

Edward B. (Ted) Davis

“A History of the Creation–Evolution Conflict”

Episode 27 of The Advent of Evolutionary Christianity

EvolutionaryChristianity.com



Ted Davis is a historian of science at Messiah College in Pennsylvania. Past-president of the American Scientific Affiliation, he is an evangelical Christian who subscribes to the Apostle’s Creed. He has edited and contributed to technical books in the history of science, and he is currently writing a book about the religious beliefs of prominent American scientists.

HIGHLIGHTS

Ted Davis presents a clear introduction to **a mid-ground approach between complete biblical literalism (fundamentalism) and largely metaphorical scriptural interpretations** preferred by theological liberals. Notably, the **Book of Genesis** cannot be taken literally as the history of creation, but Davis asserts that it is very important for Christians to accept as **factually true the miracle stories of Jesus**, especially **the bodily resurrection**. This conversation excels in generating theological engagement. For theological liberals who value an inside look at **why evangelicals are reluctant to extend the moniker “Christian” to those who disbelieve in the bodily resurrection of Jesus**, this is an eye-opening interview. Note: A substantial part of the opening dialogue concerns the work of this historian of science in **refuting the “warfare” model of the history of science and religion**.

SUGGESTED AUDIENCES

This episode is highly recommended for clergy, seminarians, and religious studies majors and graduate students (for whom the *supplemental* questions 8 and 9) are intended. Any Evangelicals who might be interested in this series will almost certainly find great support for their views and religious convictions in the words spoken by Ted Davis. Even so, this episode (in addition to the Bill Phillips episode) is also highly recommended for nontheists and the theologically liberal who value an opportunity to experience a clear and logically consistent exposition of why the core literalism of the Jesus story (e.g., “the empty tomb”) and belief in God’s transcendence are central to evangelical faith. The academically inclined may be best

served by the Davis interview in this regard; laypeople may find the Phillips interview more accessible. Both are well spoken and clear in their reasoning.

Following his personal story at the beginning of the interview, Davis offers a technical academic history of science and theology. This continues for the first third of the program. Then, on p. 11 of the transcript, Davis begins presenting topics and views in language well within a layperson's grasp.

BLOG COMMENTS

Note: Ted Davis substantially participated in discussion and comments on the blog page associated with his interview.

Richard R. Powell:

Ted, thank you for your detailed and thoughtful responses. It is so important to me that you are taking the time to dialogue on this subject. I haven't had as warm an experience with other evangelicals. Some, like their counterparts in the atheistic camp, essentially just want to convince me, sometimes at almost any cost, including bullying and scare tactics. I'm not getting a sense that you are doing that, nor did I get a sense that you were doing it in the interview, only that you are energized by the subject and dedicated to understanding. This is so refreshing and affirming.

Jim Zikos says:

Ted, during your interview with Michael I found it interesting when you suggested that his reading of the New Atheists was a partial one. Perhaps everyone has their own constructive role to play in this whole process. I am pleased that part of your own role is to expose the New Atheists' own fundamentalist tendencies.

KEYWORD TOPICS

Presbyterian, Evangelicalism, Christ's sacrifice (as core understanding of the Gospel), **astronomy, American Scientific Affiliation** (as crucial organization for evangelicals teaching or researching science), **Richard Bube, Bernard Ramm, Ian Barbour, Christianity-and-science, history and philosophy of science, natural philosophy, popular science books** (importance of), **"warfare" view of the history of science and religion** (critique of), **Andrew Dickson White** (as originator of warfare view), **John Calvin, John Wesley, Enlightenment atheism** (as roots of the warfare view), **August Comte, Voltaire, Richard Dawkins and Jerry Coyne** (as extreme modern proponents of warfare view), **New Atheism** (critique of), **Karl Giberson** (chronicles warfare view), **John William Draper, morality** (liberal stronghold for keeping religion), **theology** (importance for science), **Galileo** (heresy trial of), **religious fundamentalism** (as distinct from "religion"), **in-group v. out-group** (dynamics of cooperation v. hatred), **Francis Collins, Henry Morris, "dogmatic theology"** (as unfair pejorative), **NOMA**

