruse, *Can a Darwinian Be a Christian? The Relationship between Science and Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 76.

²Francisco J. Ayala, “Human Nature: One Evolutionist’s View,” in *Whatever Happened to the Soul? Scientific and Theological Portraits of Human Nature*, ed. W. S. Brown, N. Murphy, and H. N. Malony (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 36.



—or the property of being sinful as a result of this act—has been transmitted through natural generation to all subsequent human beings (save Christ and, arguably, his mother). Indeed, interpreting the said sinfulness through scriptural passages such as Ps. 51:5 (“I was born guilty, a sinner when my mother conceived me”) and, crucially, Rom. 5:19 (“just as by the one man’s disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man’s obedience the many will be made righteous”),³ the mainstream church of western Christendom seems to have affirmed original sin at an early stage of its doctrinal development. Writing around AD 418, Augustine states the “real objection” against the Pelagians, namely, “that they refuse to confess that unbaptized infants are liable to the condemnation of the first man, and that original sin has been transmitted to them and requires to be purged by regeneration.”⁴ Augustine’s position was ratified at the Council of Carthage the next year; thus canon §110 states as a “rule of faith” that “even infants, who could have committed as yet no sin themselves . . . are truly baptized for the remission of sins, in order that what in them is the result of generation may be cleansed by regeneration.”⁵ Ever since, of course, this has been the official position of the Catholic Church, as witnessed most recently in its *Catechism*, §§402–406, which teaches as a “certainty of faith” that Adam’s sin (and not merely the consequences thereof) is “transmitted by propagation to all mankind.”⁶

Not only Catholics, however, but Protestants too have traditionally regarded original sin as a doctrine of faith. Thus the Augsburg Confession of 1530, §2, states that “since the fall of Adam all men begotten in the natural way are born with sin,” condemning “the Pelagians and others” who deny this.⁷ Similarly, §9 of the Church of England’s thirty-nine articles (or §7 of the twenty-five articles of the Methodist Church) asserts that “Original sin standeth not in the following of Adam (as the Pelagians do vainly talk); but it is the fault and corruption of the Nature of every man, that naturally is engendered of the offspring of Adam.”⁸ In the same vein, John Calvin, emphatically challenging the “quibbles” of the Pelagians, proclaims as follows:

We thus see that the impurity of parents is transmitted to their children, so that all, without exception, are originally depraved. The commencement of this depravity will not be found until we ascend to the first parent of all as the fountain head. We must, therefore, hold it for certain, that, in regard to

³Scriptural quotations are from the *New Revised Standard Version Bible* (Washington, DC: National Council of the Churches, 1989).

⁴Augustine, *On the Grace of Christ, and on Original Sin* 2.19, quoted from New Advent (2012-10-21), www.newadvent.org/fathers/15062.htm.

⁵Quoted from New Advent (2012-10-21), www.newadvent.org/fathers/3816.htm.

⁶Quoted from the Vatican Archive (2012-10-21), www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/_INDEX.HTM.

⁷Quoted from the Book of Concord (2012-10-21), bookofconcord.org/augsburgconfession.php.

⁸Quoted from Anglicans Online (2012-10-21), www.anglicansonline.org/basics/thirty-nine_articles.html.

human nature, Adam was not merely a progenitor, but, as it were, a root, and that, accordingly, by his corruption, the whole human race was deservedly vitiated.⁹

What makes monogenism all the more difficult to handle, then, from a theological point of view, is that it seems to be entailed by original sin: a doctrine which is traditionally upheld as a certainty of faith by (at the very least) a vast majority of western Christendom.

Commenting on this issue in what is probably the most authoritative statement by any major Church official to date, Pope Pius XII, in his 1950 encyclical *Humani Generis*, takes the bull by the horns:

When, however, there is question of another conjectural opinion, namely polygenism, the children of the Church . . . cannot embrace that opinion which maintains [A] that either after Adam there existed on this earth true men who did not take their origin through natural generation from him as from the first parent of all, or [B] that Adam represents a certain number of first parents. Now it is in no way apparent how such an opinion [viz., polygenism] can be reconciled with that which the sources of revealed truth and the documents of the Teaching Authority of the Church propose with regard to original sin, which proceeds from a sin actually committed by an individual Adam and which, through generation, is passed on to all and is in everyone as his own.¹⁰

Apparently, then, Pius XII's worry is that polygenism implies proposition [A] and/or proposition [B], neither of which is acceptable from his point of view. Although he does not seem to rule out polygenism *tout court*, he emphasizes that "it is in no way apparent" how it can be reconciled with the non-negotiable doctrine of original sin.¹¹ This, however, is where I want to add a comment on my own. Even though it is in no way apparent how to harmonize polygenism with original sin, it is technically quite possible nonetheless—without having to embrace either [A] or [B].

