

Who Are the Creationists?

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James Rusk, in his article, "Answers to Creationism" in the September 1988 issue of *The Planetarian*, presents some very helpful background information on issues raised by creationists. What I felt was lacking in the James Rusk article, and most other critiques of creationism, is a sense of who the creationists are and why they hold to the positions they do. Granted, there are increasingly vocal creationist "activists" who are trying to mold public education in their own image. Their tactics distort both science and theology. These hard liners and their supposed "scientific creationism" are playing a power game and must be met on their own terms. These people, however, are a small vocal minority, even within the fundamentalist churches.

My own interest in creationism is a personal one. I grew up in a conservative Christian environment where creationism was the norm. I found great value in my religious beliefs and was reluctant to let go of them, but I was also interested in science and struggled to make sense out of the two realms in a harmonious manner. I did not give up my creationist beliefs because someone shot them down. Rather, I "evolved" out of my creationist perspective over a period of years as I found new ways of thinking that did not involve throwing the baby out with the bath water.

Most people who identify themselves as creationists are what I would call "naive creationists". They are the followers, not the theologians. They are to be found sitting in every science class and planetarium show. They usually have not fully grappled with the issues and become hardened in their positions. They are often silent in their objections. Some are very intelligent people who are actively seeking ways to reconcile science with their faith. They believe sincerely in God, they attribute to him the power to do anything he wants, and they have no reason to question that he could or did create the world in six days. I believe most creationists in this category are open, honest people who are interested in hearing new information, if perhaps mistrustful of the views of unbelievers, but willing to discuss their beliefs in an atmosphere of mutual respect. Most of them can't understand what would motivate people to reject God, or what seems to them to be a straightforward and acceptable account of creation in the Bible. There are real and troubling issues these people must overcome to be able to accept a modern scientific world view in general and evolution in particular.

As science educators it is not our role to attack religious beliefs per se. Rather we should

respect and assist in the growth process that must go on in all individuals trying to integrate modern understandings of the world with their religious beliefs. The comments that follow do not constitute a handbook for debating creationist activists. I have chosen to discuss three issues that are central to the struggle sincere Christians must face in integrating their beliefs with modern science. It is hoped that non-creationist readers will gain some appreciation for the issues that face an open minded creationist and that readers still in the process of integrating science with their religious beliefs will be encouraged to continue the process.

If God Is Not the Creator, How Is He God?

The doctrine of creation is absolutely central to Christian theology. If God is not the creator how does he have ultimate power and authority over the world or man? What claim does he have on us? For Christians it is essential to recognize that this is God's universe. All Christians must therefore believe God to be creator in some sense. A simple person with little scientific background may resolve the issue most easily by picturing God hovering over the universe saying "Let there be light...." Genesis chapter one is just such a straightforward, uncritical statement of faith.

Whether or not this is God's universe is not a matter science can decide. Any claim either way is a statement of faith, not science. What science does witness to is the prevalence of natural law. Within the operation of natural processes it is possible to explain such things as the formation of stars and planets, the origin of the elements, the accumulation of organic molecules leading to life, and the propagation and variation of species. We should inspire our students and planetarium patrons to grow in their appreciation of natural processes, whether they are naive creationists or naive atheists. If they can be helped to move beyond simplistic slogans into an awareness of the diversity and complexity, but also the simplicity and order of the natural world we will have given them a motive to reexamine their belief system. Some will, others won't, but they will have gained something along the way.

The more one understands and appreciates the processes of nature the less one needs God to fill in the gaps in our knowledge. This can be threatening to fundamentalists who may feel science is leading them toward atheism. On the other hand, if God is used simply to fill in the chinks in our knowledge we have a rather weak conception of God, sometimes called the "God of the gaps" in theological circles. Such a God is bound to be constantly on the defensive as knowledge expands. If life can arise by natural processes without divine intervention perhaps God is not necessary. On the other hand, perhaps the emergence of life gives witness to how subtle and beautiful nature really is, where the entire universe is brimming with the potential of coming alive to give glory to God. It is all a matter of perspective. Obstructing the scientific process is a weak response with a poor track record historically. Creationists should be challenged to find ways of understanding God that do not put them in opposition with the search for truth. After all, if God is truth, there should ultimately be no conflict.

