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Reconciling Science and Religion: One Christian's Perspective

RODNEY HONEYCUTT

I make no claims to being an expert in theology. To the contrary, my professional background is in the life sciences. More specifically, my professional training is in biology, and for over thirty years my research, teaching and publications have focused on questions related to evolutionary biology. Therefore, I consider evolutionary biology to be foundational for anyone conducting serious research in the life sciences. As Theodosius Dobzhansky, a great evolutionary biologist and a Christian, stated in the title of his article, "Nothing in biology makes sense except in the light of evolution."¹ Without the theory of evolution, biology as a discipline would be trapped in a quagmire of seemingly unrelated observations, thus rendering the entire field as a totally descriptive science, occurring several rungs below physics and chemistry. Advancements in the life sciences throughout the last 150 years are a result of the comparative framework provided by evolutionary theory, and this remarkable progress has allowed biology to stand on an equal footing with chemistry and physics as a "true experimental science." Therefore, as a life scientist and a Christian, I hold a worldview large enough to embrace both the facts supporting evolution as a natural process and a faith in God as my Father and Christ as my Savior.

My statements above may appear difficult for many brothers and sisters to accept. In fact, throughout my academic career as a professor of biology, students have asked a host of questions concerning my worldview. Why are scientists willing to accept the basic tenets of evolutionary theory as facts rather than entertaining alternative viewpoints such as Intelligent Design? How can one be an evolutionary biologist and a Christian? How can one believe in the inspired word of God, yet believe life originated through a process involving mutations and natural selection? If one accepts the theory of evolution, what makes humans different from any other animal in creation? If one is willing to consider parts of Genesis to be allegorical, how does one stop the acceleration down a slippery slope? Admittedly, these are not easy questions, and I am sympathetic with people of faith, who have difficulty reconciling perceived conflicts between a scientific and religious worldview. Although I have dealt with these issues in my own mind, any conclusions derived by me are clearly not the last word and may very well be unacceptable to many. Nevertheless, I will attempt to provide some points of view hopefully helpful to those seeking a better appreciation for why I can be both an evolutionary biologist and a Christian.

"Now the Bereans were of more noble character than the Thessalonians, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true" (Acts 17.11). As a scientist, I love this simple passage because it exemplifies what I consider to be at the heart of a scientific approach. By nature scientists are trained to question everything with "great eagerness" and by thorough examination of the facts, and the realm of science encompasses any natural phenomena

1. Theodosius Dobzhansky, "Nothing in biology makes sense except in the light of evolution," *The American Biology Teacher* (March 1973): 125–129.

addressable with the scientific method. Therefore, science makes no claims regarding the supernatural because the method simply does not apply. Objectivity and a repeatable methodology (e.g., one that can be employed independently by other scientists to test conclusions drawn by a fellow scientist) are required for the investigation of nature. However, I will be the first to admit that some scientists are not necessarily objective. Nevertheless, science is based on empiricism (knowledge derived from experience) and experimentation, and poorly constructed hypotheses, especially those derived subjectively, succumb to serious scrutiny by those employing the scientific method.

What components make this approach such a powerful tool for scientific investigations? The method is cyclical and involves multiple components including: 1) making an observation and establishing questions related to the observation; 2) formulating a hypothesis, which is a model used to explain the observation; 3) collecting empirical data either supporting or refuting the hypothesis; 4) testing the validity of the hypothesis based on the data collected; and 5) revising the model by either formulating an alternative hypothesis, if the former was rejected, and expanding on the existing hypothesis. This procedure is dynamic, and for major paradigm shifts to occur, scientists must constantly test and question preceding hypotheses. Advancements in science are made through such questioning, and explanations capable of withstanding the onslaught of repeated investigations eventually become theories. A theory is not a tentative statement, and it does not represent "absolute truth." Nevertheless, a theory provides an explanation, accepted with a high degree of confidence much greater than an initial hypothesis. Therefore, when one says "evolution is simply a theory," this is confirmation of evolutionary theory's ability to have great explanatory power relative to observations of nature.

Can the idea of a religious belief in God be addressed using the scientific method? The primary basis of any religion is faith, and as such, religion adheres to a set of doctrines followed by all people of faith. Some of the components required for application of the scientific method are present, but several critical steps are lacking. For instance, the goal of Christianity encourages people to believe in one God and Christ as the Son of God. Therefore, the model represents a hypothesis of only one God and Creator of the universe. However, Christianity deviates from science primarily as a result of the last three steps. No data are required for the faithful to believe in either God as the Father and Creator or Christ as the Son of God. Scriptures and the creation represent facts not subject to refutation. Therefore, there is no process of evaluation and revision, and if these steps could be applied, then religion would cease to be based on faith. As a Christian, I do not consider my faith in God testable in the arena of science.

