

## WHERE IS THE HUMAN SOUL?

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### ABSTRACT

It is courageous of you to raise the issue of evolution in relation to the Christian faith, knowing in advance that this is a delicate subject. That is why it is tempting to be silent on this topic and worry about all sorts of subtleties. However, you are not concerned with yet another interpretation of Calvin, but you are raising an issue that belongs to the core of theology. According to Martin Luther, the first article of faith was the most important because all theological decisions rest on the doctrine of creation.

**Key-words:** Soul, metaphysics, anthropology, bible, biology, evolution

I perceive in their struggle the sincere motivation to seek the truth, at the risk of having to adjust or revise our reliable opinions. In this sense, it is a process of metanoia, a permanent renewal of our thinking, where truth is the criterion of this conversion. I have been asked to respond to your thoughts on the sixth chapter, which deals with common ancestry and human doctrine. You introduce your chapter with the anecdote of a conversation with a retired farmer in the Bible Belt who told you in no uncertain terms, "I don't want to be descended from apes." It is a sign of pastoral skill that you advanced this conversation and raised the issue of human dignity.

That is what this chapter is about. You argue that also in common descent with animals - whether apes or not - human dignity and uniqueness are sufficiently emphasized and that man is not on an equal footing with animals. This uniqueness of man does not lie in his empirically observable characteristics or in substantial



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differences between man and animal, but in God's calling. I see a development in your thinking here since in 2006 you argued for a separate creation of man from animals. This is also a surprising approach compared to a theistic evolutionist like Denis Alexander because Alexander speaks of divine intervention to give a man a soul. You move more consistently within a Darwinian framework by placing man in principle in the animal world. The special qualities and abilities, such as intellect, morality, and self-consciousness, are not "unique in kind," but "unique in degree." Although man has a greater complexity of abilities, man differs only gradually from other created species, so there are no hard limits.

I see three problems here:

### **1. A consistency problem.**

The first question that comes to mind is whether you are consistent. On the one hand, you say that being human does not consist of special properties that are empirically observable, on the other hand, you claim that the gradation and combination of these properties are such that these properties are empirically observable. If this is the case, you can no longer say that the difference between humans and animals is not substantial, can you? Something similar applies to our self-consciousness. On the one hand, you claim that self-consciousness is not unique to humans; on the other hand, you refer positively to John Polkinghorne, who claims that self-consciousness is unique to humans (203). You adopt the distinction between two-dimensionality and three-dimensionality to characterize the distinction between humans and animals.



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I also notice this internal tension when you mention in your book the idea of a 'cultural big bang' of 45,000 years ago, in which religion would also have originated. This idea does not fit into a scheme of evolution in which all developments are causally related. Accepting divine intervention here contradicts one of the main motivations of your book to make the first and second causes inseparable. I am confused by this and would like to know if there is something wrong with saying that there is an ontological difference between man and animal. I think the farmer in the Bible Belt would like a clear answer to that. The question then arises: is man's uniqueness that he is a unique animal, or does man have a dimension incomparable to the animal? Does man belong qualitatively to the animal world or not?

## 2. A Biblical Theological Problem

You argue that religious aptitude and self-transcendence are unique to humans. In this regard, you note that humans have been given the opportunity to respond in a personal way to God's claim (200). The word 'possibility' in particular interests me here. What does this option include? Is this about the human soul, so that we are not only talking about man's uniqueness but also his uniqueness? Actually, you don't get into that because, more or less in passing, you reject talking about the human soul (197, 202).

I consulted Christian dogmatics and there you rightly reject the hard (Cartesian) dualism of body and soul, but you are open to a duality of body and soul. It seems to me that in your latest study, you do not have this openness. I can understand this if you use the theory of evolution as a framework. First, homo divinus is a specialization of homo sapiens, and second, the theory of evolution is a materialistic



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theory in which (by definition) there is no room for the immaterial or the transcendent. But precisely then it raises the pressing question of whether the materialistic theory of evolution does not conflict with the Christian faith. Doesn't the acceptance of the theory of evolution by Christians imply (unintentionally) that we are stuck with a materialistic worldview, and doesn't that lead 'literally' to a soulless Christianity? Isn't that a modern form of Sadaism?

