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Complementarity: On Being A Christian Evolutionist

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Complementarity:

On Being A Christian Evolutionist

An Integration of Faith and Learning Paper
Submitted by
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Introduction

The creation/evolution debate is alive and quite vigorous in the United States. Recently, a narrow majority of the Kansas Board of Education voted to remove virtually any mention of evolution from the state’s science curriculum. Board Member Steve Abrams said, “it is not good science to teach evolution as fact” (Reuters, August 12, 1999). Another facet of the controversy surfaced in debate on the floor of the House of Representatives, when Texas Rep. Tom DeLay laid blame for the series of recent school killings directly at the feet of Charles Darwin. DeLay said that we should expect such behavior so long as our schools “teach the children that they are nothing but glorified apes who are evolutionized out of some primordial soup of mud” (Reuters, August 20, 1999). Closer to home, Pennsylvania’s Department of Education has been considering adopting new science standards for students in Kindergarten through twelfth grade, and some legislators are calling for the removal of the study of evolution as a required standard.

Organizations such as the National Academy of Sciences and the National Association of Biology Teachers hold quite different views. These groups state in several of their publications that many scientific explanations (evolution being one) have been so thoroughly tested and confirmed that they are held with great confidence. Indeed, they conclude that, with regard to evolution, “an enormous amount of scientific investigation has converted what was initially a hypothesis into a theory that is no longer questioned in science” (National Academy of Science, 1998).

Such statements obviously polarize those who support either position, and set up an either/or situation. I remember one very sincere and serious student who came to my office with a very
troubling question. She said that she was a Christian, raised in what she considered to be a rather conservative home and denomination. She said that she had never had any reason to doubt that the earth was millions of years old, or that evolution may have been the means by which God created the tremendous diversity of living things that we see today. However, she said that her roommate had been insisting with some fervor that one could not be both a Christian and an evolutionist, and that the earth could not be more than a few thousand years old. "So tell me," she said, "Can a person believe in an old earth and evolution, and still be a Christian?"

Science and Scripture: An Either/Or Debate?

Why do questions such as those posed by my student seem to set up an either/or debate? In examining the topic of origins, must science and Scripture be seen as being in opposition to each other? The answer, many would say, is quite obvious: topics such as creation and evolution, whether the earth is young or old, and whether humans were instantaneously created or descended from lower animal forms, are inherently contradictory concepts. They result in contradictory answers to the crucial questions of origins, and they cannot be reconciled. Therefore, those who support one view are necessarily opposed to the other, and debate is inevitable.

There is, however, a serious logical flaw in the either/or format. The contemporary evolution/creation debate usually reduces itself to a contest between special creation (instantaneous inception of a mature, functioning universe by divine decree) and naturalistic evolution (continuous development of forms by autonomous, material processes). Both of these positions in the debate are made up of answers to several diverse and categorically distinct questions, each of which should be individually investigated. Simply offering us two packages of answers with the demand that we
choose one or the other, causes us to mix questions that can not, and should not, be answered solely by natural science or scripture. A second difficulty with this either/or dichotomy is that it forces many Christians to choose between two explanations, neither of which they find acceptable. It is my belief that this either/or debate is a false debate, one that is not inevitable, and that science and Scripture are not in opposition. As I related to my student that day, it is possible for one to be both a Christian and a scientist.

Relating Natural Science and Scripture

As a Christian trained in the natural sciences, I am engaged in the study of the world around me. Although the ultimate aim of such study is to develop a unified and all-encompassing understanding of the world, my perceptions of that world are informed by two perspectives which differ significantly. I observe the world around me through the “lens” of Scripture and through the lenses of microscopes and other instruments of the natural sciences.

Through the lens of Scripture, I perceive the world around me as God’s Creation. From the Bible, I read that not only is the entire universe God’s Creation, but it is entirely dependent upon divine action for its very existence. As Creation, the world around me is governed by God’s power, and all elements of creation exhibit value and purpose.

Through the lenses of natural science, I see the world around me differently. I see a world whose physical properties, behavior, and development are coherently interrelated. Although there is tremendous diversity among living things, they are all made up of cells assembled into a hierarchy of structures, and each cell contains the same essential material of life—DNA.

As most of my first-year students soon begin to realize, there are different ways of looking
at the world around us, and there is a need to wrestle with the relationship between the perspectives of science and Scripture. How does one view the relationship of these two views of the world, each of which is drawn from a different source? As indicated by the title, *Putting It All Together: Seven Patterns for Relating Science and the Christian Faith*, Richard H. Bube (1995), lists seven ways of relating science and Scripture. Richard Wright (1989), in *Biology Through the Eyes of Faith*, lists four relational structures. It is my belief that there are essentially three ways to relate science and Scripture, and additional models are simply expansions upon these three.

