

Creationism: What's a Catholic to Do?

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The Creation Museum made national news when it opened in northern Kentucky in 2007. The facility presents itself as a cross between a natural history museum and a theme park with a whopping \$25 million worth of state-of-the-art displays, dinosaur exhibits, videos, rides, dioramas and special effects. Created by the Christian apologetics ministry "Answers in Genesis," this museum is devoted to the idea that the stories in Genesis of creation and its aftermath are literally true. It is firmly rooted in a view known as creationism, or at times, creation science.

Proponents of that view have been in the news in recent years, struggling to counter the teaching of evolution theory in public schools. In December of 2005, for example, a federal court judge, John E. Jones III, ruled that the attempt of the school board of Dover, Pennsylvania, to insert the teaching of intelligent design into the science classrooms violated the United States Constitution by trying to smuggle in a religious position masquerading as science. The 2009 anniversaries of Charles Darwin's birth (1809) and evolution book (1859) fuel the debate.

As Catholics, what are we to make of this? What are creationism and intelligent design and how do they relate to our faith in God and creation? After describing each of these movements briefly, we will present some perspectives on the Bible's teaching about creation. We'll follow with some overall conclusions for Catholics.

Creationism

The term creationism does not simply reflect the belief that the world and all that is in it has a Creator. It is used with a much more narrow and precise meaning. It describes the belief that the creation by God occurred literally as described in the Book of Genesis. The details of Genesis, moreover, are understood to be scientific statements about the beginnings of all things. The most common view would affirm that the world is thus only between 6,000 and 10,000 years old, and that plant, animal and human species were created pretty much as we know them today.

Today's renewed debate about creationism has its roots in the 19th century with the rise of the sciences of geology and evolutionary biology (connected particularly with Charles Darwin). The traditional interpretations of Genesis were being challenged by scientific evidence, which caused these interpretations to go progressively on the defensive. The fact that scientific data were at times being used expressly to ridicule religion and religious faith only aggravated the situation. The battle was seen as one of "science against religion."

The classic confrontation of these two, in the United States, is the famous Scopes Trial (the "Monkey" trial), which took place in the small town of Dayton, Tennessee, in the summer of 1925 and was immortalized further in a Broadway play, then film, *Inherit the Wind*. The state of Tennessee had passed a law forbidding the teaching of evolution in the schools; this law was challenged as unconstitutional. While the defendants (who supported the law) won the case, it was later overturned on a technicality. Those supporting the side of faith and Scripture, however, were made to look silly by national media, which, partially due to the exploding new media of radio, covered the trial extensively.

After withdrawing into itself and away from the spotlight for several decades, the creationist movement began to reemerge in the late 1960's and 1970's, through such societies as the Institute for Creation Research (1970), in Santee, California. A new public and aggressive phase began with the bringing of a series of court cases which argued that teaching creationism in science classrooms should be included as an alternative to evolution.

The first such case which drew national attention was in California (1981), but those in Arkansas (1981), Louisiana (1985), and finally the United States Supreme Court (1987) dealt with the more substantive issues. Creationism's new tactic in these cases was to present itself as "creation science," that is, a scientifically respectable alternative to evolution. In each case, the courts found that to be a false and deceptive attempt to advance in the public schools a particular set of religious beliefs.

Intelligent design

In 1989, the book *Of Pandas and People* appeared. In drafts of the book, it is reported, the word "creationism" was changed, almost without exception, to "intelligent design." Subsequently, it is considered the first "intelligent design" textbook.

Intelligent design is the concept that certain features of the universe and living things are best explained by appealing to an intelligent cause, a supernatural cause.

In one sense this is not a new idea. For millennia, philosophers have argued that the complexity of nature points to some "prime mover" or "first cause," or God. This appears in ancient Greek philosophy (e.g., Aristotle), medieval Christian philosophy (e.g., St. Thomas Aquinas), and the "natural theology" movement (e.g., William Paley) of the 1800s.

