

BARRIERS TO ACCEPTING THE POSSIBILITY OF CREATION BY MEANS OF AN EVOLUTIONARY PROCESS: III. CONCERNS OF THE TYPICAL AGNOSTIC SCIENTIST

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Introduction

A while ago, I had breakfast with a former student who, upon going to graduate school, had abandoned the faith of her youth. While in college, she had been fully engaged in the day-to-day life of following Christ. Nothing was more important to her. Anyone who met her was struck by her sincerity, joy, and peace. She was a Bible study leader and missions project organizer. Having had many talks about our shared Christian journey, I came to greatly admire her.

Now though, it was different. She had been to graduate school, where she had gained expertise in biology. Sadly, to me, the faith she knew as a 22-year-old was now a distant memory. The sparkle, the joy, and the contentment that had so characterized her life was gone. She had emerged, she told me, from the bubble that had enclosed her earlier existence—now she lived in reality.

As I drank my coffee and munched on my toast I felt a little lonely as I adjusted to this new person sitting across from me. She was bitter. The Church, she felt, had lied to her. Having purposely distorted the real world, it had kept her enclosed in the bubble. Upon emergence, she looked back and saw the layers around it, not as a protective shield, but as impenetrable barriers which would forever prevent her re-entry. She would never go back. She had lived in a fairy-tale world. I was no longer her mentor. I was a perpetrator of that which she now regarded as an ephemeral event—a dream in her past.

I would like to begin by suggesting that we Christians may have unnecessarily surrounded ourselves with a multi-layered bubble that isolates us from the academic world. I will explore whether many of the bubble's layers are products of our own Christian culture and not the Bible itself. Indeed, I wonder if some may arise from our inadequacies in how to understand the Bible. Others may come from our unwarranted skepticism about science. True, scientific hypotheses are sometimes wrong. However, the branch of science which is causing the greatest discord is not simply centered upon a hypothesis. Rather, it involves an all-encompassing theory which, following 150 years of testing its many dimensions, is consistent with all the sub-disciplines of biology. One of the hallmarks of a great scientific theory is cohesiveness. Few if any theory in the history of science has ever unified all the disciplines of the natural sciences as has the theory of evolution. Perhaps it is time for us, even we evangelicals, to explore whether we are propping up the layers of a bubble that we, and not God, have put in place and thereby, have artificially isolated ourselves from the world of academics.

As we proceed I will describe five layers which I think may play a role in unnecessarily blocking entry—or reentry—of agnostic scientists into the realm of evangelicalism.

Layer 1: The story of Adam and Eve must be viewed as history

The story of Adam and Eve is among the most profound in the entire Bible. It is packed with theological richness and provides a deep sense of meaning that permeates our own existence. However, evangelicals sometimes read this story in a manner that ignores its theological richness and focuses instead on its historicity. Let's look briefly at one aspect of this story:

So the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then he took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. And the rib that the LORD God had taken from the

man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. Then the man said, "This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; this one shall be called Woman, for out of Man this one was taken." Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh.¹

Jesus, years later, referred back to this story in a discussion with narrow-minded Pharisees. They had missed what this story had to say about the relationship between a husband and a wife. They had viewed marriage as a legal agreement in which the woman was a piece of property. Gone was the much richer way of viewing marriage as laid out in the Garden. Although it is unlikely the Pharisees paid any attention to what Jesus said, his disciples were listening, and through the ensuing discussion, he helped them come to understand the sanctity of marriage as well as the unparalleled significance of the "other." Although the historicity of the story was not an issue in Jesus' day, Jesus called for people to look beyond literalism—to seek out the message. Perhaps we, by focusing on the historicity of this story are a little like the Pharisees. We see the words in Scripture, but we miss that to which the words are pointing us.

Today, by seeming to hold on to the historicity of all aspects of this story (at least in the eyes of agnostic scientists), we have constructed a layer that prevents people from seriously considering entering into the realm of evangelicalism. The message of this story in the Garden is foundational to Christianity. It begins with life the way it is meant to be lived—in full and unobstructed communion with God. It proceeds to describe the temptation to set ourselves up as the lords of our own little universe—to do it our way instead of God's. It shows the alienation we all experience as a result of sin in our lives and points to Christ, the Tree of Life, who is our hope for a better day. There is nothing more fundamental to Christianity than all that is encompassed in the story of Adam and Eve.

