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Theological Observer

AI Nannies?

On August 11, 2023, the Wall Street Journal featured an article titled “The AI Nanny in Your Baby’s Future.”¹ Shortly thereafter, I submitted the following letter to the editor that was unfortunately not printed.

It was with great interest that I read your recent article on the potential use of artificial intelligence to raise our children. I was particularly intrigued with this statement: “Human infants arrive in the world a bit underdone. A likely evolutionary reason is that if a typical fetus spent any longer developing in utero, its head would simply be too large to deliver safely. So nature had to compromise.” No one will dispute that development of the human brain does occur “at a breathtaking pace during the first two years of life” and certainly is part of the reason why humans “are the most intelligent, creative and productive of all species.”

But what if this reality isn’t the result of evolution but of a higher design? In most religious traditions—certainly the case in the Judeo-Christian—there is no higher calling than the care and nurture of children, a calling that requires sacrifice. Unlike a bird, which is soon pushed out of the nest, or any number of four-legged creatures that quickly learn to fend for themselves, children require sacrifice of self from their caregivers. Is that sometimes a burden? Certainly. But rather than seeing it that way, should parents perhaps instead learn to recognize it as part of God’s design by which they learn selfless love?

Maybe we should be worried about AI nannies. But let’s not forget the harm they could bring to parents’ own development.

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Sasse, Evolution, Mayes

One of the fascinating and most prominent twentieth-century theologians for confessional Lutherans especially in The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod

¹ Dana Suskind, “The AI Nanny in Your Baby’s Future,” *The Wall Street Journal*, August 11, 2023, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-ai-nanny-in-your-babys-future-999d0e50>.

(LCMS) was the late Hermann Sasse. When the synod's traditional theology was under siege in the 1950s, he was recognized as representative of what the Lutheran reformers confessed, an honor he still deserves. Since he was anything but a home-grown Missourian, his testimony to the classical Lutheran faith was seen as all the more valuable, especially in the face of what came to be known as the Seminex theology, which found support from prominent Lutheran scholars and church leaders in both Germany and America. His *Here We Stand* had a Luther-like ring to it, and for many Lutherans Sasse was playing the role of the sixteenth-century reformer himself.¹ His story as a wandering theological pilgrim from the University of Erlangen through the United States to its conclusion in Australia belongs to the saga of twentieth-century Lutheran history. Published in 1959, his *This Is My Body*, with its account of Martin Luther's debate with Ulrich Zwingli, was a bright star in an otherwise theologically darkening sky for Lutherans who found themselves in an increasingly compromising situation with the Reformed.² From the perspective of the twenty-first century, such debate can be seen largely as a lost cause, since with rare exception, member churches of the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) are now presumed to be in full pulpit and altar fellowship with one another and now with major Reformed, Anglican, and Methodist churches. With a woman as general secretary of the LWF, any discussion on overturning the ordination of women is off the table.

As Lutheran and Reformed churches were growing closer to one another in the 1950s and then 1960s, Sasse's *This Is My Body* was a trumpet sound to confessional-minded Lutherans for the battle before them, and in this book he showed that Luther had the better side of the argument with Zwingli in their colloquy at Marburg, which was the first and last attempt to bring the two reformers to an agreement. At the 1959 LCMS convention I acquired a copy and had the great man autograph it. This meeting with Sasse is preserved in a photograph depicting Sasse, my late colleague Kurt Marquart, and myself, taken by the late editor of *Christian News* Herman Otten, which ever so often appeared on its pages. Around 1968 our seminary awarded Sasse, who was on a speaking tour in the United States, an honorary degree of doctor of divinity. J. A. O. Preus, soon to be synod president, was seminary president at the time. Sasse was rightfully recognized by many as the most significant confessional Lutheran theologian of the time, even by non-Lutherans, and half a century after his death he remains a significant figure.³

¹ Hermann Sasse, *Here We Stand: Nature and Character of the Lutheran Faith* (Adelaide: Lutheran Publishing House, 1966).

² Hermann Sasse, *This Is My Body: Luther's Contention for the Real Presence in the Sacrament of the Altar* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1959).

³ As recently as September 19–20, 2023, at the Theological Symposium of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, John T. Pless delivered an essay, "Hermann Sasse's Confessional Response to Secularism."

