



Debating Darwin

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Debating theistic evolutionists is not easy. Not long ago it was virtually impossible to have a debate for at least two reasons. Firstly, many churches and organisations felt that debates over origins were divisive and a distraction from their core ministry. Secondly, many leading theistic evolutionists regarded creationism as something of an embarrassment in the church that should not be given credibility and publicity through serious engagement. Such thinking is still present, but there has been far more interaction recently, in part spurred by the Darwin anniversary year in 2009: the public profile of Darwinism is so great that the church cannot ignore it as an issue.

Many of our brothers and sisters in Christ are theistic evolutionists. This is another reason why it is hard to debate. Who wants to cause trouble within the family when we face such great opposition from outside the church? It is particularly difficult to address the issue given that I argue their views are not doctrinal peccadilloes, but (largely unwittingly) a major aberration affecting core Christian doctrine – all this in people whose love and service of the Lord can be far greater than my own.

Finally, the leading theistic evolutionists are accomplished scientists (usually far exceeding any creationist in academic honours) who have spent years developing a coherent theological position. Some creationists underestimate the intelligence and the theological and scientific rigour of theistic evolutionists. What we might imagine to be ‘knock down’ arguments are rarely effective.

I have recently had a number of opportunities to engage with some leading theistic evolutionists on radio, in public debates and in print.¹ This article

is intended to draw some lessons from these opportunities to help us all as we encounter theistic evolution in its various forms.² My aim is not to discuss tactics or debating tricks to help ‘win’ a particular encounter, but rather to set out the general approach that I have found to be effective and also to explain the line of argument usually made by theistic evolutionists. I will be concentrating on theological rather than scientific issues since that has been the focus of the debates in which I have been involved. Finally it should be understood that the audience that I have been trying to influence in these debates are well-educated, Bible-believing Christians, often with negative experiences and expectations of creationists. Alternative approaches might well be more appropriate with a different audience in mind.

What is the debate about?

The focus of the debate will often determine the outcome. My argument centres on the story-line or plot-line of the Bible. This is a true story that takes us from creation to fall and then to the redemption and restoration of creation by Jesus Christ. The conflict with evolution arises because it is giving a different story to the Bible. (Here I am careful to define ‘evolution’ not as ‘change over time’ but the ‘amoeba to man’ history of life on earth). The conflict is most apparent when it comes to death and suffering. In evolutionary history death and suffering have always been present. They are an inevitable part of life – a fact of nature like gravity. The biblical story, I argue, presents death and suffering as a consequence of human sin – unnatural aberrations in a once perfect world. It is only with this understanding of history that the death of Jesus makes sense as

a punishment for sin. If physical death was not a consequence of sin, why did Jesus need to physically die to pay the price of sin? Similarly the resurrection is a victory over physical death. If death was present from the beginning Jesus, in his resurrection, would be conquering an enemy of his own making.

Time permitting, I try to mention two other independent arguments that also express other aspects of the story-line of the Bible and that are in conflict with evolution: Adam as the physical ancestor of all humanity and a global flood. The details of these arguments can be found in my chapter in Finlay *et al.* (2009).

This focus on the story-line of the Bible is more productive than, for example, a detailed exposition of Genesis 1, for a number of reasons:

- Talk of the Bible as presenting a story is increasingly popular today among biblical scholars and theologians – particularly those who are more inclined to theistic evolution and who emphasise the need to appreciate the literary artistry of the Bible. It is therefore rhetorically powerful to counter expectations and show that ideas often accepted by theistic evolutionists actually undermine their own position.
- The arguments I make rest on multiple passages of Scripture with different literary genre, not the interpretation of isolated verses. In other words I am making a *doctrinal* argument. This is extremely important to counter the theistic evolution approach to interpreting scripture.
- What people thought was a debate about genetics or geology is focused



on our understanding of the cross and resurrection – something that is clearly of central importance and relevant to every Christian whether scientifically trained or not.

- The argument about death and suffering touches on very pressing pastoral issues and apologetic problems. If God made the world with death and suffering in place the issue of suffering has become an even greater apologetic difficulty, and it is pastorally problematic to say the least to counsel a cancer sufferer that cancer was part of the world God pronounced “very good”.³ These questions resonate with people and reinforce the message that this debate is not a boring irrelevance.
- The argument is expressed in terms of issues that the Bible talks about directly. In other words the question is not, ‘Is the Bible compatible with evolution?’ – obviously something the Bible does not directly address. Rather, key questions become, ‘Did physical death come from human sin?’, ‘Was Noah’s flood a global event?’, ‘Was Adam the physical ancestor of all humanity?’
- Creationism is usually portrayed by theistic evolutionists as a recent (American) innovation and hence out of step with the mainstream tradition of the church. The approach I take does not seek to defend ‘creationism’ (however defined) but to focus on the specific doctrinal questions noted above. On these issues I am clearly following the historic Christian position. Theistic evolution is desperate to portray itself as mainstream theology but in reality it requires much theological novelty.