– “**Non-Overlapping Magisteria** (frame for science-religion issue advocated by **Stephen Jay Gould**, and disputed by Ted Davis), **John Hedley Brook**, **theology of creation**, **voluntarist theology**, **rationalist theology**, **mathematics** (as “divine language”), **The Fall**, **M. B. Foster**, **Reijer Hooykaas**, **Thomas Torrance**, **modern scientific method** (v. Aristotelian methods), **A. R. Hall**, **Galileo**, **Descartes**, **Boyle**, and **Newton** (as influenced by a sense of God’s will v. God’s reason), **Plato**, **nature as contingent** (a shared understanding of both secular science and Christianity), **Christ rising from the grave** (as literally true), **Resurrection** (as core faith element of Christianity), **God as separate from nature** (as literally true), **Jesus as deity** (support for), **the Incarnation**, **N. T. Wright**, **the empty tomb** (evidential importance of), **Scientific Revolution**

BIOGRAPHY

Ted Davis is Distinguished Professor of the History of Science at Messiah College in Pennsylvania, where he teaches courses on historical and contemporary aspects of Christianity and science and directs the Central Pennsylvania Forum for Religion and Science. Mainly known for his work on the scientific revolution of the seventeenth century, Davis edited (with Michael Hunter) *The Works of Robert Boyle*, 14 volumes. Davis wrote the chapter on Isaac Newton in *Galileo Goes to Jail and Other Myths about Science and Religion*, ed. Ronald Numbers.

Davis has also written numerous articles and reviews on the history of religion and science in modern America, including a commentary on the Dover Intelligent Design trial (which he attended) that was published in the Winter 2006 edition of *Religion in the News*. BBC radio has featured his research on modern Jonah stories, published in *Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith* (December 1991). With support from the National Science Foundation and the John Templeton Foundation, Davis is currently writing a book about the religious beliefs of prominent American scientists in the 1920s. An article based on this project was published in the May 2005 issue of *American Scientist*.

Davis is the past-president of the American Scientific Affiliation, a fellowship of scientists who share a common commitment to the Bible and to the practice of integrity in science. More information on Ted Davis and his work at: <http://www.messiah.edu/hpages/facstaff/tdavis/home.htm>

SUPPLEMENTARY VIDEO

An hour-long lecture by Ted Davis, “Science and American Christianity”:
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x1Hqf2NG550>

SUPPLEMENTARY WEBPAGE

Listener comments to this audio can be found (and new ones added) at the following url. Ted Davis substantially interacted with those posting 2011 comments on this page:

<http://evolutionarychristianity.com/blog/general/ted-davis-the-creation-evolution-conflict-in-historical-perspective/>

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

Note for teachers: As with all episodes, the suggested discussion questions below aim to evoke personal reflection more than full comprehension of the content and ideas. But if you prefer to pose more didactic questions to students, Ted Davis himself offers eight such “Questions for Classroom Use,” enumerated as questions 8A–8G.

1. **Between biblical literalism and Bible-as-metaphor.** Ted Davis, a historian of science, identifies **a midway course between biblical literalism and theological liberalism**. In this he is joined by fellow scholars and scientists who share a commitment to scientific integrity and who, as Evangelicals, share faith and Christian community through their membership within the American Scientific Affiliation—for which Ted Davis is past-president.

With respect to SCIENTIFIC INTEGRITY, **biological evolution** is accepted, as is **a multi-billion-year universe**. Davis says,

The assured results of science can in fact rule out certain types of approaches to theology and science. An example, of course, would be the fact that the universe is billions of years old—currently they would say something like 13.7 billion years old, and the Earth is something like 4.5 billion years old. And **those two facts rule out taking literally the creation story in Genesis chapter I**, under which God creates a world in six days a few thousand years ago. Almost certainly, that didn’t happen. **And so one has to look for something else as the content or message of Genesis chapter I**. One possibility is that it is indeed a message for us from our Creator, which I think it is. Then, one has to say, “Well, the message must be something else.”

With respect to EVANGELICAL FAITH, there are some aspects of the Bible that, for Ted, may not be compromised and for which faith-supporting evidence is deeply valued. Such core elements of evangelical Christian faith include: **a transcendent God, purpose and intent to Creation, bodily resurrection of Jesus and His saving grace**. Davis explains,

Science can certainly rule out some possible ways of approaching [theology]. The danger comes, I would say, when people think that science must be the dominant dialogue partner. The danger here is in assuming that there is no such thing as **a transcendent Creator**, who is in fact capable of acting outside of or apart from nature at certain times—and, indeed, who is the source of nature itself, the source of the order that we find.