There is, however, an enormous amount of data to suggest that humanity arose over a long period of time. We have a great deal of paleontological data about human predecessors. We have genetic data, which are unequivocal in laying out the message that we did not descend from two unique people who lived 10,000 years ago. There is a huge body of data that implies that the first woman did not come from a man's rib.

So what can we say about Layer #1, an assertion which seems to block many from entering the Kingdom? Should we try to convince all of the non-scientifically inclined evangelicals to cease believing that Adam and Eve are the first human beings? That would almost certainly be futile at this time—there is no point in trying. Besides it could harm their faith. What the church can, and in my opinion must do, however, is to make it clear that there are two ways in which evangelicals view this story. One is historical, the other, allegorical. To publicly acknowledge that and to make it clear that the latter view does not in any way disengage an evangelical from their faith would be of considerable significance. Let's allow both views to co-exist in evangelicalism for now. I am convinced that we can eliminate the barrier by simply admitting that there are many deeply committed Christians who believe that many elements of the story of Adam and Eve is not historical. I think we need to tell our children that at a young age and I think we need to show them why there are committed Christians on both sides. It also would be good to show them why the historicity of Adam and Eve is not foundational to faith. Having admitted that, then let's quickly move on to the message. Let's do like Jesus did when he tried to get the Pharisees to move beyond the words of the law and to focus on its meaning. Just like the Pharisees who, in focusing on dotted "i's" and crossed "t's" had lost sight of what God really wanted to say, let's make sure that doesn't happen to us.

The agnostic misses the profundity and the beauty of the story of Adam and Eve, and it is our fault. Sometimes it almost seems we prefer to keep the richness of the story as our trade secret. We have so stressed the historicity that instead of profundity, the agnostic sees a man in a deep sleep, a God who reaches in and pulls out a rib and fashions it into a woman. He sees a talking snake, fig leaves, an apple in the hand of Eve, and flaming swords. He is so taken by our insistence on its historicity that we are almost blocking him from seeing its meaning. If the message is missed, do we bear some of the responsibility? Jesus may well have been speaking of us when he said:

And if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to be thrown into the sea with a large millstone tied around his neck.²

It is clear from the context of this comment of Jesus, that “the little ones” he refers to are the spiritually immature. My student, I am afraid, was in that category. Here is to hoping we are not the ones who carry millstones into eternity.

Some evangelicals will always feel it necessary to conclude that this is history pure and simple, and we will always want to respect that. After all, we believe that Jesus rose from the dead and if that’s not true, as Paul put it “we are of all men most miserable.” We are called to believe things that take us out of the everyday world that can be examined by scientific tools. It’s perfectly okay for some people to believe that Eve really was created from Adam’s rib. However, the notion that evangelicals have no choice but to believe this is a cultural layer surrounding a bubble—the body of data is enormously overwhelming that it is a parable, and we need to make it clear that there are many deeply committed Christians who see it that way. We must, in my opinion, peel back this layer and no longer let it block entry into the kingdom of God.

Layer #2: A God who is love would not create through a process that includes suffering and death

As a keen observer of nature and as a very gentle man, Darwin could never come to grips with what he considered to be the cruel method God had used to create the various forms of life. The weak suffered and died and it was the strong that passed on their heredity material. Yet, in contrast, Jesus teachings presented just the reverse—protect the weak, for of such is the kingdom of heaven. If the God of New Testament theology stresses protection of the weak, then how is this consistent with a God who creates by preserving the strong and casting aside the weak?

Not only does Darwin’s theory involve saving the well-adapted and casting aside the inefficient, but the process by which this happens is wrought with painful suffering. Darwin himself lost his faith over this issue. In 1856 he wrote in a letter to his friend, J. D. Hooker:

What a book a Devil’s chaplain might write on the clumsy, wasteful, blundering low and horridly cruel works of nature.³

And in 1860 he wrote to the Harvard botanist, Asa Gray:

There seems to me to be too much misery in the world. I cannot persuade myself that a beneficent & omnipotent God would have designedly created the Ichneumonidae with the express intention of their feeding within the living bodies of caterpillars, or that a cat should play with mice.⁴

In the 150 years since “Origin of Species” was published, the issue has not gone away. Two years ago, the highly regarded philosopher of biology, Philip Kitcher, put it this way in rejecting the God of Christian theology in light of evolution:

There is every reason to think that alternative processes of unfolding the history of life could have eliminated much of the agony, that the goal could have been achieved without so long and bloody a prelude.