Meaning out of Randomness

Living organisms are truly phenomenal examples of order and complexity. How could such order emerge out of the chaos of the universe through chance? If the universe did emerge through chance, how do we escape the conclusion that all is meaningless?

These are questions every thinking person must come to terms with. Einstein was no fundamentalist, but even he, in other contexts, had difficulty accepting that God played dice with the universe. Many Christian fundamentalists reject evolution because random processes seem incompatible with the basic premise of a purposeful creator. Those who lobby against evolution frequently play on this theme to ridicule it. They compare evolution with a dictionary resulting from an explosion in a print shop. How can a chaotic world of atoms turn into the ordered structure of living organisms by chance?

The "how" question has an answer. Evolution is based not only upon randomness but also selection. A better analogy is this: what are your chances of finding your name in a can of alphabet soup? The chances are pretty good as long as you are there to recognize the right letters as they swirl by and pick them out. This is what actually happens in nature. Our blood stream carries digested alphabet soup past the cells of our body which select what they need and reject the rest. As long as the soup we eat is nutritious enough, the cells can grow and manufacture new living cells out of molecular building blocks. What we are watching is nothing less than the transformation of nonliving molecules into life before our very eyes. Every time a cell divides a new living thing has been created by natural processes. A cell is literally a life factory. If one can accept that cellular division is a natural process it seems like a small step to believe that these microscopic life factories can gradually retool over eons of time.

The meaning question is harder. Does life have ultimate meaning? How can life be meaningful if it arises out of chance events? Must life be laid out in advance and planned by God to be seen as meaningful? These are deep questions that each person must answer in his own way. What I offer here is merely an observation that the question of meaning in a world of random events need not be an insurmountable obstacle to Christians. There is a parallel in Orthodox Christian theology. For Christians there is meaning in Christ's death. By any ordinary standards dying at the hands of one's enemies would be a defeat, but in Christian theology this defeat is nothing less than God's ultimate victory over the forces of evil. My question is simply this: if Christian theology can see victory in what was overtly a defeat, can it not find transcendent meaning in what is overtly the work of chance?

Biblical Creation Accounts

Fundamentalists in particular, but Christians in general, hold the Bible to be the source of their faith. Some creationists feel they are obliged to hold the positions they do because, to quote a

slogan, "the Bible says it, I believe it, and that settles it." That seems like a pretty impenetrable wall at first, but perhaps it is not.

Beliefs about the nature of the Bible in conservative churches vary. It may be described simply as the Word of God, leaving the details of how God speaks to man through the Bible open to interpretation. Fundamentalist churches tend to put more qualifiers on the doctrine, such as inspiration, infallibility, inerrancy, etc., up through literal verbatim dictation from God. My experience is that the more restrictive the doctrine of inspiration, the less the people are able to read the Bible for themselves with comprehension, and the more they rely on authority figures to quote it and interpret it for them. In churches and in devotional literature the Bible is usually read in very short passages, with the focus on individual words or phrases.

The key in any discussion of the Bible is to be familiar with it directly through first hand reading as an adult, not from memory of childhood stories and sermons. I recommend actually sitting down and reading through the book of Genesis. It is not that bad. Anyone who tries this, however, will recognize certain difficulties from the outset. There is a general progression through the book, but there is not a unified story line. Genesis does not read like a novel, or a history book, or a list of commandments, or any other simple text. It is amazingly choppy and repetitive. It resembles a patchwork quilt more than a single weave. Most biblical scholars today believe the original material in the book of Genesis was handed down through oral tradition in the form of sayings, songs, stories, etc. for hundreds of years, collected at various religious sanctuaries in the early days of Israel, compiled in various early written forms for various historical reasons, then edited into the form we have it today late in the history of Israel.

But if the work is a collection of writings by different authors with different styles, different viewpoints, different cultural influences, and different historical settings, what becomes of the concept that the Bible is the word of God? Can a fundamentalist dare venture down this road without the certain prospect of losing his faith? No one can tell from the outset where an open mind may lead, but there are many Christians who recognize the cultural, historical, and even the theological diversity of the Bible and still discern the voice of God through it all. Can God speak to man through other men? The long tradition of preachers in the church would seem to support this. If God can speak through ordinary men, with all their limitations, is it too much to believe that God can speak through the medium of human literature, with all its limitations as well?

