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## Hidden Agenda Behind the Evolutionist/Creationist Debate

*One group of Christians has so magnified the importance of a particular view of origins that it rivals, if not surpasses, the redemptive message of the gospel.*

**O**NCE AGAIN the evolution/creation controversy makes front-page news. Here are all the ingredients a newsman could ask for. We see the champions riding out to do rousing, albeit verbal, battle. Behind each of the two groups is a home front, a good-sized segment of America's general public. One side the mass media find easy to caricature or portray as the buffoon. The other side, speaking from a rostrum of academic prestige, is learning to

flavor its pontifications with enough salt to satisfy the media taste.

How delightful a battle, so human yet so bloodless! Who would be churlish enough to ask for definition of terms or clarification of the issue? But do it we must. We begin by asking whether evolution and creation are necessarily antithetical alternatives. And the answer depends on how the two words are defined.

### Defining Evolution

Evolution is a term that can conjure



up a host of images and conceptual extrapolations—nature red in tooth and claw, social Darwinism, robber barons and laissez-faire capitalism, reductionist materialism, aggressive atheism, ethical relativism, human perfectibility, a self-existent universe. To the scientist acting as a scientist, however, such ideas are simply not germane. Evolutionary theorizing is merely a way of explaining in natural terms the history and mechanism of change within the universe as a whole, in certain parts of it such as stars and the earth, and in life on our planet (i.e., cosmology, stellar evolution, historical geology, and organic evolution).

Usually the scientist is simply investigating whether there exist long-term, large-scale, natural processes analogous, for example, to the development of a baby from a fertilized egg. More often than not, he has no theological or philosophical ax to grind, and is likely to be a bit irritated when a nonscientist carries his ideas beyond what he feels to be their legitimate bounds. Obviously that irritation is not a preventive against unwarranted extrapolation, for each idea listed above has turned to scientific evolution for support. The point is that a scientific concept must be considered independently of its versions.

## Defining Creation

The word creation, too, evokes different responses. Many scientists shun it altogether because it connotes situations and events impossible to understand through empirical data. Theistic scientists, to be sure, do not shy away from the word, for they see the material realm as contingent upon a creator. To them, the stuff of the world, its behavior patterns and changes over time, are all cradled in the hand of a transcendent God. Among today's theistic scientists, however, is a group called creationists, who require the word creation to mean much more. For them, believing in creation means adhering to a specific chronology of events which they believe the Bible unequivocally describes. Compressed into perhaps 10,000 years or less, it is a chronology sufficiently idiosyncratic as to call for a new name—"creationism."

Daniel Wonderly describes another group of creationists who have been around "since the latter part of the 19th century" (some say the 18th century). Including himself among them, he describes them as "a large body of

Catholic and Protestant creationists who accept the geologic evidence for long periods of time, including the entire sedimentary record." Many within this group, according to Wonderly, "believe that matter and the basic forms of life were originally created by divine fiat, with extensive speciation following the creation." Wonderly's group is not at the center of the current controversy, so that here the terms creationist(s) refer exclusively to those who insist upon a very young earth and the rejection *in toto* of the geological timetable.

It is the habit of these creationists to apply the label "evolutionist" to almost anyone who differs from them in the slightest degree. They fail to recognize that there are many who hold to divine creation while rejecting the label "creationist." Such people consider themselves faithful to the Christian Scriptures but see no reason to exclude God from slow processes which result in novelty. They are creationists in the traditional sense, but now find themselves standing in the gray area between "creationists" and "evolutionists." By omitting them and their contributions, current discussions are so starkly black and white that a balanced examination of the issues is impossible.

## Evolutionary Theorizing

In most cases, evolutionary theorizing begins with pre-existing stuff which evolves; that is, changes. Given that stuff, its energy and its basic laws, scientists face the task of drawing historical and mechanistic conclusions from presently accessible empirical data. They do not ask "Who?" and "Why?" Rather it is "How?" and "When?" that concern them as scientists. The theists among them will certainly use the term creation to describe the origin of the basic stuff of the universe; but what about subsequent developments? How does one label changes that turn primordial matter into new entities? Do theists label them "creation" so as to affirm their theism? Do they also require that the processes be supernatural, fearing that natural (and gradual) processes are somehow beyond the purview of God?

