

THEOLOGY AND SCIENCE—TOPIC SESSION

Topic:	Human Distinctiveness
Convener:	Celia Deane-Drummond, University of Notre Dame
Moderator:	Gloria Schaab, University of Miami
Presenter:	Denis Edwards, Australian Catholic University
Respondents:	Oliver Putz, University of Santa Clara Elizabeth Johnson, Fordham University

Denis Edwards spoke to the title “Humans, Chimps, and Bonobos: Towards an Inclusive View of the Human as Bearing the Image of God.” He began his talk by acknowledging the recent book by Celia Deane-Drummond, *The Wisdom of the Liminal*, that reinterprets image bearing in a way that takes into account the lives of other animals and deep evolutionary history. Edwards presented a focused discussion on the great apes using the divergent work of Frans de Waal and Michael Tomasello, who are both prominent in public discussion. Edwards analyzed implications of their work for a renewed theological anthropology, while retrieving the writings of Athanasius.

Edwards explored de Waal’s argument for the building blocks of morality. While rejecting the evolutionary view as sufficient, Edwards is sympathetic to many of de Waal’s conclusions. Michael Tomasello, on the other hand, puts much more emphasis on distinctive characteristics of humans in their sophisticated cultural worlds through a “racket effect,” along with capacity for shared intentionality. Edwards draws on these insights to bolster his theological view of the human person as both in continuity with but distinct from other animals.

He resisted confining the language of image bearing to humans, and uses what he perceives as Athanasius’ more inclusive account of the worth of creation to make his point. For Athanasius all creatures bear the imprint of the divine image, and Edwards uses this to argue for an extended concept of *imago Dei*. His discussion of wisdom made flesh in the incarnate Word has implications for how humans treat other creatures, who, like humans, become icons of Holy Wisdom.

Oliver Putz remained unconvinced of Edwards’ case with respect to an inclusive view of image bearing. He used further resources from science to counter Edwards’ scientific narrative and reliance on de Waal and Tomasello. He also argued against Edwards by suggesting that overall the work of Athanasius points in another more exclusive direction, namely, a traditional stress on human rationality. He was also far more skeptical of the value of image bearing in general as an inclusive theological category that defines the human, on the basis that image bearing is inevitably anthropocentric. He proposed an alternative philosophical starting point for an inclusive theological anthropology, using Martin Heidegger’s notion of *Dasein*.

Elizabeth Johnson’s response was far more positive, describing Edwards’ reflections as “a terrific paper...a model of its kind.” Johnson finds in Edwards a sensitive development of the idea of the work of Wisdom in creation, but now in a new key. At the same time she has a number of critical remarks on the specific challenges involved. The first relates to the use of ancient authors in contemporary discussion, recognizing that a much more static view of the natural world prevailed then. How might this connect with an evolutionary view, or indeed any understanding of creation that is also historical in tone? The second objection relates to the

Topic Session: Theology and Science

possibility of extending image bearing to other animals, and what this might say about the dignity of the gift for human beings. Johnson is keenly aware of the weight of the theological tradition against more inclusive categories. The third difficulty is related to the problems in constructing an adequate understanding of image bearing.

The discussion that followed was, as might be anticipated, lively and engaged; it raised particular issues connected with the challenges faced by those entering this vitally important territory. Edwards commented that he believed he is justified in his selection of sources as a way of re-appropriating the tradition in the context of the modern world. Given that the room was full to overflowing, there was insufficient time to address all the questions that emerged, and the session showed not only how difficult this terrain is in theological terms, but also the controversy that this is likely to generate. This is an area rich with possibilities for further theological exploration.

CELIA DEANE-DRUMMOND
*University of Notre Dame
Notre Dame, Indiana*