

ADAM, Apes, AND Divine ACTION

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In August 1999, the Kansas State Board of Education made a landmark decision by excluding questions dealing with evolution from the required biology examination. Responding to challenges that evolutionary biology is “just a theory” and not a proven fact, the Board signaled that scientific evolution was no longer required in the biology curriculum. This opened the door to other perspectives, such as Creationism or Intelligent Design Theory. Some hailed this as a victory for religious faith because it placed limits on the “atheistic” teachings of science. Others worried that the quality of their educational program was being sacrificed to the wishes of “well-intentioned... folks who want things to be mindlessly simple.”¹ In the elections of 2000, a new State Board of Education was elected in Kansas. This new Board promised to overturn the 1999 decision, in effect requiring the teaching of modern evolutionary theory. Clearly teaching modern evolutionary theory remains controversial.

While the mystery of who I now am is more comprehensible than the mystery of ultimate past or future, it is clear that my path is shaped by the integration of the divine and the scientific.

In its basic form, modern evolutionary theory claims that all forms of life evolved from a common ancestor. The wide array of living species today evolved through a process of ‘natural selection’ acting on variations among individual members of a particular species. In this understanding, genes—and the mutations that occur during the process of inheritance - provide a mechanism for the evolution of different species from common ancestry. Only individuals with variations that help them adapt better to their environment will survive and bear offspring, thus perpetuating the variation and eventually establishing it as a characteristic of the species. This evolutionary process required billions of years and many different antecedent life forms. Evolutionary theory makes no claims about how initial life began. Rather, it attempts to describe how simple, early life-forms grew, changed, and developed into what we know today. Modern evolutionary theory, neither denying nor affirming the existence of

such a divine being as God, excludes any creative action by God as the cause for how life came to be.

SCIENTIFIC MATERIALISM

Two months after the 1999 Kansas decision, the *Des Moines* (Iowa) *Register* ran three editorials, addressing the controversy between modern evolutionary theory and religious faith. The first editorial by Jonathan Wilson argues that science basically “debunked the notion that the (Christian) Bible is literally and factually true.”¹ Science should be taught in the classrooms and religion kept as a personal belief prerogative, but not an educational norm. Wilson speaks triumphantly of scientific knowledge, placing little value on religious knowledge. Wilson’s editorial represents *scientific materialism*, an intellectual position that gives credence only to knowledge that is verifiable and testable by scientific experimentation. From this perspective, God must not exist because God cannot be verified by science. Writers such as Richard Dawkins and Daniel Dennett espouse such scientific materialism and argue that science leads us to conclude that the objects and events of the natural world can be explained in terms of their material properties. Therefore, evolution is an utterly mindless series of physical events—with no purpose, no design, no god.

Obviously the scientific materialist position poses major challenges for Christians—rejecting the existence of God and the purposefulness of creation. Some Christians may perceive additional challenges as well. If humanity evolved from some primordial soup by a method akin to trial and error, how does humanity differ from the rest of creation? What are the implications of evolution for the Christian understanding that humans are “created in the image and likeness of God?”

CREATIONISM

One response by Christians is *creationism*. A second editorial in the *Des Moines Register* represents this response. Steve Cooper, the second editorialist,² challenges the factualness of evolutionary theory. A theory, he argues, is not an established fact; it should not be taught as such. Cooper claims that the word of God is fact, and we could use those words as a better norm than science. He argues “perhaps more Americans would like to teach their children that life is a precious gift from a personal God, rather than the result of a mindless mechanism working

out its non-plan in the swamps and fields of the planet.”²

Creationists, such as Henry M. Morris, try to make their case by proposing an alternative “science” that takes into account the Biblical ‘truth’ about such things as evolution. This results in alternative, allegedly “scientific explanations,” such as ‘flood geology’ and punctuated evolution followed by periods of stability. Creationism’s literalist reading of Scriptures ironically leads us to the same typology as scientific materialism. Both scientific materialism and creationism assume that there is an inherent warfare between science and religion, thereby creating a false dichotomy and an “either/or” choice. As Ian Barbour, a physicist and theologian, observes: “Both sides err in assuming that evolutionary theory is inherently atheistic.”³

MEDIATING POSITION

There is a third, mediating position on modern evolutionary theory that draws from the Wesleyan quadrilateral of scripture, tradition, experience and reason. This position recognizes both science and scripture as essential sources of authority for Christian faith and discipleship. A third editorial in the *Des Moines Register*, written by Derek Pursey, represents this position. Pursey argues that God is revealed through nature as well as Scripture. He asks for “dialogue based on mutual respect for each other’s integrity.”⁴ This mediating position fits best with my own perspective. As both pastor and scientist, I am unwilling to affirm a God who constrains science capriciously or is limited by scientific exploration. I receive both scientific knowledge and the methodology of science as good gifts from God. Through modern evolutionary theory I am able to appreciate the connectedness of my life and species with the rest of the natural world. I recognize both the potentialities and limitations of myself and of Creation. While the mystery of who I now am is more comprehensible than the mystery of ultimate past or future, it is clear that my path is shaped by the integration of the divine and the scientific.