I don’t believe that it’s possible to get a genuinely contingent order without having a God who’s able to determine the nature of nature. **A God who indeed has the power to raise Christ from the grave** is the kind of God who has the power to determine the nature of nature. That’s what the Christian account says: that God has raised Christ from the grave. The kind of nature we have is the kind of nature I would expect such a God to create. A God who can determine the nature of nature, in the first place, is also the kind of God who can re-order nature into a new

creation, as he did with Christ. So, that's where I would say, **we must not allow an inappropriate kind of naturalism to ride herd on theology.**

Question 1A: *Where do you reside on the **spectrum** from a fully literalist (fundamentalist) view of the Bible to a fully metaphorical view of miracle stories recorded in it?*

Question 1B: *If your faith is evangelical, is Ted Davis is a good spokesperson for your views? If so, what did you **most appreciate** about his articulation of faith? Alternatively, if you are theologically liberal, a nontheist, or a member of a religion other than Christianity, what can you appreciate about this inside look into the mind of an Evangelical?*

Question 1C: *Where, if at all, did this interview **disappoint** you or make you uncomfortable—either in what Ted Davis said or what the host, Michael Dowd, said?*

Question 1D: *What was **the most memorable** thing you learned in this interview?*

2. **Christian faith and a literalistic belief in the Resurrection.** Ted Davis, in contrast to most of the Christian thought-leaders in this series, suggests that, for one to be a Christian, **belief in the actual bodily resurrection of Jesus is a necessity.** He says,

I don't think we have Christian faith (to be honest) if we don't understand that the Church began with the belief that **Christ had been raised from the grave**—not in a symbolic way, but in a quite literal way that just shocked the pants off of the Jewish authors of the Gospels. After all, they had not been expecting this. They were fearful, as you and I would certainly have been. They were fearful after the crucifixion, and they remained skeptical that Christ had returned. But when they actually experienced him in their presence—in some cases, as Paul says, more than 500 at one time—they became convinced that indeed God had done a great act here. And that indeed had implications for who this man Jesus was.

Over the subsequent years, the Church formalized a doctrine of the deity of Jesus and the Incarnation, but I believe those are already implicit in the language of the Gospels and the *Letters* of Paul and Peter. That sort of an event, I think, *defined* Christianity. I really believe that **without the Resurrection of Jesus, there would never have been a Christianity at all.** That was not just some imagined experience of this, but a literal experience of this.

Question 2A: *Is belief in the physical, bodily resurrection of Jesus **an important, incidental, or completely extraneous element in your faith or worldview?** And can you recall a pivotal moment in your own religious journey when you actively chose to embrace, question, interpret differently, or let go of such belief?*

Question 2B: *Because belief in the actual bodily resurrection is a central concern to some Christians, to what extent does this interview with Ted Davis help you to **empathize** with why that is so? What is your own view on the subject, and how comfortable are you with those who believe differently?*

Question 2C: *This question is expressly for self-identified Christians who do not assent to a creed or belief that testifies to the actual bodily resurrection of Jesus. The question is this:*

Have you ever had your Christianity called into question for your lack of this particular belief? If so, what were the circumstances, what feelings came up for you, and how did you handle it?

3. **How important is the “empty tomb”?** Ted Davis and host Michael Dowd conclude their gentle face-off about **the relevance of biblical miracle stories** in this way: Davis quotes historian of Christianity **N. T. Wright**, who says,

The actual bodily resurrection of Jesus (not a mere resuscitation, but a transforming revivification) clearly provides a *sufficient* condition of the tomb being empty and the ‘meetings’ taking place. Nobody is likely to doubt that. Once grant that Jesus really was raised, and all the pieces of the historical jigsaw puzzle of early Christianity fall into place. My claim is stronger: that **the bodily resurrection of Jesus provides a necessary condition** for these things; in other words, that no other explanation could or would do. All the efforts to find **alternative explanations fail**, and they were bound to do so.

Dowd counters with, “Typically for me, it’s not a fighting point. I allow for people to have a variety of interpretations of how they think about the Resurrection and how they understand it historically and evolutionarily and that sort of thing.” Then the conversation moves to other, less contentious topics.

Question 3: *Where do you stand on the matter of “the empty tomb”? If you have never deeply considered this argument before, can you step into the shoes of Ted Davis and sense why this is so important to him (and to many other evangelical theologians and pastors)? Please elaborate.*

4. **His personal faith journey.** In addition to showcasing the theological content, host Michael Dowd always encourages his guests to speak of their personal faith journey. In response, Ted Davis shares that he was raised as the son of an evangelical Christian minister and that he came to **personally embrace an evangelical** sense of the Gospel in this way:

I recall, specifically, beginning to understand the Gospel within an evangelical sense when I was a teenager, and embraced that. I responded to what I still believe, and believed at the time, was **the love of God being extended to me through the sacrifice of Christ**. So I’ve had that understanding of Christian faith most of my life. I’ve simply begun to reflect on that more, as an adult. I’ve been reading theology now, as opposed to the time when I really didn’t read much theology; I just understood the gospel message as it was presented to me.

