

**JONATHAN W. CHAPPELL**

## Rethinking the Historical Fall in the Light of Evolution: F.R. Tennant and After

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*Arguably F.R. Tennant played a pivotal role in precipitating academic discussion about the Fall and evolution between 1902 and 1939. This article outlines his proposals and explores the principal conversation partners during this period, showing that, whether in support of the Fall or opposed to it, they were spurred into contributing to the debate in direct response to Tennant's pioneering writings.*

Key words: Tennant, Barnes, Chesterton, Micklem, von Hügel, evolution, original sin, fall, theodicy

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Frederick Robert Tennant (1866–1957) was a Cambridge philosophical theologian whose early education had been in the natural sciences; he argued that the idea that human beings were to be held responsible by their Creator for an original sin committed at some point in the distant past had been rendered impossible by new knowledge concerning the evolution of living things in general and the origin of mankind in particular. He claimed that the Augustinian notion that some kind of inherited flaw or stain had been passed on by generation from our aboriginal ancestors had been radically undermined because it involved the acceptance of the now increasingly discredited Lamarckian theory of acquired inherited characteristics.<sup>1</sup> His principal objective was to refute the idea that sin had somehow entered the human condition at a specific moment in history. The reality of sin was all too plain; however, it was a mistake to think of it as having come about because of a fall from a state of original righteousness. Rather, it was part and parcel of the way our species had evolved from its animal ancestry.<sup>2</sup> Therefore the Fall should be seen, not as a break from a prior state of perfection, nor a turning away from an originally created nature, but as a gradual realisation of the need to transcend the animal impulses with which we have evolved.<sup>3</sup> This position is further developed in his later work, *The Concept of Sin*:

A concept of sin such as shall be of universal application must be framed in the light of the indisputable facts that man is conscious before he is

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1 Tennant, F.R. *The Origin and Propagation of Sin: Being the Hulsean Lectures Delivered Before the University of Cambridge in 1901-2*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (1902), pp. 35-37.

2 *ibid.*, p. 10.

3 *ibid.*, p. 11.

self-conscious, impulsively appetitive before he is volitional, and volitional before he is moral. If he bear the image of the heavenly he also bears the image of the earthly. A creature needing nourishment, and belonging to a race renewed similarly to those beneath him, certain organic propensities are, or once were, indispensable to his nature.<sup>4</sup>

It is clear, he argued, that many of the 'native propensities' that we find in man are strong because they are, or once were, useful or necessary to life and were therefore through countless ages intensified by natural selection. Far from resulting from an evil bias or a corrupted nature, 'they belong to man as God made him'.<sup>5</sup>

Tennant in no way underestimated the enormity of sin. However, he claimed that, to the evolutionist, sin is not an innovation, but is the survival or misuse of habits and tendencies that were incidental to an earlier stage of development, and whose sinfulness 'lies in their anachronism'.<sup>6</sup> The fact that we are natural before we are moral beings, thus renders sin empirically inevitable.<sup>7</sup> Nonetheless, we still have the capacity to surmount our sinful proclivities in this life if we try earnestly to adhere to the moral example set by Christ.<sup>8</sup>

Although it is certainly true that secular thinkers, such as the socialist Robert Blatchford,<sup>9</sup> were arguing for the illogicality of a historical fall at the same time as Tennant's lectures, there is no doubt as to the originality of Tennant's contribution to the debate. Not only was he one of the first figures from within the British theological establishment to challenge the historicity of the Fall; he was also a leading pioneer in the attempt to build a new synthesis between Christian doctrine and evolutionary theory.

And whilst Tennant was to some extent echoing the ideas of late nineteenth-century philosophers, such as Herbert Spencer,<sup>10</sup> who popularised the notion of linear historical progression, he himself played a leading role in the construction of a new natural theology on teleological and anti-mechanistic lines. In this vein, he praised the efforts of the vitalist movement in physiology, and argued, *pace* the Darwinists, that variations should be seen as being directed along predetermined paths, rather than as simply random.<sup>11</sup>

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4 Tennant, F.R. *The Concept of Sin*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (1912), p. 155.

5 Tennant *op. cit.*, (1), p. 93.

6 *ibid.*, p. 94.

7 *ibid.*

8 *ibid.*, p. 125.

9 Blatchford, R. *God and My Neighbour*, London: The Clarion Press (1903), pp. 10, 124.

10 Spencer, H. 'Progress: its laws and causes', in *The Westminster Review*, Vol. 67. (April 1857), pp. 445-447, 451, 454-456, 464-465.

11 Tennant, F.R. 'The being of God in the light of physical science', in Swete, H.B. (ed.) *Essays on Some Theological Questions of the Day*, London: Macmillan (1905), pp. 55-100.

Indeed, as his development of the anthropic principle clearly shows, Tennant was one of the first theologians to contend that evolution and the design argument were not only compatible, but also mutually supportive.<sup>12</sup> Just as Thomas Aquinas had argued in his 'Fifth Way' that something non-rational requires a rational agency to control and direct it,<sup>13</sup> so Tennant claimed that, as evolution seems to be moving towards some kind of *telos*, there must be a 'guiding hand' behind it all.

Thus, in many respects, Tennant's synthesis set the stage for the debate on science and religion which was to follow. As Arthur Peacocke<sup>14</sup> has correctly observed, those who supported Tennant's approach, such as the liberals and modernists, enthusiastically welcomed the opportunity to explore the connection with science which had been opened up by the new natural theology being promoted by those biologists who endorsed non-Darwinian and vitalist interpretations and the physicists who emphasised the non-mechanistic perspectives of their theories.

For many traditionalists, however, this interpretation of the Fall was difficult to embrace. Not only were they confronted by a modernist movement which was determined to demythologise Christ's miraculous activities on earth; but the liberal attempt to reconcile the Fall with evolution was seen as a further blow to an orthodox soteriology.

### Support for Tennant: rejection of the historical Fall: 1902–1939

The rejection of the historical Fall and support for Tennant's ideas during this period emanated from three main quarters: firstly, liberal-minded ecclesiastics, who believed that the only way in which 'modern man' could be brought to embrace the Christian faith was if those anachronistic aspects which science had shown were inimical to it were eradicated; secondly, professional theologians, who held that modern theology would only retain its intellectual respectability if it adopted an anagogical hermeneutic, embraced the findings of modern thought and dispensed with doctrines incompatible with it; and, thirdly, professional scientists, who, in privileging their discipline above that of the mind-set of a more 'antiquated age' argued that only an uncompromising acceptance of the canons of natural science would free religion from the prison of 'mythological thought'.

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12 Tennant, F.R. *Philosophical Theology*, 2 vols. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (1928-1930).

13 cf. Aquinas, T. *Summa Theologica of St. Thomas Aquinas*, 1, 2, 3, Westminster, MD: Christian Classics (1981).

14 Peacocke, A. 'Biological evolution and Christian theology – yesterday and today', in Durrant, J. (ed.) *Darwinism and Divinity*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell (1985), p. 112.

