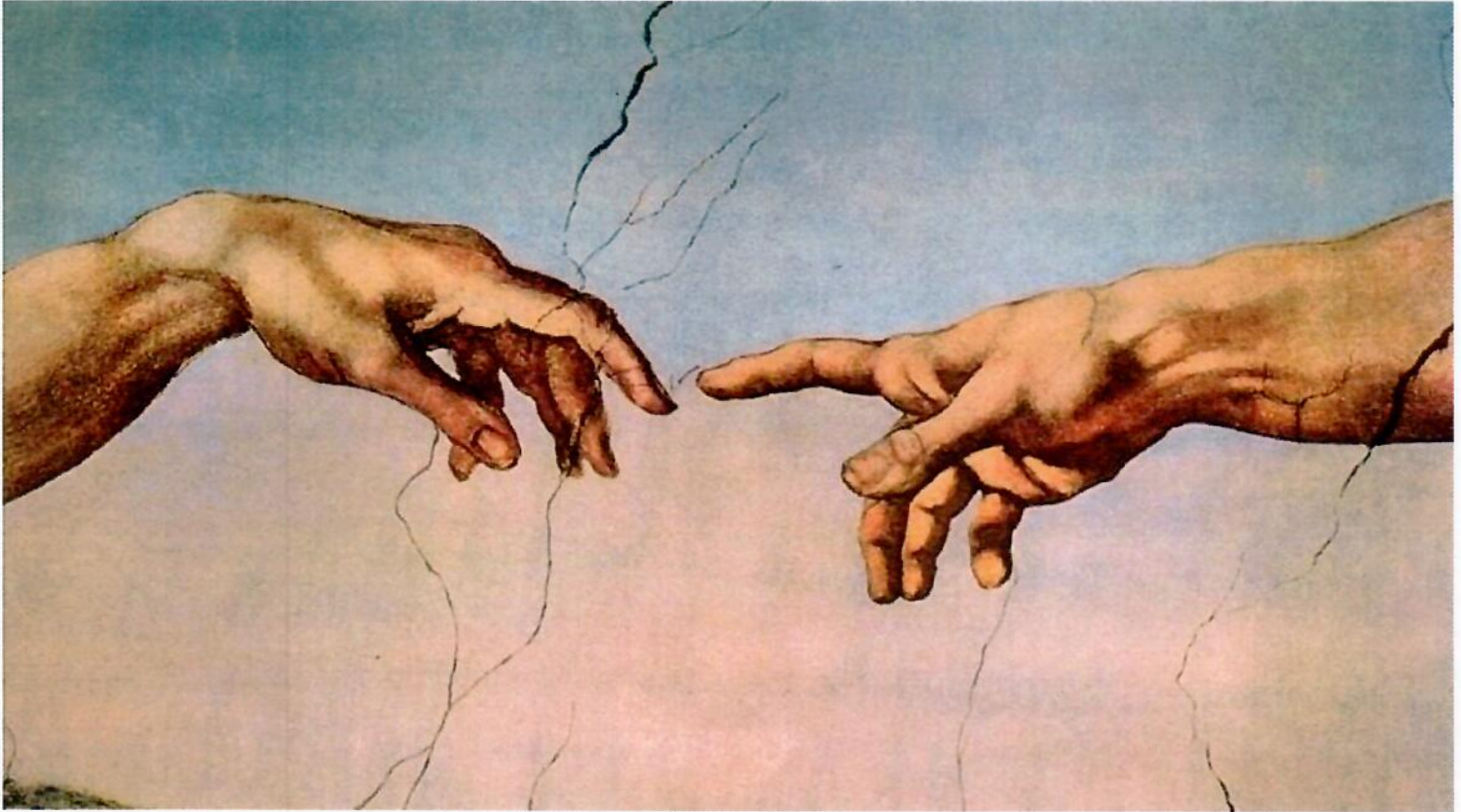


Christopher E. Longhurst: Another different view on Michelangelo

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Detail from the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel in The Vatican, showing the hand of God reaching out to the hand of Adam.
Photo / Supplied

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By Christopher E. Longhurst

OPINION:

The exhibition "Michelangelo: A Different View" at Auckland's Aotea Centre this summer has attracted unprecedented interest. The exhibition was originally born out of an idea to give New Zealanders an opportunity to see up close and from "a different view" the Florentine sculptor's sumptuous frescoes in the Vatican's Sistine Chapel.

However, this "different view" has given another view perhaps raising more questions than providing answers as participants flock to see what lies behind the literal meaning of Michelangelo's highly allegorical frescoes.