Question 4: *In listening to these interviews, how important to you is a guest’s personal story? What aspects of Ted Davis’s faith journey were most helpful, insightful, curious, or confusing for you?*

5. **Challenging the “warfare” view of the history of science and religion.** Ted Davis says that one of his main goals as a historian of Christianity and science is “to debunk the warfare view of the history of science and religion.” This “**conflict**” mode is the first of the “Four Types” model of the relationship of science and religion that **Ian Barbour** talked about in his interview. Here is a brief excerpt drawn from Ted Davis’s **lengthy critique of the “warfare” view** of the history of science and religion. Davis explains:

The roots of the warfare view are in **Enlightenment atheism**, and that gives rise in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century to something that is perhaps best called, “the religion of science”—the type of thing that **Auguste Comte** was interested in. **He wanted to see traditional religion replaced by science.** . . . That particular view, the atheist type of religion of science, sees science and religion as mutually exclusive ways of viewing the world—and it tries to replace traditional religion with science. It really is a kind of religion, as **Karl Giberson** has so well shown in his book, *Oracles of Science*, which I know that he discussed in your interview. People such as **Richard Dawkins**, of course, don’t realize this is what they’re doing—or don’t acknowledge that’s what they’re doing (replacing one kind of religion with another), but that’s what they’re doing. In that view, that’s a hardcore warfare view. . . .

According to this version of the warfare view, **religion is still important for moral reasons.** We don’t want to get rid of religion (unlike Dawkins). But *theology* must be swept aside to allow the endless progress of science. **On this particular view, theology has never had a productive conversation with science.** It’s never inspired scientific activity or influenced a valid scientific idea. It’s really done nothing but hold back the progress of science.

Question 5: *Before encountering this interview, what was your understanding or assumptions about **the history of conflict or collaboration** between science and religion since the time of Copernicus, Galileo, Newton, and the birth of modern science? And does Ted Davis present a convincing case for you? Discuss.*

6. **Beyond the “warfare” model.** After summarizing the history of how the warfare model of the relationship between science and religion came to be, Ted Davis describes how contemporary scholars tend to regard the two domains. He explains,

Most historians of science are not religious believers. But those of us who study the history of science and religion pretty much **agree that historically there’s actually been a very rich conversation between theology and science.** There have certainly been instances of genuine conflict, and **Galileo** in part got caught up in such a conflict in the seventeenth century. There’s no effort here to say that there was *no* conflict historically. What the effort does is to say that **the conflict metaphor is woefully inadequate to describe most of what has taken place.**

There’s so much that does not fit into that one box. The actual historical interaction has been far richer and more complex than the warfare model would ever be able to capture. It’s not a claim that there’s been a harmony either—historically between science and religion. Rather, the interactions themselves are incapable of being described by any single, simple metaphor.

When Dowd then asks him for what *his* view of the history of interaction between science and religion is, Ted Davis embarks on a detailed academic explanation and then concludes,

I think **Christianity substantially shaped conceptions of scientific method** and scientific knowledge during the seventeenth century. . . . People like **Galileo, Descartes, Boyle, and Newton** are shaped by those very conceptions of the idea of **God's will versus God's reason** and how we're going to go about understanding the world. They take positions on this, which are not the same. So on the one end, people like Descartes and Galileo line up on the **rationalist** side of this. And you have people like Robert Boyle and Isaac Newton lining up on the **voluntarist** side.

Question 6: *Granted that this part of the interview focused on a scholarly topic in the history of science, in what areas of societal life — public policy, governance, religion, culture, the arts, and so forth — do you value gaining an historical perspective when attempting to understand a current issue or problem?*

7. **The New Atheists — pro and con.** In this series, the guests not uncommonly criticize the New Atheists. In this interview Ted Davis says, “The warfare view of [Richard] Dawkins and [Jerry] Coyne is more hardcore than that. As I've indicated, they want to eradicate religion in the name of science.” Rarely does Dowd let such a comment pass without, at least in part, **rising to the defense of the New Atheists.** In this instance, **Dowd** says,

I think that what they're trying to do is **keep supernatural, otherworldly religion—what they would think of as “mythic religion”—from steering the ship of civilization.** That in the hands of religious fundamentalists—especially when you've got competing religious fundamentalisms around the world and you've also got weapons of mass destruction that are really small and really easy to obtain, or getting easier to obtain all the time—I think their concern is that, *that* kind of mythic consciousness interpreted literally could be a danger to human civilization. I don't think it's religion, as such. It's **religious fundamentalism**—that is, mythic language interpreted in a completely literal way, and that sees **the in-group as our religious folk and everybody else is the out-group.** You can be very kind and loving (and expected to be kind and loving) with the in-group, but you can be practically demonic towards the out-group—and that *that* thinking is not sustainable is the way I read them, at least.