### ***Ecclesiastics***

The need to dispense with any anti-scientific beliefs which smacked of 'primitive magic', whether sacramental or doctrinal, was strongly urged by Ernest William Barnes (1874–1953). Barnes, who was Bishop of Birmingham from 1924 until his retirement in 1953, launched a campaign to rationalise the Christian faith. In a notorious collection of sermons and addresses,<sup>15</sup> he argued that the Church needed to accept in full the implications of Darwinian theory, which, far from fading away, was gaining increasing prominence in biology, if it was to win back its intellectual credibility. Such a task should present no difficulties for Christians because 'a generation ago the brilliant writings of Aubrey Moore ... smoothed the way for the acceptance by English High Churchmen of the doctrine of evolution'.<sup>16</sup> As such, Christians were no longer prepared to accept doctrines that were clearly incompatible with the scientific world-view as presented by evolutionary biology and geology.<sup>17</sup>

Barnes emphasised the need for the Church to do more than merely pay lip-service to evolution.<sup>18</sup> Many theologians and clergy, he thought, acknowledged the veracity of evolution only superficially and, when under pressure, would often revert to discussing the Genesis myth as if it were literally true. They had therefore failed to think through properly the implications of the scientific revolution for Christian doctrine.<sup>19</sup>

More alarmingly, Barnes asserted, modern theologians had failed to confront the necessity of rethinking the doctrine of the historical fall and original sin in the manner set forth by scholars such as Tennant. He first drew attention to the issues raised by Tennant in a sermon delivered at a meeting of the British Association in August 1920.<sup>20</sup> In his address, he criticised the doctrine of the historical Fall, and proposed replacing it with a philosophy of progressive evolutionism which held that the emergence of the human soul was part of the Divine plan. For Barnes, mind originally emanated from matter; spirit had then emanated from mind; and, since the whole process can hardly be futile, survival in the spiritual realm is assured because spirit ultimately transcends matter. The sermon was widely reported in the press, and its coverage in *The Times* provoked a public correspondence between Barnes and General Bramwell Booth of the Salvation Army.<sup>21</sup> Booth strongly defended the historical fall; in re-

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15 Barnes, E. *Should Such a Faith Offend? Sermons and Addresses*, London: Hodder & Stoughton (1927).

16 'Evolution and the fall', in *ibid.*, p. 11.

17 Tennant *op. cit.*, (11), pp. xviii-xix.

18 Tennant *op. cit.*, (12), p. 13.

19 *ibid.*, p. 14.

20 Barnes, E. 'Christian revelation and scientific progress', in Swete (ed.) *op. cit.*, (11), pp. 1-9.

21 'Doctrine of the fall: canon Barnes on science and faith', *The Times*, 30 August 1920, p. 7;

spouse, Barnes stated that, for members of the Church who subscribe to modern science, 'the Christ-Spirit is the supreme and final power in the evolution of man'.<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, he argued that, although sin was real, the traditional attempt to explain it in terms of a historical fall was no longer credible.<sup>23</sup>

While 'Evolution and the Fall' was controversial, a greater storm was yet to come. It followed a meeting in 1927, in which Arthur Keith, President of the British Association, delivered an address on the subject of human origins. Barnes responded by preaching a provocative sermon in Westminster Abbey, commending Keith's work and calling on the Church to be open to the new scientific discoveries which shed light on the evolution of human origins. The narrative of the Fall in Genesis 3 should be dismissed as primitive myth, and the 'horrible theory of the propagation of sin, reared on the basis of the Fall by Augustine' should be discarded.<sup>24</sup> Though some Christians continued to assert that the human mind was a special creation of God, such a position was simply unsustainable. The primordial antecedents of early stages of human development were still evident, in spite of evolution's advance, and thus biology revealed 'that much that is evil in man's passions and appetites is due to natural instincts inherited from his animal ancestry. In fact, man is not a being who has fallen from an ideal state of innocence: he is an animal slowly gaining spiritual understanding and with the gain rising far above his distant ancestors.'<sup>25</sup>

The Church, Barnes argued, had to face up to this reality. Evolution was clearly God's method of creative activity, even though the full extent of suffering in the natural world remained problematic. His public intervention was reported extensively, and leading newspapers of the day ran sensationalist headlines such as: 'Outspoken Sermon by Dr. Barnes – Evolution a fact – Darwin's Destruction of Theological Scheme'.<sup>26</sup>

Although the letters from the public that Barnes received in response to his sermons seem to indicate broad support for his views, his ideas provoked much controversy within the Church.<sup>27</sup> While it is certainly true that Barnes ruffled a goodly number of ecclesiastical feathers among the

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letters from Booth to the editor of *The Times*, 31 August 1920, p. 6; and 3 September 1920, p. 6. For insightful coverage of the controversy between Barnes and Booth concerning the Fall, see Barnes, J. *Ahead of his Age: Bishop Barnes of Birmingham*, London: Collins (1979), pp. 126-132.

22 Barnes, E. 'The Fall of Man', *The Times*, 1 September 1920, p. 6.

23 Tennant *op. cit.*, (12), p. 16.

24 Barnes, E. 'Religion and science: The present phase', in Swete (ed.) *op. cit.*, (11), pp. 309-317; cf. p. 331.

25 *ibid.*, pp. 312-313.

26 See *Daily Telegraph*, 26 September 1927, p. 12; also *Manchester Guardian*, 26 September 1927, p. 7 and *The Times*, 26 September 1927, p. 9.

27 See Barnes, J *op. cit.*, (21), p. 128.

Church hierarchy of the period, perhaps the most accurate verdict on the Barnes episode is given by Adrian Hastings, who argues that Barnes was correct in recognising that what remained a liberal minority among the clergy, and an even smaller minority among the laity, was fast changing the fundamental character of the Church of England's worship. Hastings is also surely right in arguing that Barnes was perspicacious in recognising that the bishops as a whole were in the process of surrendering point by point to this forceful minority because they could find no intellectually credible alternative.<sup>28</sup>

In addition to Barnes, significant early ecclesiastical support for Tennant's views also came from Congregationalist minister turned Anglican priest Ronald John Campbell. In his book *The New Theology*, he argued that coming to terms with science was the most pressing issue facing the Christian faith.<sup>29</sup> The Church could only flourish in the new century, he said, if it dispensed with a literalistic exegesis of Scripture and interpreted the Genesis creation narrative in allegorical terms. Fully accepting the veracity of evolution also meant reinterpreting the doctrine of the Fall. Campbell's book, which precipitated the first prominent 'modernist' outburst within Anglicanism in the twentieth century, stressed God's immanence in the world and within mankind. It argued that human beings should be perceived as the agents of God's will and that Christ was the forerunner of what we might become in the future. This spiritual approach, Campbell argued, was wholly compatible with modern science. Indeed, he felt that the non-mechanistic perspectives in science could be harmonised with the religious view that the world was the product of a divinely guided organic evolution, which culminated in the spiritual evolution of the human race.<sup>30</sup>

In addition to the latest developments in biblical criticism and science, the main influence on Campbell was Hegelian idealism. This, combined with his full acceptance of evolutionism, led him to conclude that the notion that man was detached from the universe or its Creator was unsustainable. God, likewise, must not be seen as extrinsic to his creation, but as the ongoing foundation of the universe. Human beings are infused by the divine spirit because they are the products of – and are a central part of – that universe. God was not an ethereal, mysterious being: He was contained within the world and lay at the heart of the existential self. The emergence of human personality was thus seen as a pivotal step in the realisation of the divine plan.<sup>31</sup>

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28 Hastings, A. *A History of English Christianity 1920–1985*, London: Fount Paperbacks (1986), pp. 202–203.

29 Campbell, R.J. *The New Theology*, London: Chapman & Hall (1907), p. 4.

30 *ibid.*, p. 9.

31 *ibid.*, p. 28.

