

Human Nature in Theistic Perspective

with Celia Deane-Drummond and Paul Wason, "Becoming Human in Theistic Perspective"; John H. Walton, "Human Origins and the Bible"; Mikael Stenmark, "Is There a Human Nature?"; Alan J. Torrance, "Is There a Distinctive Human Nature? Approaching the Question from a Christian Epistemic Base"; Alistair McFadyen, "Imaging God: A Theological Answer to the Anthropological Question?"; Celia Deane-Drummond, "God's Image and Likeness in Humans and Other Animals: Performative Soul-making and Graced Nature"; and John Schneider, "The Fall of Augustinian Adam: Original Fragility and Supralapsarian Purpose"

IS THERE A DISTINCTIVE HUMAN NATURE? APPROACHING THE QUESTION FROM A CHRISTIAN EPISTEMIC BASE

by Alan J. Torrance

Abstract. Interpretations of human nature driven by scientific analyses of the origin and development of the human species often assume metaphysical naturalism. This generates restrictive and distortive accounts of key facets of human life and ethics. It fails to make sense of human altruism, and it operates within a wider philosophical framework that lacks explanatory power. The accounts of theistic evolution that seek to redress this, however, too easily fail to take sufficient account of the unique contribution of interpretations from a specifically Christian epistemic base. The latter involve a Christological and, hence, eschatological approach which is intrinsic to the interpretation of human nature in light of the purpose and intentionality of the Creator. Phenomenological approaches to the nature of humanity lack the categories to distinguish between human nature as the object of divine intentionality and its present dysfunctional and, ultimately, subhuman state.

Keywords: altruism; Christology; eschatology; evolutionary biology; evolutionary theism; human nature; human uniqueness; metaphysical naturalism; religious pluralism

Ever since Plato, Western philosophy has been concerned with understanding the forms or essences of things. A perennial source of interest in this regard has been the nature of the human. Are there distinctive

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characteristics in our thinking, feeling, and acting that we possess or acquire naturally and that set us apart from other beings? And, if so, what are they? Aristotle's classification of living things by class and difference (*per genus et differentiam*) has generated the question as to whether there are unique characteristics that differentiate the human being from the rest of the animal kingdom. Today, however, we are faced with the bigger question as to whether any relevant differences are qualitative as opposed to merely quantitative. Are there, moreover, any relevant differences between *Homo sapiens* and the other hominids that suggest a uniquely distinctive, human nature? In this essay I consider how we answer the question as to *whether* there *is* a distinctively human nature from the perspective of Christian theism. Integral to this will be an emphasis on the importance of drawing a clear distinction between an abstractly or generalistically conceived *religious* account and a specifically *Christian* account of God and God's involvement in the contingent order.

I shall begin by posing the question as to whether a specifically Christian account can be reconciled with contemporary approaches in evolutionary biology and psychology. In his modern classic *On Human Nature*, E. O. Wilson argues famously that "if humankind evolved by Darwinian natural selection, genetic chance and environmental necessity, not God, made the species" (1978, xiii). More recently, Francisco Ayala commented, "It was Darwin's greatest accomplishment to show that the complex organization and functionality of living beings can be explained as the result of a natural process—natural selection—without any need to resort to a Creator or other external agent" (2007, 8567). Such an approach has obvious implications. The nature, character, and, indeed, emergence of human nature are not to be interpreted with recourse to any divine or transcendent intentionality. If that is the case, then how could Christian theism be perceived as having any relevant bearing on whether we have a distinctively human nature? The subsequent loss of any (theistically conceived) teleological facet to human nature would appear to imply that human beings are to be conceived as devoid of any *ultimate* or transcendent ethical purpose, not to mention accountability. Clearly, such an approach has implications for every facet of human existence and social interaction—not least for the academic enterprise *per se* given that the very concept of "truth" and "truthfulness" appears to assume participation in a moral universe with obligations to be "truthful." The extent of the problem is highlighted in Churchland's (1987) remarkably candid reference to the place of truth in her interpretation of human beings. For Churchland, human beings are simply organisms with nervous systems:

Boiled down to essentials, a nervous system enables the organism to succeed in the four F's: feeding, fleeing, fighting, and reproducing. The principal chore of nervous systems is to get the body parts where they should be in order that the organism may survive. . . . Improvements in sensorimotor control confer an

evolutionary advantage: a fancier style of representing is advantageous *so long as it is geared to the organism's way of life and enhances the organism's chances of survival*. Consistent with her presuppositions, she then adds, "Truth, whatever that is, definitely takes the hindmost" (1987, 548–9).¹

This, in turn, brings us to the question "Is there such a thing as a human nature that is more than the amoral, aspiritual deliverance of the effects of genetic chance and the kinds of environmental necessity characterized by the four F's?" Is human nature to be conceived as anything more than genetic coding or the genetic patterning of mental development—Wilson's "epigenetic rules"? If there is more to it than naturalist accounts of these kinds suggest, it is tempting to ask what is missing and what precisely we are entitled to "add on" in order to provide a more full-orbed definition of human nature. This might lead us to follow in the footsteps of Immanuel Kant and try to provide what amounts to a "supernatural" element in the confused hope that some kind of graft can be made to take between the desired "supernatural" elements and the "naturalistic" accounts provided by evolutionary theorists.

Such an attitude (characteristic of the majority of attempts to reconcile religious and scientific accounts) assumes that one can adopt an Archimedean point from which to reconcile general theistic beliefs with the results of an essentially naturalistic account of evolution. Apart from the obvious philosophical challenges that such an approach poses, such a dualistic *modus operandi* stands in profound tension with what appears to follow from Christian faith's self-understanding. To be a *Christian* theist, I shall suggest, is to commit oneself to addressing the question of the nature of the contingent order as a whole—and of human nature within that—from a specifically Christian epistemic base.

SO WHAT IS DISTINCTIVE ABOUT THINKING FROM A CHRISTIAN EPISTEMIC BASE? SOME CRITICAL THEOLOGICAL CONCEPTS

This section seeks to articulate, albeit in a rather condensed way, what can easily be demonstrated to be the fundamental concepts involved in thinking about human nature from a Christian epistemic base.

Integral to the Christian epistemic base that is characteristic of the shared creedal tradition of the Roman Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox churches is the conviction that in the incarnation we are confronted by two things. First, we are presented with the ultimate ground for interpreting the nature of God and the divine intentionality vis-à-vis the contingent order. Second, we are presented with human nature as it is intended to be by its Creator—*sub specie aeternitatis*.

The multifaceted witness of the New Testament and the theological tradition of the Christian church proclaim that in the person of Jesus Christ, we are presented with the "fullness of the Godhead dwelling bodily,"

as Paul put it, or “Emmanuel” (God with us) as Matthew put it, or the eternal Logos (God’s creative Word²) made flesh, as John put it. In short, Jesus is presented as the one in whom we have God uniquely present with humanity. A further implication is that we are presented here with the free, creative intentionality of the creator. The incarnate Logos is none other than the one through whom “all things came into being through him,” as John put it, “and without him not one thing came into being” (John 1:3, NRSV). Paul writes, “For in him all things were created . . .” (Col. 1:16). The church’s Nicene Creed summarizes this witness by affirming the incarnate Son to be “very God of very God . . . of one being with the Father (*homoousios to patri*), by whom all things were made.”

To operate from a distinctively Christian epistemic base, therefore, suggests that the direction of the pressure of interpretation in our conception of God and God’s purposes for humanity should be *from* God’s self-disclosure in the incarnate Logos *to* general religious or theistic assumptions about God and not the other way round! This is not to imply that God’s self-identification as the incarnate Logos is something that can be recognized by our inherent or natural epistemic abilities. On such an account, the recognition of the Creator’s presence in the world is not the product of a natural “religious” capacity. Integral to the witness of the New Testament is the insistence that God is known in and through God’s reconciling presence: by awakening our minds, God enables us to know what we otherwise could not know. Various New Testament metaphors suggest that we ask to be given the “eyes to see,” the “ears to hear,” “the heart to understand.” As Matthew suggests with regard to Peter’s confession, it was not “flesh and blood” that revealed the presence of God in the person of the Messiah. It was God the Father who revealed this “from above.” John argues that we require to be reconstituted (reborn) “from above,” and Paul emphasizes the need for the “reschematization” of our minds for the sake of discernment. In short, God reconciles alienated and dysfunctional minds (*echthroi te dianoia*) by creating a “new humanity” who knows the divine purpose, in and through Jesus Christ, by the work of the Holy Spirit. The implication here is that this process is the essential condition for our understanding who the creator is and what his creative purposes are vis-à-vis human beings.