This particular argument has also long had its philosophical critics. Does it actually "prove" the existence of God, or just show that one's belief in God is reasonable? How does it account for the brokenness and irrationalities in nature? If there are indications of intelligent design, what about the indications of unintelligent design?

Today, the new twist on the intelligent design movement is this: to see intelligent design as a scientific position that should be studied in science classes alongside of (and in opposition to) that of evolution. In 2005, the Dover, Pennsylvania, school district required the presentation of intelligent design as an alternative to evolution. The only textbook proposed was *Of Pandas and People*. This was challenged in court, and in December 2005, the judge ruled that intelligent design is indeed a "mere re-labeling of creationism and not a scientific theory." As such, the school board policy was a violation of the U.S. Constitution. As a matter of fact, intelligent design is not so much a scientific position but more a philosophical argument. From a Catholic viewpoint, the argument is one of the relationship between science and religion, about which there has been much thought over the centuries.

It is worth noting that in all of the major court challenges to creationism, Roman Catholic scholars-biblical specialists, theologians and scientists have been witnesses against Creationism and the fundamentalist understanding of intelligent design.

Creation in the Bible

Now let's switch gears and look a bit more closely at what the Bible teaches us about creation. In the Bible, "creation" means that in order to understand everything that exists at its deepest level, it must be seen in relationship to God. Or, in other terms, the only reason everything or anything exists is because of the overflowing goodness and love of God. Creation always implies a Creator; the two go together. In light of this, it is easy to see that "creation" is neither a scientific concept nor a properly philosophical one. It is a religious statement not only about temporal beginnings but also about every single moment of time.

When we open the Bible, the very first pages (Gn 1:1-2:4a) speak of God's creating. It would be a mistake, however, to stop there. Many other passages in Scripture also speak of creation; these occur elsewhere in the Pentateuch. The Psalms, the Wisdom Literature (e.g., Proverbs and Job), and the Prophets. It becomes clear that if we are to understand Genesis 1 properly, we must look at these as well.

What strikes us immediately is that when the Bible speaks of God as Creator, it draws on a variety of metaphors or analogies rooted in human experiences. We can note four.

When God creates, it is:

1) like parents giving birth. "Before the mountains were begotten, and before you gave birth to the earth and the world" (Ps 90:2). It is worth noting that both paternal (begetting) and maternal (gave birth) images are combined here.

2) like an artisan fashioning or forming an artifact. "For thus says the Lord, the creator of the heavens (he is God!), who formed the earth and made it; he established it; he did not create it a chaos, but formed it to be inhabited" (Is 45:18). Here four different verbs which describe the work of an artisan are used: *create, form, establish, make*.

3) like a mighty warrior defeating a powerful enemy. "O God, my king from of old...you smashed the heads of the dragons in the waters, you crushed the heads of Leviathan...you brought dry land out of the primeval waters" (Ps 74:12-17). Here we can note that "dragons, Leviathan, primeval waters" were common expressions in the ancient world of the Bible for the forces of chaos and destruction opposed to creation.

4) Like a mighty king or commander giving orders; when he speaks, things happen! "By the word of the Lord, the heavens were made. . . .For he spoke, and it was made; he commanded, and it stood forth" (Ps 33:6,9). This is clearly the key image behind Genesis 1 where God's word is all-powerful. "Then God said, 'Let there be light,' and there was light" (Gn 1:3).

We are not, obviously, to ask here which of these four metaphors is more true. They all are equally true; they are different, complementary, and at times overlapping ways of thinking and talking about God's creative activity. But none of them is "literally" true; they are symbolic, metaphoric ways of speaking. In creating, God gives life, overcomes chaos and fashions, through skilled activity or by word of command, a good (or beautiful, by many translators) world.

Occasionally one reads or hears the remark given by creationists that if Genesis is not "literally" true (i.e., gives accurate scientific information), then it can only be "mere metaphor." The implication is that if scientific language is "true," other kinds of language are less than true. This is not only mistaken; it is exactly backwards.