The concept of Intelligent Design has been introduced as an alternative explanation to evolutionary theory. As both a scientist and a Christian, I have serious issues with this concept. First, Intelligent Design does not present testable hypotheses but is rather argumentative and based on a set of highly subjective assumptions. Second, Intelligent Design presents a "God of the gaps" argument that considers natural phenomena not yet explained by science unexplainable by science. This position is untenable and dangerous. What if a devout Christian actually based his or her faith on a doctrine that considered the flagellum (a mobile, whiplike structure that propels particular cells) to represent an irreducible structure constructed by an intelligent designer? This Christian's faith could be challenged by scientific facts that clearly demonstrated that the flagellum was reducible. This is dangerous and does a great disservice to all people of faith, especially those struggling with the interface between science and religion.

So, how do I as an evolutionary biologist and a Christian deal with scripture apparently contradicted by scientific evidence? I agree with philosopher Michael Ruse's statement, "Christian faith cannot remain static and untouched but must move forward creatively to meet the challenges."² I am not arguing for rejection of Christian doctrine and the Word. I am arguing for a mindset like the Bereans. A Christian should be willing to examine the Word carefully, and when conflicts arise, one should be open enough to seek reconciliation

2. Michael Ruse, *Can a Darwinian Be a Christian?* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 110.

with facts. A narrow interpretation of Genesis creates major conflicts as well as presuppositions directly refuted by scientific facts, and in many cases appears to be misinterpretations of the actual intent of the text. For instance, adherence to 6,000-year-old Earth is simply incongruent with scientific data supporting an age of 3.6 to 4.0 billion years. Therefore, the Bishop of Ussher's hypothesis simply does not hold up to scientific evidence. "With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day" (2 Pet 3.8). The same scientific evidence refutes other assumptions including: 1) the denial of a hierarchy of life interconnected as a result of descent with modification (species sharing common ancestors), and 2) insistence that man is in the literal image of God and is somehow separate from the rest of life. To the contrary, all data from molecules to whole organisms confirm the Tree of Life with humans representing one of the many leaves. Furthermore, evidence clearly supports the evolutionary process as well as the fact that life has turned over throughout millennia. If I were to create a universe, my creation would appear stagnant, incapable of change much like most of humanity's architectural creations, which do not withstand the test of time and succumb to changes in the environment. God's creation is much more. It is dynamic, ever-changing and full of life. The more I learn about the evolutionary process and nature in general, the more I stand in awe at the simplicity of natural selection as it builds on what is available and is regenerative in a manner no simple blueprint can provide.

My reading of the Genesis account of creation is different. I do not view it as God's how-to book, designed to describe in intricate detail the formation of the universe. To me Genesis says, "Be still, and know that I am God; I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth" (Psalm 46.10). I see my duty as being to "worship the Lord in the splendor of his holiness" (1 Chron 16.29). A student at Pepperdine recently asked me what makes humans special relative to other animals? I indicated that as one of the leaves on the Tree of Life, humans are an integral part of God's creation and share many physical features with other primates and mammals in general. Humans do have larger brains, yet many behaviors, including reasoning, are shared with some of our close relatives. This is confirmed by Solomon's statement "As for men, God tests so that they may see that they are like the animals. Man's fate is like that of the animals; the same fate awaits both: As one dies, so dies the other. All have the same breath; man has no advantage over the animal" (Eccl 3.18). Even though humans share many features with other primates, including eventual death of the physical body, we may be the only animal capable of contemplating either our own mortality or conflicts over evolution versus religion. Of course, how can I test this hypothesis? To me God's spirit living inside me is the real reflection of his image, and this is confirmed by John's statement, "God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and truth" (John 4.24).

At this point, you might ask: Why did you become a Christian? Although I was not without some religious upbringing, being confirmed as a Methodist in my early teens, for most of my life I could be classified more as an agnostic. In fact, throughout a large portion of my early professional life, I simply gave little thought to my relationship with God. Sure, I was willing to accept the premise of God's existence and often contemplated him in times of trouble, but I had no real commitment to having a true relationship with God. My decision to accept Christ as my Savior resulted from being confronted for the first time in my life with the fact that I not only did not have a relationship with God, but I had no claims for considering myself a Christian. My final decision to become a baptized believer was the result of reading the following passage in Luke:

On one occasion an expert of the law stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he asked, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" "What is written in the law?" He replied, "How do you read it?" He answered, "Love the Lord your God with all of your heart and with all of your soul and with all of your strength and with all of your mind, and love your neighbor as yourself." "You have answered correctly," Jesus replied. "Do this and you will live" (Luke 10.25-28).