I should add that the above does not suggest that we should rule out *a priori* the possibility that people may come by “natural” means to religious insights that are true. What it does imply, however, is that if it is the case that God has determined to be known in history in an act of reconciling self-disclosure, then it is simply irrational, if not disobedient, for us to decide to ground our “religious understandings” elsewhere. In short, if we rule out interpreting God in the light of the incarnation because we hold to natural, innate capacities to discern the nature and purposes of the divine, then we are ruling out *a priori* the possibility that God freely intends to

be known in that particular series of events in space-time. To do that, of course, would be to exclude *a priori* the contribution of the central and defining element of Christian orthodoxy to knowledge of God and the divine purpose.

The second key element integral to the Christian tradition is the perception that in Jesus Christ we are presented not only with God but with *what it is to be human in truth*—that is, with the one who uniquely defines human nature as it is created and elected to be. It is in him—rather than in the originally created humanity, represented by the first Adam—that the *telos* of humanity is determined. He is the final or *eschatos Adam*, the true *imago Dei*, or *imago Patris* and, as such, defines and, indeed, constitutes humanity in its properly functional form as this involves our existing in “communion” with God.³ By the Spirit, we are given to participate “in Christ”—that is, in his true humanity as his “body” and thereby constituted as the church (*ekklesia*).

The reason for providing this concentrated account is to demonstrate that the whole thrust of the New Testament serves to imply that the human being only fulfils its creative *telos* as it participates in Christ, by the Spirit, in communion with God—and, as such, in equally radical communion with its fellow human beings. Human nature, we find, is intended to be conceived as cohumanity where we exist in communion with God and one another. This is not envisioned as some kind of supererogatory ethic, but rather as the very essence of human nature in its properly functional form.

What should be clear from this perspective, is how radically it contrasts with the presentation of human nature proffered by Churchland, Wilson, and Simon and colleagues. From a Christian epistemic base, the latter’s account of human nature, conceived with exclusive recourse to the evolutionary derby, appears to denote a subhuman, unreconciled, and dysfunctional form of existence—one, indeed, that is completely contrary to the *telos* of the creator as this is evident in the incarnate Logos. Rather than articulating the essence of human nature, such accounts describe the dysfunctional nature of the human condition from which God desires to redeem a lost humanity.

HUMAN NATURE AS GIVEN IN AN ESCHATOLOGICAL PROCESS OF BECOMING

Arguably the most fundamental concept in the development of the Judaeo-Christian tradition is that of covenant. Israel was elected to bear witness to God’s unconditional covenant commitment to humanity. Covenant, indeed, defines the ground and grammar of the Torah—the law God gave to the Israelites. As God is unconditionally faithful to humanity (Exod. 20:1–2), so human beings are obliged and motivated to be unconditionally

faithful *in response* both to God (“You shall have no other Gods before me!” vv 3–11) and to one another (“You shall not murder, commit adultery, steal, lie . . .” vv 12ff.). The theological anthropology is clear. The fulfillment of our created being is found in corresponding to the creator’s orientation toward us by our being unconditionally faithful to God and to others. We are created for communion with God and one another—and that communion defines our natures. This is even apparent in the geographical location of the Garden of Eden that is placed at the source of the four rivers. To its early readers, this meant that it was found at the top of the mountain on which God dwelt. Our archetypal state is one of communion with God and one another. [Consequently, as Sanders shows, Jesus (1985) and Paul (1977) were seeking to be true to Judaism in interpreting the Torah as being fulfilled in loving God and one’s neighbors as oneself.]

