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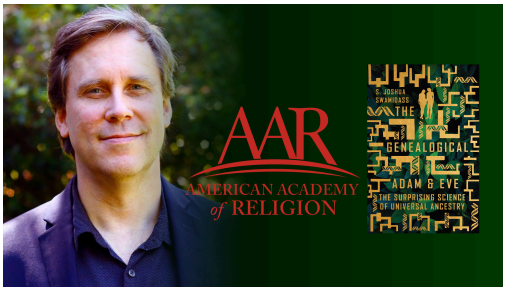
On the Origins of a Virtuous Vision for Human Perfection



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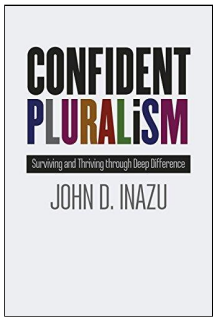
There is more to S. Joshua Swamidass's book *The Genealogical Adam and Eve: The Surprising Science of Universal Ancestry* than meets the biological eye. We can easily fix our attention on the debate about harmonizing Genesis and genetics. While this is certainly a very important topic, we must also account for the fact that a moral vision of human perfection frames the discussion. Swamidass bookends the volume with two sets of three "aspirations"[1] or virtues: courage, curiosity, and empathy in chapter one; and tolerance, humility, and patience in chapter eighteen. I have been asked to respond to these two chapters.

Framed Around Six Virtues



Swamidass acknowledges his debt to John Inazu, his colleague at Washington University, for the second set of "aspirations" or virtues (which Inazu develops with "legal authority in mind" whereas Swamidass has "scientific authority in mind").[2] These aspirations build upon Swamidass's goal as "a scientist in the church and a Christian in science" (a goal which he shares with Inazu from whom he quotes): to "make room for our differences, even as we maintain our own beliefs and practices."[3] The second set of aspirations taken from Inazu grounds Swamidass's "ongoing 'civic practice,'"[4] which gives rise to this book. The three virtues set forth in chapter one aid scientific inquiry. The three virtues set forth in chapter eighteen assist in engaging our pluralistic society.

Let's take up each set of aspirations or virtues in turn. As Swamidass acknowledges, it takes **courage** to ask questions that are filled with uncertainty, as with "How much does evolutionary science press on our understanding of Adam and Eve?"[5] In Swamidass's case, the uncertainty, and with it fear, that he experienced for years in engaging this question eventually gave rise to **curiosity.** His particular curiosity stemmed from a growing confident faith that was "rooted" in the second Adam—Jesus—rather than in the first Adam.[6] Such curiosity led Swamidass to a new or deeper level of understanding and discovery of "a curious fact," namely that "Everyone was convinced that evolutionary science unsettled our understanding of Adam and Eve, but I couldn't find the evidence that demonstrated this as true."[7] As a result, where others could only see confrontations, collisions, fractures, and dead ends between evolutionary science and the biblical account of Adam and Eve, he could see a "crossroads"[8] and a new path forward involving **empathic understanding** for people of faith without in any way denying scientific analysis and authority.[9]

There is something here for all of us to take away from Swamidass's reflections on his own journey: courage leads to curiosity and empathy.

The only point I would add as a theologian is that the starting point in Scripture as I read it is the divine empathy, which inspires courage and curiosity bound up with increasing confidence in Christ Jesus, which in turn gives rise to empathy for one another.

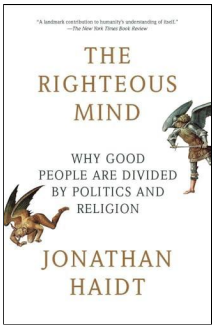
Swamidass notes in chapter eighteen that scientists wield "immense authority" about human origins.[10] It is important that they wield such authority as a scalpel rather than a blunt sword. In other words, they must wield their authority virtuously.[11] Like religious authority, scientific authority can easily be abused.[12] What is required are the virtues of **tolerance, humility,** and **patience,** which are set forth in chapter eighteen.

Scientific Authority, Virtue and Beauty

Swamidass recounts a story from chapter one where a discussion on human origins and Adam and Eve involving an evolutionary scientist and a pastor holding to a traditional reading of the Genesis account led to a dead end. The conversation could have moved toward a new crossroads rather than roadblock involving a collision and fracture if these virtues had shaped the conversation.