...a just Creator cannot consign vast numbers of its creatures to pain and suffering because this will provides some greater good. Divine justice requires that the animals who suffer are compensated, that the suffering isn't simply instrumental to the wonders of creation but redeemed for them.⁵

It is clear that God did create this way. So we need to get to work on peeling back this layer, this barrier that blocks the way for many agnostic scientists. I have been asked this question about why God would create through this seemingly cruel process dozens of times, as I am sure, have many of you. Darwin was a product of his time. His theory was stimulated through reading Thomas Malthus and studying economics. Darwin's theory comes straight out of the industrial revolution with all of its abuse, suffering, and cruelty. He saw the parade of organisms in the history of life as one long brutal struggle for survival.

There are other ways of looking at the parade. Nothing is more certain in life, than death. There is beauty in accepting death, in order that new life can arise. Few things in life are more certain than that we will experience at least a moderate amount of pain. Struggling through pain and successfully making it to the other side is one of life's greatest joys. Who are we to say that there could have been a better way for generating life's diversity than the same phenomena that characterize and perhaps even enrich our own experiences in life?

God wills freedom for our lives, just as God wills freedom for creation. The processes of our lives are enhanced by the freedom we enjoy. We are not marionettes operating in response to the strings that God is pulling from on high. We are free creatures and we wouldn't want it any other way, even though the by-product of that freedom can be extremely painful.

I spent a portion of this summer in Denali National Park where grizzlies, wolves, caribou, sheep and other mammals have lived just like they do now for thousands of years. I arrived on the scene, although some distance away, of a wolf stalking a caribou, and then killing it. Soon afterwards, a grizzly and cub scared the wolf away and proceeded to feast upon the now-dead caribou. The wolf lingered in the background, knowing his turn would come once they had had their fill. If this scene is ugly you would never know it by watching the faces of those on the tour bus with me.

I have had the privilege of studying the science of life for over 40 years. When one is in Denali Park looking out at the wonder of the living world as it has existed for millions of years, there is nothing ugly about it, and it is pretty naïve to say that we would be able to do in a richer and more beautiful way if we were God. When, I spend my days studying all that goes on inside of a living cell as the mitochondria shuffle off to various locations and ribosomes churn out thousands of precisely structured protein molecules per second. When I think of genes being turned on and off according to the needs of the cell, I feel a little like I am still out in Denali Park. I am studying processes that have been going on for billions of years. The processes are majestic. I am so privileged to have spent my life studying them. Sure, every cell is going to die, but does that somehow make it less beautiful? Sure the grizzly is going to get old someday and will become a feast for some young wolf who is perfectly adapted at taking down the old grizzly. Who am I to say that God could have done it much better if God had never incorporated death and suffering into life?

I am a Christian. I believe in the atonement. I believe Jesus suffered and died on a cross. I believe that from the experience of that cross emerged the answer to all of humankind's deepest needs. I believe that Paul was put in prison, where he died. I believe that from that prison cell emerged the most inspiring words ever written. Who am I to say there could have been a better way—one that involved less suffering?

Darwin was a product of his time, I can understand that. Kitcher, to whom I referred earlier, is a philosopher, not a biologist, so I'll try to understand if he can't see the beauty in the processes that God chose to bring about life in all of its beauty. One thing is for sure though: we are not in a position to second-guess God and say how we would do it if we were God. Our task as Christians is to help others see the beauty in the process instead of denying its existence or that it is in some way beneath God to will freedom to creation even if that freedom includes suffering.

Layer #3: Science explains it all—there is no need for God in the history of life

We move on to look at a third layer that seems to surround the bubble enclosing evangelical Christianity. When Darwin boarded the *Beagle*, he was heavily steeped in William Paley's design-hypothesis. Once he was able to show how the diversity of life could have arisen by natural processes he had, he thought, eliminated the need for God. Perhaps he had showed God could be shoved back to the warm little pond where life began, but other than that he saw no need for God in the history of life.