Conflict

The first pattern that I propose is that of a "conflict" perspective, in which it is believed that science and Scripture tell us the same kinds of things about the same things. This view can be divided into more focused patterns based on one's view of the superiority of science or Scripture. One pattern would posit that when science and Scripture are in conflict, one must be right and the other wrong. In this situation, science always proves to be the "winner." It is this pattern which may be the most commonly held view of the interaction between science and Scripture. Those who adhere to this perspective argue that Scripture, written by non-scientists to unlearned people, has become meaningless in the present scientific day, a relic of a less knowledgeable past. In contrast, many conservative Christians hold that, when in conflict, the Scriptural descriptions always have priority over scientific explanations. In both patterns, the adherents hold an "only" approach. Those who champion science see science as the only valid source of insights into the nature of reality, while those who champion Scripture see Scripture as being the only valid source of insights about anything the Biblical writers have mentioned. It is this insistence upon pitting science against Scripture that
typically leads to the combative mentality seen in the current evolution/creation debate.

Compartmentalization

A "compartmentalization" perspective is one which argues that science and Scripture tell us different kinds of things about different things. Given this perspective, there is no common ground between the two—science has absolutely nothing to say about Scripture and Scripture has absolutely nothing to say about science. For many, compartmentalization is the safest way to deal with an admittedly problematic relationship. Science and Scripture are placed into separate airtight compartments, so that no interaction between them is possible. S persuaded, a non-Christian who is inclined toward science sees Scriptural descriptions as being, at best, good literature, and at worst, irrelevant speculation. Christians who believe Scripture regard scientific descriptions with suspicion, as information from an alien or unfriendly culture. Interestingly, with this compartmentalized view, both Christians and non-Christians agree that only one perspective is valid and that the other can be safely ignored. Indeed, it is safer and far simpler to ignore the views of the other.

Complementarity

The third perspective, and the one which I find to be most compelling, is "complementarity." Complementarity holds that science and theology tell us different kinds of things about the same things. Each, when true to its own authentic capabilities, provides us with valid insights into the nature of reality from different perspectives. Complementarity assumes that both biblical truth and scientific knowledge are needed for a balanced view of topics such as human origins. From this perspective, science and Scripture offer neither competing explanations nor completely separate
explanations; rather, they offer explanations which complement each other. Moreover, the reason that they can offer complementary explanations is that science and Scripture ask different questions, employ different methodologies, and have different purposes.

An example of complementarity is given by Charles Hummel (1986) in his book *The Galileo Connection*. Hummel has the reader imagine four individuals—Einstein, Gauguin, Beethoven, and King David—standing on a hilltop surveying a magnificent valley at sunset. Although they are all *looking* at the same scene, each *perceives* something different. They agree to meet again to share their representations, and six months later, the four reassemble. Einstein the scientist produces several pages of mathematical formulas that scientifically explain the relative motions of the earth and sun, the color of light, and the composition of clouds. Gauguin the painter holds up a canvas which conveys the beauty of the sunset in a variety of brilliant colors. Beethoven the musician passes around copies of the score to his Pastoral Symphony and then asks colleagues to listen as he plays it for them. Finally, David the psalmist sings out, "The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands" (Psalm 19:1).

Which of these descriptions is best? Which has more value or merit? To launch the shuttle Columbia, Einstein's work would be important, but in my office or home, I would prefer to look at Gauguin's painting. After struggling to write this paper, I might prefer to listen to Beethoven's Pastoral Symphony. During my morning devotions, reading David's psalm would best help me express praise to God as Creator. The answer as to which representation is best depends upon the purpose of the inquirer.

Hummel's example helps us to see that biblical and scientific descriptions are complementary perspectives—different kinds of maps for the same terrain. Each perspective has value, for although
each view is valid, each is incomplete. Together, each of the views provides a wholeness to Creation.

Categorizing the Questions

Thus far, I have argued that while many would see the creation/evolution as being an either/or debate, this is a false dichotomy and need not be the case. Although initially it would appear that the question of origins would produce conflicting (or at best, compartmentalized) answers, there are, in reality, two ways of viewing this question—through the lens of Scripture and through the lenses of natural science. I have also argued that although these two views result from looking at the world from fundamentally different perspectives, they are complementary views where each asks different kinds of questions.

Howard Van Till (1986,1988) suggests that the questions which might arise in order to develop a unified and comprehensive understanding of human origins could be divided into eight categories, under two principal headings. Under the classification internal affairs would be those categories of questions which pertain to the nature of the material world irrespective of its relationship to any external, non-material powers or persons which may exist. In essence, questions of internal affairs are the domain of the natural sciences. Under the classification external relationships would be those categories which pertain specifically to the issue of the relationship of the world to external forces or beings. Questions of external relationships are the domain of philosophy and religion, and thus ultimately of scriptural authority.

