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On the Origin of Reconciliation

Lauren Kerby, 2011

“In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth” (Genesis 1:1). Thus begins the most disputed tale in living memory, the Judeo-Christian story of how the world and its inhabitants began. The conflict between Darwinian theory and Creationist beliefs has raged for well over a century now, and through the generations both sides have progressed through a sort of evolution of their own. Yet the conflict continues to be seen as just that: a battle between two opposing sides, one of which will reign victorious while the other fades into the memory of an unenlightened past. Exaggerated by the media and exacerbated by fundamentalists on both sides, this image of an irresolvable clash is ultimately a counterproductive waste of time. Pure evolutionary theory and pure creationism do indeed appear to be polar opposites; however, in the middle ground between the extremes, there are just as many possibilities for overlap and compatibility as for contradiction and opposition. However, in order to find that middle ground where reconciliation between the two is possible, one must first admit the fallibility not of the Scriptures themselves nor of scientific research and experiments, but of human understanding of these various explanations for the origins of the world and of man. This is not necessarily a compromise; neither side must be forced to give up one principle it holds dear in exchange for keeping another. Rather, this reconciliation stems from conceding that humans err in their understanding both of the divine and of the natural world. Realizing that human comprehension of both will deepen and change over time allows formerly held beliefs and theories to be modified and interwoven to form a more cohesive view of the whole, and that view may someday come close to approximating the truth.

The first step toward reconciliation between scientific and religious versions of human origins is to recognize that science and religion serve two extremely different purposes. The differences are complex and it would be unfair to state that they do not share certain goals, but in the simplest scenario, science seeks to explain how the world came into being, while religion seeks to explain why. This may come as a surprise to some, including a number of Creationists who view the Bible as a sort of encyclopedia, one that holds the precise answers to everything from philosophy to physics. In reality, there is no justification for treating the Bible, divinely inspired though it may be, as a scientific document. Surely both evolutionists and open-minded creationists can agree upon that, regardless of their opinion as to the origins of Scripture. The reason for this
is simple: if Genesis was written over 3,000 years ago, how could one expect the author to command the scientific vocabulary necessary to describe the exact mechanisms of the universe’s formation? More importantly, how could one expect a reader at that time to understand it? Howard J. Van Till, a retired professor emeritus of physics and astronomy at Calvin College, argues that “The human writers inspired by God had no vocabulary for concepts like galactic redshift, thermonuclear fusion, plate tectonics, spacetime metrics… To expect Scriptures to provide us with the kind of statements that would be directly relevant to the evaluation of contemporary scientific theories on the world’s formative history strikes me as profoundly misguided” (151).

On this point, creationists can concede that their understanding of Genesis as a scientific account of creation is potentially misguided, but that concession does not give grounds for evolutionists to declare the Bible to be disproved entirely simply since it has been disproved scientifically. A document does not have to be scientific to be valid. Were that the case, centuries of the world’s greatest literature would suddenly become obsolete because of content that goes against the laws of the natural world. A new way must be found to view Scripture; or perhaps it is an old way, ancient even, the way people understood the Bible before the advent of science. Genesis, and indeed religion as a whole, functions as an explanation of purpose for humans in relation to the divine, to nature, and to each other. The story of the Garden of Eden serves for some as an explanation for why humans are flawed, imperfect, and ultimately mortal. It can be taken literally or as a metaphor for a more vague development of awareness of right and wrong. Yet the fact remains that the nature of Genesis is “a teleological, not chronological, account of God’s ordering of the earth and its life forms. The order here is an order of purpose, not time” (Clouser, 517).

Genesis was written to answer the question of why people exist on this earth, not how. Searching it for scientific answers would be no more productive than analyzing the periodic table in search of higher meaning in life. The common misconception of Genesis as the infallible scientific account of the beginning of the world is the fault of human misunderstanding and misinterpretation. Neither evolutionists nor creationists must concede that the Bible is right or wrong, but surely they can agree that for scientific purposes, there are more factual and concrete sources, while for philosophical and literary purposes, the Bible remains an extraordinary and valuable explanation of the nature of man.