Sometimes we can expect too much from a debate. I would be worried if people were convinced of my view too quickly, because they might become unconvinced equally quickly. My aim is for people to go away thinking, ‘There is more to this debate than I realised. There are some big issues I need to think through carefully.’ If they have understood the argument I’m making they will work out for themselves that the Bible’s story is incompatible with evolution.

Obtaining apparently minor concessions (e.g. human beings as special creations, human but not animal death from sin) is significant because they undermine the consistency of theistic evolution in a way that makes it unravel as a coherent and attractive position. The admission that we are indeed giving different accounts of the Bible’s story (Finlay *et al.* (2009, p.83)), is in fact a massive concession because it shows that this is a vitally important debate about central issues. It really matters in evangelism and Christian belief which story is correct.

Theistic evolution responses

One of the greatest frustrations about the response of theistic evolutionists is that there isn’t really a response – or more precisely not a response to the argument I am actually making. It is a policy of (unintentional) evasion as I explain below.⁴ In my experience the only way to expose this is to have a ‘cross-examination’ format as part of the debate that allows one point to be pursued in detail, but obviously this limits the ground you can cover.

Throwing up doubt

Theistic evolutionists focus a lot of attention on how we interpret the Bible, rightly pointing out that an inerrant Bible does

not ensure inerrant interpretation. The problem is that they do not offer alternative interpretations based on careful exegesis but instead a series of strategies to cast doubt on the historicity or meaning of any passage that raises an apparent incompatibility with evolution. For example:

- A great emphasis is given to exploring the literary features and genre of key passages, in particular the early chapters of Genesis. Sensitivity to genre is indeed very important for correct interpretation but their argument rests on the mistaken assumption that the genre limits the type of information (e.g. historical information) that can be communicated. They also mistakenly assume that the presence of literary features in a passage (e.g. parallelism, repetition, figurative expressions) means that it cannot be a historical account.
- The early chapters of Genesis are often compared with other Ancient Near East literature to make the point that Genesis is seeking to correct the theology of other creation myths. This is undoubtedly true, but again it is not clear why this has any relevance in assessing the historicity of the Genesis accounts. In fact, a stronger polemic is achieved if Genesis is also correcting the false *history* of the other creation stories.
- Theistic evolutionists often make statements like: “Genesis 1-3 nowhere states that there was no death before the Fall” (Finlay *et al.* (2009, p.75)). Such statements are clever rhetoric but bad theology. There is much in the Bible that is not explicitly spelt out. The doctrine of the trinity is never explicitly stated, nor are the heretical variants of this



doctrine explicitly condemned. Nowhere does the Bible say that the darkness during the crucifixion was a sign of God's judgement on sin, yet given the rich typology extending right through the Bible of darkness and light it would be strange to argue that this was not a biblical conclusion to draw. As for death and the Fall, the Bible *does* make it explicit that physical death is a result of sin (e.g. Rom. 5:12).

- Meanings of words in unrelated passages are sometimes employed to cast doubt on the meaning of passages that are problematic to theistic evolutionists. For example John 8:51 speaks of death in a spiritual sense, but this unrelated passage cannot be used to negate the clear exegetical evidence that Paul's discussion of death in Romans 5 includes physical death.

These are all essentially negative strategies to create doubt about the meaning of a passage. In effect theistic evolutionists are asking (implicitly or explicitly), 'Is it possible to understand the text or passage in a different way?' The answer, of course, must always be, "Yes." It is *always* possible to (mis-) understand any passage in other ways. But such 'interpretations' do not reflect the author's intention so much as our own presuppositions. To adopt such a strategy to biblical interpretation consistently completely undercuts the Bible's authority. Many cults claiming biblical authority have long argued that texts apparently teaching the deity of Jesus Christ should be 'interpreted' in other ways. Our response is to say their 'interpretation' is *wrong* for multiple, compelling exegetical reasons. Not every so called 'interpretation' is credible.

The place of science interpreting Scripture

By adopting the tactics outlined above theistic evolutionists are not attempting to come up with an alternative better interpretation through a careful weighing of exegetical arguments, but to justify an interpretation *demand*ed by their commitment to evolution. They are usually at pains to deny that science is determining their interpretation of Scripture – they are merely seeking 'harmony' between two sources of revelation. But since they regard evolution as a fact – as much a fact as the roundness of the earth – this belief rules out many possible interpretations. Logically, if Scripture is inerrant (so no writer could have been mistaken in what they say about earth history) and evolution is a fact then anything a writer says that appears to conflict with evolution *must* be 'interpreted' another way. For example, if Paul says death came through sin then by death he must mean spiritual death alone – it *cannot* include physical death. Theistic evolutionists are not opening up another possible interpretation. On this point they are insisting only *one* interpretation can be correct.

The primary commitment to evolution is also evidenced in the arbitrary choices of what should be understood as historical in the early chapters of Genesis. For example, Eve's creation from Adam's rib is metaphorical, but Adam's portrayal as a farmer is historical. These choices are not made on exegetical grounds, but according to what is compatible with the evolutionary story.