The 'New Theology' developed by Campbell was a bold attempt to assert that the vision of a quasi-purposive universe proclaimed by some scientists was consonant with a religious world-view.<sup>32</sup> Its objective, he argued, was 'a restatement of the essential truth of the Christian religion in terms of the modern mind' based on 'a re-emphasis of the Christian belief in the Divine immanence in the universe and in mankind'.<sup>33</sup> Accordingly, many elements of 'orthodox' doctrine would have to be radically revised – particularly the historical Fall and the atonement by Christ. These doctrines were 'immoral' and 'misleading'; moreover, they 'go straight in the teeth of the scientific method, which, even where the Christian facts are concerned, is the only method which carries any weight with the modern mind'.<sup>34</sup>

Campbell did not deny the reality of sin: evil for him was the failure of human beings to fulfil their role in the universal scheme of things. But the traditional idea of a fall from a state of grace that was somehow the fault of man was for him antithetical to the tenets of science: 'It is almost superfluous to point out that modern science knows nothing of it [the Fall], and can find no trace of such a cataclysm in human history. On the contrary, it asserts that there has been a gradual and unmistakable rise; the law of evolution governs human affairs just as it does every other part of the cosmic process'.<sup>35</sup> Furthermore, he asserted that the doctrine of the Fall should be dispensed with, not simply on the grounds that it was inimical to science, but because it was never a legitimate tenet of the Christian faith in the first place: 'It [the Fall] is not integral to Christianity, for Jesus never said a word about it, and did not even allude to it indirectly. It implies a view of the nature and dealings of God with men which is unethical and untrue'.<sup>36</sup>

### Theologians

The weightiest endorsement of Tennant's *The Origin and Propagation of Sin* on the part of a professional theologian emanated from the pen of N.P. Williams. Williams's scholarly significance lies chiefly in the fact that his *magnum opus*, a meticulously researched tome entitled *Ideas of the Fall and Original Sin*, constitutes one of the most exhaustive historical-critical surveys of theories of the Fall ever produced. The main corpus of this monumental work is devoted to an examination of the Fall from the Hebrew Scriptures up until the work of Tennant; however, in the concluding section, Williams offers an analysis of the impact of the Darwinian

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32 Ruse, M. *Monad to Man: The Concept of Progress in Evolutionary Biology*, Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press (1996).

33 *ibid.*, p. 3.

34 *ibid.*, p. 4.

35 *ibid.*, p. 60.

36 *ibid.*, p. 59.

revolution in thought and knowledge, and expresses much sympathy with the position advanced by Tennant.<sup>37</sup>

Before discussing Tennant's views, however, Williams first endeavours to dismantle what he sees as the folly of Origen's neo-Platonic notion of pre-cosmic fall (which, prior to Darwin, had been the most prominent non-historical method of dealing with the Fall).<sup>38</sup> It is absurd, he argues, to attempt to speculate on the ultimate transcendent origin of evil rather than upon the first of its alleged manifestations in human history.<sup>39</sup> For believers in the biblical and Christian idea of God, even this ultimate fall must still be conceived as having occurred in time. For, he argues, 'any attempt to lift the ultimate origin of evil out of Time plunges us into the gulfs either of dualism or of unmoral monism'.<sup>40</sup> The Origenistic pre-temporal Fall is clearly flawed, he says, on account of its being oxymoronic. Furthermore, the abstruse metaphysical speculation characteristic of a priori reasoning in this matter is doomed to failure. Our only means of gaining an intelligible grip on the problem of the aetiology of human sin is to change our epistemological and methodological approach and see if an answer can be afforded by means of a posteriori evidence, 'derived from an examination of the world as we actually know it to be, in the light of that Darwinian revolution which the eyes of the great German philosophers were never destined to see'.<sup>41</sup>

If we turn our attention away from the realm of metaphysics, and focus instead upon the evolutionary history of the planet and of our species as depicted by Darwin, we shall clearly see that Augustinianism, with its theory of a paradisaical condition of original perfection, cannot possibly be reconciled with the evidence of gradual ascent from 'gross and brutish beginnings which is given us by geology and biology'.<sup>42</sup> Few Christian thinkers, he asserts, 'will now attempt to identify the protoplast of Augustine's imagination with *Pithecanthropus erectus*'.<sup>43</sup> For Williams, the only version of the traditional Christian doctrine of man which has the remotest chance of surviving in the modern world is that taught by the Greek Fathers, 'which regards the protoplast as a babe, a frail, undeveloped, ignorant creature, and views the first human sin rather as a *praevaricatio* – a stepping-aside from the true line of upward progress – than as a *lapsus* or fall from a high level of moral and intellectual endowment'.<sup>44</sup>

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37 Williams, N.P. *The Ideas of the Fall and of Original Sin: A Historical and Critical Study*, London: Longmans, Green & Co. Ltd (1927), pp. 530-537.

38 *ibid.*, p. 505.

39 *ibid.*, p. 506.

40 *ibid.*, pp. 512-513.

41 *ibid.*, p. 513.

42 *ibid.*, p. 514.

43 *ibid.*

44 *ibid.*

For Williams, all that basic Christian thought requires us to affirm, and all that modern knowledge permits us to affirm, of the first specifically human creatures that inhabited this earth,

is not a Fall but a failure – a failure to ‘move upward, working out the beast’, a failure to rid themselves of the anachronistic ‘ape and tiger’ strain in their blood, a failure to emancipate themselves from the fatal flaw of deficiency in ‘herd-instinct’ or gregarious feeling, the flaw of which their developing intellects had made them progressively conscious.<sup>45</sup>

Such a failure would have occurred following the transition from animal to human self-consciousness, a move from ignorance of morality to an awareness of ethical obligations. Exactly how and when such a transition would have taken place Williams concedes we have no way of knowing.<sup>46</sup> However, we can speculate that such a transition would in all probability have been mediated

not by a sudden flash of moral illumination, succeeded by a single act in which man turned his back upon the new light, but rather by a period of twilight during which the lineaments of the animal slowly melted into the human, the faint glow of potential self-consciousness which smouldered in the brains of our simian ancestors grew in brightness, consistency, and firmness, and the gregarious impulse which had kept the ancient hunting-pack together gradually flowered in the idea of a communal law and in a rudimentary sense of ethical and tribal obligation.<sup>47</sup>

Williams thus endorses Tennant’s view that ‘sin’, far from being attributable to a fall from a prior state of perfection, is due to the innate moral deficiency in human beings – a deficiency which would appear to have been characteristic of our nature from the moment when we first became recognisable as morally responsible agents. It is a product, not of a primal act of disobedience, but of survival instincts inherited from our pre-human ancestors.<sup>48</sup>

### **Scientists**

In addition to Churchmen and professional theologians, the 1920s also produced notable scientists who criticised the historical Fall; intriguingly, not so much on the grounds of its incompatibility with Darwinian natural selection, but because it conflicted with a positivistic view of spiritual

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45 *ibid.*, p. 517.

46 *ibid.*, p. 518.

47 *ibid.*, p. 515.