As a Christian, I necessarily recognize both my own creatureliness and that of the entire material realm. Furthermore, I have no problem at all with divine creation by fiat if the evidence requires it. In another time my position would have clearly marked me as a creationist, but today that

appears not to be the case. Now it seems that one can claim to be a creationist only by rejecting the possibility that God's activity includes time-consuming natural processes.

There is a tendency for today's self-styled creationists to subsume all such processes under the term "evolution" and then apply the term pejoratively at the first hint that someone does not accept their scenario. I do not know whether they respond from an *a priori* bias against process, or are fully convinced that Scripture negates it. For whatever reason, what they regard as evolution is anathema to them, and its association with divine activity is considered incongruous.

Often those who do battle with "creationists"—call them evolutionists—are equally rigid in separating process from God. Prominent among them is Steven Jay Gould, the Harvard paleontologist (see his "Evolution as Fact and Theory," *Discovery*, May 1981). With the alternatives limited by such a dichotomy, it is no wonder that the current battle between the extremes of evolutionists and "creationists" generates more heat than light.

## The Lesson of Big-Bang Cosmology

Although evolutionary theorizing generally begins with pre-existent material, a few scientists try to fit even the origin of matter into a naturalistic framework. Most notable are advocates of the steady-state cosmology that envisions the continuous *ex nihilo* creation of matter atom by atom over endless time. At present this cosmologic view is being eclipsed by big-bang cosmology, a concept that includes a seeming "beginning" of the universe. Supposedly there was a moment about 15 billion years ago when all of the matter in the universe exploded from a point and moved out to form the expanding universe of today. The status, even the existence, of that universe-in-a-point are problematic, to say the least.

How one eminent scientist responded to this apparent beginning and how others have responded to him are instructive here, for the whole affair bears upon what I consider to be an

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implicit conviction of creationists—namely, that if in the present universe we can find evidences of former catastrophes, abruptness, discontinuity, or currently inexplicable processes or events, then we will have irrefutable proof that the universe was made by almighty God. A logical extension is that many will be drawn irresistibly to a theistic conviction, perhaps even to Christian faith.

Unfortunately, the case of astrophysicist Robert Jastrow does not follow the above script. At the 1978 meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, Jastrow gave an address entitled "God and the Astronomers" (now available in a small book of the same name). Jastrow made the dramatic statement that "now we see the astronomical evidence leads to a biblical view of the origin of the world." Nowhere did he say straight out, "I believe that God exists." But he came so close that a number of noted scientists have taken up the cudgels against him.

Jastrow's God, it turns out, is basically the God-of-the-gaps. Where empirical knowledge fails, invoke God. He says:

*Scientists cannot bear the thought of a natural phenomenon which cannot be explained, even with unlimited time and money. . . . Every effect must have its causes, there is no first cause. . . . This religious faith of the scientist is violated by the discovery that the world had a beginning under*

*conditions in which the known laws of physics are not valid, and as a product of forces or circumstances we cannot discover . . . the scientist's pursuit of the past ends in the moment of creation! . . .*

*For the scientist who has lived by his faith in the power of reason, the story ends like a bad dream. He has scaled the mountains of ignorance; he is about to conquer the highest peak; as he pulls himself over the final rock, he is greeted by a band of theologians who have been sitting there for centuries.*

Jastrow began his talk by stating his own agnosticism, and he maintained that position when quizzed following the formal talk. A Christian physicist in the audience, Paul Arveson, asked him, "In light of all this evidence and in light of your own honesty in taking it at face value, why are you still an agnostic?" Jastrow replied, "I keep coming close to the edge of faith, but I never quite make it over. . . . In my later years I may reconsider this. You know how old men often turn to such thoughts."

One wonders why Jastrow went to the trouble of sticking his professional neck out so far while continuing to be an unbeliever through it all. It would seem that theistic conviction does not automatically follow when a person becomes aware that scientific knowledge has its limitations.

If the astronomic evidence and Jastrow's inferences from it were unsuccessful in making even Jastrow a be-

liever, it is not surprising that others were unconverted. Fred Hoyle, British astrophysicist and proponent of a universe infinite in space and time, was interviewed after Jastrow's lecture and said that he thought "the main controversy is whether the so-called origin of the universe really has to be taken literally or whether this is a physical transition from a preceding state." He added, "I personally have little doubt that there has to be a preceding stage, perhaps even an evolutionary process." Even a Christian astronomer, Owen Gingerich of Harvard, was cool to Jastrow's conclusion. His response, quoted in *Time* magazine (February 5, 1979), was that "Genesis is not a book of science. It is accidental if some things agree in detail. I believe the heavens declare the glory of God only to people who've made a religious commitment."

