Religious perspectives on the science of human origins - Where is Adam

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Audience member: 00:18 I'm a born again Christian, and I'm a docent here. So that tells you a little bit about conflict. But I do have a very good friend who is Muslim, and we have been friends for six years. And we've discussed back and forth the difference between Islam and Christianity. She tells me she loves Jesus. So I've encouraged her to start a group called Messianic Muslims. (00:45) But my question for you, and that is that in Islamic faith, and I'm quoting you, I believe, that Adam, as the first human being, would it be a problem for your religion if Adam turned out to be the first human being of record?

Mustansir Mir: 01:02 The first human being of?

Audience member: 01:06 The first human being of record, rather than being the first biological human being?

Mustansir Mir: 01:12 See, from Islamic standpoint, the main thing is that God created a human being who was a model being. That is, one who had been given knowledge, understanding, of right and wrong, and who was also given the ability to choose between right and wrong. The entire story of Adam that is told in the Koran, there's no reference to time, and there's no reference to space. Number one. (01:51) Number two, it's a moot point whether this story is to be taken literally or metaphorically, symbolically or mythically. We don't know. And there are many people who believe that the story is told not in order to point out that this is when everything began in a physical and measurable time sequence, but it's told to point up certain models. Certain lessons are drawn from this story. Exactly when this happened, how this happened, we don't know. (02:27) Third, it's really hard to say whether Adam was this type of Homo erectus or Homo sapien or what. Islam does not say anything about it. The crucial point, again, is this is a modern being. From a scientific standpoint, whatever can be established beyond a shadow of a doubt would be
the position of Islam. (02:53) And then, of course, this does not mean that there are no problematic areas that would remain. Areas in which reconciliation would have to be made between religion and science. This reconciliation is not automatic. It's not easy. There are crucial questions, and there are difficult questions. But these have to be dealt with by Muslim scholars who are equally competent in science, on the one hand, and in the old religious tradition, on the other hand. Unfortunately, we do not have many such Muslims at this time. So the issue is in a limbo, you can say. The jury is still out. In fact, there is no jury to begin with. Because first, the issue has to be discussed. Different dimensions of the issue have to be identified, and then possible answers have to be constructed. They have to be critiqued. And then, only after such a [inaudible 00:03:50] emerge a position that you might be able to call a plausible Islamic position. (03:57) And that has not happened, unfortunately. But I think this occasion presents us with an opportunity to raise some issues within the Muslim community also. And they have to come to grips with these matters. So I cannot present you with the finished response. (04:18) And I should say one more thing. And that is, see, people representing different faiths, they sometimes seem to be under the impression that whenever science raises an issue, they have to come up with a response overnight. Otherwise, there'd be something missing, or they'll feel bad about it. Science takes years and years, and makes investigation and critiques, counter critiques, and then presents a viewpoint or a theory or hypothesis or whatever. I think religion can do the same. You can, and you ought to, take time to consider all aspects of the matter, and then give a considered judgment. And if you cannot do that overnight, the moment the question is asked, "Oh, you have to pretend an answer." That's not necessarily. (05:11) So I think Muslims need to take time with this issue, which is an extremely important issues. It has philosophical, moral, religious implications, and you cannot simply say, "Oh, this is what science says. Oh, you have to have an answer." No, you don't have to overnight. Need to take time, but I'm hoping that such a response will be forthcoming. And not one, but several, from which will
That was a great answer. Thank you.

I'd like to spend a little bit more time on that question because I know it comes up. And actually, Rick, one of the news pieces I saw in one of your interviews, it was there's, well, where is Adam? And I think it would be great if those of you who've dealt with that question before could give us a little insight. [inaudible 00:06:13] talked about his community on some of the answers to that question, or the reflection on it, that you're encouraging in your own communities.

Let me start off. Actually, Elliot should begin with this because-

Because I'm the oldest one.