It is a cliché that everyone has his own interpretation of the Bible, but there is actually a near consensus among academic theologians that crosses Catholic, Protestant, and Jewish doctrinal lines on many of the central issues. Fundamentalists lie outside this consensus. The consensus view is that Genesis is an interweaving of at least three earlier written sources (labeled J, E, and P by biblical scholars), each of which draws on a wealth of earlier material handed down

through oral tradition.

The seven day creation narrative is from the P source, attributed to priestly writers in about the sixth century BC. The garden of Eden story, on the other hand, is attributed to the J source, who was writing about the time of David or Solomon. A key difference that helps separate the two strands is the term used for God. In the P tradition it is asserted that the name Yahweh, the proper name for the God of Israel, (translated LORD with all upper case letters in most English translations), was not known or used until the time of Moses (cf. Exodus 6:3). Therefore throughout Genesis the P writer refers to God by the generic term El or Elohim, which is translated simply as God. The J tradition, on the other hand, attributes knowledge of the proper name Yahweh to the children of Adam and Eve (Genesis 4:26). In passages taken from the J source, the name Yahweh is used from the outset. Many other stylistic differences can be correlated with the nomenclature for God.

With this in mind, read the first three chapters of Genesis. The P narrative extends from Gen. 1:1 through 2:4a. God is simply called "God" (Elohim). Creation is by the spoken word: "Let there be... and there was...." God is pictured as a transcendent spirit moving over a primordial "sea". The P creation account is a highly structured, liturgical recitation of the creation week which is presented as the source of the Sabbath cycle in Hebrew tradition. There are eight creation events (each starting "And God said.."), blocked into six "days". The "days" are each bounded by evening and morning, so it is clear the writer was not thinking about eons of time. On the other hand, the first "day" occurs before the creation of the sun and moon, so they are not natural days either! It makes better sense to consider the days of creation to be a literary device for purposes of liturgical recitation, rather than literal statements about units of time, whether hours or eons in duration.

The J narrative is the familiar Garden of Eden story, which begins in Gen. 2:4b and continues through chapter 3. God is called "The LORD God", which is translated from the proper name Yahweh Elohim. God is pictured in vivid anthropomorphic imagery of a potter molding the clay of the ground into human flesh, breathing into it the breath of life, planting a garden, and walking in the garden in the cool of the day. The contrast with the lofty spiritual imagery in the P narrative is striking. Unlike the opening of Chapter 1, the initial state of the earth is a dry, barren landscape.

The sequence of creation events in the P account is (1) light, which is separated into day and night, (2) the "firmament in the midst of the waters" (literally the solid dome of the sky, cf. Job 37:18), (3) the gathering of the waters to create seas and dry land, (4) vegetation and trees, (5) the sun, moon, and stars for signs and seasons, (6) sea creatures and birds, (7) land animals, and finally (8) "man", male and female.

By contrast, the J narrative is loosely structured into a flowing narrative and no particular time frame. The sequence of creation events begins with man, interpreted as a male. To meet the

man's need for food, plants and trees are created. Then in an attempt to find companionship for man the animals and birds are created. Finally woman is created as the perfect fulfillment of man's need for companionship.

Do contradictions between multiple strands like this somehow discredit the Bible? Only for a rigid Biblical literalist. Whoever set these two narratives side by side, preserving their distinctive literary qualities in the process, could clearly see these are two accounts of creation that do not fit together in their details. Surely we must conclude that the literal details were not the real focus of the editor. The sequence of creation events seems like inconsequential trivia when compared with the meatier theological issues dealt with in these chapters: the claim that God is supreme over his creation, that the material world is good, that man is created in the image of God, that God has provided for all the needs of man, that we are caretakers of creation, and that human sexuality is to be viewed as a gift from God.

Conclusion

Evolution is central to the modern scientific world view. It goes beyond the realm of biology and impacts thinking in all of the sciences. Science educators should be free to speak as confidently about evolution as they would about Newton's laws of motion in physics. "Creation science" is neither good science nor good theology. Its influence in our public educational system should be resisted vigorously.

On the other hand, for individuals with strongly held religious beliefs the process of coming to terms with evolution has a human dimension that is more complex than many people realize. I would not recommend watering down presentations of scientific concepts for their benefit, but neither would I recommend scorn as an appropriate response. I do not have a prescription for dealing with creationists in concrete terms, other than to suggest that both parties need to learn patience and have a willingness to listen as well as speak.