If you ask me, this insight was also implicated in the Reformed farmer's indignation. From reading Genesis 1-2, he concluded that Adam was not made from the animals or the Preadamites, but from the earth. Moreover, the man was not created parallel to the animals, but God made a separate decision to create man, and this creation also occurred in a special way: God himself breathed life into him. If there is something that indicates an ontological difference from the animal world, it is this. Even if we were to read the Scriptures in perspective, this difference in approach makes it clear that a gradual difference between man and animal is not enough.

In the early church, a great biological similarity between humans and animals was already observed, but the discontinuity was ontologically underlined. Man, therefore, is not absorbed in biological reality and cannot be reduced to it. In Scripture, we see that an essential difference is made between the soul of man and the soul of the animal. Man is religious, he prays to God and has a relationship with God. Miraculously, this relationship continues until death. - Matt. 10:28; Luke 23:46; Phil. 1:21, 23. If we simply say here that man has qualities that are "unique in degree" and not "unique in kind," it becomes inexplicable that man by faith is spiritually one with Christ and an animal is not. I also see a line here to bodily resurrection. Because the believer is one with Christ by faith in his soul, the blessed resurrection of the believer



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is thus given. If the spiritual dimension and the soul disappear, where are faith, love, and hope?

### 3. A metaphysical problem

The previous exploration indicated that the spiritual dimension of man is an indication that there are aspects of man that cannot be deduced from physics and biology. This requires relativizing materialism rather than reducing our reality to materialism. Remarkably, we have the support of numerous scientists who have won Nobel prizes. One philosopher of science who has articulated this is Thomas Nagel, a leading philosopher and university professor at New York University, a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences who has won several academic awards, indicative of his scientific erudition. He is himself an atheist, so he has no religious interest in his critique of the theory of evolution. He has written a significant book under the title *Mind & Cosmos*, with an even more revealing subtitle: *Why the neo-Darwinian materialist conception of nature is almost certainly false* (2012).

Nagel criticizes reductionism and materialism in evolutionary theory. He opposes the idea that complex reality can be derived from some simple mechanical principles. He clearly states that the "intelligence" of this world is not accidental. Incidentally, he also recognizes that an evolutionary self-understanding of reality implies the disappearance of the objectivity of morality. He says that the theory of evolution is more a presupposition than a confirmed scientific hypothesis. Significant is his observation: 'The fact that evolutionary naturalism is given priority despite implausible conclusions ... is due to the secular consensus that it is the only alternative to theism for understanding ourselves' (29).



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The crux of Nagel's argument boils down to the fact that physics and chemistry cannot explain life and consciousness. Life, consciousness, intelligence, desire, language, creativity, and knowledge are not by-products of physical laws, but the exact opposite. The most profound explanation of all is not provided by the laws of physics, but by 'the mind'. He, therefore, advocates a re-evaluation of metaphysics. If we lose the metaphysical notions, eventually we will have no answer for Dick Swaab, who reduces man to brain cells, so that all human freedom, morality, and responsibility disappear. If the human spirit has no structural place in our human teaching, spiritual unity with Christ, the indwelling and work of the Holy Spirit, spiritual life, the resurrection of the body, and eternal life also disappear. The whole invisible creation of angels and demons disappears from view. So I prefer to assume that the Reformed farmer's concern arose from the experience of this spiritual reality. The fact that you refer positively to Victor Lamme's denial of free will worry me. Free will has always been seen as the key to bringing evil into this world. The denial of the soul and free will also has far-reaching consequences for the interpretation of evil. In summary, the atheist Nagel reminds today's theists to beware of the Christian concept of the soul. This calls for a reversal of things, and this is how I arrive at my position: instead of Christians letting their theology be marked by the materialistic thinking of the evolution paradigm, the proponent of the theory of evolution has a message for the Christian doctrine of the human being. soul.

**Source:**

*W. van Vlastuin, lecture 'Evolution, suppose it is true', September 22, 2017, in Nijkerk after Gijsbert van den Brink, And the earth gave birth. Christian faith and evolution.*



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