Scientist-writer Isaac Asimov was notably unrestrained in responding to Jastrow. He wrote:

*If I can continue to read the English language, Jastrow is implying that since the Bible has all the answers . . . it has been a waste of time, money and effort for astronomers to have been peering through their little spyglasses all this time. Perhaps Jastrow, abandoning his "faith in the power of reason" (assuming he ever had it) will now abandon his science and pore over the Bible until he finds out what a quasar is . . . Why should he waste his time in observatories? ("Science and the Mountain Peak," *The Skeptical Inquirer*, winter 1980-81, p. 43).*

Such an intemperate response shows that Asimov holds deep convictions that Jastrow has disturbed. Asimov is an avowed atheist and Jastrow has pointed to what he considers to be evidence for God. He has touched a sensitive spot beneath the skin of Asimov's formal scientific knowledge.

## Do Creationists Have a Hidden Agenda?

It seems to me that similar sensitive spots exist in the "creationist-evolutionist" debates, but are being covered over in an effort to portray the discussion as purely scientific. The fact is, the "creationists" have a hidden agenda. And, because they are sincere Christian people, I believe it contains supremely important issues, issues that transcend the minutia of science and strike at the heart of what it is to be human. The question of God's exis-

## "Blessed Are the Meek"

*Moses, by turns raging and afraid,  
Was meek under the thunderhead whiteness,  
The glorious opacity of cloudy pillar.  
Each cloud is meek, buffeted by winds  
It changes shape but never loses  
Being: Not quite liquid, hardly  
Solid, in medias res. Like me.  
Yielding to the gusting spirit  
All become what ministering angels  
Command: sign, promise, portent.  
Vigorous in image and color, oh, colors  
Of earth pigments mixed with sun  
Make hues that raise praises at dusk,  
At dawn, collect storms, release  
Rain, filter sun in arranged  
And weather-measured shadows. Sunpatches.*

EUGENE H. PETERSON



tence is certainly one, as illustrated by the Jastrow affair. But also crucial are God's relationship to the universe as well as the purpose and destiny of human life.

In the debate now going on, however, such issues are not overtly discussed. We are led to think, by the "creationists" at least, that what is being debated is totally a scientific matter, a question to be argued in the same way as any of the many scientific issues in history. Ostensibly the Bible is kept out of the discussion, although the biblical wellspring of the "creationists" is clear to all who are familiar with its history. It is only because of the American commitment to separation of church and state that mention of the Bible is muted. As a result, the wrong battle is being fought and a potent weapon silenced.

Suppose the "creationists" were to win their case, or at least to insinuate their position into the public schools. Would a proclamation of the Christian gospel thereby be assured? Does human uniqueness flow only from a creationist cosmology? Is "proof" of a 10,000-year-old earth a key to revealing Christ's redemptive act on the cross? To me, the answers are obviously No. Thus, I consider the creationist approach to be poor strategy for a truly Christian impact on the world. I do not believe it will accomplish what its promoters desire (and what I desire)—namely, widespread and effective dissemination of the good news of God, including a respect for the divine authorship of the material realm.

### The Aberration of "Creationism"

Scientists in general, and many Christians among them, regard the "creationist" movement as aberrational and cultic, an irritant rather than a force for creating understanding. While many of its leaders have earned doctoral degrees from prestigious universities, most are in the fields of engineering, mathematics, physics, and chemistry—areas lacking in the historical dimension crucial to the issues being debated. Admittedly, some are biologists, but geologists and astronomers are almost unrepresented.

More important than academic background, however, is the way in which "creationists" participate in the scientific enterprise. Having set in concrete their view of events in the midst of distant history, they come to lecture from a rostrum of certitude. They sep-

arate themselves even from scientists who are committed Christians. The Creation Research Society, for example, was founded by people who withdrew from the American Scientific Affiliation, not because ASA members were unable to recite the Apostles' Creed with full affirmation but because the ASA was supposedly "soft" on evolution.