To me these verses revealed a great truth about my life. I might be willing to entertain the idea that God exists, but I certainly had no relationship with God. I knew this because I could not answer these questions in the affirmative. This started a serious study of scripture with two very good friends, and through these studies, I became convinced of one great truth: Jesus is who he says he is, and it is through him one gains a relationship with God. So you see, I came to Christ without a great debate over a literal interpretation of Genesis, and if this had been emphasized by my friends, it would have become a great stumbling block.

Although science requires a high level of skepticism and adherence to a repeatable methodology, even scientists, especially those who are Christians, are capable of maintaining a sense of wonder. For instance, I realize that some of the miracles in the Bible apparently defy physical laws. Nevertheless, this does not keep me from believing in the possibility of miracles. One of the truly great miracles is seeing a changed life through the Lordship of Christ. In addition, the comfort from prayer is a true miracle. Every time I think of prayer, I remember my wife Dee's cancer, and how I sought help through prayer without truly being able to articulate my inner strife. I was comforted by the following verse:

In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express. And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God's will. And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose (Rom 8.26–28).

I truly believe God delivered us from this peril, and this is confirmation of miracles in my life. "I sought the Lord, and he answered me; he delivered me from all my fears" (Psalm 34.4).

Just because I am a scientist does not mean I am incapable of appreciating the wonderment presented by the creation, and from a holistic standpoint, I view nature as an eternal metaphor, which will always remain a little mysterious. The following is one of my favorite descriptions from Aldo Leopold, a famous ecologist and naturalist:

I heard of a boy once who was brought up an atheist. He changed his mind when he saw that there were a hundred-odd species of warblers, each bedecked like to the rainbow, and each performing yearly sundry thousands of miles of migration about which scientists wrote wisely but did not understand. No 'fortuitous concourse of elements' working blindly through any number of millions of years could quite account for why warblers are so beautiful. No mechanistic theory, even bolstered by mutations, has ever quite answered for the colors of the cerulean warbler, or the vespers of the wood thrush, or the swansong, or—goose music. I dare say this boy's convictions would be harder to shake than those of many inductive theologians. There are yet many boys to be born who, like Isaiah, may see, and know, and consider, and understand together, that the hand of the Lord hath done this.³

God can use us, despite our imperfections, weaknesses, and doubts. As I tell my children, just because we are Christians does not mean we must turn off our brain. We can grow spiritually and gain a closer relationship with God through such introspection. Yes, science does challenge certain beliefs considered by many devout Christians to be absolute truths. As a professional scientist, some of my views may never be completely concordant with those of my brothers and sisters in my community of believers. At the same time, my religious beliefs place me at odds with many colleagues in the secular scientific community. I have only one defense to offer to my brothers and sisters. I do not view total reconciliation between science and religion as requisite for my salvation. To my colleagues in evolutionary biology, I simply provide a quote from Michael Ruse. "We ultimately do not have powers which will necessarily allow us to peer into the

3. Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac with Essays on Conservation from Round River* (New York, NY: Ballantine Books, 1966), 230–232.

ultimate mysteries. If nothing else, these reflections should give us a little modesty about what we can and cannot know, and a little humility before the unknown.”⁴

In conclusion, at times I have placed God on the back of my list, and still on occasion I take my eyes off what it means to be a Christian. Nevertheless, my struggles are more basic and not derived from a scientific worldview. I sometimes lack humility (not “poor in spirit”), fail to be pure in heart, do not always seek righteousness, and forget to show love and forgiveness. As such, God is not through with me, and I must continue to “fight the good fight, finish the race, and keep the faith.” God bless!

RODNEY HONEYCUTT JUST FINISHED HIS THIRD YEAR AS A PROFESSOR IN PEPPERDINE UNIVERSITY’S NATURAL SCIENCE DIVISION. PRIOR TO PEPPERDINE, HE WAS A PROFESSOR OF BIOLOGY AT TEXAS A&M UNIVERSITY, AND ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR OF ORGANISMIC AND EVOLUTIONARY BIOLOGY AT HARVARD UNIVERSITY. HIS RESEARCH AND TEACHING INTERESTS ARE IN EVOLUTIONARY GENETICS AND PHYLOGENETICS, AND HIS RESEARCH ON THE EVOLUTION OF MAMMALS HAS TAKEN HIM TO MANY CONTINENTS. HE WOULD LIKE TO THANK PEPPERDINE’S NATURAL SCIENCE DIVISION DIRECTOR, DR. MICHAEL FELTNER, DR. CHRIS DORAN AND HIS WIFE, DEE, FOR HELPFUL COMMENTS MADE ON EARLIER DRAFTS OF THIS PAPER.



4. Ruse, *Can a Darwinian Be a Christian?*, 219.