48 *ibid.*, p. 520.

progress. The most prominent was the Scottish Presbyterian and trained biologist, James Young Simpson, who had studied under Adam Sedgwick at Cambridge and subsequently taught biology at Edinburgh University. In his younger years, Simpson had met, and been greatly influenced by, Henry Drummond. He shared Drummond's evolutionary optimism and this coloured his whole approach towards the relationship between science and religion. As early as 1912, he produced a book called *Spiritual Interpretation of Nature*, in which he argued that, while the scientific critique had helped to sweep away the nonessential elements of the Christian faith, science itself could never falsify the essential core of religious truth. A great deal of this book was devoted to an in-depth consideration of evolutionary theory. While he expressed admiration for the project of theological reconstruction undertaken by Tennant, he remained sceptical of Darwinism and argued that it should be clearly distinguished from evolutionism – a view which enabled one to see the progressive ascent of life as God's method of creation.<sup>49</sup> The process of evolution had a law-like quality which 'directed by an overruling yet indwelling purpose' revealed the reality of God's immanence.<sup>50</sup> While Simpson conceded that there had been some evolutionary blind alleys, he believed that the general thrust of evolution led to the appearance of higher and more advanced forms of life. Along with many of his contemporaries, he attempted to play down the severity of animal suffering, arguing that it could in no way be equated with human pain. Likewise, he insisted that the struggle for existence in nature had been grossly exaggerated by Darwinism.<sup>51</sup>

For Simpson, the appearance of the mind was a pivotal stage in the evolutionary process. The mind, in turn, had led inexorably to self-reflexive consciousness and the emergence of the moral sense.<sup>52</sup> The Darwinian attempt to reduce morality to social instincts was seen as a failure to understand the fact that the mind transcended the material world. The ultimate objective of progress was to produce souls which were 'perfectly adapted' to life in the spiritual realm.<sup>53</sup> Most controversially from a modern perspective, the new knowledge concerning heredity led him to espouse eugenics in response to the fear that leaving undesirable individuals free to reproduce would degrade the quality of the race.<sup>54</sup> However, by the time the third edition of *The Spiritual Interpretation of Nature* was published in 1928, he was cautiously conceding that, although we might know 'at least in a few extreme cases, particularly of disease, what is unfit, undesirable,

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49 Simpson, J.Y. *The Spiritual Interpretation of Nature*, 1st edn. London: Hodder & Stoughton (1912), pp. 106-107.

50 *ibid.*, p. 110.

51 *ibid.*, chap. 6.

52 *ibid.*, chaps. 13 & 14.

53 *ibid.*, p. 317.

54 *ibid.*, pp. 193, 194.

degenerate, it is not so easy to decide what qualities may be useful to society, or in what proportion they should be encouraged'.<sup>55</sup>

Simpson's most systematic treatment of the Fall is to be found in his 1925 volume *Landmarks in the Struggle between Science and Religion*. Unsurprisingly, given his views on human progress, he turned to the work of Grafton Elliot Smith – an anatomist whose theories unashamedly trumpeted a positivistic anthropology – when discussing the latest speculations on human origins.<sup>56</sup> Smith claimed that the earliest hunter-gatherers were highly peaceable peoples, whose lives were devoid of conflict and strife. War had only appeared relatively late in the human story and was the result of the agricultural revolution. For Simpson, such a vision of the human condition was clearly at odds with the claim that we are inherently sinful and predisposed to violence and conflict. On the contrary, it suggests that we are naturally good and peace-loving, and are tempted into sin only by aberrant social influences.<sup>57</sup> He thus roundly condemned the doctrines of the historical Fall and original sin, which, he maintained, were born out of a woeful ignorance of the prehistoric age.<sup>58</sup> He was unfailingly optimistic in his hope that the human race could be bettered by eliminating the deleterious social factors that produced unnaturally violent and selfish behaviour – all of which are sadly evident in contemporary society. In the final section of his book, *Nature: Cosmic, Human and Divine*, Simpson developed the idea that the human species is a crucial step in the cosmic process of evolution<sup>59</sup> – the trajectory of which he saw as a providentially guided ascent towards 'higher things': 'We are part of a process that is a rational, orderly Whole', he averred, 'with these tremendous possibilities in it, emerging at every stage ...'.<sup>60</sup>

Simpson thus repudiated the historical Fall, and argued that it had never taken place – not (as did Tennant) on the grounds that human beings were inherently aggressive and had thus always been disposed a priori to sin – but, on the contrary, because humans are innately irenic creatures who are driven to evil only by a posteriori corrupting environmental pressures. Echoing Rousseau's 'noble savage', Simpson maintained that man

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55 Simpson, *The Spiritual Interpretation of Nature*, 3rd edn. London: Hodder & Stoughton (1928), p. 195.

56 Simpson J.Y. *Landmarks in the Struggle between Science and Religion*, London: Hodder & Stoughton (1925), p. 24.

57 *ibid.*, p. 37. This thesis is also articulated by Simpson in his subsequent work *Nature: Cosmic, Human and Divine*, New Haven: Yale University Press (1929), pp. 95-96.

58 Simpson *op. cit.*, (48), p. 54.

59 Simpson's theory is analogous in many respects to the 'Law of Complexity' adduced by the Jesuit palaeontologist, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1881-1955), which holds that consciousness develops towards ever higher levels in the universe, culminating in the 'Omega Point' which is man.

60 Simpson *op. cit.*, (48), p. 119.

originated without any violent tendencies: it is social institutions, not our animal antecedents, that produce discord and sin.

### **Criticism of Tennant: defence of the historical Fall: 1902–1939**

In spite of Tennant's definitive attack on the historicity of the Fall, a number of scholars criticised his thesis. Such attempts to uphold the historical Fall during this period took essentially two forms: firstly, there were those who, perhaps fearful of the implications of Darwin's theory, withdrew from any engagement with modern science, arguing that the only way in which the historicity of the Fall could be affirmed was by rejecting evolution. Then, there were those who recognised that the only intellectually respectable way forward was to affirm the premises of both the historical Fall and evolution, and accordingly work towards achieving some kind of rapprochement.

#### ***Defence of the historical Fall and rejection of evolution***

Tennant made few converts to his New Theology from among conservative evangelicals, non-conformists and Roman Catholic thinkers who saw little advantage in attempting to find a compromise with scientific thought. As far as they were concerned, the modernist position was clearly heterodox: not only did its emphasis on an immanent deity vitiate the traditional doctrine that man was fallen; it also, *mutatis mutandis*, undermined the notion that man was in need of salvation from an authority that existed outside the world. Traditionalists therefore insisted that it was essential to uphold God's transcendental nature, and the doctrine that, once man had been given the capacity to choose, he had rebelled against the Creator's plan, thus requiring Him to undergo kenosis and become incarnated in the world as Christ Jesus. While, as we shall see, some liberal Anglo-Catholics, such as Charles Gore, attempted a compromise by embracing the new natural theology and its image of a purposefully evolving universe – on the proviso that God's transcendence and the reality of miracles and supernatural events were retained – there was a growing suspicion among many more traditionalist thinkers that any form of natural theology was irrelevant to salvation.

