

- **Release Date:** January 10, 2019
- **ISBN:** 9781632694881
- **Retail:** \$14.99
- **Pages:** 304
- **Category 1:** Religion / Philosophy
- **Category 2:** Science/Philosophy & Social Aspects
- **BISAC:** REL051000 RELIGION / Philosophy
- **Format:** paperback

HOMO LAPSUS

SIN, EVOLUTION, AND THE GOD WHO IS LOVE

Niamh M. Middleton

In *Homo Lapsus: Sin, Evolution, and the God Who Is Love*, author and theology professor Niamh

Middleton argues that evolutionary biology provides empirical evidence for Christian teachings on the related issues of human origins, the origin of evil, and the existence of a beneficent Deity. Rather than attempting to simply reconcile evolution with creation, *Homo Lapsus* focuses on the evolution of evil as the key to synthesis between evolutionary biology and Christianity.

The book's narrative theme focuses on the continuing battle between religion and science for priority as fields of knowledge. The passage of time has led to the development of a perspective on human nature in Darwinism that is almost identical to that of Christianity. As a result, leading evolutionary biologists are now claiming that the Genesis explanation for moral evil as being due to an "original sin" is redundant, since science can explain the inevitable evolution of traits such as greed, aggression, and the lust for power. What if, however, rather than offering an alternative explanation for evil, evolutionary science is providing empirical evidence for a doctrine of revelation? Based on a detailed review of the evidence, *Homo Lapsus* argues that the evolution of evil was not inevitable, that science does corroborate a primal Fall at the outset of human history, and that in so doing it shows revelation to be a higher form of knowledge than empirical evidence.

Homo Lapsus

*Sin, Evolution, and the
God who is Love*



Niamh M. Middleton

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About the Author

NIAMH M. MIDDLETON



Niamh Middleton is a former primary school teacher who now lectures about theology at Dublin City University. When she met her teenage sweetheart and future husband Gerry, he was considering becoming a Roman Catholic priest, while she was an atheist. Despite their disagreement on the subject of religion, he changed his mind and they married, becoming the parents of two daughters. Niamh remained an atheist for over a decade after her marriage, until a challenging life event caused her to fall back on her religion and draw comfort from it. She became a born-again Christian and in 1994 began a study of theology which culminated with the award of a PhD in 2003. She lives in the seaside suburb of Clontarf, Dublin, where she is involved in an ecumenical Bible study group. She enjoys reading, writing, music and traveling.

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Suggested Interview Questions

For Niamh M. Middleton, author of

Homo Lapsus

Sin, Evolution, and the God Who Is Love

Q: You have written a book about original sin. Surely this is now an outdated doctrine. Is it still an essential part of Christian belief?

A: That question illustrates perfectly the reason why I've written *Homo Lapsus*. Ever since evolution became accepted by science, Christianity has been fighting a rear-guard action to hold on to its raison d'être. Although a lot of theology has been written on the subject of evolution and its implications for the Genesis story of creation, temptation and fall, institutional Christianity tends to avoid the issue doctrinally. Original sin is no longer taught in Religious Education programmes here, for example. However, if there was no "Fall" of humanity, there is no reason for the Incarnation either. Christians believe that Jesus became man to save us

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from our sinful condition. It has been left largely to evangelical Christianity to continue advocating the doctrine.

Q: Yes, but at the cost of rejecting the theory of evolution outright. Surely in the long term this approach can't work?

A: Many evangelical Christians have been changing their stance on the issue of evolution and are engaging with it in the context of Genesis. In fact, some of the most cutting-edge theology on the subject is now emerging from evangelical Christianity.

Q: Is it not the case, though, that the evolutionary process itself seems to rule out direct creation and a one-off primal sin?

A: Well, theologians have dealt with those difficulties in various ways, and it is generally accepted that there is a mythological dimension to the Genesis story. A recent theological development has been to think of the first humans as a group or tribe who disobeyed God and "fell" together, with Adam and Eve being re-conceptualised as perhaps the first group leader and his wife. In this scenario it is argued that God infused souls into a pre-existing hominid species, which is a type of direct creation. This way of interpreting Genesis has been largely inspired by the striking similarities between the Darwinian view of human nature and the Christian one. "Fallen" humanity is near identical to Darwinian humanity. The similarities are so striking that leading evolutionary commentators such as E. O. Wilson are now claiming that the Judaeo-Christian explanation for moral evil as being due to an "original sin" is redundant, since the science of genetics can explain how and why traits such as greed, aggression and the lust for power have evolved.

Q: Is it not true, though, that the scientific explanation for characteristics categorised as "sinful" in Christianity is a convincing one that, via books of popular science, has become well-known and accepted by significant numbers of the general public?

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A: Certainly, but it's an explanation that begs a very pertinent question: what if, rather than offering a new explanation for evil, evolutionary science is actually providing empirical evidence in support of a doctrine of revelation? The renowned American Christian theologian and ethicist Reinhold Niebhur is said to have observed that original sin is the only verifiable doctrine of Christian theology, and the evidence emerging from contemporary Neo-Darwinism certainly backs him up. My main argument in *Homo Lapsus* is that, contrary to the polemics of high-profile Neo-Darwinists such as Richard Dawkins and Daniel Dennett, evolutionary biology actually provides corroborative empirical evidence for Christian teachings on the related issues of human origins, the origin of evil, and the existence of a beneficent Deity. In doing so, it also ironically shows that revelation is a higher form of knowledge than science, since Genesis predates the discovery of evolution by millennia and reveals the underlying truth of our evolution which transcends the realm of scientific inquiry.