When we talk about the most important things in our lives, those things that we are personally most invested in, we have to use metaphorical language; literalistic, scientific language just is not able to do it. Thus, our deepest personal experiences of love and happiness, suffering and sorrow, births and deaths are all expressed in symbolic ways. "My heart is soaring like a lark!" "My spirit is crushed!" These are not scientific statements, yet they represent deeply held truths. Our talk of the birth of the universe is similar.

In looking at the various creation texts in the Bible, we can also get a pretty good picture both of what the sacred writers thought the world looked like and of about how old they thought it might be. The earth, according to these writers, is flat and immoveable, for example. The sun rises and sets around the earth. A dome, held up by cosmic pillars, serves to keep out the "waters above" (the source of rain) except when floodgates open to let down the rain. The chronology provided by these writers suggests the world may be 6,000-10,000 years old.

Science in the 16th century (e.g., Copernicus, Galileo) showed that this picture of the earth is not scientifically accurate, and science in the 19th century (modern geology, e.g., Charles Lyell) has shown that the time frame is also not accurate.

Is the Bible wrong, then? No way! But Catholics believe that biblical statements such as these reflect more the culture of their times and do not represent the formal teaching of the Scriptures. In a 1981 address to the Pontifical Academy of Sciences, Pope John Paul II taught that these passages are in the Bible "not in order to provide us with a scientific treatise, but in order to state the correct relationships of man with God and with the universe."

The New Testament adds a very important dimension to our faith in God as Creator. At the beginning of John's Gospel, we read, "In the beginning was the Word....All things came to be through him, and without him nothing came to be (1:1-3). In the Letter to the Colossians, Paul takes it a step further, "For in him were created all things in heaven and on earth...all things were created through him and for him...in him all things hold together" (Col 1:16-17).

Christians believe that all things are created in and through Christ; he is the source of all creation. And he is also its goal; all things are for him. He is the "mystery of God, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" (Col 2:2-3). In a real and deep theological sense, we can say that Jesus Christ is the Logos ("Word"), the mystery, the plan and the "intelligent design" of God for all of creation.

What's a Catholic to do?

In the light of these observations, we can draw four conclusions.

First, at Sunday Mass we recite the Creed, which begins, "We believe in God, the Father almighty, Maker of heaven and earth." We believe! This is a statement of faith. God, the Father, has created all things in, through and for the Son, Jesus Christ. This affirms our deepest religious belief about all creation, and it is not subject to scientific proof or disproof.

Second, religious language, though it may be the deepest and most true, is not the only way to talk about the wonders of creation. Clearly, science is another. It has its own methods and procedures, and, as science, does not and cannot deal with issues of ultimate concern. One can be both a devout and committed Christian and an evolutionary scientist.

Many evolutionary scientists are deeply Christian. There is no necessary conflict between science and religion, provided that each respects the limits of its own way of seeking understanding. This has been recognized down through the centuries, e.g., by St. Augustine (d. 430), St. Thomas Aquinas (d.1274), Pope Leo XIII (*Providentissimus Deus*, 1893), Pope John Paul II (*Address to the Pontifical Academy of Sciences*, Oct 3, 1981), and Pope Benedict XVI (*Speech to seminarians, Castel Gandolfo*, July 25, 2007).

Third, conflict does indeed occur when these limits are violated. This, by the way, can happen on either side. On the one hand, there are scientists who appeal to evolution as evidence to reject faith in God. This is wrong. But, on the other hand, the attempt to turn religious faith into science is the same mistake, but in the opposite direction. Both creationism and intelligent design fail in this regard. Creationism is based on a wholly inadequate understanding of biblical texts. Intelligent design tries to pass off as science a philosophical position in a way that many Catholic theologians would find inadequate.

Finally, new scientific discoveries may challenge us to deepen our understanding of a biblical text or of a theological position. We believe, however, in the deepest sense, that there can be no ultimate contradiction. The Source of Truth is One, and that Source is God, the Father of Jesus Christ, in, through and for whom all things are created.

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