Internal Affairs
The internal affairs of the world around us might be comprised of three categories of questions: questions concerning *properties*, questions concerning *behavior*, and questions concerning *history*. Questions concerning properties seek information with regard to the physical properties of matter. For example, what is the chemical composition of DNA? How does blood flow through the circulatory system of invertebrates? Questions concerning behavior seek information as to the patterns of behavior exhibited by material systems. For example, what patterns of behavior are exhibited in predator-prey relationships? How do antibody molecules respond in the presence of the chemical complement? Questions concerning history seek information about the sequence of events and processes preceding the present state of affairs. What is the character and chronology of the temporal development of the universe?

External Relationships

The categories of questions falling under the heading "external relationships" might include question concerning *status, origin, governance, value*, and *purpose*. Questions of status might include questions such as: In addition to the material world, does there exist any other, non-material entity, power or person? If so, where does the material world stand in relationship to it? Does it stand as an equal among other members of a divine pantheon, or does it stand under God as His responsible servant? Questions concerning origin might include: What is the ultimate cause or source of the existence of man? What, or Who, causes something to exist in the place of nothing? Questions concerning governance might ask what causes matter and the material systems to act as they do? Questions concerning value might seek to determine if living things have value, and if so,
by what criteria that value is established. Finally, questions of purpose might ask, do living things exist for some purpose? If so, for what purpose?

Having identified eight categories of questions concerning the nature of the world around us, one needs to ascertain the sources of answers to these questions, and to determine to which source these questions should be directed. From the beginning of its history, the Christian community has recognized two distinct sources of answers to its questions: the Bible, God's written Word, and the Creation, God's handiwork. It is my belief that these are both legitimate sources of answers to questions concerning the world around us. The Bible, being inspired by divine revelation, gives us confidence that it will provide trustworthy answers to appropriate questions concerning the world around us. Further, because the world around us is God's Creation, scientific study of it will provide reliable answers to questions concerning its physical nature.

Knowing the types of questions which we might ask, and recognizing two reliable sources of answers to those questions, how does one determine the relationship between these sources and questions? Should all questions be directed to both sources, or should the sources be distinguished, directing some questions to one source and some to the other?

The categories of questions presented by Van Till divides that list into two major classes: internal affairs and external relationships. I would agree with Van Till that each of these two classes of questions may be appropriately directed to only one of the sources for answers. Specifically, I believe that only those questions which deal with the internal affairs of the material universe may be legitimately investigated by using the tools of natural science. Our scientific knowledge has brought such capabilities through its technological applications that we are tempted to believe that there may be no limitations to what science can do. However, there are limitations
to natural science, and because of these limitations natural science is powerless to deal with any other categories of questions. Good, honest natural science, therefore, is carried out in the awareness of these limitations. Hence, when scientists make statements concerning matters of the status, origin, governance, value, or purpose of the universe, they are drawing from their philosophical or religious perspectives, and not from the results of scientific explanations.

Similarly, I believe that only those questions which deal with the relationship of the universe to the Creator may legitimately be directed to the Scriptures. My understanding of the Bible as covenantal canon, as noted by Kline (1975), is that the Bible was never intended to provide answers to questions concerning the physical properties, the material behavior, or the temporal development of the material world. Kline suggests that, in its emphasis on covenantal relationships, the Bible was written in such a way as to avoid questions regarding the internal affairs of the universe. As a result, good, honest exegesis is carried out with an awareness of this constraint. While we can infer some features which pertain to the general character of Creation (its orderliness, coherence, intelligibility, etc.), it is fruitless to address to Scripture questions about the physical properties of matter, the temporal chronology of the universe, or about the mechanisms involved in the resultant diversity of life on earth. Therefore, when theologians claim to make statements concerning the specifics of the structure or history of the universe on the basis of scriptural exegesis, they are asking the Bible to answer inappropriate questions.
Educational Implications

Silence is Not an Option

As noted, the creation/evolution debate is not only alive in the United States, but questions of how, or whether, evolution should be taught are currently being considered by several state departments of education. Approaches spanning a broad spectrum are being proposed, and both public and private schools are struggling to find approaches that are both educationally sound and palatable to their constituencies. These are not easy decisions, and the difficulty is exacerbated by the either/or confrontational approach that has characterized the creation/evolution debate.

One option that is favored by some boards of education is simply to eliminate the topic from the curriculum, or remove aspects of evolution from the science standards. Those supporting this method would argue that since there exists a diversity of strongly held views on how, or if, evolution should be presented, then adopting any specific approach would alienate and anger some portion of that state's or district's constituency. Therefore, they would argue, it is best to simply eliminate the topic from the curriculum, and thereby eliminate grist for debate.

