

Could Adam and Eve have been disabled?

Images of Creation

in catholic Religious Education textbooks in France

And why not?

Images of people with disabilities are never used to illustrate the Creation-narrative in catholic religious education (RE) textbooks in France. Instead, all illustrations suggest “beauty and perfection” according to our western contemporary standards. However, there is no biblical reason to assume disability was not present in “the Garden of Eden”. Did God only create that which we, humans, consider beautiful or perfect? Should not RE insist on God creating everything, including creatures like the blobfish which might not conform to our Western standards of beauty, but must be considered “good” in Gods’ eyes?



Fig. 1

One of the aims of RE in France is to promote mutual esteem and a better way of living together.¹ Although it is not mentioned explicitly, this esteem and living together also concerns people with disabilities. This article states that there are biblical and theological arguments in favour of disability being present in the Garden of Eden; thus, if we want to change the way our society perceives people with disabilities and promote the idea that all people, regardless of their abilities, are fully in God’s image, then illustrations of the Creation-story in RE textbooks should include people with disabilities.

Disability in the Genesis-story?

In our western societies, representations of what humans “ought to be like” are in part conditioned by our perception of the Creation-account and its’ so-called “adamic perfection”. Catechesis of creation is critical to an understanding of the self as God’s creature. Our perception of this narrative also involves the images used to illustrate and interpret it. In all RE textbooks used in France, the illustrations of the Creation-story contain “idyllic” images of two rather elegant people surrounded by beautiful animals in a lush garden. This nourishes the impression among pupils of RE that God wanted human beings to be perfect according to our Western standards.²

¹ See : <http://www.ere-oca.com/ere/presentation> website of the Alsatian Diocese of the Catholic Church, Service for catechesis and religious education, (consulted 22nd of April 2017).

² A random polling, conducted by the author as part of her PhD-research in 2016, among RE-pupils of four elementary schools in Sélestat, France, shows that 85% of the pupils believe that Adam and Eve could not have been disabled.

Is there really only one way of representing the Creation-story? An exegetical look at the Bible-text shows there is space for interpretation.

- God created humanity or humankind, not just “one man”.

In the Hebrew Bible, God says “Let us make ADAM in our image.” This is often understood as if God created one male person. However, a closer look at the text hints to another possible translation of ADAM: “Let us make **humanity / humankind** in our image.”

As both translations (singular and plural) have been accepted, we are to make a choice as to which one we are going to promote in religious education.

Classic exegesis would look at the reception of these verses throughout history and would try to find out the original intention of the authors. However, looking towards the past to find a so-called “real” meaning of these verses may not be true to the profoundly eschatological character of our faith. The truth is not behind us, it is in front. The truth of the Creation-account is an on-going one because, as stated in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*: “Creation did not spring forth complete from the hands of the Creator, the universe was created “in a state of journeying” (in statu viae) toward an ultimate perfection yet to be attained, to which God has destined it.” (Church, 1995)

Thus, which interpretation of the word “adam” in RE textbooks is going to help improve the esteem between pupils of different abilities?

From that point of view, the plural interpretation is far more promising. The expression « male and female » is used to represent the whole of humanity. Indeed, biblical Hebrew poetry doesn’t use purely abstract concepts; the abstract notion of totality is expressed by a pair of concrete words. In a very similar way “heaven and earth” in Gn 1 designate the whole of the Universe and the expression “body and soul” in Isa 10, 18 stands for the whole person. (Watson, 1984, p. 321)

The following verse of the *Book of Wisdom* sheds a complementary light on the Creation-account: “He himself has made small and great and provides for all alike” (Wisdom 6, 7). The *Book of Wisdom* states that God created small and great, and again, the author uses the expression of opposites to indicate totality. Then why would we not include “the clumsy and the deftly”, “abled and disabled” in the account? The author of *Wisdom* concludes: “His providence is the same for all.”

Thus, images of groups like the ones underneath actually render the intention of the Bible-text much more accurately:

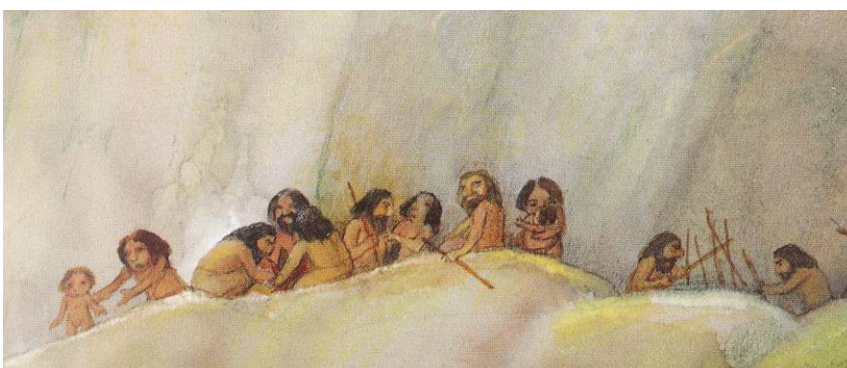


Figure 3



Figure 2

- There is no mention of humankind being pure or unblemished or perfect neither in Gn 1 nor in Gn 2-3. Paul Ricœur puts it this way: "All the speculations about the supernatural perfection of Adam before the fall are adventitious arrangements that profoundly alter the original meaning, naive and crude; they tend to make Adam superior and therefore foreign to our condition, and thereby reduce the Adamic myth to a genesis of man from a primordial superhumanity." (Ricœur, 1960)

In the wake of Ricœur, theologians have rejected the adamic perfection – or at least have tried to reinterpret it. One might object that God created humankind in his image, so surely God being perfect, his image must have been so too. This is very much true. But "What exactly does God think is wrong with Down syndrome that it is not to be represented in the resurrection body?" John Swinton asks (Swinton, 2011). We could even take it a step further: what is so wrong with Down syndrome that it is not to be represented in the Creation-account?