It is this same communion with God and neighbor that characterized Jesus’s very being. What is clear from the exposition of this in the New Testament is that this form of orientation and activity is not merely *supererogatory* but *definitive* of the new (redeemed, reconciled, properly functional) humanity. The essential nature of humanity, we find, *is* to love God and thereby to love one’s neighbor—to be oriented to the creator and human persons in a manner that corresponds to and participates in *God’s* orientation to his people. This is definitive of what it means to be created anew (i.e., free from dysfunction) in the true image of the Father, thereby participating (*koinonein* or *metechein*, to use the Pauline terms) in Christ and in his communion with the Father. Paul uses the expression “*en Christo*” over 130 times in his letters. For him, participation in Christ’s (vicarious) communion with the Father and with others defines what it essentially and truly means to be *human*.

On this understanding, as Irenaeus saw, human nature is realized and fulfilled by being reconciled and redeemed into the life for which it was created. To be human involves, therefore, a refusal to be “schematized” (*me suschematizesthe!*) by the secular order and an openness to being metamorphosed (*metamorphousthe*) by the renewal of our minds for the discernment of truth (Rom. 12:2). This takes place for the sake of communion with God, together with all the epistemic, semantic, doxological, and ethical implications that this entails. To reiterate, for the New Testament writers, our being related to God is not a dimension *added on* to our “nature” as human beings, but rather a mode of (reconciled) being-in-communion with God (cf. John 17), which, as such, defines human nature as it is in truth. In sum, we are properly functional human creatures when, by the Spirit of God, we exist “with God,” as this is mediated and facilitated by the God who is “with us” in the person of Jesus Christ and by the work of the Spirit.

DOES THIS MESH WITH ACCOUNTS OF HUMAN NATURE
PROVIDED BY EVOLUTIONARY BIOLOGY?

It should now be clear that an epistemic base characterized by Christian theism does not allow us to define “human nature” with reference to a general (psychological, biological, or physiological) analysis of the human that brackets out our relationship to God and his creative purposes. As I have argued, to conceive of the human being outside of its relation to God is not a neutral option. It is to allow the focus of our analysis to be humanity in a dysfunctional state—a state that distorts its creative *telos*.

Few discussions present the nature of the potential distortion of naturalistic interpretations more lucidly than Herbert Simon’s influential treatment of altruism from a nontheistic perspective.⁴ One of the challenges for the evolutionary naturalist has been the struggle to make sense of acts of genuine altruism, which seem to go against the thrust of evolutionary psychology in a way that does not condemn such actions as dysfunctional. This is illustrated by Herbert Simon’s analysis of altruism in his article “A Mechanism for Social Selection and Successful Altruism” (1990).⁵ The puzzle which Simon (a leading cognitive scientist, cyberneticist, and winner of a Nobel Prize in Economic Science) sought to address is why certain people do not behave in the ways in which evolutionary theory would dictate—namely, the effective dissemination of their genes. How, for example, do we explain the Mother Therasas of this world? His answer is framed in terms of two principles: “docility”—some people are docile and consequently do what they are encouraged to do by their peers without adequately questioning why or whether it is in their interests, and “limited rationality”—what Plantinga rightly takes to mean “stupidity” (2000, 214, n. 21). In terms of Simon’s naturalistic account, therefore, morally virtuous or self-denying people such as Mother Theresa reflect unfitness—a form of unfittedness that will not survive long, that will literally be self-sacrificing, however. The evolutionary process condemns such dysfunctional genes with the result that the docile gullibility and limited rationality constitutive of altruism will be purified from the gene pool! Proper (self-interested and nonaltruistic) function will win the day, and nature’s “design” of us will rule unimpeded.