It is my opinion that state or district boards of education subscribing to this approach are being educationally irresponsible. One of the primary objectives of education, whether at the high school or college level, is to equip students with the knowledge and skills to think critically and to make intelligent decisions regarding many difficult issues. Indeed, it may be that the reason for much of the furor in the adult community regarding the subject of evolution stems from the fact that these same adults never received an adequate education as to how to consider the scientific and philosophical issues surrounding difficult topics. To simply remove the study of evolution from a district's or state's science standards only serves to perpetuate a lack of critical thinking by choosing
to avoid the topic and omit it from the next generation's curriculum.

If the study of evolution is allowed to remain as part of the science standards for a state or district, how might it responsibly be taught? I would suggest that it is possible to teach evolution in either public or Christian schools, in a manner which is acceptable to both groups who find themselves on opposite ends of the current evolution/creation debate.

Naturalistic or Natural Process?

One of the primary difficulties that Christians have with the teaching of evolution within the context of the public school, is that it is taught as a naturalistic process. Howard Van Till (1986) describes the naturalistic world view of science as holding that all natural processes are inherently naturalistic—i.e., whatever happens is solely the result of self-existent matter behaving according to self-governed patterns. Evolution, as a natural process, is viewed as an autonomous mechanism functioning apart from any need for divine governance. According to a naturalistic world view, the material world is all there is, humans are simply complex molecular machines, and evolution is merely an undirected result of Nature's undirected, purposeless self-expression.

If it is truly the desire of public schools to remain neutral with regard to religious views, then evolution as a naturalistic process should not be taught. The naturalistic world view is one which contains a very definite atheistic commitment, and the public school system should not favor this particular religious commitment over another.

The "Two Science" Model

Scientific special creationists are attempting to convince the public that "creation science"
is true science and that a true debate exists between the two sciences--"creation science" and "evolution science." Organizations such as the Institute for Creation Research and other "scientific creationist" organizations would define "creation" as the instantaneous inception of a fully developed universe, and "evolution" as naturalistic evolution. These organizations would have us believe that both views are science, and since it would be unfair for schools to present one science and not the other, both sciences should be presented. However, it is my belief that this issue of fairness is insupportable. Instantaneous creation and naturalistic evolution are not the only two hypotheses for the origin of the universe and living organisms. In fact, many would argue that neither hypothesis is correct. My objection to the two science model is not only that it perpetuates the either/or debate of evolution and creation, but it also reinforces the view that evolution is an entirely naturalistic process. In teaching a two science model, students often feel as though they must choose between a theistic and an atheistic hypothesis. I do not want my students, or my own children, to be taught that evolution must occur in the absence of divine governance, and that evolution must necessarily be associated with a naturalistic, atheistic world view.

Evolution as a Natural Process

Throughout this paper I have argued for a complementarity view of the relation of science and Scripture. It is my belief that science and Scripture tell us different things about the same things. Each, when true to its own authentic capabilities, provides us with valid insights into the nature of reality from different perspectives. As a result, both biblical truth and scientific knowledge are needed for a balanced view of origins.

According to these principles of complementarity, the investigation of evolution, as a natural
process, lies fully within the domain of the natural sciences. Because the study of biological evolution is such an important principle of contemporary biology, excluding it from the curriculum would be educationally irresponsible. However, like any other topic within the natural sciences, evolution must be taught in a way that respects the boundaries of the scientific domain. Only those aspects of evolution dealing with internal affairs--aspects of properties, behavior, or history--fall within this domain. As long as discussion is limited to these aspects, evolution can be treated in a neutral manner, as is necessary in the public school classroom. Questions of value, purpose, or governance--those which fall under external relationships--should be discussed separately, since they lie outside the purview of science.

Conclusion

It is my belief that the evolution/creation controversy is not an either/or debate, and, in fact should not be a debate at all. The study of evolution, as a topic within the domain of natural science, provides us with answers to questions concerning specific properties, behavior and history. A scientific study of origins allows us to view evolution as a natural process to describe the temporal development of living things. The study of Scripture provides answers to fundamental questions of status and its consequences of origin, governance, value, and purpose. Scripture teaches that the universe is governed by God's power, that it has value in its relationship to the creator, and that its purpose is to show the love of God.

When seen from a complementarity world view, in which science and Scripture tell us different things about the same things, science and Scripture no longer need to be enemies. Natural science should be treated as a friend--an ally--providing a more complete answer to questions of
origin and other aspects of Creation. As Van Till noted, "both biblical scholars and natural scientists are needed in our quest to know ourselves, our place in the Creation and its history, and our relationship to the creator of all" (1985, p. 155).
References Cited