1. S. Joshua Swamidass, *The Genealogical Adam & Eve: The Surprising Science of Universal Ancestry* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2019), 6.
2. Ibid., 6, including note 5. See John Inazu, Confident Pluralism: Surviving and Thriving through Deep Difference. 2016.
3. Swamidass, *The Genealogical Adam & Eve*, 5.
4. Ibid., 6.
5. Ibid., 7.
6. Ibid., 8.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid., 215.
9. Ibid., 9.
10. Ibid., 215.
11. Ibid., 218.
12. Ibid., 220.

Rather than imposing their will on the other party, a scientist should model humility, realizing that they might not be able to change their dialogue partner's mind.[13] Tolerance on the part of the scientist would make space for the other perspective, while living in the tension of disagreement. Patience is also required, as it would allow the person adhering to a traditional reading of the Genesis text to articulate how it might be reconciled with an evolutionary account of human origins.[14] Someone adhering to a traditional account of Scripture, like the pastor in question, must also model humility, tolerance, and patience. This person must approach the subject matter free of rigidity, which would impose or force agreement in every domain.[15]



In my estimation, it is doubtful that Swamidass would have settled on the latter three aspirations or virtues if he had not experienced an evolution in his own person: from creativity to curiosity to empathy (noted in chapter one). Though it is not set forth in his own autobiographical account, I maintain that empathy in some form gives rise to courage and curiosity, and in turn more empathy, a point made earlier in this review. One of the most important features of any well-functioning community or society is empathy for those not belonging to one's own in-group, whether familial, scientific, religious, or other. Empathy has been in increasingly short supply for the past several years, as the social psychologist Jonathan Haidt observed.[16] From a Christian perspective, the greatest of all spiritual gifts is love, which involves empathic concern for the well-being of the other at its core.

Here it is worth noting that in his seminal account of virtue—*The Nature of True Virtue*, Jonathan Edwards grounded virtuous love in the intra-Trinitarian mutual love "between the several persons of the Godhead," which extends outward toward the creation.[17] For Edwards, love for being in general is the fount of virtue. Being in general is the triune God and, by extension, all being. Since love for being in general or the triune God is the fount of virtue, then God's love must first be for God's triune self, and then extend outward, "flowing out to particular beings…"[18] Private or particular affection does not convey true virtue, which, as just noted, involves a general benevolence toward all, and which flows from being in general, which is the triune God. Edwards writes,

> …no affection limited to any private system, not dependent on, nor subordinate to Being in general can be of the nature of true virtue; and this, whatever the private system be, let it be more or less extensive, consisting of a greater or smaller number of individuals, so long as it contains an infinitely little part of universal existence, and so bears no proportion to the great all-comprehending system. And consequently, that no affection whatsoever to any creature, or any system of created beings, which is not dependent on, nor subordinate to a propensity or union of the heart to God, the supreme and infinite Being, can be of the nature of true virtue.[19]

Such unconditional love was on display in Martin Luther King, Jr's work, which Swamidass read with others in the wake of Ferguson and police protests near his home in St. Louis as he was completing this book.[20] Such love no doubt inspires Swamidass's larger social vision: healing fractures, rebinding a broken cosmos, inclusion overtaking exclusion, shalom giving rise to what he refers to as "peaceful science."[21]

Swamidass's account of virtues shows that there is more than meets the biological eye regarding this book. There is still more, though. You have heard it said that beauty is in the eye of the beholder. Regardless of whether that is the case, Swamidass's project involves the pursuit of what he finds most beautiful. It propels him forward to look for connections where so many only see collisions and fractures at the crossroads of faith and science.