Although there are more constructive evolutionary accounts of altruism,⁶ it is simply confused, from a Christian perspective, to assume that human nature can be defined by exclusive recourse to accounts of its origins provided by evolutionary naturalists. To do so is, first, to commit the genetic fallacy—to seek to interpret what human nature *is* by considering how certain facets of human nature (may) *have come to be*. The “survival of the fittest” principle cannot, therefore, have a *foundational* role in determining whether human beings have a distinctive nature and, if so, what that might

be. Why? Because no purely phenomenological study can ever ultimately distinguish properly functional human nature from dysfunctional human nature if “proper function” is to have any ethical or teleological significance. The implications of confusion here can be horrendous. For example, in Thornhill and Palmer’s (2000) analysis of rape from the perspective of evolutionary psychology, *A Natural History of Rape: Biological Bases of Sexual Perversion*, it is argued that rape is either an adaptive behavior or a by-product of adaptation (DATE, 9, see Lloyd 2001, 1537). The question that emerges is whether rape is not a function of fitness. Clearly, not only rape or ethnic cleansing, but the whole gamut of evils can be “justified” if proper function is conceived in terms of fitness. For Christian theism, proper function is *intrinsic* to the definition of human nature and an ethical account of proper function stems from a teleological perspective that nontheistic accounts are simply unable to provide unmanipulatively—without the (*secondary* and *relative*) developments we find in game theory.

Second, putting to one side what are, arguably, incidental considerations as to how precisely God is involved in the dynamics of the evolutionary process, it is simply confused to try and build any kind of theistic teleology onto a naturalistic (and hence, by definition, inherently atheistic) account of the origins of human nature. To build a theistic account of human nature onto a foundationally naturalistic account is to seek to integrate a full-orbed nonteleological account and an explicitly and foundationally teleological account. As Alvin Plantinga has rightly pointed out, whatever kind of science one combines with metaphysical naturalism, the conclusions will necessarily be compromised by the atheistic suppositions of metaphysical naturalism: “Since metaphysical naturalism all by itself has these implications, it is no surprise that when you put it together with science (or as far as that goes, anything else—ancient Greek history, the Farmer’s Almanac, the Apostle’s Creed) the combination also implies them” (2001).

It might be added here that the Christian tradition makes a parallel mistake whenever it seeks to build a definition of the “new humanity” with foundational reference to nonscientific, phenomenological accounts of our universal, “Adamic”—fallen and hence dysfunctional—humanity. From a Christian epistemic basis, it is simply difficult to determine whether there is a distinctive human nature and how it should be conceived by making recourse to an unreconciled account of “humanity in general.” Appeals to the “*imago Dei*” have been profoundly misleading in this regard. When Jesus changed Simon’s name to Peter following the latter’s recognition and confession of who Jesus was, he was indicating that, as von Balthasar has argued, Peter had only been able to come to this recognition by virtue of his new identity “Peter” (1973, 48–9). For Paul, “life according to the Spirit” is not defined with foundational reference to “life according to the flesh.” From a Christian perspective, human nature is conceived in light

of what it is *in truth*, and only then, from that center, do we consider (retrospectively) how it might be treated from other perspectives.

DO WE HAVE A NATURE THAT IS DISTINCT FROM THE OTHER
EXTANT HOMINIDS? AVOIDING A “UNIQUENESS OF THE GAPS”

The almost universal tendency in Western theology has been to see the *imago Dei* as providing the key to defining human uniqueness. Too easily, however, and for reasons implied in the previous paragraph, this is taken as warrant for pointing to some universal human capacity that can be found by introspective or sociological analysis. This has given rise to what I have described elsewhere as a “uniqueness of the gaps,” where one seeks to determine phenomenologically what differentiates human beings from other animals and hominids and then determines that quality to define the “*imago Dei*.” Traditionally, the *imago Dei* has been conceived with reference either to a *sensus moralis* (e.g., Kant and Ritschl) or to reason and language as the *capax Verbi* (e.g., Aquinas et al.) or to our self-awareness and related capacity for self-transcendence (e.g., Schleiermacher and Rahner) or, indeed, to a cocktail of either some or all of the above. In short, there is a widely held view that in order to be warranted in attributing to human beings a “human nature,” one has to be able to determine what we have that other hominids and animals do not. There are several problems with such an approach, of which I shall mention three. First, as with the “god of the gaps,” whenever attempts have been made to define a specific capacity or quality that only human beings have, science has responded by suggesting that hominids have that same capacity in embryo, implying that the difference is, at best, quantitative rather than qualitative. Second, not all human beings are likely to possess the relevant qualities (e.g., the young, the elderly, the “mentally disabled,” those with Alzheimer’s, etc.). Third, evolution is not stationary, and it is not clear that other extant *hominidae* (as this includes the “great apes”) may not develop the relevant capacities over time in ways that resemble the capacities of *Homo sapiens*.