The only contacts that "creationists" have with the scientific community at large are through campus debates where their ablest speakers generally acquit themselves very well. However, rather than face-to-face debate before generally uninformed audiences, creationists should be making their case through established scientific channels. After all, science is not static. Its history records a myriad of cases where people with new ideas supported by new data have overturned the status quo. And they have done it directly by confronting their peers. The journals and the scientific meetings are there for those who would participate.

What we see, in fact, is "creationists" talking to creationists. They speak about research that they have done. What that research seems to involve, however, is a search of the orthodox scientific literature to cull out statements that reinforce creationist prejudices. How odd that the honesty of establishment scientists in expressing their failures as well as their successes should not be matched by a similar honesty by "creationists," whose scientific convictions seem surprisingly free of ambivalence and uncertainty. Consider, for example, this ingenuous statement of an establishment anthropologist, David Pilbeam of Harvard University, in his review of Richard Leakey's book, *Origins*:

*Perhaps generations of students of human evolution, including myself, have been flailing about in the dark; that our data base is too sparse, too slippery, for it to be able to mold our theories. Rather the theories are more statements about us and ideology than about the past. Paleoanthropology reveals more about how humans view themselves than it does about how humans came about (American Scientist, May/June 1978, pp. 378-379).*

Such a statement no doubt evokes different responses. Creationists probably say, "I told you so," and add another arrow to their quiver. Some professional anthropologists with phyl-

ogenies well worked out in their own minds may be upset and rush to reply.

My own response is two-fold: first, to admire the author's candor as well as the give-and-take of the intellectual environment from which it springs and then to add the author's remarks to my mental storehouse of information about human nature. There it joins with data, both secular and biblical, to provide the grist for my own thinking about the mechanism (not the Mechanic) behind human origin. Currently I see sufficient ambiguity to make me cautious about endorsing a particular mechanism of human origin. About human nature, however, I have no hesitation. I believe that the Bible unequivocally affirms that we humans, in spite of our all-pervasive sin, are the apple of God's eye, significant enough to be redeemed by the death of his only Son.

### Reasons for Creationists' Success

If "creationists" have been unable to dent scientific orthodoxy, what accounts for their success in capturing headlines and influencing state legislators? I believe there are two factors that any successful salesman can quickly recognize. First, there is zeal issuing in hard work, and, secondly, a new product for which there is clearly a wide market.

For many years, a host of Christian people with a simple faith and little knowledge of science has been suspicious of scientists as a group. In their reading of the Genesis account, God brought the current universe into being as it is now in six 24-hour days. All this scientific theorizing about evolutionary processes is simply introducing complications where there is obvious simplicity. Besides, scientists seem always to be attacking the Christian faith and acting as if they could accomplish anything through science.

For a long time such Christians saw the alternatives as science or faith—choose one. And they chose their faith. Then came the new generation of "creationists" with the message that Christians can now have their cake and eat it too. The Bible has been right all along; science is now seen to affirm the simple story to which the faithful have been holding for so long. Thus, the new twist of "creationism" is to argue that the facts of science point to "creation" rather than to "evolution." This is reflected in the title of the current creationist bible, *Scientific Creationism* (ed. Henry Morris, Creation-Life



Publishers). Its message is that about 10,000 years ago God created by fiat a universe much like that of today. The earth's multitude of plant and animal species shares a simultaneous birth rather than any common ancestry, and the fossil-filled rock record is primarily a consequence of the flood of Noah.

In publications galore, this message has been disseminated through religious bookstores all over America. It has been picked up by a diverse readership—pastors, speakers, youth workers, and Sunday school teachers. Most of them are not scientifically trained. So the message they send forth is often garbled or incomplete or just plain wrong. Though their message is often lacking in accuracy or balance, it is heard by many Christian people, and it creates the widespread conviction that the scientific establishment is engaged in a conspiracy to keep the truth hidden so that atheistic secular humanism can have its way.

Seemingly in support of such a conclusion is the scarcity of books written by Christian authors who oppose recent earth "creationism." Many scientifically qualified people fall into this category, people with an orthodox faith in Jesus Christ and a deep commitment to divine creation. For a diversity of reasons they have not felt constrained to expose in writing the faulty foundation of "creationism." For some it is the unpleasantness of writing polemics against fellow Christians; for others it is a conviction that nothing will change the minds of those who want to believe the "creationist" paradigm. Still others recognize the many tentative areas of historical science and refuse to be drawn into a debate where rigidity seems to dominate.