Ted Davis then says,

I think that's a fair way to read them. But it's only a partial way to read them. I think reading them in historical context against this rise of Enlightenment atheism—and the way in which **science is seen as a source of objective absolute knowledge, and religion is seen purely as an obscurantist or backward force**—that is the problem. For **Dawkins**, religion is not good: **religion is a “virus”** and we need to eliminate it. He doesn't discriminate on the kinds of religion that he's talking about here, between what you would call fundamentalism and other kinds of religion. In Dawkins' view, someone like **Francis Collins** (who cannot fairly be called a fundamentalist at all) is just as deluded as someone like Henry Morris, because the belief in God *itself* is delusional.

Davis concludes that **the basic flaw with the New Atheists** is that they “believe that atheism is not only the best metaphysical framework in which to place modern science, but the only one in which it makes any sense.”

Question 7A: The most prominent New Atheists include biologists Richard Dawkins, PZ Myers, and Jerry Coyne, philosopher Daniel Dennett, philosopher and neuroscientist Sam Harris, and journalist and writer Christopher Hitchens. *What, if anything, was your perspective on the so-called New Atheists before beginning this series on Evolutionary Christianity? And how, if at all, has this series shifted or developed your view?*

Question 7B: *Of the **three distinct worldviews** presented or discussed in this episode, which is the most difficult for you to, in a way, stand in the shoes of? Is it the perspective of Davis, Dowd, or Dawkins that seems most alien, illogical, or even repugnant to you? And why?*

Question 7C: *Continuing from the previous question, **whichever worldview is the most unlike** your own outlook, pretend that you have an opportunity to pose one question to its spokesperson to help you better see the world through their eyes (not that you need to agree with them; only understand). **What question would you ask?***

8. **Content questions for classroom use (as suggested by Ted Davis).**

Question 8A. *According to Davis, what is the "**warfare**" view of the history of science and religion? Why do most historians now reject it? How has it influenced the modern conversation about science and religion?*

Question 8B. *According to Davis, what needs to be done in order to advance the conversation, if the warfare model is untenable?*

Question 8C. Davis says that **Christian theology** "substantially shaped conceptions of scientific method and scientific knowledge" during the **Scientific Revolution**. *What specifically is he claiming, as far as you can tell from this interview?*

Question 8D. Davis articulates a Christian theology within which to place both nature and natural science. *How (in his opinion) does **Christian theism help us make sense** of nature and our ability to comprehend it scientifically? What does he say about each of the following three elements of his theology: **creation, resurrection, and eschatology**?*

Question 8E. *In Davis' opinion, what was the general situation in America during the 1920s (the era of the **Scopes trial**), relative to science and religion? What (if anything) is different now?*

Question 8F. *How does Davis see himself, in relation to the idea of "evolutionary Christianity"? Explain his position. To what extent (if any) does evolution have an influence on his theology?*

Question 8G. At the end of the interview, Davis talks about the **American Scientific Affiliation** (<http://www.asa3.org>), a fellowship of Christians in the sciences; he is a former president of that organization. From what is said in the interview, what overall approach to religion and science does the ASA represent?

SUPPLEMENTARY question drawn from the online Forum discussion:

Question 9. *Peruse the comments and discussion posted in the [online forum](#) or the selected forum postings printed immediately below. Choose one that intrigues you or that inspires you to new thoughts and understandings, and explain in a paragraph or two **what opened up for you**.*

RICHARD POWELL (January 5, 2011)

Ted, your conviction over the centrality of a literal resurrection is one I shared for many years and I think there is a quote from St. Paul about Christianity not having any point if Jesus was not raised. That sure made sense to me for a long time. And yet I had to admit that there were valid reasons to doubt the reliability of the records and the nature of the community in which that story formed, and eventually the "extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence" line of reasoning convinced me that I didn't have the extraordinary evidence to make such a claim. I appreciate N.T. Wright, and while I have read some of his work, I have not read the one that you refer to.