In truth, reconciliation between creationism and evolution is not so much a process as it is already a regularly occurring event. Ever since the publication of Darwin’s theory, people who are both religious and reasonable have been seeking a way to reinterpret the Bible so that it is complemented rather than contradicted by the discoveries of modern science. With sufficient creativity, any two things can be reconciled, and little creativity is required to resolve the differences in this case. As early as the fourth century of the common era, St. Augustine of Hippo

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suggested that the “days” described in the first chapter of Genesis were not meant to be taken temporally, based on the description of God creating light on the first day but not creating the sun, moon, and stars until the fourth day (Clouser, 517). This is only one of numerous inconsistencies obvious to the thinking readers of Genesis, and those readers have found many ways to demonstrate that reason and faith are not mutually exclusive. From the “gap-theory” of some creationists, which proposes a lapse in time between the first and second verses of Genesis and allowing for the insertion of the time span suggested by the geologic record, to the common dismissal of the problem as time being a human invention and therefore irrelevant to God, there exists an infinite number of ways to resolve the apparent conflict. A classic argument for the irrelevance of the Bible is that the first and second chapters of Genesis tell two different and seemingly contradictory stories. However, this argument only works if the Bible is interpreted as a literal, scientific account of the world’s origins, which is not at all its purpose. As has been shown, Genesis has a very different purpose, one that is ultimately teleological. As such, the two chapters can be seen as giving purpose to different aspects of human time. In a modern reconciliation proposed by Roy Clouser, a professor of philosophy and religion at the College of New Jersey, the first chapter of Genesis represents God’s organization and arrangement of the workweek: “What is religiously important is the ‘first,’ ‘second,’ etc. as contrasted with the ‘seventh,’ not whether the ‘days’ can be construed as geological eras or taken to be twenty-four-hour periods in which the entire universe appeared” (518). On the other hand, the description of the creation of Adam and Eve is interpreted by Clouser to be representative of the creation not of the first humans, but of the first religiously conscious humans. By Clouser’s definition of humanity, the figurative character known as Adam was not truly human until God had “breathed into him,” making the divine presence known to man by communicating with him and awakening at last his religious consciousness. “[Genesis] does not regard ‘human’ as synonymous with any strictly biological structure or capacity, and it is clueless with regard to any biological processes or beings” (521). When Genesis is seen for what it truly is—a religious document—means of reconciliation are simple to find, though convincing others may be more difficult. However, reconciliation is clearly possible if only that first step of admitting imperfect human understanding of sources, regardless of whether they are based in science or faith.

The sheer number of different forms of reconciliation of creationism and evolution shows that no single theory can or will apply to every long-held religious belief and every cutting-edge scientific theory. There is simply too much variation within the beliefs held by creationists and theories maintained by evolutionists, and the latter expands daily as new scientific discoveries are made. The process must be individual, and in the spirit of true modernity, it must consist of each person using his or her own faculties of reason to evaluate
both sides and find a middle ground that compromises neither religion nor reason. For some, this may mean maintaining that the world was created in precisely six days; for others, this may mean denying any sort of miraculous or special creation by some divine power. The extremists will always remain, but the majority will continue to find means of reconciliation. This does not compromise the intelligence of the person who chooses to hold on to religious beliefs in addition to scientific explanations of the world’s origins. In reality, for the average person or even the exceptional person, the theory of evolution must be taken on faith just as much as the story told in Genesis. It is a rare person indeed who is sufficiently qualified in the fields of evolution and religion to speak as an expert on the gray area between the two. Alvin Plantinga states that “The scientists among us don’t ordinarily have a sufficient grasp of the relevant philosophy and theology; the philosophers and theologians don’t know enough science; consequently, hardly anyone is qualified to speak here with real authority” (114). This leaves the possibility of turning to one of the few who is truly an expert and believing without question that expert opinion. However, a more modern course is to examine the evidence of faith and science with sufficient humility to admit that what was previously interpreted in either case might be wrong. Blind faith is not the answer, regardless of where that faith is directed. Reconciliation must take place on an individual, conscious level to be worthwhile, meaningful, and lasting.