Theistic evolutionists justify their approach by arguing that science is merely helping us choose between two or more interpretations that have roughly equal

merit on exegetical grounds (Spanner, 1987, p.57). They cite the way astronomical observations showed Psalm 93:1 was wrongly interpreted to mean that the earth was stationary in space.

It is not a problem for scientific, and indeed other extra-biblical data, to assist in our understanding of the Bible and challenge preconceived ideas. (For example, in Acts 2:29 Peter uses the external observation of the existence of David's tomb to support his interpretation of Psalm 16.) However such data must never impose a meaning that is *alien* to the text. To understand Psalm 93:1 as teaching a stationary earth is bad exegesis since the same language is used of feet in Psalm 121:3 without us subscribing to a doctrine of the immovability of feet. Astronomical observations merely confirmed solid exegetical arguments.

The greatest weakness of the theistic evolutionist position is that their interpretation of passages about sin/ death, Adam and the flood have negligible exegetical support, as ably exposed by Lamoureux (2008) – a theistic evolutionist with a less orthodox understanding of Scripture than those with which I have engaged. Furthermore, as noted earlier, we are not dealing with a few isolated texts peripheral to the Bible's message but many passages which concern central aspects of the Bible's story. Where multiple, independent doctrinal arguments demonstrate an incompatibility between evolution and the Bible's story our commitment to the authority of the Bible means we must be ready to question evolution rather than impose an alien 'interpretation' onto the Bible. If someone claimed to have found the body of Jesus we would challenge their theory. We would not 'reinterpref' the New Testament to

argue it teaches a non-bodily resurrection.

The central point of disagreement with theistic evolutionists is over their commitment to evolution. Unless that is undermined scientifically, biblical arguments alone are unlikely to convince. We need real experts *in the appropriate fields* (of similar scientific stature to the theistic evolutionists) to expose the deficiencies in the evolutionary story of earth history, but we need equally to demonstrate the credibility of an alternative creationist model that is consistent with the story of the Bible. Theistic evolutionists are almost without exception ignorant of recent creationist research. More seriously there is a deeper failure to understand the methodology behind building a creationist model. Under challenge scientifically, theistic evolutionists fall back on the security of the overwhelming scientific consensus that, for example, the earth is old. What they fail to understand is that we will not know if a better (biblically compatible) model is able to explain this same weight of data and more without undertaking a lengthy, expert-led, multidisciplinary research program.

Conclusion

In spite of all I have said above I have been surprised by how much common ground I can share with theistic evolutionists when we have debated. They are often responding to a stereotype of creationism and, sadly, real creationist arguments and approaches with which I am equally uncomfortable. Bad creationist arguments do enormous damage and can be the reason people adopt theistic evolution.

Finally, the spirit in which the debate is undertaken is as crucial as the arguments themselves. A respectful, good-humoured exchange helps to dismantle

unhelpful stereotypes and encourages the audience that it is an issue which will generate more light than heat as they investigate it further themselves. This is not to deny that central issues of the Bible's story are at stake (my presentation emphasises this), but to recognise that most people do not yet understand the debate in this way. With the right approach many could be won over. That is why now is the time for engagement.

References

Finlay, G., Lloyd, S., Pattemore, S. and Swift, D, (2009). *Debating Darwin. Two debates: Is Darwinism true & does it matter?* Milton Keynes: Paternoster.

Lamoureux, D. O. (2008). *Evolutionary Creation. A Christian approach to evolution.* Cambridge: Lutterworth Press.

Spanner, D. (1987). *Biblical creation and the theory of evolution.* Exeter: Paternoster.

Notes

¹ Finlay, Lloyd, Pattemore and Swift (2009)

Some of the audio debates are available on the internet. In date order:

Debate with Denis Alexander 29/11/08: www.premier.org.uk/unbelievable

Panel discussion about the film *Creation* 26/09/09: www.premier.org.uk/unbelievable

Presentation at *God & Darwinian Evolution Conference*, 13/11/09: www.biblicalcreationministries.org.uk/b/index.php/downloads

Debate with Ard Louis, Brighton 15/05/10: www.bethinking.org/science-christianity/creation-or-evolution-do-we-have-to-choose.htm

² 'Theistic evolution' is a label that encompasses an enormous range

of positions. Here I am referring to a position that affirms the inerrancy of Scripture and in which God's work of creation is accomplished through entirely natural processes not needing special intervention at any point. This is the form of theistic evolution adopted by Denis Alexander and many others within the leadership of the influential organisation *Christians in Science*.

³ A major incentive for people to become theistic evolutionists is that their position avoids the apologetic problems of scientifically defending a young earth. However, they have replaced that problem with an even greater apologetic problem of suffering – a point that Denis Alexander seemed to concede on the two occasions I have debated him.

⁴ In addition to the theological areas I discuss below theistic evolutionists often spend a large proportion of their presentations establishing that science is in no way hostile to Christianity – an argument I entirely agree with. The evasion is evident in the assumption that the compatibility of science and Christianity ensures there is no conflict between the Bible and evolution.

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