This for me points out a central problem facing evangelicalism. The evidence being defended is not self-evident. It takes someone like N.T. Wright or yourself, working full time studying the subject, to buttress my sagging faith. I can't do it on my own. Like with the mountain of evidence that now has convinced many evangelicals, including yourself, that evolution is a fact, there is a growing mountain of biblical criticism that has done the same for my own understanding of the texts from which we get the resurrection story. This is why an evolutionary perspective is so important to me; it doesn't trap me in an interpretation that turns out to be, well, inconsistent with the facts.

TED DAVIS response to Powell above (January 6, 2011)

I understand your point about evangelicalism and evidence for the resurrection. As Wright points out in one of the passages I quoted, there is no neutral starting point from which one can evaluate the evidence for an event like the bodily resurrection. This is no less true for a David Hume or a Richard Dawkins than it is for Tom Wright or Ted Davis—or Richard Powell. That doesn't mean that we just have to throw up our hands and give up, but it does mean that

intelligent, well-informed and well-meaning people are not all going to draw the same conclusions. Worldview is very hard to keep out of that calculation, and worldview is not purely objective. If you are looking for reasons to believe, Richard, let me indeed recommend that you study the final parts of Wright's massive book (going back to the details from there, selectively), or the chapter on "Crucifixion and Resurrection" in Polkinghorne's "The Faith of a Physicist." IMO, both of those authors are very hard-headed in their approaches to the evidence, but just as hard-headed in their criticisms of Enlightenment rationalism. An appropriate response to Hume's skepticism can be to show some skepticism toward his skepticism. Hume basically argued that *no amount of testimony* for a miracle would ever be sufficient for him to accept it, and that's not exactly an objective analysis.

The biggest problem I am addressing in my interview gets to the heart of this: for at least a century, it's been pretty much assumed both by secular minds and by many Christian scholars as well, that thoughtful people can't believe in a literal resurrection. Along with this comes an uncritical embracing of the "warfare" view, either (like Dawkins) in the hard-core atheistic form or else (like many Christian scholars) in the softer, gentler form of A. D. White, according to which "science" is always "progressive" and "dogmatic theology" is always the opposite, so that in order to make intellectual and social progress we have to remove the bathwater of Christian theology in order to save the baby of Christian ethics—all in the name of "science."

NOTE: This dialogue continues on the [forum](#) webpage.

MICHAEL DOWD (January 6, 2011)

I would argue that there are two kinds of Christians in the world today: one-story Christians (those who get their primary inspiration from what is natural and *undeniably* real), and two-story Christians (those who get their primary inspiration from what is unnatural and undeniably otherworldly). Two-story believers tend to interpret religious concepts and doctrines in a "supernatural" way, which is why they're called "believers". One-story Christians, in contrast, interpret traditional religious language and images as pointing metaphorically to our real lives in the real world. They don't need to believe, they know through experience.

IMHO, one of these ways of thinking has a future, the other does not.

TED DAVIS response to Dowd above (January 7, 2011)

Michael is right about true Christian "believers" (in an "orthodox" sense) holding to the real existence of something beyond the purely natural, whether or not it's called "supernatural" (a term that's been used for a long time without a single consistent meaning). I affirm my belief in a God who is often described as "supernatural," while many (non-traditional) "believers" would not affirm such a belief. This is not something (IMO) that objective analysis can resolve, in the same way that objective analysis *can* resolve a lot of other matters. That's what Wright is getting at when he talks about "worldview," a term that

Christian scholars have used for quite some time (an equivalent German term would be *Weltanschauung*).

Dawkins (e.g.) thinks it's absolutely objective to deny the existence of any and all such entities, even to mock those who do believe in something beyond nature. (This is why his crowd talks about their silly "flying spaghetti monster"—it's nothing but open mockery of otherwise serious matters.) But Dawkins is not being absolutely objective, and if he wants to dispute that I'd be happy to appear opposite him in a face-to-face debate. (I challenged Jerry Coyne in this way some time ago, but of course he ignored me.)

What Dawkins, Coyne, and so many other new atheists miss is the simple fact that science cannot interpret itself metaphysically, and that it can make sense within quite different metaphysical frameworks. IMO, Christianity makes no sense apart from the concept of a "God" who genuinely creates a universe with a purpose, and it's very hard for me to separate that from something like a "supernatural" God.

For me (speaking here as a scholar of science and religion), the idea of a contingent order (which I talk about in the interview) has been crucial for understanding why the modern scientific method of rational empiricism has been so successful, and I simply cannot make sense of a universe that is *both* contingent (in terms of both its existence and its specific nature) *and* orderly, without something like a "supernatural" God. In short, for me (speaking again as a scholar, not simply as a "believer"), belief in God actually makes more sense than unbelief. Others won't see it that way, I readily grant, but I do not grant that my conclusion is unwarranted.