13. Ibid., 219.
14. Ibid.
15. Ibid., 220.
16. Jonathan Haidt, "Can a Divided America Heal?" TEDNYC, November 2016; (accessed 11/22/2020). Haidt's emphasis on empathy fits within his larger moral vision and approach to addressing social conflicts. Haidt and his team have identified what they take to be six moral foundations ("sources of intuitions and emotions") that surface in people's minds and shape their ethical determinations: harm/care, fairness/reciprocity, in-group/loyalty, authority/respect, purity/sanctity, and liberty. Haidt asserts that we must account for these varied "foundations" when seeking to address society's moral concerns. Refer to the "Moral Foundations" website: http://moralfoundations.org/. Haidt also wrote an important book on this subject titled *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2012).
17. On the Trinitarian dynamic of love of God's triune self-preceding and extending to the love of creation (Trinitarian overflow), see Jonathan Edwards, *The Nature of True Virtue*, in *Ethical Writings*, ed. Paul Ramsey, vol. 8, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989), 557.
18. Ibid.
19. Ibid., 556-557. See also 554-555.
20. Swamidass, *The Genealogical Adam & Eve*, 14. Also see Swamidass, "Grieve the Segregation of Science, God and Nature, 2018.
21. This grounding of virtuous love in the divine being in Edwards's thought raises the question of the ordering and formation of virtue. Karl Barth, whose work Swamidass appreciates, writes the following concerning the teleological orientation in monastic spirituality, which reflects a virtue-based ethical framework: "a concrete individual and collective sanctification, a teleological concretion of the Christian status, a practical and regulated brotherhood, and all this in the service of concrete and total love." Barth goes on to "definitely and inflexibility oppose" this orientation in view of the doctrine of justification by faith for Jesus' sake, not by any work of the law, not even the law of love. He takes issue with the *Imitatio Christi*'s obscuring of this doctrine with its directives and takes special aim at the closing sentence of Benedict's rule, which is translated (EN49) as "the heavenly kingdoms will be opened to those who do these things." Barth writes, "It is a pity that the final sentence in Benedict is as follows: *Facientibus haec regna patebunt superna*. This cannot be admitted for a moment. The statement must be resolutely reformulated. It is not because and as they do this that the *regna superna* will open up to them. It is because and as the *regna superna* are opened up to them in the death of Jesus Christ that they will do this in the power of His resurrection." Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV.2, *The Doctrine of Reconciliation*, Study Edition, 24 (London: T&T Clark, 2010), 16. It is also worth pursuing clarification of the meaning and nature of virtues in Swamidass's account. Here I call to mind a leading commentator on Barth's thought. Donald Bloesch provides the following account of virtues and contrasts it with "graces," which he finds in Barth, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and Helmut Thielicke. He classifies their model or orientation as "evangelical contextualism": "Evangelicals in this tradition speak more of graces than of virtues. Virtues indicate the unfolding of human potentialities, whereas graces are manifestations of the work of the Holy Spirit within us. It is not the fulfillment of human powers but the transformation of the human heart that is the emphasis in an authentically evangelical ethics." Donald G. Bloesch, *Freedom for Obedience: Evangelical Ethics in Contemporary Times* (San Francisco: Harper & Row Publishers, 1987), 191. It would be interesting to see Swamidass engage Barth and Bloesch's treatments of graces, virtues, and the law of love in his ongoing articulation of "aspirations" or virtues in his vitally important "Peaceful Science" pursuits.

Swamidass's sense of the beautiful is not a matter of private sentiment and taste. Rather, it entails the public pursuit of a more glorious harmony that brings together seemingly disconnected parts into what he refers to as "the many-colored wisdom of God."[22] He goes on to claim:

> In the wasteland of origins, virtue can arise. If we make space for one another with tolerance, humility, and patience, I wonder if new sorts of beauty might arise. Some are convinced evolution is a myth. Others are convinced that Adam and Eve are a myth. One person's fact might be another's fiction, but they both can enter the same narrative, at a crossroads of many questions. Meeting grounds like this are rare, and they have value.[23]

Swamidass does not seek to dismiss or undermine the scientific consensus of origins. Rather, he embraces the scientific rules pertaining to origins, while also seeking to develop ground rules for a more constructive engagement of domains beyond scientific inquiry.[24] One of the takeaways for me from his treatment is that the narrative that creationists and evolutionists potentially share in terms of our common history is big enough for large questions concerning such matters as inheritance, dominion, and genetic manipulation. Such large questions require all of us to seek answers if we are to move toward constructive and comprehensive solutions benefiting all parties.