After World War II he was appointed dean of the theological faculty of the University of Erlangen, whose predecessors were leaders in the nineteenth-century Lutheran renaissance and whose names can be found in Francis Pieper's *Christian Dogmatics*. Among Sasse's colleagues were Werner Elert and Paul Althaus, both of whose writings in English translation have become familiar on this side of the Atlantic. Sasse had opposed the Nazi movement when it was not popular to do so. He corresponded with Karl Barth and Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Catholic theologians. He was a confessional Lutheran theologian with ecumenical theological star power. Sasse's German and English bibliography is massive, and what was written in German is still being translated into English. One full section in our seminary's bookstore is devoted to his writings. LCMS presidents consulted him, and theologians from other confessions corresponded with him. In the postwar period Lutheran churches were moving closer to fellowship with the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD), the union of Lutheran and Reformed churches, who shared with each other a common confession and liturgy. Noticeably at stake was the doctrine of the Lord's Supper, on which Luther and Zwingli were divided. After the war Sasse left his post at the University of Erlangen and began a journey that ended at Luther Seminary in Australia, perhaps having given up hopes, so it seems, for a call to an LCMS seminary, most likely St. Louis.

As that seminary was trending toward the neoorthodox theologies of Karl Barth, Emil Brunner, and Rudolf Bultmann, which Sasse opposed,⁴ its members would have seen him as an obstacle as they embraced the new theological approaches. Sasse's journey ended in Australia, where along with Kurt Marquart he was instrumental in uniting the two Lutheran synods, the one in fellowship with the LCMS and the other with the synods now constituting the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), into the Lutheran Church of Australia (LCA). Since its founding the LCA has kept its fellowship options open and, at this writing seems intent on ordaining women and joining the LWF. We can only hope that our prophetic vision is wrong.

For many, perhaps most, this introduction is old news, but it is intended to provide a background for expanding on an essay by my colleague Benjamin Mayes that appeared in the April 2023 issue of our journal: "Creation Accommodated to Evolution: Hermann Sasse on Genesis 1–3."⁵ If you did not know it before reading Mayes' article, you now know that Sasse, the great confessional scholar, held to

⁴ Hermann Sasse, "Flight from Dogma: Remarks on Bultmann's 'Demythologization of the New Testament,'" trans. Matthew C. Harrison, in *The Lonely Way: Selected Essays and Letters*, vol. 2 (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2002), 93–116.

⁵ Benjamin T. G. Mayes, "Creation Accommodated to Evolution: Hermann Sasse on Genesis 1–3," *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 87, no. 2 (April 2023): 123–150.

evolution and saw Genesis 1–11 as a metaphor. In contrast, the LCMS has been consistent in its opposition to evolution, which in most private and public educational institutions is the standard explanation for how things came to be as they are now. Pastors may have to engage in the evolution-versus-creation debate with their high school and college parishioners. It should be kept in mind that there is no one agreed-upon definition of how things evolved or how long it took from its beginning to when it ended. There is no one agreed-upon definition of evolution. Evolution is a collection of theories for how the world came to be as we know it. One theory does not have to agree with another, and so the time that it took from the beginning to the present can differ by eons.

Strictly speaking, evolutionary theories do not address the question of divine participation in how the world came to be. However, with processes that are thought to have taken place over many millions and even billions of years, the question of God's existence becomes irrelevant and hence ignored. Evolution does not require the denial of God or address his participation in the evolutionary process, which is known as theistic evolution. However, Charles Darwin, who is credited with articulating the modern theory of evolution, was a theological student and became an atheist before he developed it. Evolution does not provide a definitive answer of how it all started. The book of Genesis does: "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth" (Gen 1:1).

Sasse preferred the evolutionary theory for how human beings were created to the Genesis account, which he understood as a metaphor. So Mayes writes: "Also it is clear here that Sasse accepted the findings of these disciplines, including paleontology, as including facts that necessitate a figurative reading of Genesis 1–3. What controls his exegesis of Scripture in this case lies outside of Scripture."⁶ Sasse attributed the LCMS insistence in belief in a historical understanding of Adam to its Midwestern environment, which is a cautionary way of saying that the synod had come under the influence of Fundamentalism.⁷ Whether or not Adam really existed as a historical person is not one doctrine among others, but it is the one on which all subsequent doctrines without exception depend and from which they are derived. In Adam's sinning all humanity sinned and consigned all his descendants to sin and death. Without Adam as presented in Genesis, it would be difficult to explain the unity of the human race and its fall into sin or come to any understanding of Christ as the second Adam in and from whom God constitutes a new humanity (1 Cor 15:22). Mayes provides all the necessary theological arguments and so his essay

⁶ Mayes, "Creation Accommodated to Evolution," 141.

⁷ Mayes, "Creation Accommodated to Evolution," 140n74. Milton L. Rudnick called this widely held hypothesis into question. See his *Fundamentalism and the Missouri Synod: A Historical Study of Their Interaction and Mutual Influence* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1966).

deserves close attention, not only in how pastors might have to face this issue among their parishioners but also in understanding the doctrines we believe as a composite whole and not just a collection of disconnected truths.

