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Suggestions for Future Reading

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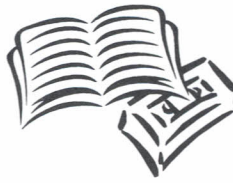


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Resource Guide

CHRIS DORAN

I hope that this issue of *Leaven* has given you a taste of what the contemporary theology and science dialogue is all about. If you are interested in learning more about the subject, I highly recommend visiting the Counterbalance Interactive Library that can be found at www.counterbalance.org. This website combines short, easily accessible articles with video clips from some of the world's leading scholars on a large range of topics concerning the theology and science dialogue. In addition, in this article I have reviewed nine books that are excellent sources of further information.

Whether you agree with the science, philosophy or theology of the Intelligent Design (ID) movement, William Dembski's *The Design Revolution* is an important book to read. In this work, he seeks to address what he believes are the forty-four most common questions about ID. These forty-four questions are arranged into six different topic areas. Each question is addressed in a chapter of approximately 5–7 pages, which makes it easy for the reader to read the book from start to finish or merely read the chapters that fit with one's particular concerns. For most readers, the two important topic areas will most likely be "Basic Distinctions" and "Detecting Design." In "Basic Distinctions," Dembski tries to show how ID is different from how it is often characterized by its opponents. For example, he spends time showing how ID is neither a substitute for the Christian doctrine of creation nor scientific creationism by another name. Also in this section, great care is taken to demonstrate how ID is not primarily motivated by religious concerns, but rather by scientific concerns that the theory of evolution is incomplete. Finally, this section looks at why the term "intelligent" is used instead of a term like "optimal." In "Detecting Design," Dembski explains what it is that ID is fundamentally trying to do. He readily admits that design in nature cannot be verified empirically, but rather that design is confirmed by inference through the use of statistics. This is done primarily through the use of the ID explanatory filter, which attempts to weed out events or phenomena that happen by chance, so that an investigator can understand what is designed.

Before the very controversial *The God Delusion*, Richard Dawkins wrote an important book, *The Selfish Gene*, which many atheists believe makes their case against Christianity indisputable. While I disagree with the conclusions that Dawkins draws on the meaning of life, he is a fine writer who articulates his position clearly for the lay reader. The basic thesis of *The Selfish Gene* is this: the basis of biological life lies in an organism's genes. No matter how big or how small an organism is, genes are what pull the strings and get us to act the way we do. Genes do this in order to put us into situations so that we will reproduce and create more genes. For Dawkins, then, organisms, whether they are one-cell bacteria or humans, are simply complex gene replicating machines that dance to the beat of their genes. The problem with genes, though, is that they are selfish: they only want to reproduce and make more genes that look like them. In other words, our genes cause us to do things to protect ourselves and those who are part of our kin group. It's not that we can't be altruistic, it's that we are generally only altruistic when we know that we're getting something out of it. To be fair, Dawkins is clear on this point: he is not advocating a system of morality based upon his understanding of evolution. He is merely explaining what we are up against as we try to set up systems that define what is right and wrong. Dawkins is unmistakable on another point as well. If at the bottom of life

there are only genes pulling strings, then life is ultimately without purpose and the universe is meaningless. This does not mean we should be depressed, it just means that we should give up waiting for “God” to save the day. We need to go out and define purpose for ourselves.

Since being called as an expert witness in *McLean v. Arkansas* (a case that determined the constitutionality of teaching creation science in the state of Arkansas), philosopher of science Michael Ruse has been a prominent international figure in this dialogue. Although he is not a Christian, Ruse makes the case that Christianity and evolution can coexist meaningfully in his book *Can a Darwinian Be a Christian?* It is this perspective that makes the book quite insightful. In a very real sense, this book is written in response to Dawkins and other atheists like him, who believe that Christians who somehow make evolution and religion fit together are, in fact, delusional. He starts by laying out the fundamental aspects of what make up modern evolutionary theory, then goes on to present the central tenets of Christianity. From there he explores a variety of topics (origin accounts, human evolution, design, the problem of pain and even extraterrestrials) where atheists believe evolution proves Christianity false. Ruse carefully shows how atheist arguments do not in fact preclude someone from being a Darwinian (for Ruse this means roughly someone who is convinced that evolution is the best explanation for the rise of biological life) and a Christian at the same time. He states, “Can a Darwinian be a Christian? Absolutely! Is it easy for a Darwinian to be a Christian? No, but whoever said that the worthwhile things in life are easy?”¹