No, no, that's not true. That's not true. But because what I'm going to speak about, the Christians borrowed from their Jewish heritage. So it's a borrowed notion. And that's this, the language of humankind being made in the image of God. This also ends up being within the Islamic tradition as well. This is a phrase that is used in the first account of creation in the first chapter of Genesis, but it's probably the most mysterious expression that you will find in religious communities. Because, at least within these three, there has never been a definitive definition of what exactly that means. Its meaning has been given in several different ways. (07:24) In some cases it is meant to suggest a certain authority in creation, reflected particularly in the second creation story, with humankind naming the animals, Adam naming the animals and thereby demonstrating a kind of creative participation with God in the formation of other creatures. And so human co-creativity with God is sometimes seen. Sometime it's seen as human beings having a distinctive, discursive rationality, a capacity for reason that is different in kind from what you find in other creatures. (08:08) In some cases it has been human religious sensitivities or sensibilities, an inclination towards worship or to think of the
transcendent, however that might be defined in. (08:24)
And in some cases it has been in terms of distinctive
relationality, particularly relationality with God. At
different times and different places, it’s had all of these
names, but nothing that has ultimately been definitive. But
all of these reflect a sense that humankind has of itself
that somehow it's different than other things that it sees
about it. Now, it may be this is just an example of specie
pride, that this is a thing that we have said for a very long
time about ourselves because we like herself so well. So
that may be, in a sense, the motivation for it. (09:12) On
the other hand, we recognize in the early days of the
development of evolutionary theory, one of the sharp
challenges for many of those who were perfectly willing to
accept an evolutionary account of nematodes was that
they weren’t quite prepared to accept an evolutionary
account of human origins. Because humans seem to be so
different than everything else. Now, I won't say that’s a
particular answer to the question at hand, but it has
something to do with the way in which, on the one hand,
the textual tradition gives warrant to seeing humans as
distinctive and different, and yet not being able to actually
give a definitive account of what that difference is.

Connie Bertka: 10:00 Nancy, do you want to add to that?

Nancy Howell: 10:02 Just for the record, none of my seminary students has
actually asked me about Adam, even though that's how
Connie sort of prefaced who should be addressing this
question. (10:14) Obviously, because Christians are so
diverse, there are people who take Adam to be a literal
human being, specific person who was the first. But that's
not true for all Christians because some would argue that
Adam is symbolic of humanity and its creation. Some
would also say that the importance of that symbolism is
not so much whether Adam was one person. It's also not a
scientific statement, but it's a statement to say that we
owe our existence to God, that there is some dependence
on God there. And that, I think, established something of
the continuum upon which students see themselves
taking.
I would just add one additional meaning to the one's that Jim had. The notion of being created in the image of God, in the Jewish tradition, it means all of the things that he mentioned. But also the notion, it's a reference to the fact that we have moral knowledge, and that we have freewill to be able to act on that moral knowledge and, therefore, responsibility. Judaism is really big into responsibility. And that's seen as part of our being created in the image of God. (11:34) And then, because of these various factors, that we have moral knowledge and responsibility, that we have a spiritual side to our lives, that we are co-creators with God, that we are able to relate to other human beings as well as to God. Because of these various factors, the notion of being created in the image of God within the tradition means that we have an ultimate worth that cannot be measured. (12:01) I still remember when I was in, this is antiquity, but when I was in biology in 10th grade, back in 1957 or something, the text said that if you simply counted the chemicals that were in the human body, they would be worth, at that time, $1.57. Now, with inflation, maybe about $10. I don't know. But the point is that the whole notion of being created in the image of God says that we have human worth beyond the merely physical. That doesn't denigrate the physical, quite the opposite within our tradition. God created the whole human being, the mind, the emotions, the will, the soul, if you will, as well as the body. And none of them is any less human than any other part. And basically, our job is to use all of these faculties to try to do good in the world. And we have the freewill to choose whether to do good in the world with those faculties or not. (13:11) Now, does this raise us above other animals? Well, in certain ways, yes. But if you look through the exhibit, you saw over and over again, how are humans different from the primates that succeeded us? We do most of our movement based upon two feet. There are some animals that use two feet every once in a while, like chimpanzees, but we do it most of the time. We have a brain that allows us to create and allows us to imagine and allows us to think discursively, and a series of other things that you'll see in the exhibit, which would also say, even though there's not necessarily a gap, as it were, between the creation of chimpanzees and our creation, from an evolutionary perspective, the human
being is indeed distinct in certain ways. Is that the end of creation, or of evolution, who knows? (14:14) But in any case, in terms of the way, at least, my tradition would see Adam... And by the way, in the first creation story, it's not a proper noun. Adam simply means a human being. God created the human being male and female. God created the human being. And it's only in the second creation story that Adam becomes a proper name. And then you got Eve, who is the proper name of the woman. (14:40) So I frankly don't see any problems with reconciling the Adam and Eve stories, and especially the doctrine that comes out of it of human beings being created in the image of God. I don't see that as in any way being contradicted by evolution.