Some traditionalist Christians remained chary of embracing even non-materialistic forms of science and regarded the repudiation of natural theology, associated with figures such as Karl Barth, as more conducive to the maintenance of a conservative Christianity.<sup>61</sup> One thinker who fell

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61 Bowler, P.J. *Reconciling Science and Religion: The Debate in Early Twentieth-Century Britain*, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press (2001), p. 243; pp. 283-284; pp. 288-289. For a highly informative and recent scholarly discussion of Karl Barth's repudiation of natural theology, see also Holder, R.D. *The Heavens Declare: Natural Theology and the*

into this category, was the non-conformist minister, Nathaniel Micklem, who even wrote a book in which he insisted that science could tell us nothing about the Fall or salvation.<sup>62</sup> Moreover, Micklem was uncompromising in his insistence that theology must preserve an image of humanity as having gone astray and in dire need of redemption from an agency beyond itself. He was particularly exercised by the absence of any sense of sin, or recognition of the need for salvation, in many evolutionary accounts of man's development.<sup>63</sup>

In addition to non-conformist thinkers such as Micklem, the 1920s and 1930s also saw a reaction to liberal interpretations of the Fall on the part of a number of highly articulate Roman Catholic writers, including Hilaire Belloc,<sup>64</sup> W.E. Orchard and G.K. Chesterton. Although the Catholic Church remained officially opposed to evolution at the end of the nineteenth century, it began to modify its position concerning biological evolution in the early part of the twentieth. However, it vigorously upheld the doctrine of the special creation of the soul by God and fiercely resisted any theory, such as the Darwinian view that the human mind had evolved from an animal, which it regarded as a threat to the spiritual nature of man. Accordingly, these Catholic writers sought to preserve a role for the supernatural in the creation of man and vigorously insisted on the historicity of the Fall. Moreover, their hostility to evolution was grounded not so much on a desire to interpret Genesis literally as on a recognition that the Church was a bulwark of civilisation and the only spiritual resource capable of stemming the tide of materialism and naturalism.

Undoubtedly one of the most prominent defenders of the Fall during this period was G.K. Chesterton, who had established himself as a well-known critic of Darwinism and materialism prior to his conversion to Catholicism in 1922. Early on in his career, Chesterton had been greatly influenced by Anglo-Catholic theologians such as Charles Gore. In his 1909 essay 'Science and Religion',<sup>65</sup> he advocated a somewhat simplistic scientific model, arguing that 'physical science is like simple addition: it is either infallible or it is false'.<sup>66</sup> In his celebrated book *Orthodoxy* he defended the historical Fall and original sin in the wake of those progressionist evolutionists and modernists who had simply ignored it.<sup>67</sup>

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*Legacy of Karl Barth*, West Conshohocken, PA: Templeton Foundation Press (2012).

62 Micklem, N. *What is The Faith?*, London: Hodder & Stoughton (1936), p. 157.

63 *ibid.*, p. 142.

64 For an account of Belloc's bitter debate with H.G. Wells over the latter's support for Darwinism and debunking of a historical fall, see Wilson, A.N. *Hilaire Belloc: A Biography*, London: Mandarin (1997), pp. 54–60.

65 Chesterton, G.K. 'Science and religion', in *All Things Considered*, London: Methuen (1908).

66 *ibid.*, pp. 187–193.

67 Chesterton, G.K. *Orthodoxy*, London: Hodder & Stoughton (1908), p. 15.

Provoked by the polemical position of Tennant and his followers, Chesterton further argued that, as evolution displayed numerous instances of physical degeneration, it was perfectly possible that moral falls had occurred. Besides, a sense of depravity was not dependent on the nature of man's physical origins per se, but stemmed from spiritual conviction.<sup>68</sup> In *The Everlasting Man*, which was in many respects the most important work following his conversion, he argued that Darwinism misconstrued the qualitative difference between man and animal, and the unbridgeable gap that divided them: reason. While creation and the constancy of species were upheld by Holy Scripture and Church tradition, the transmutation of species or even their common descent were incapable of empirical verification. Chesterton thus poured scorn on the evolutionist claim that the origin of life and the human mind were rendered more intelligible if seen as continuous with the animals. Even if man bore a physical resemblance to the animals, the human soul was unique and showed the spark of the divine: 'Man is not merely an evolution but a revolution.'<sup>69</sup> Chesterton went on to dismiss the sciences of physical anthropology and palaeontology as evidentially weak disciplines that had produced a wholly fictitious popular conception of the 'primitive cave man' struggling to develop spiritually and morally, based on little more than conjecture and a few fragments of bone and stone. The first *Homo sapiens*, Chesterton argued, were already fully human and fully civilised – and the tragedies of oppression and tyranny were clear signs of our fallen condition.<sup>70</sup>

### **Attempts to affirm both the historical Fall and evolution**

Among the most significant of those who attempted to defend the Fall by proposing a synthesis between evolution and theology during the period 1902–1939 was undoubtedly E.J. Bricknell, who, in 1926, wrote an important essay entitled 'Sin and the Fall',<sup>71</sup> which contained a trenchant attack on Tennant. He excoriated Tennant for minimising the moral dimension of sin, and claiming that the evil tendencies in man's nature are the result of purely animal antecedents. On the contrary, revelation indicated that early man had deliberately transgressed from the divine plan. He began his discussion by asserting that, although in the teaching of Christ in the Gospels there is no formal theology of the fall or original sin, 'in His teaching and ministry He assumes that all men are in a condition of "fallenness". They are sick and need a physician.'<sup>72</sup> It is manifestly clear, he says, that Christ in his teaching implied that mankind as a whole had strayed

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68 Simpson *op. cit.*, (48), pp. 189-190.

69 Chesterton, G.K. *The Everlasting Man*, London: Hodder & Stoughton (1925), p. 23.

70 *ibid.*, p. 25.

71 Bricknell, E.J. 'Sin and the fall', In Selwyn, E.G. (ed.) *Essays Catholic and Critical*, London: SPCK (1926), pp. 205-224.

72 *ibid.*, p. 210.

from the right path and had 'swerved away from God's purpose'.<sup>73</sup> He thus held that the historical Fall is doctrinally necessary, first and foremost because it is presupposed in the teaching and ministry of Christ Himself.

While Bricknell goes on to concede that the theory of evolution has presented the greatest challenge to the notion of a historical fall and credits Tennant with having made the most systematic attempt to reinterpret the doctrine in the light of biology, he states that he is 'unable to accept this [Tennant's views] as an adequate explanation of all the facts, even though we owe much to Dr Tennant for his treatment of the problem'.<sup>74</sup> Firstly, Bricknell argues that Tennant underestimates the gravity of his assertion that instinct exists prior to moral conscience in man. If human sinfulness is attributable to a priori anachronistic urges within man, how (he asks, in good Kantian fashion) can man be held morally responsible for his actions? If man is simply determined by animalistic impulses over which he has limited control, what manner of freedom would he have to transgress from the divine law and commit sin?<sup>75</sup>

The only way, Bricknell asserts, of reinterpreting the narrative of the Fall which is both consistent in evolutionary terms and coherent theologically is to posit the existence of a first human pair, or pre-human pair, who were sufficiently rational and so forth to be morally accountable. Until there is moral accountability, the concept of sin has no application. Once there is, there is the possibility of wrongdoing. Thus, for Bricknell, Tennant's denial that there was ever a moment in human history when human beings consciously chose to disobey a moral command renders his theory incompatible with the concept of freedom which is a necessary prerequisite of moral accountability and thus sin.<sup>76</sup>

For Bricknell, then, the Fall must be seen as a moral evil, and one which represented a deliberate transgression on the part of early humans from the divine plan. He took account of the fact that several different races of early humans had existed, and suggested that these may have constituted 'false starts'. Furthermore, the fact that the evolution of man was not a simple progression, but a highly complex process, indicated that early humans had started to develop along moral lines but had subsequently transgressed.

Bricknell argues that the original sin which is inherited as a result of the fall wounds human nature, but does not render it totally depraved. 'Rather it is the balance of our nature that is upset.'<sup>77</sup> Although he ex-

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<sup>73</sup> *ibid.*, p. 211.

<sup>74</sup> *ibid.*, p. 218.

<sup>75</sup> *ibid.*, p. 220.

<sup>76</sup> *ibid.*, p. 222.