The Meaning of Creation: Genesis and Modern Science by Conrad Hyers is now twenty-five years old, but a book that I still use in my course as an introduction to the issues involved with reading Genesis. The most important questions that Hyers asks the reader are these: Should a modern person expect Genesis to be written specifically for her? Or was it written for the ancient Israelite of a few thousand years ago? If you say yes to the first question, then you might expect Genesis to answer certain scientific questions important to twentieth- and twenty-first-century people, if the entire Bible is to be deemed historically reliable. For example, scientific creationists (one type of biblical literalist) believe that the events of Genesis 1–11 must be historically and scientifically accurate if the Bible is to be considered reliable. Hyers, however, thinks the second question is in fact the correct question to ask. After analyzing the tremendous downsides to the scientific creationist position, he lays out the many issues that faced ancient Israelites and what might have caused the text to be written as it is. For example, is Genesis 1 intended to tell us with scientific accuracy that the universe was created in seven days, or that Genesis was responding to the rampant polytheism of the Near Eastern civilizations during the time of the ancient Israelites? Hyers offers an extremely persuasive argument that the Genesis writer is responding to the latter option. In the end, Hyers assures the reader that the theological statements made in Genesis about God, humans and the world are no less true today than they were thousands of years ago simply because they do not meet the standards of contemporary science, which of course presumes that science is the ultimate arbiter of truth.

High school teachers across the nation know her name. Whether they welcome her into their classrooms or quiver at that news that she is making a presentation to their school board, Eugenie Scott is perhaps the foremost person in the country to speak on the role of science education in our public school classrooms. Her book *Evolution vs. Creationism: An Introduction*, which I have used in my own courses, explores the central topics that come up when discussing evolution in America. The first section of this book is, for me, the most helpful. Here, Scott lays out in wonderful detail what it is that science does and does not investigate. Furthermore, she takes up one of the most important and misunderstood issues of this discussion: what do scientists mean when they use the word “theory?” Scott carefully explains what theories are and how they relate to other scientific concepts like facts, hypotheses and laws. The second section of the book delves into the history of the creationism/evolution controversy from before Darwin to the

1. Michael Ruse, *Can a Darwinian Be a Christian?: The Relationship Between Science and Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 217.

present. The book's last section includes selections from primary sources that have shaped this controversy, specifically as it has played out in the United States. Scott brings in a variety of legal decisions that have been handed down by school boards, state supreme courts or the United States Supreme Court. In a chapter on educational issues, she looks at excerpts from many of the disputed biology textbooks that have appeared in United States schools in recent years, as well as commentaries from many of the participants involved in the debate on what does or does not belong in our public school classrooms. Finally, she surveys a wide range of Christian thinkers who have written about evolution, the concept of purpose and meaning, or the literalness of the Genesis account.

Ian Barbour is widely recognized as the grandfather of what is known as the science and religion dialogue. He has not only written extensively in this field, but as a professing Christian sees the need to be accessible as well. *When Science Meets Religion: Enemies, Strangers, or Partners?* is probably Barbour's most easy-to-read book for someone who is new to this conversation. For more than thirty years now, Barbour has described the four ways that science and religion might interact with one another: conflict, independence, dialogue and integration. He argues that the conflict position is characterized by groups like scientific materialists (atheists) and biblical literalists, who believe that either science is right and religion must be discarded, or that religion is right and science must be radically reworked. The independence position can be summed up by the following: science answers the major "how" questions of the world, while religion answers the significant "why" questions. In other words, science can tell us how the universe works, but religion tells us why it is here in the first place. The dialogue position seeks to take the intuition of the thinkers who argue for the independence position and move it one step forward. A dialogue thinker might ask whether or not a question at the "edge" of science might in fact have philosophical or theological implications. For example, the inherent intelligibility of the universe leads one to investigate why the universe makes so much sense. Finally, the integration position examines the possibility of science and religion working together to form a coherent worldview, wherein science impacts religion and religion subsequently influences science. It is this two-way avenue that distinguishes integration significantly from dialogue. The rest of the book then looks at the topics of astronomy, quantum physics, evolution, human nature (via neuroscience and genetics), and how God works with/through nature from the vantage point of each of the four perspectives.²

Finding Darwin's God: A Scientist's Search for Common Ground Between God and Evolution is a widely acclaimed book written by Roman Catholic biologist Ken Miller. He, like Dawkins, writes in a way that is easy for non-scientists to follow. In many ways, this book is about Miller's own personal journey to make sense of being both an evolutionary biologist and a Christian. In the chapter entitled "God the Charlatan," Miller investigates the questions surrounding the age of the earth. He eventually dismisses the scientific creationists who argue that most, if not all, modern evaluations of the earth's age are faulty by constructing a theological response, rather than a primarily scientific one. He maintains that it would be easier to believe that God is a charlatan than to believe the scientific creationists who claim all the geological data about the earth's age is wrong. Miller looks at more problems with scientific creationism and ID in the chapters "God the Magician" and "God the Mechanic," where he lays out in very specific detail what sort of God ID would have us believe in, if ID is correct. In particular, he takes up the question of why this God is not responding to all of the tragedies of the universe, but instead is spending time applying tails to bacteria. In the end, I am not convinced by his theological conclusions (he challenges the traditional doctrines of divine omnipotence and omniscience), but Miller gives thoughtful Christians quite a few things to think about.

2. If you want to try a fuller work of Barbour's, I recommend *Religion and Science: Historical and Contemporary Issues*. I use this book currently in my theology and science undergraduate course.