Q: That's an argument that could cause a lot of controversy among scientists. Could you give me a brief description of how you go about making it?

A: Well, my book has a narrative theme that focuses on human morality as it evolved from pre-historic hominid species up to the emergence of modern *Homo sapiens*. In order to show that evolutionary biology provides empirical evidence for a primal Fall at the outset of human history, I have to establish the possibility that human evolution did not have to take the course that it did, and could have had a morally superior outcome. I argue that we could have evolved into the most peaceful and cooperative species on the planet. It must be remembered that the theologians who formulated the doctrine of original sin didn't know about evolution, or the way in which the moral decisions made by the first humans would have impacted not just on our individual selves but on our overall evolution as a social species. The new theological idea of envisioning the first humans as an evolving group also has the advantage of situating the classical doctrine within a progressive evolutionary context. We can still progress morally and fulfil God's plan for

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us, albeit with a moral handicap that can only be healed by grace. I am convinced that this is an idea whose time has come, given the immense popularity of books such as Israeli historian Yuval Noah Harari's *Sapiens* and *Homo Deus*. Harari has shown that there is substantial interest in our evolutionary pre-history and its implications for our progress as a species.

Q: Harari writes from an atheistic perspective. How would your book relate to his, given its religious interpretation of our history and pre-history?

A: Harari's books actually cover much of the same ground as *Homo Lapsus*, since they focus on how the moral events of our pre-history have impacted on the course of history as well as on the dystopian scenarios we can expect in the near future if we are not careful, given the immense powers we now have thanks to scientific advances. The major difference is that, being written from a Christian perspective, my book does not consider the harmful events of our pre-history or history to have been inevitable. Nor would it agree that, in order to avoid a dystopian future, a scientifically and historically informed politics will be sufficient. I argue on the contrary that definitions of human progress must not be left to the secular domain, but must also be guided by the data of Christian revelation as envisioned especially in Jesus's preaching of the Kingdom of God. I am convinced that without this, we won't be able to avoid the dystopian scenarios envisioned by Harari, despite our new knowledge of how our "selfish genes" evolved. In fact, that very knowledge could lead to the use of genetic engineering and other prosthetic means in misguided attempts to upgrade human behavior, with potentially catastrophic results.

Q: What kind of audience do you expect your book to appeal to?

A: I originally intended it to be an academic monograph, but as time went on I grew hopeful that it would appeal to a wider audience, given the popularity of the subject and the importance of the religion/science debate. During the course of my research I also became aware of the divisions among Christians on the subject of human origins caused by the scientific

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doctrine of evolution. I would love my book to contribute to the reunification of Christians on how Genesis should be interpreted.

Q: Could you explain those divisions?

A: Well, members of institutional Christian denominations such as Roman Catholicism which accept evolution tend to consider the Genesis account of origins to be primarily mythological, which has led to the doctrine of a primal Fall being shoved under the carpet, so to speak. On the other hand, there are still substantial numbers of evangelical Christians who interpret Genesis literally and, while advocating a strong doctrine of the Fall, feel they must reject evolution.

Q: How do you think your book might heal those divisions?

A The book's title *Homo Lapsus* gives a clue to that, since it links the Christian perspective on origins with the scientific one. I argue that the two perspectives on human origins fit together like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, mutually expanding on one another to create a much clearer and more detailed picture of what happened. The implications for Christianity are that the two viewpoints are in no way mutually exclusive and that in fact each requires the other for its fullest completion. So, it's not an either-or scenario, but one that shows how evolutionary biology actually makes the doctrine of the Fall more important and relevant than ever. Hence there is no reason why institutional and evangelical Christianity should differ any longer on the subject of origins, and Christian unity on the subject has never been more important than at this particular point in time in my opinion.

Q: Why do you say unity on this subject is so important?

A: Well there are two reasons. Firstly, due to new discoveries in the fossil record in Africa, we now know a lot more about how and where we evolved, and why we behave as we do. We also know that there were many other hominid species besides ourselves with whom we coexisted peacefully until we gained the cognitive abilities that set us apart from them. A big

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question in paleoanthropology now is how we gained the cognitive abilities that revolutionised our existence as a species and also made us more warlike in comparison to other species such as the Neanderthals. In the past it was thought that Neanderthals and similar species were brute savages, but recent paleoanthropological and archaeological discoveries indicate that they were peaceful, empathetic and family oriented. The topic of human origins has become a very hot one, and generates a lot of interest and excitement. It seems very clear to me that the Christian view of our origins and its revelation of the underlying reason for the moral flaws in our behavior has attained a new relevance. Yet it is unheard and neglected, largely due to disunity among Christians and a reluctance to engage with the science. Which brings me to my second reason for stressing the importance of clarity and unity among Christians on the subject.

Harari's books are popular representatives of a trend that sees and stresses the relevance of our pre-history to our history, and above all to our future. From a faith perspective I would ask if it can be a coincidence that at the very point in our existence as a species where we have attained the ability to understand and manipulate the building blocks of our nature, we are also being bombarded with new information about how that nature evolved. Understanding history in terms of our pre-history means using our new knowledge about origins to try to avoid future catastrophic mistakes of the kind that have marred our past. This knowledge has the potential to be very helpful in guiding the future direction of societies. I would argue however that without the Christian perspective on origins and human nature, it is more likely to do catastrophic harm than the great good of which it is capable. I believe that all the new evidence emerging is crying out for a Christian interpretation, and this is why as Christians we must present a united front.

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