Echoing a Historical Discourse on Virtue and Beauty

In reading Swamidass on the import of the virtues and beauty, I was reminded of two historical treatments involving scientific inquiry. Let's begin with the virtues. Here I call to mind Peter Harrison's discussion of faith and science in *The Territories of Science and Religion*. Harrison argues that in the ancient and medieval world religion or theology and natural philosophy, which today is reduced to science, were not separate disciplines, but rather two aspects of a larger enterprise: they were stages guiding us toward our telos as humans—virtue as a way of life. All this changed with the privatization of religion in the post-religious wars setting of Europe where the emerging nation states interiorized religion for political purposes. Confessions of this period were set forth as discrete, objective propositional statements used to unite and distinguish religious traditions for territorial cohesion serving the various nations of Europe. Later, science moved in the same propositionalist direction where the aim was to arrive at objective propositions and activities, as distinct from virtue, which was achieved separately and now by entirely different means. The reduction of religion to a series of formulaic propositions and activities was exported to the rest of the world, where like the Christian faith, other spiritual traditions were internalized and privatized as religions emphasizing doctrine and practices for the sake of European colonial ambitions.[25] These "religions" were often placed by Christianity's apologists in competition with Christianity rather than as distinct paths leading to virtue with the Christian faith at the apex.[26] Such competition also arose between religion and science as a result of such territorial disciplinary and political moves.

In reading Swamidass's pursuit of a multifaceted and many-splendored beauty in a world of fractures, I call to mind Owen Gingerich's treatment of Copernicus' challenge to the Ptolemic conception of the universe. Gingrich argues that aesthetics played a foundational and pivotal role in scientific exploration, specifically the Copernican Revolution. Beauty, not simply cold facts, leads to scientific discovery.[27] Along with Einstein's novel scientific work, Copernicus' revolution was "motivated by the passionate search for symmetries and an aesthetic structure of the universe. Only afterward the facts, and even the crisis, are marshalled in support of the new world view."[28] Copernicus' revolution moved us beyond the separation of planetary motions into homocentric spheres, and with them Ptolemy's equant, which Copernicus believed resulted in a cosmological "monster" of disparate parts rather than a whole "man".[29] Swamidass brings the pursuit of a beautiful vision of human perfection to bear on the faith and science debate over the genealogical Adam and Eve. Whereas for Copernicus, the debate concerned which is more beautiful—a geocentric vs. heliocentric universe, for Swamidass, it is the beautiful compatibility of Genesis and evolutionary genetics.

22. Swamidass, *The Genealogical Adam & Eve*, 220.

23. Ibid., 221.

24. Ibid., 217.

25. Peter Harrison, *The Territories of Science and Religion* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2015), 83-116; Cf. Peter Harrison, *'Religion' and the Religions in the English Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002). Here is a helpful summary quotation from Harrison in *Territories* that addresses the transformation in the understanding of religion and science as objective entities distinct from virtue: "[There was] a remarkable change in the understanding of both religion and science that can be traced back to the early modern period. What began to take place then was that the philosophical exercises and bodies of knowledge employed in the inculcation of the interior virtues of _scientia _and _religio _came to stand in for the things themselves in their entirety. The content of catechisms that had once been understood as techniques for instilling an interior piety now came to be thought of as encapsulating the essence of some objective thing—religion. Religion was vested in creeds rather than in the hearts of the faithful. In a related process, the label '*scientia*' which had traditionally referred to both a mental disposition and a formal body of knowledge, came to be associated with the latter alone, eventually giving rise to an objective thing—science. While there had once been a close correspondence between science considered to be a virtue and science understood in terms of demonstrable knowledge, from this period onward, science was increasingly thought of as a body of systematic knowledge or a method that existed quite independent of the dispositions of its practitioners. The very possibility of a 'science of religion' rests upon these transitions...." Harrison, *The Territories of Science and Religion*, 84.

26. Ibid., 26, 31, 37, 99. For further discussion on the construction of world religions, see Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions: Or, How European Universalism Was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005), 20; Jason Ānanda Josephson, *The Invention of Religion in Japan* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2012). See also: Derrick Peterson, *Flat Earths and Fake Footnotes: The Strange Tale of How the Conflict of Science and Christianity Was Written Into History* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2020), 42-90.

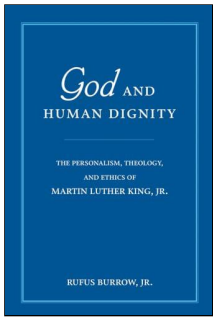
27. Owen Gingerich, "'Crisis' vs. Aesthetic in the Copernican Revolution," in *Vistas in Astronomy* 17(1): 85-95 https://doi.org/10.1016/0083-6656(75)90050-1. On page 90, Gingerich writes, "The debased positivism that has so thoroughly penetrated our philosophical framework urges us to look to data as the foundation of a scientific theory, but Copernicus' radical cosmology came forth not from new observations but from insight. It was, like Einstein's revolution four centuries later, *motivated by the passionate search for symmetries and an aesthetic structure of the universe.* Only afterward the facts, and even the crisis, are marshalled in support of the new world view." (italics added). Cf. Peterson, *Flat Earths and Fake Footnotes*, 253-280.