<sup>77</sup> *ibid.*, p. 219.

presses some doubts about Augustine's doctrine of the inheritance of evil tendencies in man via generation (chiefly on the grounds that modern science holds that modifications acquired during the lifetime of an organism cannot be passed on to descendants by heredity), Bricknell argues that more weight should be attached to 'social heredity'. Individuals only come into existence as members of a community, a view which has been endorsed by modern psychology. From its earliest moments, he says, 'the infant is having his tastes and tendencies moulded by the influence of those around him. And all through life we are being shaped by social tradition in all its many and subtle forms.'<sup>78</sup> In their moral and spiritual lives, individuals are being interpenetrated by the moral and spiritual lives of others. The 'herd instinct' thus prompts our conduct far more than we like to assume. Just as it may be the condition of progress, so the herd instinct may be equally the condition of movement away from the purpose of God. We may see in original sin the result of misdirected social influence. 'Every society has in a real sense a corporate mind, the product not only of its present members but of its past members also, but all who belong to and share its mind come consciously or unconsciously under its sway.'<sup>79</sup> Thus, while he advises caution concerning claims that original sin is transmitted biologically, he says we can positively affirm that its effects can be passed on through the misdirecting of such tendencies by bad societal influences.<sup>80</sup>

Bricknell also observes that Tennant's position had been attacked from other directions. He refers, for example, to the work of C.W. Formby who in his book *The Unveiling of the Fall* argues that we cannot isolate the evil tendencies in man from the evil in nature. For Formby, if we gainsay a temporal historical fall, as Tennant does, this still leaves us with the problem that the process of evolution was vitiated long before man ever appeared on the scene.<sup>81</sup> 'It is therefore impossible to suppose', Bricknell avers, following Formby's argument, 'that a perfectly good and wise God would have created, say, the cobra or the cholera germ. It is not enough to say that the world is imperfect. The existence of "dysteleology" in nature, the ruthless competition and cruelty all go to show that it does not perfectly express the will of God.'<sup>82</sup> Thus for Bricknell, as with Formby before him, if we follow Tennant in denying a temporal fall, we would, in order to sustain a satisfactory theodicy, have to posit that the nature which man inherited from his animal ancestry was fallen before ever he inherited it. Man would have to have 'appeared on the scene burdened by an inherently self-centred nature dominated by instinctive structures of animalism whose overpowering bias towards evil he could not be ex-

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78 *ibid.*

79 *ibid.*, p. 220.

80 *ibid.*

81 Formby, C.W. *The Unveiling of the Fall*, London: Williams & Norgate (1923), pp. 11-13.

82 Chesterton *op. cit.*, (64), p. 221.

pected to control'.<sup>83</sup> Although Bricknell himself ultimately rejected such a 'pre-organic fall' as pure mythology, he conceded that Formby had made a strong case, and he thought that the problems Formby identified and attempted to resolve further underscored the need to uphold the doctrine of a historical fall.

An equally central figure during this period was J.H. Morrison, who, while anxious to uphold the historicity of the fall, nonetheless felt that the only way of achieving this was by forging some kind of synthesis with the data of evolution. What is particularly distinctive about Morrison, however, is that, while he was broadly in agreement with Tennant's evolutionary ideas, he nonetheless maintained that it was possible to embrace the findings of palaeontology fully and yet still preserve a core element of the historical Fall. As his *Christian Faith and the Science of Today* illustrates, although fully supportive of the scientific enterprise, Morrison was troubled by the fact that many modernist thinkers were gradually moving away from the traditional Christian understanding of man's relationship to God. Morrison worried that, despite the fact that many modernists attempted to uphold the notion of Christ as Redeemer, the tendency among those who subscribed to the New Theology was to eschew the historical Fall altogether – and consequently the need for redemption. This reduced Christ to little more than an ethical ideal for what man might aspire to become when the entire process of spiritual evolution reached its eschatological consummation.<sup>84</sup> Such a tendency, Morrison feared, led the New Theology to propagate a form of Christianity which uncritically espoused the positivistic assumptions of the new natural theology.

Morrison recognised the dangers of this approach and strove to develop a new perspective which would help reconcile modern science with a more orthodox form of theology. In *Christian Faith and the Science of Today* he endeavoured to take full advantage of the anti-mechanistic movements within science, while at the same time guarding against the temptation of submerging himself totally in the optimistic philosophy which characterised non-Darwinian evolutionary thought. In spite of a clearly expressed scepticism concerning the confident claims of science to deliver certain knowledge,<sup>85</sup> Morrison believed that theology ought to take seriously what the new scientific data were saying about God's creation.<sup>86</sup>

With this determination to marry science and theology very much in mind, Morrison begins his chapter on evolution by stating that there is one aspect of non-Darwinian progressivism of which he does approve, namely,

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83 *ibid.*

84 Morrison, J.H. *Christian Faith and the Science of Today*, London: Hodder & Stoughton (1936), p. 37.

85 *ibid.*, pp. 2-3.

86 *ibid.*, especially chaps. 2 & 3.

the notion that the 'evolutionary process has intelligent purpose at the heart of it'.<sup>87</sup> And, in support of this claim, he invokes the names of thinkers such as Henri Bergson, Jan Christian Smuts and James Simpson. Notwithstanding this qualified support, he confesses that he has strong reservations about an over Whiggish or positivist image of man as 'the hero of the cosmic saga, a valiant and aspiring creature who has fought his way upward from the lowest depth and has now won the heights'.<sup>88</sup> Many Christians had come to rely too heavily on evolutionary optimism, and had ignored the increasingly pessimistic note which was being sounded by numerous philosophers. For Morrison, such cautionary pessimism was exemplified in particular by the writings of the 'gloomy Dean' of St Paul's, William Ralph Inge, whose book, *God and the Astronomers*,<sup>89</sup> stressed the universal degeneration which was central to the second law of thermodynamics. When examined in relation to human origins, Morrison argued, this tension between progress and degeneration leads us to ask whether we are heroic, ascending beings or fallen ones. In short, if *Homo sapiens* are indeed descended from primates, does this mean that one should urge them to achieve ever higher levels of attainment, or accept that they are sinners in sore need of a redeemer?<sup>90</sup>

Morrison was convinced that simplistic conceptions of human evolution in terms of a linear ascent from the apes had to be revised in the light of the highly complex evolutionary process portrayed by scientists such as Arthur Keith. The evidence suggested that the genus *Homo* was of great antiquity. Moreover, biological evidence showed clear signs of degeneration among species, and the argument that apes are degenerate humans was becoming increasingly prominent.<sup>91</sup> This made it possible for Morrison to claim that the first *Homo sapiens* had been created by some substantial mutation. Human intellectual abilities and moral consciousness had appeared suddenly, and were not simply an extension of something found in the animal world.<sup>92</sup>

For Morrison, the fact that numerous instances of degeneration could be identified during the course of evolution meant that it was now possible to square the historical Fall with modern scientific thought. This is clearly borne out by his contention that

there is a great body of evidence to show that at every stage all along the line of ascent living creatures seem to have missed the upward

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87 *ibid.*, pp. 136-139.

88 *ibid.*, p. 158.

89 Inge, W.R. *God and the Astronomers: Containing the Warburton Lectures 1931-33*, London: Longmans, Green (1933).

90 Morrison, *Christian Faith and the Science of Today*, pp. 176-177.

91 *ibid.*, pp. 179-181.