I also can't make sense of Christianity itself—that is, the very existence of the church, as a body of believers that has continuously since the very beginning identified itself as followers of the crucified and resurrected Jesus—unless something absolutely extraordinary and even unprecedented took place to transform the terrified and sniveling disciples (and that's how I would have behaved myself in such a situation) into a bold and outspoken group that would not (IMO) have literally given their lives for something they knew was not true (the actual resurrection of Jesus). . . .

I agree with Michael's description of the group of religious people he identifies with, as follows: "One-story Christians, in contrast, interpret traditional religious language and images as pointing metaphorically to our real lives in the real world. They don't need to believe, they know through experience. IMHO, one of these ways of thinking has a future, the other does not."

What I would question here is the apparent embedded assumption: that "Two-story Christians" (the group I identify with) have no future, because (apparently) our belief has been falsified or become unbelievable as a result of evolution. Unless I am mistaken, this is *at least partly* what is meant by the term "evolutionary Christianity," and (if I have understood this correctly) it is probably the number one reason why I distanced myself from the term in my interview.

Those who say this (that evolution makes two-story Christianity untenable) are IMO missing the same thing that Dawkins misses: namely, that science cannot interpret itself

religiously. Although I would agree that some reliably established scientific facts *can* rule out some specific religious beliefs (such as the belief that the universe is only a few thousand years old), there is simply no way that “science” can rule out something like the resurrection. (Bill Phillips talks about this in his interview.) And, science is entirely incapable of answering the larger questions it raises, such as “why is the universe comprehensible at all?” or “why is mathematics so unreasonably effective for understanding nature?” or “why is it true that ‘beautiful’ mathematical equations are precisely the ones we need in order to grasp the order we find, way down deep, in nature?”

A robust theism explains those things quite well. A robust naturalism (whether a religious naturalism such as one-story Christianity or a purely atheistic naturalism) doesn't do very well at all; it simply has to accept these things as “brute facts” about the universe, a universe that we are “lucky” enough to exist within. That could be true, but frankly it's not the sort of attitude that science normally takes; science searches for deeper explanations, and in this case a robust theism provides them. (Ken Miller talks about this briefly in his interview.)

Finally, Michael, let me respond to your point about one-story Christians knowing through experience, in contrast to two-story Christians who know in “supernatural” ways. Partly this is correct; it's the two-story Christians who usually view the Bible as “divinely inspired.” What this misses, however, is the fact that the group of folks I've been talking about—traditional Christians who accept evolution and the creeds together, who do not see in “science” or “evolution” a warrant to dismiss biblical faith—this group typically takes what Polkinghorne calls a “bottom up” approach to *both* science *and* religious faith. What he means by that is that both science and religion are searches for “motivated belief,” which makes them what he calls “cousinly” disciplines. I say more about this in one of the essays that you have already mentioned: [“The Motivated Belief of John Polkinghorne”](#).

In addition, let me point out that the idea of “evolutionary Christianity” puts too much attention on “evolution” and too little on cosmology. I remember being part of a lively conference about Christianity and science in the late 1980s. After listening to a few “one-story” Christian speakers talk about how we needed to discard theism in order to embrace science, I was given the opportunity to make a few comments, and I began by asking them which science(s) they had in mind: biology or cosmology? The message from cosmology is *very friendly* to genuine divine transcendence, especially the apparent fact (not yet contradicted by any actually demonstrated science) that the universe is not eternal and the overwhelming impression that (as Freeman Dyson has put it) “the universe looks as though it knew we were coming.” (Those who would invoke an all-but infinite “multiverse” here need to recognize that such ideas are far from scientific, even though lots of scientists are interested in them. Just one specific “multiverse” hypothesis is even potentially capable of an observational check, and if those observations can be made they would be capable only of showing that that particular hypothesis is *not* true.) So, I would not be so quick to move into a one-story model just yet...

Once again (forgive me for starting to sound like a broken record), I think the future of

“science and religion” will lie with those who recognize that (a) the universe makes more sense within a robust theism; (b) science itself (that is, our ability to comprehend nature at all, and to comprehend it in a specific way) makes more sense within a robust theism; and (c) Christianity itself (including its very existence) makes more sense within a robust theism.