Sasse does not delve into how an evolutionary definition for the origins of humankind is combined or is at least compatible with the Genesis account of Adam or into how this can be read allegorically. Simply to say this or that section of the Scriptures is parabolic or allegorical does not make it so. Even those sections in the New Testament that are identified as parables make comparison with things and events that exist, which are open to scrutiny. Farmers sow seeds, and merchants buy pearls. Just how does one make the jump from a supposedly figurative or mythological account of Genesis to evolution, or make the jump in the opposite direction from evolution to an allegorical reading of Genesis? There is nothing in Genesis or in any theory of evolution that allows or even suggests for one to be interpreted by the others. As Mayes points out, for Sasse human beings could have existed as *Homo sapiens* for thousands of years (why not millions?) before God spoke to them.⁸ Mayes lays out all the relevant arguments and analyzes them. It is a must-read.

American Fundamentalism, which Sasse holds responsible for the LCMS holding to a literal reading of Genesis, was followed and replaced by Evangelicalism, a movement that accepted biblical inspiration. Its proponents have become academically credentialed. This is reason enough to give attention to Houston Christian University and Talbot School of Theology professor William Lane Craig, who, like Sasse, argues that evolution and Genesis are compatible and who takes the next step to show how one might be compatible with the other. He lays out his argument in an article titled “The Historical Adam” in the journal *First Things*, which leans politically and religiously conservative in general.⁹ His place in mainline Evangelical Protestantism is confirmed by the publisher’s description of a book of his, saying of it that it “upholds the suffering of Christ as a substitutionary, representational, and redemptive act that satisfies divine justice.”¹⁰ Craig’s motives are known only to himself, but like others holding to theistic evolution, he believes that evolution and the Genesis account of Adam’s creation are not necessarily incompatible and so removed are any obstacles for those holding to evolution to adopt the Christian faith.

Craig follows an argument presented already by Sasse that “If Genesis 1–11 functions as mytho-history, then these chapters need not be read literally.”¹¹ At the base of Craig’s argument is a distinction between “the *literary Adam* and the

⁸ Mayes, “Creation Accommodated to Evolution,” 142.

⁹ William Lane Craig, “The Historical Adam,” *First Things* 316 (October 2021): 41–48.

¹⁰ *Atonement and the Death of Christ: An Exegetical, Historical, and Philosophical Exploration* (Waco, TX: Baylor Univ. Press, 2020), inside front flap of dust jacket.

¹¹ Craig, “The Historical Adam,” 43.

historical Adam . . . [which] implies a further distinction between *truth* and *truth-in-a-story*.¹² It is hard to avoid seeing that this proposal resembles Karl Barth's distinction between *Historie*, what really happened, and *Geschichte*, the account of what happened without insisting that it had. (Rudolf Bultmann took the more historically agnostic approach and held to the word or the gospel and saw little of real historical value in what the Gospels said about Jesus.) Distinctions by Craig in reinterpreting Genesis 1–11 fit within the framework proposed by Sasse and are familiar to those trained with neoorthodox theologies of the last century.

Problematic in this approach is that references to Adam in the New Testament are disqualified from possessing any historical character and have only theological meaning. Applied equitably across the board, this calls into question the historical character of all the Old Testament events to which the New Testament refers as having really happened—Cain and Abel, the flood, and so on. Dispatched by Craig is Matthew 19:4, “Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female?” (Gen 2:24). This provides a basis for marriage without requiring belief that God really did this.¹³ For Craig, Romans 5:12–21 requires believing no more than “that there was a progenitor of the entire human race through whose disobedience moral evil entered the world.”¹⁴

Genesis does not provide a nice fit for evolution. If Adam evolved from an inferior apelike creature and was not created out of the dust of the ground, it would take some readjustment to see how he would return to the dust. Metaphorical readings of any section of the Scriptures should be demonstrated, and so it has to be proven how the first chapters of Genesis are any more metaphorical than the remainder. Thus, if the account of Adam's creation and his fall into sin are a metaphor, then it can be asked if the account of Abraham, which provides the scheme of the miraculous birth of Jesus and his death as a sacrifice, is also a metaphor. What is a concern here is how such a prominent and productive theologian like Hermann Sasse, who was understood as “Mr. Lutheran,” could hold to evolution.

While Sasse was a New Testament scholar, he set forth his theology on the basis of the sixteenth-century Lutheran Reformation, including the Lutheran Confessions, of which he was the foremost scholarly proponent. Here lies the issue of how the Scriptures and the Confessions interface with one another. Subscription to the Lutheran Confessions was never intended to mean that they would be regarded as a source of autonomous authority independent of the Scriptures, from which alone they would derive their authority, just as the moon reflects the light of the sun and has no light in itself. Scriptures and the Confessions do not possess side-by-side

¹² Craig, “The Historical Adam,” 43.