92 *ibid.*, p. 83.

road, and turned aside into blind alleys where they remained stagnant or even began to degenerate. Does this not suggest that in some mysterious way, deep embedded in nature, there is a principle hostile to progress, some inscrutable power which continually obstructs and diverts and frustrates the upward movement?<sup>93</sup>

Morrison believed that the fall could be seen as simply the latest example of the deleterious effect of this 'hostile principle'.<sup>94</sup> Far from being incompatible with evolution, the failure of human beings to reach their goal was now explained with the aid of science. The history of the human species had been 'polluted near its fountainhead', and we have been suffering the effects ever since.<sup>95</sup> While Morrison emphasised this point strongly, he was reluctant to go as far as some Calvinists in asserting that man's being was totally depraved. However, his position still left room for the role of Christ as redeemer, who saves us from the consequences of our distorted beginning. It also presents us with an image of God as something more than an ethical ideal, or a mere architect or mathematician. Morrison's position was thus much closer to that of Lodge than that of Drummond.<sup>96</sup> While the former conceded that humans had succumbed to false pride, the latter had unreservedly embraced the canons of positivism.

Morrison's position also has an obvious affinity with the thesis outlined by Griffith-Jones in his *Ascent Through Christ*. However, in supporting his ideas, Morrison was able to take advantage of the latest empirical evidence concerning the origin of *Homo sapiens* which had been unavailable to Griffith-Jones when he first published his book in 1899.<sup>97</sup> Perhaps Morrison's most significant contribution in this regard was his insistence that science was not *ipso facto* the enemy of orthodox faith; on the contrary, its data could be used to uphold pivotal doctrines such as the historical Fall. Moreover, Morrison's emphasis on man's fallenness served to temper some of the modernists' more extravagantly optimistic claims vis-à-vis man's destiny.

Support for the historical Fall is also, ironically, to be found in the work of Sir Oliver Lodge, who is sometimes presented as an example of a thinker who rejected the historical Fall on the grounds that it conflicted with his belief in positivistic evolutionism.<sup>98</sup>

Lodge begins his defence of the historical fall by attempting to diagnose the aetiology of the sense of sin which lies within the consciousness of

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93 *ibid.*, p. 185.

94 *ibid.*, pp. 186-187.

95 *ibid.*, p. 186.

96 *ibid.*, pp. 193-195.

97 Griffith-Jones, E. *The Ascent Through Christ: A Study of the Doctrine of Redemption in the Light of the Theory of Evolution*, London: James Bowen (1900) [1899].

98 Simpson *op. cit.*, (55), p. 49.

mankind. After concluding that animals do not possess such a sense of their own internal disorder by virtue of the fact that they merely obey their instincts and lack the freedom of self-conscious and rational beings, Lodge argues that ‘dramatically, we may conceive of its apprehension by some early genius of the race, who felt that some things had been forbidden, who knew that he had the power of choice, who realized the meaning of Good and Evil. Such as one might well be called “the first Man”.’<sup>99</sup> Whether we call this first man ‘Adam’ or not, matters nothing, according to Lodge. What matters is that in that way began the special privileges and responsibilities of humanity: ‘It was an upward step’, Lodge avers, ‘and he fell over it’.<sup>100</sup>

This argument is then developed further by Lodge and, in words which unambiguously affirm his adherence to the historical fall, he asserts that:

There is no real opposition between the biological account of the rise of man, and the scriptural account of the Fall. One is the natural sequence of the other: they are two aspects of the same thing. You cannot fall effectively unless you rise. Given the rise, a fall was inevitable ... humanity is always making mistakes and spoiling its own outlook. There is a sense in which we do suffer for the faults of our ancestors, just as we inherit their gains and advances. We are standing on the shoulders of those that have gone before us; we reap the fruits of their weakness, as well as their strength.<sup>101</sup>

Furthermore, in words which clearly illustrate his commitment to the historicity of the Fall, he goes on to argue that ‘all these facts can be put in allegorical form; but it is the facts that are important, not the allegory. The old legend of the third Chapter of Genesis is very crude, but it contains a great truth ...’<sup>102</sup> And what, for Lodge, does this ‘great truth’ amount to? It amounts to ‘what is called in theological language “a falling away from grace”, a falling below his [man’s] own level ... rejection of the higher and free choice of the lower; the decadence, the deterioration, the sinking back to the brute, after he had attained the standard of man’.<sup>103</sup> Thus, spiritual progress will only be achieved, he contends, by ‘sorrowfully admitting that *historically* such dire lapses have occurred’.<sup>104</sup>

Amidst all the heat of debate, some theologians in the 1920s felt that their most judicious move was to stand back and assess the implications of the views of both traditionalists and modernists concerning the fall. In 1926 Charles Gore, in the second volume of *Reconstruction of Belief*,

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99 Lodge, O. *Evolution and Creation*, London: Hodder & Stoughton (1926), pp. 141-142.

100 *ibid.*, p. 142.

101 *ibid.*

102 *ibid.*, pp. 142-143.

103 *ibid.*, p. 143.

104 *ibid.* (my italics).

entitled *Belief in Christ*,<sup>105</sup> contrasted the traditional Christian notion that man was created perfect and then rebelled against God's purpose with the modernist view that moral evil was simply the 'tiger and ape' instinct remaining within us.<sup>106</sup> While Gore clearly argues that it was perfectly possible for Christians to hold that creation developed through a purposive evolutionary process,<sup>107</sup> he (Gore) nonetheless felt that it was still important to believe that God's purpose could be subverted, once beings with the gift of freedom emerged.<sup>108</sup> The Genesis account suggests that our first parents were innocent, rather than perfect. Although they had the capacity to attain perfection – or to follow their own selfish path, they elected the latter option – with calamitous consequences for the human race. While it is difficult to pin Gore down as to how exactly such sinfulness was passed on to future generations, he argued that it manifested itself chiefly through our inability to make societal progress.<sup>109</sup> The purpose of Christ's incarnation and sacrifice on the Cross was to show us a way out of the impasse that was of our own making.<sup>110</sup>

While Gore admitted that many traditional beliefs had to be reinterpreted, and praised biology for underscoring the theological need to come to terms with evolution, he criticised the modernists for using this as an excuse to abandon the fundamentals of the Christian faith.<sup>111</sup> The modernist mistake was to reject any compromise between a view which regarded some elements of the creed as mythical, and one which still acknowledged the need to view them as literally true. In the same way that it is still common to speak of the 'rising of the sun' in everyday parlance, even though we know in a post-Copernican universe that it is the earth that moves, we can continue to speak of Adam as 'Everyman' when trying to conceptualise the fall.<sup>112</sup>

Although Gore acknowledged the progressive nature of biological evolution, he nonetheless believed that the origin of man's higher faculties remained a mystery. He also thought it was clear that human experience yielded clear signs of man's moral imperfection and this suggested that our creation was characterised by both progress and tragedy.<sup>113</sup> Gore's position can be seen as something of a *via media* between the acceptance of

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105 Gore, C. *The Reconstruction of Belief, Volume 2: Belief in Christ*, London: John Murray (1926).

106 *ibid.*, p. 565.

107 *ibid.*, p. 566.

108 *ibid.*, p. 589.

109 *ibid.*, p. 590.

110 *ibid.*, p. 592.

111 Gore, C. *The Reconstruction of Belief, Volume 3: The Holy Spirit and the Church*, London: John Murray (1926), p. 47.

112 Gore, C. *Can We Then Believe? Summary of Volumes on 'Reconstruction of Belief' and Reply to Criticisms*, London: John Murray (1926), pp. 66-67.