Just because we cannot see the specific ways in which God works in the history of life says absolutely nothing about God's activity in that history. It certainly doesn't imply that God is not present or working in ways that are not measurable. The story of Joseph in the book of Genesis could easily be an analogy to how God has worked in the history of life.

The ancient Hebrews, in essence, posed the following important question: Are events always as random as they appear to be? And with that, they proceeded to tell the story of Joseph who *just happens* to be thrown into a pit, a short time before some slave traders *just happen* to pass by on their way to Egypt. Some time later he *just happens* to be sent to jail where he *just happens* to meet up with someone who *just happens* to have connections to Pharaoh. Later this same person *just happens* to recall his association with Joseph when it *just happens* that Pharaoh is reflecting on a dream he has had. The story continues as it describes the famine and the arrival of the brothers, culminating in Joseph's magnificent words:

You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives."⁶

If we had been present for the events unfolding in Joseph’s life, would we have been able to pinpoint and prove the presence of God at various key moments? Probably not, but there is never any doubt that there is an interplay here between the unfolding events which occur within the context of a world embedded with a certain degree of freedom and a world also embedded with the presence of God.

This is not to say that the history of life might not have had momentous events that parallel the crossing of the Red Sea. There were sudden moments in the history of Israel where God intervened in ways that were not subtle. It is possible that this may have occurred in life’s history as well. There were also long periods of time when there were no momentous events that paralleled the crossing of the Red Sea—no miracles. However, the point is that just as God worked in preparing the nation of Israel for the coming of Jesus, so God has been at work in whatever way He chose to make life on earth possible, and to guide or influence its outcome, however God, in His wisdom, chose to do. That is the God of the Bible, and a God who works through long periods of time in life’s creation-history is not in any way inconsistent with the God of evangelical thought. In order to eliminate the third layer surrounding the bubble, we need to make this point more clear than we have so far. We also need to make it clear that there is no *a priori* reason why we should expect to be able to use scientific tools to *prove* that God has been active in the history of life. Much harm and much sloppy scientific reasoning have been done trying to do just that.

Layer #4: Augustine’s Warning

It is a disgraceful and dangerous thing for an infidel to hear a Christian, while presumably giving the meaning of Holy Scripture, talking nonsense...If they find a Christian mistaken in a field which they themselves know well and hear him maintain his foolish opinions about scriptures how then are they going to believe those Scriptures in matters concerning the resurrection of the dead, the hope of eternal life, and the kingdom of heaven? ⁷

There are few things more certain in the mind of virtually all biologists than the fact that the earth is 4.5 billion years old, that life’s diversity has arisen through common ancestry, and that natural selection has played a key role⁸ in driving its outcome. Although Augustine’s admonishment is 1600 years old, it likely has never applied more aptly than it does today. I have sat in lunchrooms as people guffawed about Christianity for reasons that had nothing to do with core Christian principles but had everything to do with what they consider to be sixth -grade understanding of science being passed off as real science.

I cannot imagine many of these people wanting to associate with those who sound off as authorities on matters about which they know virtually nothing. Many of them have perceptions of evangelicals as being so totally out of touch with scientific facts that they could not possibly trust them to have anything meaningful to say about matters of eternal significance.

How can this layer be peeled back from the bubble we have constructed to surround evangelical Christianity? It will be a very slow process, but will largely come through education. Because of their position, pastors and other church leaders will be especially important in turning things around. As they come to understand the strength of the data and as they come to see that there are not significant theological barriers, they more than anyone else, can stop the “non-sense” (Augustine’s words) that is blocking people from getting a picture of that which really matters in life.

Layer #5: As it relates to science and faith, Christians are perceived as people who distort facts and lack integrity

If my task is to identify barriers that block agnostics from giving serious consideration to evangelical Christianity, there is one barrier which has nothing to do with science, and everything to do with living the Christian life. Regardless of whether the reputation is deserved or not, we Christians have not come through the science/creation discussion as individuals known for our integrity.