ANTHROPOLOGY FROM ABOVE OR BELOW?

The implication of our argumentation to this point shows that it is simply confused for Christian theism to adopt an “anthropology from below”—namely, a “bottom-up” approach. Such an approach generally involves interpreting the human in light of a naturalistic or quasinaturalistic “scientific” account of our essential capacities in the hope that this will allow additional recognition of the elements of human nature affirmed by the theist—usually, ethical, “spiritual,” or quasitranscendental dimensions of human existence!

At the same time, however, an “anthropology from above” is no less problematic. This seeks to start by assuming that the nature of human beings has to be conceived in “spiritual” or “transcendental” terms and then attempts to correlate naturalistic accounts with a supernaturalistic starting point. The problem here concerns not only that this graft will ultimately fail to take (as illustrated in the case of Kantian dualism), but also that, by starting with the foundational presupposition of our otherworldliness, such an approach can only ultimately fail to take sufficiently seriously our human creatureliness—that is, our “this worldliness”—and consequently all that we *do* in fact share with the rest of the animal kingdom.

The approach to human nature that operates from a Christian theistic epistemic base and is informed by the New Testament witness is profoundly different. It seeks to define human nature with recourse neither to categories provided by phenomenological means nor to assumptions about the human capacity for transcendence. It is underpinned neither by reductionist concepts of “nature” nor by abstract notions of transcendence. Rather, it operates from the Christian perception of the radical coincidence of God and humanity in space-time—that is, in history in the person of Jesus Christ. This leads it to conceive of human nature *eschatologically*—something for which Jürgen Moltmann argues so vehemently (1996)—and thus neither naturalistically nor in some transcendentalist manner that fails to center its thinking on God’s promise of new creation for all things. Consequently, it seeks to interpret human nature in the light of who God calls humans to be and who God defines, reconciles, and redeems them to be “in Christ.” Viewed as “gift” and not possession, the “human” describes what we are on the way to becoming—as that which we were created to become by a nondeistic God who remains faithful to his creative purposes. As to what the distinctively “human” is, it is glimpsed in and through our transformed participation in the “new humanity” as it is conceived in the light of the *eschatos Adam*, Jesus Christ. Properly functional human nature, therefore, requires to be conceived first and foremost eschatologically. Only “retrospectively,” therefore, in the light of the promised consummation of God’s creative purposes, can we perceive the *telos* that defines our “natures.”

“Retrospective” questions regarding the extent of the continuity and/or discontinuity between human persons and the other creatures (as this includes other hominids) are approached, therefore, with an open “look and see” approach. It neither forecloses nor affirms in advance the scope and validity of shared abilities and capacities with the other hominids. Furthermore, it does not “index” these to the present state of *our*—or, indeed, *their*—evolutionary development. But is such an approach not question-begging? To the extent that we are referring to “human persons” at all, are we not assuming clarity as to what precisely “human nature” is? Suffice it to say, the category “human persons” assumes a whole raft

of genetic and dispositional criteria as well as potentialities or capacities. One recent definition is that offered by Christian Smith, who interprets the human person as “a conscious, reflexive, embodied, self-transcending center of subjective experience, durable identity, moral commitment, and social communication, who—as the efficient cause of his or her own responsible actions and interactions—exercises complex capacities for agency and intersubjectivity in order to develop and sustain his or her own incommunicable self in loving relationships with other personal selves and with the non-personal world” (Smith 2010, 197). Although we operate with “working definitions” (often an amalgam of abilities and capacities) from this side of the *eschaton*, we can only appeal to vagueness theory to determine the actual boundaries of “human” nature. The failure to appreciate this has given rise to wide-ranging confusion, leading us to opt for some specific defining capacity or ability as characterizing human distinctiveness.