113 *ibid.*, p. 67.

the new natural theology's notion of purpose and progress in nature, and the traditional recognition that man's unique capacity for freedom had thwarted further progress and resulted in alienation from the divine purpose.<sup>114</sup> Gore therefore acknowledged that, while progress had been made up until the emergence of man, a clear discontinuity existed at the point at which man became endowed with free will.<sup>115</sup>

### **Von Hügel: a defence of the historical Fall – the Angelic Fall**

Of particular relevance to the attempt to affirm the historical Fall in a post-Darwinian world is the solution to the problem adduced by the lay Roman Catholic theologian, Baron Friedrich von Hügel. Recognising the importance of the problem of upholding the Fall in the light of a developmental view of man, von Hügel invoked the notion of an Angelic fall in an effort to uphold Christian orthodoxy.

In an address to the London Society for the Study of Religion,<sup>116</sup> von Hügel explicitly took up the cudgels against Tennant, and refused to countenance the implications for theological anthropology of denying the historical Fall. Instead, he argued that the sinful tendencies within the human condition, far from simply constituting a 'hangover' from our evolutionary past as Tennant claimed, in truth emanate from an 'ontological flaw' at the very core of our nature – consequent upon an act of primal disobedience. 'Mr. F.R. Tennant's books,' he writes, '... should suffice to warn us how easily we can be led on to think of the body as ultimately the occasion of all of our sins ... For, with Tennant, *all* sin is but an *atavism*, a lapse back into the animalism from out of which mankind has raised itself.'<sup>117</sup> 'But this', he contends, '... is a strangely inadequate view, both as to the sheer facts and as to the specifically Christian position. ... It is very distinctly not the animal within us which leads us to pride and self-sufficiency.'<sup>118</sup> What does lead to such things, he insists, is the corruption of our own once flawless nature following 'the most heinous sin' of our first parents.

What is intriguing, however, is that although von Hügel remains uncompromising in his insistence on the historicity of Adam's fall, he nonetheless, perhaps in recognition of the importance of the issues concerning evolution raised by Tennant, feels the need to seek an ultimate explanation for the existence of evil per se. This strongly suggests that von

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114 Simpson *op.cit.*, (55), p. 303.

115 Gore *op.cit.*, (104), p. 68.

116 Friedrich von Hügel, 'The facts and truths concerning God and the soul which are of most importance in the life of prayer', in *Essays and Addresses on the Philosophy of Religion, Second Series*, London and Toronto: J.M. Dent & Sons Ltd. (1926), pp. 215-242.

117 *ibid.*, p. 236.

118 *ibid.*

Hügel understood that what is significant about the theory of evolution by natural selection is that it compels one to develop a theodicy which explains the origin of natural evil. For how is it possible to uphold the notion of an omnipotent and omnibenevolent God if the ruthless competition and predation which characterise the evolutionary process were present in creation from the very beginning?

Von Hügel addresses this theological conundrum by first defending the classically orthodox doctrine that natural evil did not exist from the beginning, for, as Genesis 1 affirms, the world was originally created 'good'. How, then, did such natural evil come about? Von Hügel's answer is that we must take very seriously scriptural references to the existence of supra-human agencies such as angels and malevolent spirits. And he goes on to argue that, if there is indeed truth to such references, and a moral rebellion has occurred among incorporeal beings within the spiritual realm of the created order, then it is perfectly reasonable to suppose that defection and rebellion in the angelic realm will drastically disorder the material world. Moreover, given that it is 'common Christian doctrine' that one of the functions entrusted to the angels is the supervision of the lower creation, von Hügel contends that it is plausible to suppose that the defection of certain of the angels has had, as one of its consequences, the deformation of the material world and the disorganisation of the evolutionary process – long before the advent of man.

For, von Hügel maintains, as the 'very deep doctrine of the Fall of the Angels' illustrates, any creature endowed with the dignity to either affirm or reject God's will has the potential to descend into disorder. And this, he suggests, has been the fate of the evil angels as well as fallen humans. However, evil angelic beings are even more culpable, not only because they precipitated a fall of cosmic dimensions, but because 'the Angels are without bodies; yet this does not lift them above probation, but merely makes their testing a testing in Humility instead of Purity (sic). And, again, this absence of bodies does not make the alternatives or the Fall of these Angels to be less. On the contrary, it makes them greater.'<sup>119</sup>

If the theodical problems raised by evolution are approached in these terms, von Hügel's notion of the Fall of the Angels enables one to affirm the orthodox tenet that a discrepancy exists between the world as it is currently apprehended and the world as originally given. Such a position, moreover, enables one to maintain that the evils which blight the natural world, in addition to the miseries and tragedies which plague the human condition, are not a reflection of the will of the Creator for his creation, but are, on the contrary, a sign of a creation broken by both natural and moral evil; that is, a creation in need of redemption. Above all, the Angelic Fall enables one to affirm that the world, freely created *ex nihilo* by a loving

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119 *ibid.*, pp. 236-237.

God, is a good world, corrupted only by reason of evil.

Thus, the great strength of von Hügel's notion of an Angelic Fall is that it offers a theologically and scientifically plausible way of upholding the premises of both the historical fall and evolution – as long as one holds that the Angelic Fall occurred in historical time (i.e., after the Big Bang and the start of Cosmic evolution), but prior to the emergence of biological evolution, which led eventually to the Adamic Fall of humankind.

One useful way of understanding von Hügel's ideas about the effects of the Angelic Fall (and the subsequent Adamic Fall) on creation is to be found in the work of the scientist-theologian John Polkinghorne. Although Polkinghorne does not defend the doctrine of the Angelic Fall himself,<sup>120</sup> he nonetheless argues, in his book *Reason and Reality: The Relationship between Science and Theology*,<sup>121</sup> that evil did indeed precede the origin of man (in the form of natural evil) and subsequently took on another dimension in the form of a further fall into moral evil as a direct consequence of man's sin. Such an analysis would surely have the advantage not only of upholding the distinction between natural and moral evil, but would also lend support to von Hügel's central contention about the reality of pre-lapsarian natural evil.

## Conclusion

As we have seen, F.R. Tennant's rejection of the historical Fall was a crucial factor in provoking an often heated academic debate about the theological necessity of the Fall and its compatibility with evolution between 1902 and 1939. Having explored the principal conversation partners during this period, it is clear that, whether in support of the Fall or opposed to it, they were spurred into contributing to the discussion in direct response to Tennant's pioneering work.<sup>122</sup>

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**Jonathan W. Chappell holds a PhD in Anthropology from University College, London and an MLitt in Theology from Darwin College, Cambridge.**

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120 The Angelic Fall has, however, been defended in various ways by a number of contemporary scholars, including C.S. Lewis (*The Problem of Pain*, London: Collins [1940]); Paul Tillich (*Systematic Theology*, Volume 2, Chicago: University of Chicago Press [1951]); Hans Urs von Balthasar (*Do We Hope 'That All Men Be Saved?'*, San Francisco: Ignatius Press [1980]); Alvin Plantinga (*God, Freedom, and Evil*, New York: Harper and Row [1974]).

121 Polkinghorne, J. *Reason and Reality: The Relationship between Science and Theology*, London: SPCK (1991), p. 100.

122 I am grateful to John Polkinghorne and Rodney Holder for their advice, and to Fraser Watts and Russell Re Manning, my supervisors in the Faculty of Divinity at Cambridge, for their insightful comments on earlier versions of this article.