A document of the Holy See for the international year of disabled persons in 1981 states: "Christians know that in the disabled person there is reflected in a mysterious way the image and likeness which God Himself impressed upon the lives of His sons and daughters." (Vatican, 1981) This refers explicitly to the Creation-story. If we take this statement seriously, then we must reconsider the perception of humankind's adamic perfection: it may indeed have included disability, and still "God saw everything that he had made, and, behold, it was very good."

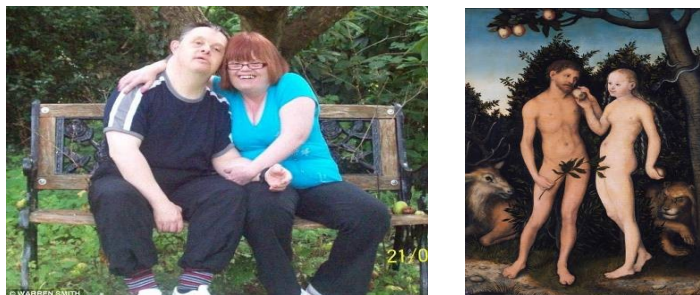


Figure 4

- Even after humanity disobeyed God and ate the forbidden fruit, there is no mention in the Bible of disability as a consequence of humankind's sin, in fact there is no reference in the Creation-stories (Gen 1–3) to disability whatsoever. This is not to deny the reality of the Fall and its' consequences. We should however clearly reconsider our understanding of the account through the lens of theologies of disability.

What do theologians think about this?

Surely, there is a consistent tradition among Christian theologians throughout the centuries that views disability as a defect of the Fall. The authors of *Disability in the Christian Tradition* substantiate this point well. (Brock & Swinton, 2012) In an article of the *Journal of the Christian Institute on Disability*, David Deuel writes: "In the beginning, there was no

disability. When God's created couple, Adam and Eve, first wilfully disobeyed Him, sin entered the world and brought pain, suffering, disability, even death with it (Gen. 3:1-24). Scripture calls this painful reality "the curse" (Rev. 22:3). It is very important to remember that people have disabilities because of the curse on all creation. Even the animal kingdom has disabilities." (Deuel, 2013) Unfortunately, a lot of believers would actually agree with this. However, there is space for interpretation.

- Thomas Aquinas says that in Paradise some human beings would have been stronger than others, or taller, or more beautiful. He says among the least advantaged none were deficient nor sinful (*Summa Theologica* I, q.96, a.3). Would not the "least advantaged" include those people we refer to today as "disabled"?
- Among contemporary theologians, several consider that disability is an ordinary aspect of what it means to be human. Thus they say it is theologically neutral to have a disability. Deborah Creamer, for instance, considers limits as an unsurprising and good, or at least not evil, characteristic of humanity (Creamer, 2009). Stanley Hauerwas supports the idea that having an intellectual disability is just another aspect of being human. Anyway, can anyone know what it means to be disabled in the eyes of God?
- Although there is no univocal interpretation in the official teachings of the Catholic Church, its *Compendium of social doctrine* states :

*"[in original sin] are to be sought the deepest roots of all the evils that afflict **social relations** between people" (§27).*

This implies that what changes after the Fall is the relation between people (and God), not their individual physical or intellectual capacities.

Why is this important?

If we want the whole of society to embrace the idea that all human beings are fully human, whatever their vulnerabilities, then we have to get away from the classical theological picture of human beings as defined by their capacities of reason and will, not only within the theological debate, or in Special Needs Catechesis, but in ordinary everyday conversation in catechesis and religious education.

All illustrations of Eden in RE tools suggest beauty, as shown in figure 5. The theological problem with the use of this type of contemporary images is that people with disabilities are as much part of the current creation as the couple of young models that meet our criteria of Western beauty in the 21st century. There is no theological reason for not using Paul and Andrea on the photo above to illustrate the beauty of creation.

If RE is really to promote mutual esteem among pupils regardless of their abilities, then it becomes urgent for editors to include images of people with disabilities in their treatment of the Creation-story. This is important for the perception that students with disabilities have of themselves, but also for the way their fellow-students perceive them.



Figure 5

The problem is not Paul and Andrea not being beautiful, the problem is our way of looking at them. We should always bear in mind this phrase of Cardinal Newman: "There are ten thousands ways of looking at this world, but there is only one right way. [...] it is the way in which God looks at the world. Aim at looking at it in God's way. [...] Aim at seeing the King in his Beauty. All things that we see are but shadows and delusions, unless we enter into what they really mean." (Newman, 1997) No doubt God sees the beauty of all people, no matter their (dis)abilities.

Table of figures:

Figure 1: <http://austin.charityowl.com/theres-actually-a-fish-named-the-blobfish/>
(consulted 11/05/2016).

Figure 2 : Delval, M.-H., & Wensell, U. (2013). *La Bible: les belles histoires de l'Ancien et du Nouveau Testament*. Montrouge (Hauts-de-Seine): Bayard Jeunesse.

Figure 3 : Smith, B. P. (2014). *La Bible en 1001 briques*. [Lyon]: Éditions Première partie.

Figure 4 : Lucas CRANACH the Elder, Adam und Eva – Warren SMITH, Paul and Andrea Annear : <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2991767/>.

Figure 5 : Association pour la catéchèse en rural (France). (2009). *En chemin avec Jésus Christ: PCS - livre du jeune*. Paris: Le Sénevé.

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