REVISITING THE TRADITIONAL QUESTIONS AS TO WHETHER THERE IS A HUMAN NATURE

This makes us ask the more traditional forms of question that emerge whenever it is considered whether or not there is a *human* nature. First, does human nature vary between populations, or is there an invariant human nature? Clearly, from a Christian perspective there is indeed a true human nature that must be conceived as invariant and is conceived in terms of participation within the “new humanity.” The true realization of our human nature remains “in a manner present and in a manner absent” to borrow a phrase that Douglas Farrow utilizes in his relating cosmology and eschatology (1999, 3). It also means that until the “new humanity” is fully realized, we remain “subhuman” and hence unstable with respect to our humanity. Consequently, human nature as we have it is variant. Dysfunctionality includes a multitude of diverse betrayals of the eschatological vision of *koinonia*: lust, greed, ruthless, self-serving competitiveness, the treating of others as means to an end, and so on. The creedal affirmation of the Body of Christ as one, holy, catholic, and apostolic, is an affirmation of the invariance of the human *telos* properly conceived, and thus of its defining “nature” as it is both fulfilled and recognized in true communion with God and neighbor.

Second, is human nature socially malleable? Precisely the same applies. To the extent that the Body of Christ is the Body of Christ *in truth*, then the defining *telos* of its participants is stable and distinctively defined. To the extent that the human mind is vulnerable to being schematized by the secular order (Rom. 12.2), human nature becomes malleable, unstable, and susceptible to the arbitrary dictates of dysfunctional human desires.

TWO POSSIBLE OBJECTIONS TO APPEALING TO A DISTINCTIVELY
CHRISTIAN EPISTEMIC BASE IN THIS CONTEXT

In this article, I tried to approach the question as to whether there is a distinctively human nature from a Christian epistemic base. There are at least two possible criticisms of such an approach. First, such an approach may be seen as inherently exclusive of claims representative of other religious traditions. This is an issue I have dealt with extensively elsewhere (Torrance 1997, 99–121). Suffice it to say, all truth-claims are exclusive of contrary truth-claims. Given that the Christian faith is irreducibly committed to historical claims, there is no possibility of a “religious” approach that assumes the nonrelevance of historically specific truth-claims that does not exclude the totality of Christian orthodoxy *a priori*. As Gavin d’Costa (1996) has shown so convincingly, along with others such as Alvin Plantinga before him (Plantinga 2000a), there is an insoluble logical problem in denying exclusivism in favor of pluralism and, *a fortiori*, inclusivism. To the extent that a truth-claim affirms anything at all that is cogent, the claim it makes is necessarily and inherently exclusive of contrary claims. As every serious scholar of world religions recognizes, the key truth-claims characteristic of Buddhism, Hinduism, and the Western religious traditions are diverse and hence mutually incompatible unless one determines to produce by selective means, a consistent and amalgam of specially chosen truth-claims and pretend that one is thereby being true to all the religions. Attempts along these lines can be found in the work of Hick (1982), Smart (1981), and, to some extent, Ward (2004). What emerges, however, is a new *exclusive* religious position (call it Hickeanism) that is exclusive of all contrary religious positions, not least most of the key religious claims constitutive of the traditions from which the selection has been made! In short, religious truth-claims, like all other truth-claims, are exclusive claims. To the extent that two religious claims conflict, one or both will be false, and it is contradictory to suggest otherwise. Christian claims are either true or false. If the historical events that the Christian faith holds to have taken place, did not take place, then those claims are false, and it is right that other religious claims should not be reconcilable with them! The implication of d’Costa’s argument is quite simple. There is no escape from the truth question!