Fr. Thomas Weinandy:

14:59 Could I just add at one point, following up from the rabbi? Part of what I think being create in the image and likeness of God is, is because we have intellects and wills, human beings can do God-like actions. We can know the truth, we can love, we can forgive, we can be courageous. These are God-like actions, and because of that, we image God in our action. We image God's goodness and love, kindness and forgiveness.

Fred Edwords:

15:31 This would be a place where humanists would give a bit of a dissenting view. By pointing out that this whole idea of human uniqueness that creates this problem of, well, what about Adam? comes from a simple accident of human evolutionary history that all of our relatives are dead. That homo erectus, they're all dead. Neanderthals, they're all dead. Heidelberg is dead. Okay. (15:58) Now, what if all of those were alive today and around with us now? Would we then have this elevated view of our special human uniqueness? Probably not. Would our religions reflect this idea of our special place in the universe? Probably not. But it's because of that accident, that all of our relatives are dead, and that we didn't even discover the gorillas and many of the great apes, that is, Western society, European society, didn't discover these animals until they'd already developed their religions. And so basically we viewed ourselves as alone in our genus, in our family, and in our super family. (16:39) So that is perhaps the cause of this
problem of our uniqueness. And that humanist would just say, no, we don't buy that. We're not unique. We're part of nature. And it's a continuum.

Connie Bertka:  16:55  Randy.

Fred Edwards:  16:56  Yeah. I'm happy to be unique.

Randy Isaac:  17:01  I think this issue of who is Adam really gets down to the root of the most difficult conflict that evangelical Christians see with the exhibit here. I think in comparison, the age of the universe, the age of the earth, even evolutionary development, really pales. Those are issues that can be dealt with, but when it comes down to who is Adam, there's a much bigger problem for, for Christians here. And it's not Genesis one or two, just as it was pointed out. That can be dealt with in the dominance as the generic piece. (17:36) But the real issue comes down to the letters that Saint Paul wrote to Romans and Corinthians. When you really get a place where St. Paul is coupling the idea of Adam, who he seems to believe is a single individual of ancestry, to the work of Christ, where the sin of Adam is related to the redemption of Christ. And if you take that, and relate that to what you see in the exhibit here, it's not an easy one to reconcile. It says in the exhibit at one point here that Homo sapien's population may have been reduced to a minimum of 10,000 people around 74,000 years ago, which was just prior to the dispersion out of Africa. And if that's a minimum population, and everything is dispersed after that, how do you really identify a theologically significant human being? (18:43) Now, that's not to say it's not solvable. There are different ways of doing it, but I think that is perhaps the most difficult issue that evangelical Christians have to deal with.

Connie Bertka:  18:56  All right. Oh, sorry. Is there-

Mustansir Mir  18:58  I'll make one point. That is, see, as we discuss these issues, we use language. Now, I think it's extremely important to determine what kind of language religion uses, and what kind of language science uses. Science is descriptive, precise, and does not use metaphors, unless a science
teacher uses analogies, similes, and so on. Religion, on the other hand, uses a language that is quite different from the language of science. (19:33) For example, in science, you would say, evolutionary theory, animals, and then human beings, irreversible process. Religion might say, "If you disobey God, if you don't live the kind of model life you're supposed to, you might become worse than animals." You see? (19:53) So in religion, there's no such irreversibility. But then, religion is operating on a different level altogether. So unless we first decide what kind of language religion uses, and what kind of language science uses, you might be comparing apples and oranges. The medium, the words, the terminology, extremely important in each case.