¹³ Craig, “The Historical Adam,” 45.

¹⁴ Craig, “The Historical Adam,” 45.

authority; the authority of the Confessions is derived from the Scriptures. The conjunctive “and” when we say we accept the Scriptures *and* the Confessions can be understood wrongly, if the Confessions are cited as a source of doctrine without prior reference and argumentation from the Scriptures.

When German and LCMS theologians assembled in the 1940s in three retreats known as the Bad Boll conferences, the LCMS theologians were unaware that German theologians saw things differently than they did. Sasse was not a participant; however, his adherence to evolution was possible for him since, like his erstwhile colleagues and participants in this conference, Paul Althaus Jr. and Werner Elert, he shared the same approach to theology.¹⁵

That small word “and” in the phrase “Scriptures and the Confessions” has allowed some to give the Confessions a virtually autonomous and independent authority, which was never intended by the formulators of the Confessions, especially Luther himself. This has allowed the development of a kind of theological literature based on Luther that makes no attempt to demonstrate that it agrees with the Scriptures, and if it does so attempt, it reflects one portion of the Scriptures to the exclusion of others. For the German theologians at Bad Boll, the Confessions represented the religious culture in which they were brought up, and so the distinction between accepting the Confessions because (*quia*) they agree with Scripture or only insofar as (*quatenus*) they do was not important to them in approaching these documents. Here they follow Schleiermacher, who taught that theology is definitely not derived from the Old Testament, nor even from the New Testament, and who placed the confessional documents of the sixteenth century as equal to the New Testament as witnesses of Christian faith-consciousness.¹⁶

Commentators on the Bad Boll conferences have concluded that the German theologians knew that their approach was different from the LCMS representatives’,

¹⁵ Since the time of the Reformation, the Lutheran Confessions have had legal status in some European churches as defining what the territorial churches require for belief. Since intercommunion with the Reformed is now accepted (since at least the Leuenberg Concord of 1973), allegiance to them has been so compromised that there is hardly a Lutheran teaching that is required of the preachers. In spite of this a Lutheran culture has remained in place in the German and Nordic churches that includes an appreciation not only for the Confessions but also for Luther and the other reformers. This can be called a cultural Lutheranism or a historic Lutheranism because it belongs to the sixteenth-century life of those nations that were influenced by the Lutheran Confessions and adopted them as documents defining not only church doctrine but also what kings, princes, and territorial councils believed. This has allowed for theologies to be derived from these documents without the requirement that they correspond with the Scriptures. Schleiermacher provided the theological arguments for how this is done.

¹⁶ Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, trans. Terrence N. Tice, Catherine Kelsey, and Edwina Lawler, ed. Catherine Kelsey and Terrence N. Tice, vol. 2 (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2016), 112–116. See Ludger Schwienhorst-Schönberger, “Marcion on the Elbe: A Defense of the Old Testament as Christian Scripture,” *First Things* 288 (December 2018): 21–26.

but the latter were unaware that the Germans were operating from a different theological foundation.¹⁷ By allowing evolution as an acceptable or even preferred replacement for Genesis regarding the origin of the human race, Sasse was operating from the same principle: that theology is a reflection of the culture in which the church lives. We cannot go into the mind of the great man to determine whether he was aware that, by removing Genesis from the understanding of how the world and mankind came into existence, he removed the foundation on which all of Christian doctrine stood.

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T. S. Eliot—Pilgrim in the Waste Land

It is the fifteenth of December of 2022 as I write this, the centenary of the publication of T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* in the United States.

During the height of the pandemic I found myself revisiting T. S. Eliot's poem "The Hollow Men." Reading that iconic poem again, but with pandemic eyes, reminded me of why I remain fascinated by Eliot—he captures both the darkness and the hope:

Sightless, unless
The eyes reappear
As the perpetual star
Multifoliate rose
Of death's twilight kingdom
The hope only
Of empty men.¹⁸

So well Eliot captures the interplay of darkness and light. And in the gloom, Eliot has something to say.

¹⁷ See F. E. Mayer, *The Story of Bad Boll: Building Theological Bridges* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1949); and Paul M. B[retscher], "Professor D. Dr. Werner Elert, 1885–1954," *Concordia Theological Monthly* 26 (March 1955): 211–214.

¹⁸ T. S. Eliot, "The Hollow Men," in *English Masterpieces: An Anthology of Imaginative Literature from Chaucer to T. S. Eliot*, vol. 7, *Modern Poetry*, ed. Maynard Mack, Leonard Dean, and William Frost, 2nd ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1961), 164.