Judge John Jones summarized his experience with school board members in Dover, Penn., this way:

It is ironic that several of these individuals, who so staunchly and proudly touted their religious convictions in public, would time and again lie to cover their tracks and disguise the real purpose behind the ID Policy.⁹

The books and articles written by scientists are full of examples of what they consider to be distortions of truth put forward by those presenting the various creationist positions, especially the leaders of the Intelligent Design movement.¹⁰

This perception, whether true or not, has served a very significant barrier in keeping agnostic scientists from seeing the glory of God that we are called to present to the world. This, as I see it, is a new phenomenon in evangelical Christianity and we have much work to do to show people that to be a Christian is to be a person of love, and to be a person of love is to be a person who at all costs, even to the extent of losing a battle, will be fully forthright and honest. Some of our own have given into the temptation to win, even at the cost of distorting the truth. This is one of the greatest barriers—even if it is only one of perception—that currently exists in blocking the way for agnostic scientists to come to faith. The onus will be on pastors. We need sermons on integrity. We need to restore Christianity to the point where people will, upon hearing that someone is a Christian, know that he/she can be trusted to be totally honest and forthright. Of all the barriers we face, this may well be the toughest to eliminate, so deep is the extent of the damage that has already been done.

Conclusion

I began this paper by reflecting on a comment of a former student who became agnostic. She referred to her earlier life as being like living in a bubble, one from which she had escaped and into which she had no intention of re-entering. I indicated that some of the layers of her bubble were layers of human construction and the task of the church is to remove those layers that will continue to have devastating consequences on human life unless steps are taken to remove them now. Having said all of that, we must not lose sight of these all-important words of Jesus:

Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it.¹¹

Jesus tells us that it is not easy to follow him. He spoke of it as being like a camel going through the eye of a needle. However, for some, because of our own human inadequacies, we, and we alone have plugged the eye of the needle. We have piled up huge roadblocks in the already narrow passageway. We have put so many non-transparent layers around the kingdom of God, that people are not even able to see glimpses of God's glory anymore. The onus is on us to bring about the changes that will make the Christian life accessible to scientists and others whose way is blocked by matters that have little to do with the Kingdom of God and everything to do with our own human frailties.

Notes

1. Genesis 2:21-24
2. Mark 9:42
3. In F. Burkhardt and S. Smith (ed.), *The Correspondence of Charles Darwin 1844-1846 (1987)*, Vol. 6, 178
4. Letter 2814 — Darwin, C. R. to Gray, Asa, 22 May [1860] Accessed from <http://www.darwinproject.ac.uk/darwinletters/calendar/entry-2814.html>
5. P. 127, Philip Kitcher, *Living with Darwin*, Oxford University Press, 2007
6. Genesis 50:20; for more detail on this view see, Falk, Darrel R, 2009, "Evolution: Biological Facts and Theological Challenges," in *Darwin, Creation and the Fall* by R.J. Berry and T. Noble, IV Press.
7. St. Augustine, *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, Book 1, Chapter 19 (cited in Francisco Ayala, "Human Nature: One Evolutionists View," in *Whatever Happened to the Soul* (ed. by Warren S. Brown, Nancey Murphy, and H. Newton Malony, p.31), (Minneapolis: Fortress Press.
8. Darwin also identified a related phenomenon known as sexual selection as playing a role in certain circumstances. Since then, we have come to see that a phenomenon known as genetic drift can, under certain circumstances play a very significant role. There is also considerable discussion about the significance of group selection. These are all fine points that flesh out details of history of life. Few, if any, evolutionary biologists would doubt that Darwin was correct at the most fundamental level.
9. http://www.sciohost.org/ncse/kvd/kitzmilller_decision_20051220.pdf, accessed on October, 4, 2009.
10. Miller, Kenneth, 2008, *Only a Theory*, Viking Adult; Forrest, Barbara and Paul Gross, 2003. *Creationism's Trojan Horse*, Oxford University Press; Schloss, Jeff, (2008), *The Expelled Controversy: Overcoming or Raising Walls of Division?* <http://www.asa3.org/ASA/resources/Schloss200805.pdf>; National Center for Science Education (2008), <http://www.expelledexposed.com/#>
11. Matthew 7:13,14.