The second possible objection to the approach I have adopted is that it stands to undermine apologetic strategies that (a) seek to defend the general principles underlying specific religious affirmations and (b) seek to ground interdisciplinary discussion on commonly held foundations. It should be obvious that it is not only possible but also immensely useful to argue for the explanatory power of theism and to expose the weaknesses and inconsistencies of opposing positions. It is unambiguously

clear, for example, that “metaphysical naturalism” and thus “evolutionary naturalism” is spectacularly lacking in explanatory power and that nothing could be further from the truth than when Richard Dawkins suggests, in *The Blind Watchmaker*, that Darwin made it possible to be an “intellectually satisfied atheist” (1986, 6). Naturalism cannot explain why there is anything contingent rather than nothing—the focus of the cosmological argument. It cannot explain the intelligibility of the cosmos that stands as the vital, unquestioned assumption of all science. It cannot explain the inconceivably low degrees of probability apparent in the fine-tuning of the cosmos in favor of the emergence of intelligent life. (It is clear that multiple universe theory simply compounds rather than addresses the problem here (Collins 2003).) Finally, it fails to appreciate the significance of the modal form of the ontological argument—that the naturalist has to be able to attach a probability factor of greater than 0.5 to the affirmation that there is no *possible* world in which God exists in order simply to affirm that God probably does not exist. There is no philosophical consensus that that could be done! In short, theism has explanatory power and cogency of a kind unparalleled by any alternative, and the attempt to repudiate it is confronted with monumental intellectual challenges and problems. To argue along such lines is clearly relevant. However, it is confused to assume, on that basis, that people are warranted in holding to theism in the abstract. The point of apologetics is not to establish religious affiliation but to show that, if you happen to be a theist (on Christian or Jewish grounds, for example), your position holds immense explanatory power. It does not and cannot establish Judaism or Christianity *per se*!

Discussions of human nature often appeal to the concept of “theistic evolution” as a means of interpreting what it is to be human. Too easily this has suggested that Christians and Jews and Muslims are first and foremost “theists” and only secondarily Christians or Jews or Muslims. This, however, is simply confused. Christians believe in God not because they first believe in theism but because they believe that God’s existence and purposes are disclosed to us in the person of Jesus Christ. It is because they are first and foremost Christians that they endorse “theism” and not the other way around! Appeal is only made to apologetic argumentation and thus as a means of demonstrating the confusion of those who seek to repudiate the Christian faith from a naturalistic or evidentialist or antirealist epistemic base. It is used against those who suggest that all forms of theism are incoherent or that theistic claims cannot be warranted. Consequently, it is not an abstractly theistic account of evolution that should drive a Christian’s approach to the question of human nature but her understanding of the nature and purposes of God! As I have sought to show in this article, it is the specific and concrete character of God’s self-disclosure alone that stands to shape and direct the Christian interpretation both of God’s relationship to human persons and, consequently, the perception of

human nature to which this understanding of the Creator's purpose gives rise.

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NOTES

1. This, of course, immediately raises the question that Alvin Plantinga has raised (also suggested by Darwin himself and then by C.S. Lewis) as to whether there is an evolutionary argument against the reliability of naturalistic accounts.
2. John deliberately commandeers the language of Genesis to emphasize the identity of Jesus Christ with God's creative Word.
3. Celia Deane-Drummond also argues that the *telos* of humanity is to be *imago Christi* (2009, 274–87).
4. I am indebted here to Alvin Plantinga's discussion of this in *Warranted Christian Belief* (2000, 214, n. 21).
5. Simon's own abstract runs as follows: "Within the framework of neo-Darwinism, with its focus on fitness, it has been hard to account for altruism behavior that reduces the fitness of the altruist but increases average fitness in society. Many population biologists argue that, except for altruism to close relatives, human behavior that appears to be altruistic amounts to reciprocal altruism, behavior undertaken with an expectation of reciprocation, hence incurring no net cost to fitness. Herein is proposed a simple and robust mechanism, based on human docility and bounded rationality that can account for the evolutionary success of genuinely altruistic behavior. Because docility-receptivity to social influence contributes greatly to fitness in the human species, it will be positively selected. As a consequence, society can impose a "tax" on the gross benefits gained by individuals from docility by inducing docile individuals to engage in altruistic behaviors. Limits on rationality in the face of environmental complexity prevent the individual from avoiding this "tax." An upper bound is imposed on altruism by the condition that there must remain a net fitness advantage for docile behavior after the cost to the individual of altruism has been deducted."
6. Cf. the work of Byrne (1988) on "Machiavellian Intelligence" and Whiten (2007) on "deep social mind."

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