In presenting the controversy engulfing modern evolutionary theory, I depicted a continuum with the two extreme positions of scientific materialism and creationism, mediated by a third position that recognizes both scripture and science as sources of authority in the sense of the Wesleyan quadrilateral. Of course, not all of the perspectives fit neatly

into such a clear-cut schema. One important exception is the theory of “intelligent design.”

The controversy surrounding modern evolutionary theory will continue to engage Christian faithful. Even Christians who share my mediating position that both scripture and science are authoritative continue to struggle with the theological implications raised by evolution. For instance, the evolutionary picture includes eons of time when there were many dead ends, much extinction, pain and suffering. Given this picture, how are we to understand God to be good, loving and compassionate? There is no one theological stance that satisfies all the challenges of science and meets the claims of traditional belief. As parish pastors we must encourage theological thought about God and God’s way of being in a world that we comfortably describe

scientifically. It is important to examine our faith claims in light of our scientific understanding, to engage in the mutually respectful dialogue that Pursey advocated in the *Des Moines Register*. □

Notes

¹ *Des Moines Register*, 10/6/99

² *Des Moines Register*, 10/28/99

³ Barbour (1997) p 84

⁴ *Des Moines Register*, 11/18/99

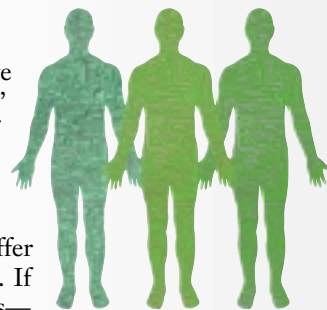


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(See *What to Read Next*, p. 14)

Intelligent Design

In the last fifteen years writers such as Michael Behe have argued that many life forms are too “irreducibly complex” to have evolved by chance. They hold that the evidence of design, sometimes “irreducibly complex design,” requires that humans and other “irreducibly complex” life forms are products of an unnamed Designer’s work. One of the older examples of irreducibly complex design that they offer is the case of discovering a pocket watch on the ground. If that watch were broken down into its component parts—springs, cogs, hands, case, etc.—it could not be reassembled into the same device by randomly reshuffling the components. Clearly an Intelligent Designer is at work, selecting which components to interface with other components thus producing a time-keeping, time-telling device. Often accepting the mechanisms of evolutionary theory that might lead to the development of ‘component parts,’ Design theorists hold that evolutionary theory itself cannot account for the complex functioning of life. They insist the “Designer” punctuated evolutionary history, introducing new “irreducibly complex” designs when standard evolutionary techniques ran their course. They are not specific about the identity of their ‘designer.’ However, it is clear that such designer acts beyond the bounds of scientific experimentation and verification.



While intelligent design offers an intriguing alternative to creationism, it is not widely accepted in the scientific community because it fails to mount any positive evidence to support its claims, rather relying on negative attacks of evolutionary theory. It fails to explain either the presence of residual and apparently non-functioning parts in current species, e.g. the appendix, or the fossilized remains of clearly antecedent species. There are also problems with intelligent design from a Christian theological perspective. The type of God implied by intelligent design would not be a personal God interested in humans and all of creation. The God implied by intelligent design would be an impersonal God, devoid of compassion but entirely trustworthy as far as design mechanics go. As a result, intelligent design’s view of humans created in the image of God becomes problematic as well. Within intelligent design theory, design creativity marks the *imago dei*—rather than mercy, justice, or compassion. It is not clear if organisms only “do as they are designed to do” or are able “to improvise on a designed base” in a manner that does not violate the original intentions of the designer. Either alternative poses limits on humanity’s free will. —JJK

Next

• **Kenneth R. Miller**

Finding Darwin's God: A Scientist's Search for Common Ground between God and Evolution

(Cliff St. Books, 1999.) Excellent explanation of evolutionary theory and analysis of the various ways for evolution and faith to interact.

• **Robert T. Pennock**

Tower of Babel: The Evidence Against the New Creationism

(MIT Press, 2000.) An analysis and rebuttal of Intelligent Design Theory as well as older creationism.

• **Ronald L. Numbers**

Darwinism Comes to America

(Harvard University Press, 1998.) A good history of evolutionary theory in the U.S. and its interaction with the religious communities.

• **Michael J. Behe**

Darwin's Black Box: The Biochemical Challenge to Evolution

(Touchstone Books, 1998.) A presentation of Intelligent Design Theory by one of its leading exponents.

When the First Opinion Isn't Convincing



Second Opinion: Reflecting on Contemporary Issues in Bioethics, by Bruce Hilton. In *Second Opinion*, Bruce Hilton explores the pros and cons of bioethical issues such as physician-assisted suicide, medical procedures in conflict with religious beliefs, artificial life support, and issues in mental health. Each chapter sets the stage for discussions of these difficult choices among people of faith. Hilton explains how our faith influences our responses to the controversial applications of medical technology, and his easy-to-grasp style makes this book useful for individuals as well as study groups. CI3-0687073596. Paper, **\$12.00**

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