28. Gingerich, "'Crisis' vs. Aesthetic in the Copernican Revolution," 90.

29. See again Gingerich, 89.

From a Fracture to a Beloved Community

Swamidass combines these two emphases on the virtues and aesthetics in his pursuit of civil interdisciplinary discourse that turns the fractures into facets of a new and grander synthesis of seemingly disparate parts for the sake of cultivating the beloved community. Here I prefer to replace Swamidass's call for "accepting" and possibly even valuing "faithful heterodoxy" as part of "a larger ecclesial conversation"[30] with a centered-set methodology. This methodology centers on the aspirations and virtues embodied in Jesus Christ, virtues which include the ones Swamidass sketches. As important as questions of human origins are, it is not ultimately a matter of where we come from, but where we are going. So, the first Adam must give way in terms of ultimate importance for Christians to Jesus Christ, the second Adam. As noted earlier, Swamidass's own quest bathed in curiosity led to the book we now analyze. That quest resulted from a growing sense of confidence in the second Adam. For Swamidass, Jesus is greater than the debate over origins.



Whether one believes in Jesus as God, to the extent Swamidass's account of the virtues is embodied in the Nazarene, we can trace the contours of his life in our pursuit of a more noble humanity. This book is not simply about origins, but about originating discourse on how to be virtuous in our engagement with one another in pursuit of human flourishing and perfection. Swamidass's treatment of virtues in the first and final chapters are not placeholders, but rather frame the entire book. This in and of itself is worth the price of admission for purchasing the volume. Far from falling prey to a Kantian divide between the natural and human and fact and freedom, which only Kant's subjective account of beauty tenuously unites,[31] Swamidass's moral quest along with aesthetics shapes the pursuit of harmony between Genesis and genetics that accounts for the biblical narrative as well as evolution. It would be worth exploring what Swamidass might discover if in future work he were to pursue a synthesis or harmony of morality with nature involving an explicitly personalist account of human being.[32]

In a world where political doctrine and civic discourse often emphasizes what is useful rather than what is good and where efficiency often eclipses purpose,[33] Swamidass's confidence in Jesus, who according to the orthodox theologian Irenaeus of Lyons recapitulates and transforms our humanity, leads us forward in the quest for a moral teleology for human flourishing.[34] This moral teleology involves our emergence as a species along the lines of evolutionary biology without being reduced to it, nor to the infancy state of humanity as Irenaeus viewed Adam and Eve.[35] Rather, it leads us to treat one another virtuously in the midst of all our keen differences, not as things but as persons, as King envisioned in view of Jesus in his own pursuit of the beloved community.[36]

30. Swamidass, *The Genealogical Adam & Eve*, 220.

31. Refer to Simon Critchley's treatment of Kant's account of artistic genius as the bridge between nature and moral freedom in *Continental Philosophy: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 76.

32. See also Christian Smith, *What Is a Person?* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2010), 400, including note 24. There he discusses moral teleology involving his personalist account of human being and drawing from Alasdair MacIntyre's *After Virtue* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), 52-53. It is worth noting MacIntyre's treatment of "man-as-he-happens-to-be and man-as-he-could-be-if-he-realized-his-essential-nature."

33. See Robert K. Merton's account of this problem in the foreword to Jacques Ellul, *The Technological Society* (New York: Vintage Books, 1964), vii.

34. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, V.21.1, trans. Alexander Roberts and William Rambaut, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 1, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1885.) Revised and edited for New Advent by Kevin Knight; http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0103521.htm (accessed on 11/23/2020).

35. See for example M.C. Steenberg, "Children in Paradise: Adam and Eve as 'Infants' in Irenaeus of Lyons," *Journal of Early Christian Studies*, vol. 12, no. 1 (Spring 2004): 1-22. https://doi.org/10.1353/earl.2004.0016

36. See for example Rufus Burrow, Jr., *God and Human Dignity: The Personalism, Theology, and Ethics of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006); Rufus Burrow, Jr., "Personalism and Afrikan Traditional Thought," *Encounters* 61, no. 3 (2000): 344-45.

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