The Stetson Group has offered New Zealanders not only an opportunity to physically look down onto Michelangelo's ceiling from a viewing platform, but also the chance to rediscover how diverse branches of knowledge can inform one of the most complex ideas in the history of civilisation – the human as an image of the divine.

In other words, he synthesised human biology, physiology, cognitive psychology, obstetrics, neuro-physics, quantum chemistry, theology, philosophy, and cosmogony to underscore that verse, "Let us make humans in our image, according to our likeness" (Genesis 1:26).

Effectively, the artist melded into plaster a version of the Bible's creation story that only an astute observer, or perhaps a child, could discover on their own.

Further, 500 years before it was fashionable to break down gender binaries, or talk about same-sex love, or discuss how those discreet faculties of the human soul – freewill and intelligence, are localised in the microtubules of the brain's neurons, Michelangelo already opened a door to these conversations.

It is all there in the pope's chapel, Adam with both gender organs, naked men among the blessed in heaven kissing each other, and the creator-God as a massive brain and a uterus in the state of post-partum retraction.

Considering just the Creation of Adam scene, Michelangelo depicted the idea of an all-knowing and all-powerful creator extending intelligence and freewill to an image of itself, the human.

Cognitive and obstetric symbolism imbues the scene to underscore creation as an intelligent birthing process.

God's billowing robe is the cross-sections of the uterus of a woman who has just given birth. The thick uterine lining pulls back. Symbolically, God has just given birth.

At the same time, this birthing process takes place from the brain's cognition. Overlaying the uterus is a cross-section of a massive human brain.

Inside the brain, God's non-creative arm girds woman, a metaphor for divine wisdom being imparted to the human, and an image of the form of Eve before her physical creation.

The woman's eyes and the eyes of Adam are fixed on each other – the love of desiring each other.

However, controversially, Adam has an umbilicus. The implications here are deep. The umbilicus implies an umbilical cord which implies a mother. The two arms outstretched represent portions of the umbilical cord.

The reciprocal position of the two hands not touching underscores the cord being cut, fostering the

idea of a child being released from attachment to its parent.

Birth is over the moment the cord is cut.

Thus, the fingers do not touch. There is autonomy and freedom for the human as God separates from Adam after imparting the divine image.

Given the umbilical cord, the brain/womb-god is transformed into the divine placenta.

Angels' heads around the father figure resemble the placenta's cotyledons. Inside are semi-transparent membranes and amniotic fluid seen in God's dress, whitish and transparent like amniotic membranes.

Even the colour of God's billowing cloak, dark wine-red, suggests the colour of the placenta.

Further, Michelangelo's creation story crosses cultural and religious borders. The ideas depicted here lie at the foundation of diverse traditions.

Viewers can see how their own learned creation stories subsist in Michelangelo's pictorial document.

For example, from the Māori perspective, Michelangelo's land (whenua) is clearly a woman, mother earth (Papatūānuku) out of which the earthling (tangata) is born.

The maternal blue surface behind the green earth represents a woman, mana o te whenua, whose breast with areola and nipple crown the head of Adam.

As the mother nourishes her child in the womb, so does mother earth.

Relating to her in the sky is Ranginui, the sky father personified as an old man in the heavens. With the cut of the umbilical cord, Ranginui and Papatūānuku are separated, and their children are born.

In other words, from both land (whenua) personified as a woman, and from placenta (whenua) personified as a womb overlaid by a massive brain, comes into existence ngā tānagta, moral and rational creatures.

So, on one level the scene represents the transmission of intelligence (logos/mātauranga), while on another level it represents a real birth and kinship (whanautanga). Adam is both of the earth therefore earthling and born out of placenta therefore human.

More than a tremendous success as far as art exhibits go, "Michelangelo: A Different View" has provided the public with philosophical and theological knowledge prior to any learned perception of what belief in God or creation could mean.

To the 16th-century Florentine sculptor energised by cutting up human cadavers and reading prohibited literature, it meant the highest possible synthesis of knowledge.

Sadly, this unification of knowledge is lost today in our national educational system because we have separated the basic fields of study from each other.

But studying Michelangelo's ceiling provides an opportunity to see again how those diverse branches of knowledge come together. Thus, another "different view".

In sum, "Michelangelo: A Different View" has done what universities across New Zealand have not done for decades – united the humanities and provided an opportunity to make human persons more responsive and sensitive beings.

On the chapel's ceiling, diverse branches of knowledge are universus, "turned towards" (versare) the "one" (uni), from which we get the word "university".

Effectively, the Florentine master transformed the popes' chapel into a micro-university.

- **Dr Christopher E. Longhurst is a VIP tour guide with "Michelangelo: A Different View".**