### An Analysis of the "Creationist" Phenomenon

How is it that one group of Christians has magnified the importance of a particular view of animate and inanimate history so that it rivals the redemptive message of the Christian gospel? What can explain, for example, the masthead of the *Bible-Science Newsletter*, which lists "A Young Earth" side by side with "Christ as God and Man—Our Savior?" It seems to me that the answer is a mixture of three ingredients: biblical interpretation, human personality, and the current American context.

Creationists, in my judgment, are hyper-literalists in their interpretation of the first chapter of Genesis. They

require the days to be consecutive 24-hour intervals, and that makes humanity a mere five days younger than the oldest stars and rocks. Furthermore, the genealogies in later chapters are seen to confine humanity to the past 10,000 years or less; so that must also be the age of the entire universe. The incredible amount of scientific evidence for the earth's great age is swept aside with seeming ease. Henry Morris, for instance, writes: "The biblical cosmologist finally must recognize that the geological ages can have had no true objective existence at all, if the Bible is true" (*Biblical Cosmology and Modern Science*, 1970, Baker, p. 23).

Yet W. B. Riley, premier American evolution fighter of an earlier generation, had no trouble accepting the geologic ages. Furthermore, a later host of conservative Bible scholars considers an ancient earth fully compatible with Scripture. These are people with evangelical credentials and a commitment to biblical inerrancy—men such as J. Oliver Buswell, Jr., E. J. Young, and Gleason Archer. How unwise to ignore their contributions.

But behind the conviction that the Genesis 1 account of creation is to be taken in uniformly literal sense are also some very able people, the second ingredient in creationism, its leaders who write and debate and speak. As mentioned previously, they have scientific or engineering credentials. Above all, their zeal is based on a belief that they are serving God in a world that is godless. In withdrawing even from Christian scientists of different persuasion, they are like Elijah in their inability to recognize a cadre still loyal to God. Furthermore, a society increasingly aboveboard in its opposition to Christian faith almost confirms the wisdom of their withdrawal. Here is where the third strand enters: American culture in the late twentieth century.

One need not be a very perceptive observer of current American society to discern the erosion of Christian behavioral standards. The opposition to Christian mores has moved from insidious to blatant, forcing a defensive posture on those who would style their lives according to biblical principles. Furthermore, atheism clad in religious and intellectual garb is heralded more openly and more frequently. Thus pressured, Christians seek help in standing firm. Some reach out for symbols and causes that seem to echo the noble words of Martin Luther, "Here I stand; I can do no other!"

"Creationism," I believe, is one such cause. I understand it, but I cannot support it. To me it is a caricature of the true Christian view of men and things. In its isolation and inflexibility, "creationism," in my judgment, is doing more harm than good.

### Science—An Ally Not an Enemy

It is my belief that the scientific enterprise, as it exists today, is plodding along the path that leads to accurate knowledge of the material realm. This is not to sanction all that goes on in the name of science; rather it is to affirm that at its core the scientific enterprise is sound. Who can deny the significant progress already made toward understanding the material world? In addition, science seems to operate in ways that eventually weed out error and define profitable avenues of attack. This seems as true for unraveling earth history as for elucidating the nature of the atom.

Of course, no Christian would grant ultimacy to scientific truth, for the heavens and the earth are destined to pass away. But this is no reason for Christians to abandon science or participate only as kibitzers. As fellow passengers on planet Earth, Christian scientists should be in the thick of things, contributing and receiving, correcting and being corrected. Participation is not implying that the scientific enterprise will one day usher in an age of the ultimate, or even of total material truth. Rather, Christians within the scientific establishment are needed both to point out the impossibility of such goals and to witness to the divine message which redeems the material world.

When a Carl Sagan or a Jacob Bronowski is carried beyond the scientific data to personal speculation, who but a Christian scientist is more qualified to resist being hoodwinked and to articulate an accurate response? The challenge is to respond precisely and clearly when God's Word is clear, with restraint and admitted uncertainty when dogmatism is biblically unjustified. Our model is He who was full of grace and truth.

It is my conviction that Christians need to strive continually to integrate scientific truth with biblical truth, never demeaning one or the other, never setting one against the other. After all, the God who made the world also authored the Word. Only when we honor them both can he be glorified fully. □