

Introduction and personal statement – more or less human? Christian and human evolution

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Nancy Howell: 00:20 My name's Nancy Howell. I teach at St. Paul school of theology. It's a seminary in the Midwest located in Kansas city. It's associated with the United Methodist church, but my work involves not just United Methodists, but students who range from Catholic lay persons and Unitarian Universalist to Pentecostal and Evangelical students along with all mainline denomination. So being prepared for class is a real challenge, for me in particular. I want to take a small slice of something we talk about in my classes on science and religion, particularly those that have to do with evolution and I want to begin with an actual concrete kind of issue. In the 1920s, there was a popular song called you can't make a monkey out of me, perhaps you've heard it. It was very popular during the Scopes trials and I don't mean to imply that you look that old, but there has been much attention to the social context of the Scopes trials. (01:25) And that song has been unearthed, one of its lines reads this way, "I'm inclined to believe the story of Adam and Eve, there's no chimpanzee in my pedigree and you can't make a monkey out of me". So what's the big issue there? I think the problem that we're faced with is thinking about what it means to be uniquely human and to be animal at the same time. We're concerned with our own identity, as well as our relationships with nature and that becomes an issue for some Protestant Christians. When they're trying to think about human evolution, it must be a critical question because Francisco I Allah has just released a new book in 2010 called, Am I A Monkey? Six big questions about evolution. Chapter one is literally entitled, am I a monkey? And his response of course is I am a primate, monkeys are primates, but humans are no monkeys. (02:29) The issue is one of identity and also one of ambivalence. How do we think about ourselves in relationship to nature? Now it is probably a surprise to some that there is some ambivalence in the tradition, but I want to point out two points of view. One comes from earlier Christian tradition from thinkers like Saint Augustan

and Thomas Aquinas. They were trying to understand what it means in Genesis to have a creation story, talk about what it means to be made in the image of God. Their reasoning ran very simply this way, although I'm sort of abbreviating the depth of their thought, humans only are made in the image of God, Genesis, doesn't say that any other creature is, the image of God must be some likeness to God then which animals don't possess. So the conclusion, including other pieces of information led to the idea that the image of God must be the rational soul, because that's what distinguishes humans from animals. (03:35) So it's understandable that many Christians have some discomfort with a theological connection with animals in particular but I want to say that the tradition has many other things to say as well. For example, if we look to Christian scriptures, both in the Hebrew Bible or old Testament, and in the new Testament, we see the Genesis accounts of creation that talk about the value of nature. We see the account of the story of Noah and the Ark and the saving of animals as part of God's plan. So it wasn't just about saving humans as a story, it was about saving the animals. Then again, in the Psalms, we have store songs about the salvation of animals that refer back to this time of Noah and there is praise about creation itself and then we have the gospel or claims that are something different, a little bit. (04:30) They claim that God cares for sparrows and lilies and then as we get to the book of Romans, the apostle Paul has written in Romans eight about the idea that the whole creation, groans waiting to be the sons and daughters of God and a new creation itself and that's a theme that is one that appears also in second Corinthians and Galatians. Will later, we United Methodist have been influenced by what Paul wrote and John Wesley who continues to influence United Methodist and other West lands actually preached on Romans eight with the belief that there would be a restoration of what he called brute creation that eradicates all suffering and that the afterlife or the new creation for animals would be happiness without interruption and without end. So what does that bring me to when I about what it means to be human? Does it make me more human to say that I am unique or does it make me less human to say that I share something with the

primates that might be important. Now the first question for me and the first issue is what does it mean to be unique? (05:54) I think we play with that word a bit loosely. I was taught in school that to be unique really meant one of a kind. Are humans truly unique, or just sort of different? And the issue becomes what do we make then of similarities and differences between humans and other animals? For example, let me talk about tool using. There was a period when we thought humans were unique because they use tools. I suppose we could still say that because Vinsel does have an iPhone and it was not made by the apes as far as I know. So that may be unique, but is it unique to say that we as primates are tool users? Not at all, because there are animals who fashioned tools, who manufactured them and who modify them. So we can say we're all tool users, but we are tool users in different ways. (06:56) The same may be said about communication. Sometimes people like to make much of the uniqueness of human language, but if by language, I mean communication. If I look at humans and at primates, I start to think about issues, not just that I use grammar English or Greek or whatever it may be, but I also use gestures and facial expressions and body language to communicate. When communication is thought of that broadly is communication unique? No are certain forms of communication unusual, or are species specific? Perhaps. Some scientist are beginning to challenge us a little bit more than those who've taught us about tool use and about communication and Frans de Waal is one who is working on the precursors of morality that we might see in all animals. He looks at the idea that there are certain traits that are characteristic of primates that eventually become translated into certain social behaviors that are part of humanity and then into the moral codes that are part of that human thought. (08:12) I thought that was challenging enough but then I realized that the work of Protestant Theology is challenged even more by looking at the work of scholars like Barbara King, who argues that there are elements of primate behavior that are actually precursors of our spirituality or religiosity, such capacities as empathy, imagination, and the like are some of those characteristics. What am I as a theologian in the United Methodist church to make of these kinds of information

coming from primary studies? I think what it tells me is that we are a tradition as Christians that encompasses a theology that really does affirm both animals and humans. So we have to affirm our humanity in and of itself as well as our relationship to animals, but in affirming ourselves, we also affirm that we too are animals. Humans are different than animals, but we are humans who are animals at the same time. This doesn't make us less important, theologically. In fact, it may make us more profound in our role as primates and I think it also ultimately tells us theologically that God has far more breadth and interest and mercy than we have imagined. (09:48) Thank you.

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