Yet this debate currently rages on a far larger scale, one that impedes its being fully resolved on an individual basis. The conflict between religion and evolution, so often portrayed as an epic battle to the death, is one that can only be reconciled when it is removed from the spotlight and judgment of experts trying to find their own version of the absolute truth and inflict it upon the rest of the world. The modern world is full of experts who like nothing better to expound their theories and beliefs as unquestionable fact, and their constant refusal to admit that someone’s contradictory theories or beliefs might be valid is what has perpetuated this conflict. The church has undeniably had a hand in fueling the anger that keeps the battle alive, with its historic antagonism toward scientific discoveries that challenge its interpretation of Scripture. Yet as more and more representative groups of creationists declare their support for not only the study of evolution but the teaching of it in biology classes, the tide seems to turn the other way, and the opposing side takes this as license for just as vicious attacks upon those backwards-thinking individuals who still do not concede that the process of evolution proves the nonexistence of God. In a 1989 book review that appeared in the New York Times, the renowned evolutionist Richard Dawkins said, “It is absolutely safe to say that if you meet someone who claims not to believe in evolution, that person is ignorant, stupid, or insane” (34). Disregarding the venom and astounding arrogance of Dawkins’ claim, which serve only to illustrate the evolutionist version of a pulpit-pounding TV evangelist, one may examine his statement to fully understand the
attitude that obstructs reconciliation between the two sides. It is, in fact, not entirely safe to assume any such thing. Colgate University’s own president, Rebecca Chopp, once served as a minister, and even Richard Dawkins would be hard pressed ever to call her ignorant, much less stupid or insane. Perhaps this is because Dawkins does not elaborate a great deal on what he means by the term evolution. Is he referring to the “Grand Evolutionary Story,” in which all of life evolved from a single organism? Surely not, considering how many highly educated, intelligent, and sane people still harbor doubts about that particular scenario. Or does he perhaps mean so-called microevolution, such as the evolution observed within breeds of dogs or the famous light and dark moths of nineteenth century England? In this case his statement is likely to be far more accurate, though his belligerence is still unwarranted. If creationists can concede that their previous misunderstanding of Genesis as a scientific account was misguided, evolutionists, in order to facilitate reconciliation, must offer the same concession, which is that humans can and do make mistakes in their interpretations. Science is proud of its own falsifiability; that is what makes it true science. This step is not a difficult one, but arrogance will impede it to the point that it cannot be taken.

This reconciliation is by no means the victory of one side over the other. Those who seek to eradicate even a hint of creationist beliefs from the minds of all religious people are no more progressive or enlightened than those fundamentalists who insist that the earth is six thousand years old and flat. Imposing personal beliefs as to the origins of the world upon another person is unforgivable, regardless of whether the source is scientific evidence or divine revelation. Especially in the West, where freedom is so highly praised, individuals must be allowed to reconcile the two sides of this argument for themselves without being declared ignorant, stupid, or insane, much less a heretic or a sinner. As a teleological document, Genesis cannot in effect be proved “wrong” by modern science; like any great work of literature, it can only be reinterpreted according to changing human comprehension of its contents. Yet it takes courage to admit the possibility of having misinterpreted something; it takes an unnatural humility to admit having done so for thousands of years. Scientists and theologians alike loathe the thought of being fallible when it comes to their areas of expertise, but faith in God is not dependent on whether humans were right in their interpretation of Genesis as a literal account of the world’s origins, nor is the power of science overturned by the thought that science cannot explain quite everything. Reconciliation originates in setting aside pride and admitting that human interpretation is just that—human. It is fallible and fascinating at the same time, but it must be allowed to undergo its own form of evolution in order to be useful, relevant, and perhaps, in time, right.

Works Cited