Nothing I have said should be taken to imply that one-story Christians are all “creationists” in the Ken Ham sense of that term, although many one-story Christians in modern America are (that was not true in the 1920s). Nor do I mean to imply that one-story Christians are all “creationists” in the Bill Dembski sense of that term (Bill is an “old-earth” creationist). But, one-story Christians *are* “creationists” in the classical sense of that term: we believe that the universe is not self-existent (that is, the universe is not “god,” the core teaching of Genesis One) and that nature did not determine its own nature.

To wrap this up, let me quote from someone who was not at all a Christian believer, as far as I know, the great historian of science Alexandre Koyre, in his book “Newtonian Studies,” p. 114: “The belief in creation as the background of empiricomathematical [sic] science—that seems strange. Yet the ways of thought, human thought, in its search for truth are, indeed, very strange.”

God bless all here,
Ted

NOTE: This dialogue continues on the [forum](#) webpage.

Connie Barlow (January 7, 2011)

I have a Science-and-Religion 101 type of question: I have never understood why anyone who is a full-scale metaphysical naturalist (such as I am) would today be disappointed to learn that no scientist (the word wasn’t even coined back then) — no natural philosopher — was an atheist (or at least an unconfused atheist) prior to Darwin. Indeed, prior to Darwin but post the discovery of the progression of fossils in rock through time, I don’t see how anyone could be even as lax as a deist. For, as soon as extinction was discovered as real (by Georges Cuvier), and as soon as it was discovered that trilobites, Triceratops, and tigers had no overlap whatsoever in the fossil record, a removed deistic God no longer held strength. Thenceforth a deistic God really had to step back in and keep intervening — at least in biological development.

And even with Darwin, though the fact of organic change through time was thenceforth well-established, one could easily doubt whether Darwin’s ideas about exactly how organic change happened were actually robust enough — especially since Darwin changed the heritability side of his argument from edition 1 to 6 of his Origin.

But after Darwin, each time a new discovery was made: Mendelian genetics, DNA, chemicals jolted into amino acids in a tube, evo-devo, and onward, it has become easier and easier, from a biological standpoint, to jettison any role for God.

So, back to my question, why should anyone like myself today be shocked or concerned by a historian such as yourself who turns up evidence that the ancient icons of modern science were not perfect little atheists? Indeed, who among us expresses shock? Who disagrees with your view of, say, Robert Boyle or Newton?

TED DAVIS response to Barlow above (January 7, 2011)

Connie,

I'll have to make this one short, since I have other things coming up very soon (thankfully, you are probably thinking). Shorter than it should be to do justice to your question.

Two points. First, the discontinuity represented by Darwin and evolution—that is, after Darwin one can be an “intellectually fulfilled atheist.” (There were indeed some notable atheists prior to Darwin; Hume was a prominent one.) I agree with that, actually, given the context from which it comes. The first American Darwinian, Asa Gray, who was also the first “theistic evolutionist” in America (at least the first who was “Darwinian”), realized this also. He understood that Darwin makes the design argument less forceful. However, he also realized that the whole picture of the history of life still suggests design—it simply wasn't design in all of the particular contrivances. In other words, he thought that the argument from design had to be different, and might not be quite as forceful, but it was hardly dead. For a relevant essay, see my review of Owen Gingerich's “God's Universe” in the *print* version of *First Things Magazine*, May 2007. You can buy the electronic version [here](#).

As for “jettisoning any role for God,” it all depends (of course) on what it is that God is thought to be doing. My own view is that God does it *all*, and that our perceptions of the regularities God placed in the creation are what we call “laws” of nature (a term that has theological roots, to such an extent that atheist philosopher Nancy Cartwright wants to get rid of that term). God isn't simply the explanation of every thing; God is the EXPLANATION of EVERYTHING. Not exactly out of a job.

Second point. My argument about the close connections between theism and natural philosophy in the *Sci Rev* was not along these lines: “most of those people were Christians; they saw no problems with science; neither should we.” Rather, it was an argument along these lines: “the very same methods that all scientists still use—a combination of reason and experience—came into prominence to a significant degree *because* those people believed that “nature” is a contingent order, created freely by a creator with the power to determine the nature of nature.” This hardly means that one has to be a Christian to use the same methods, but it does mean (IMO) that modern science is going to make a lot sense within a framework of a very robust theism. It also means that, when Dawkins asks, “what has theology ever done for us?” one of the answers can be, “given you the scientific method”; and, when [Coyne says](#) that atheism could be science's contribution to religion, one can show the ironic fallacy of such a claim—as I did in a letter to *Nature* [in response](#) to his.

NOTE: This dialogue continues on the [forum](#) webpage.

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