To see this, we must first make a basic anthropological assumption. To be a member of *Homo sapiens* (or any other biological species) is not sufficient for being *human*. In order to qualify as a human being, it is necessary also to have a (human) *soul*. This, of course, is a common Christian view anyway. According to Pius XII, for one, the idea that every human being essentially involves a soul which has been immediately and directly

⁹John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 2.1.6, quoted from the Christian Classics Ethereal Library (2012-10-21), www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/institutes.iv.ii.html.

¹⁰Pius XII, *Humani Generis* 37, quoted from the Vatican Archive (2012-10-21), www.vatican.va/holy_father/pius_xii/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xii_enc_12081950_humani-generis_en.html.

¹¹This, at least, is how I interpret Pius's statement. Another possibility, as suggested to me by an anonymous referee for this journal, is that Pius merely stipulates polygenism to be the disjunction of [A] and [B]. I doubt this, however, precisely because the Pope adds that "it is in no way apparent" how to reconcile polygenism with the teachings of the Church. If by "polygenism" he simply means the disjunction of [A] and [B], either of which "cannot" be embraced, it is apparent that polygenism (thus understood) is irreconcilable with the Catholic position.

created by God is one that Catholics are *obliged* to hold.¹² Hence let us assume as much.

Now imagine, from an evolutionary point of view, the appearance of humankind. At some point in history, presumably within the last 2.5 million years, God selects two hominid primates which he infuses with two souls and thus turns into Adam and Eve: the first human beings. At this stage Adam and Eve are the only human beings on Earth. As yet they are sinless, living in a unique state of spiritual innocence and grace.¹³ At the same time, however, they belong to a larger population of biological conspecifics. Thus, for example, somewhat perplexingly, their biological parents and possible siblings are *not* human beings, since these individuals have not been imbued with souls. Anyway, this (let us suppose) is what occurs. Yielding to some kind of temptation, Adam and Eve lose their original justice and become sinful. Alas, the sinfulness thus acquired is transmittable through natural generation. Now Adam and Eve procreate—not only with each other but also with some of their non-human conspecifics. (This might even constitute the eating of the forbidden fruit.) As it happens, however, the offspring resulting from these extramarital (some would say “bestial”) affairs *are* human beings, that is, hominids imbued with souls. God sees to it that this is the case. Indeed, we might formulate a principle—the “Human Principle”—which God universally upholds: *If at least one parent is human, the offspring is human too.* But then (to make a long story short) these illegitimate children in turn procreate, not only with each other, but also with some of the non-human conspecifics of their own generation; and so on. As a result, the proportion of humans within this hominid population increases rather rapidly, until soon enough, after a certain number of generations, all specimens thereof are imbued with souls. Interestingly, then, according to the scenario in hand, although all subsequent human beings (from the second generation and onwards) can be said to inherit the sinfulness of Adam’s and Eve’s primordial transgression through natural generation, they inherit their genetic makeup from a much larger biological stock. Thus it is possible to construe a polygenist account of human genealogy that is consonant, not only with modern evolutionary science, but also with original sin. In particular, this account implies neither proposition [A] nor [B], against which Pius XII so strongly warns. Technically speaking, then, the Pope’s misgivings about polygenism seem to have been uncalled for.

The implicit understanding of the above account is that, had no human being ever fallen into sin, the resulting genealogy of humankind would in

¹²See *Humani Generis* 36.

¹³Elsewhere I have attempted to reinterpret the “Garden of Eden,” including the doctrine that humans were originally not intended to die physically, from an evolutionary point of view. See my “An Evolutionary Adaptation of the Fall,” *New Blackfriars* (forthcoming), early view available at online.library.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/nbfr.12026/abstract.

fact have been monogenist.¹⁴ Of course, this raises the hypothetical issue of inbreeding depression, that is, “the reduced survival and fertility of offspring of related individuals,”¹⁵ something that is ordinarily detrimental to the longevity of biological populations. Yet whatever the Garden of Eden might represent, it can be plausibly suggested that it would have involved supernatural protection against this particular hereditary threat.

In sum, then, assuming a dualist (soul-body) anthropology alongside the Human Principle, a polygenist account of human ancestry would seem to be compatible with original sin. For all we know, the sinfulness of Adam’s and Eve’s original misdeed may have been passed on through natural generation to all subsequent human beings, and yet it need not be the case that Adam and Eve represent a unique biological bottleneck in the history of humankind. In this way, it is possible to accept a modern evolutionary view of the world and yet, for theological reasons, to maintain a traditional western understanding of original sin.¹⁶

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¹⁴It may be suggested that God on the contrary *wanted* a polygenist course of events to unfold. (For what it is worth, this suggestion at least avoids the idea of early human inbreeding.) Yet it is difficult, I think, to reconcile this suggestion with traditional Christian conceptions of the (arguably sacramental character of the) marital union.

¹⁵Deborah Charlesworth and John H. Willis, “The Genetics of Inbreeding Depression,” *Nature Reviews: Genetics* 10 (2009), 783.

¹⁶An embryonic version of this paper was presented in 2011 at the International Conference of Religious Doctrines and the Mind-Body Problem, hospitably arranged by the Islamic Sciences and Culture Academy in Qom, Iran.