

THEOLOGICAL BOUNDARIES ON THEISTIC EVOLUTION

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Introduction: Is Theistic Evolution ‘Beyond the Pale’?

I have been asked to address the question of how *theistic evolution* can be articulated in a manner consistent with Christian faith.¹ That is to say, I have been given the task of briefly exploring the theological boundaries on theistic evolution. Before I can do that, however, I must deal with a fundamental objection. Some say that the very *idea* of theistic evolution crosses crucial theological boundaries. ‘Creation science’ clearly argues for the illegitimacy of theistic evolution. ‘Creation scientists’, or better, ‘young earth creationists’ argue that science must operate within the pale of a literally interpreted, infallible text.

The typical young earth creationist line goes something like this. First, the biblical creation accounts are taken to be a literal, (almost) blow-by-blow account of the process by which God created the universe, including the Earth and its human inhabitants, as well as the early history of humanity. In light of that, young earth creationists affirm that creation took place a relatively short time ago (normally somewhere between 6,000 and 10,000 years ago), that all humans are physically descended from the first couple, and that physical death for animals as well as humans entered the world as a result of the sin of Adam. Given that the Bible is inerrant, any account of origins that differs from their account of it is illegitimate, for it subordinates infallible (or inerrant) Scripture to fallible, even sinful, human reason. Let me quote:

They [theistic evolutionists] try to interpret Genesis from our present situation, rather than understand the true Biblical history of the world and the changes that have occurred because of sin. Because they are not building their world view on Scripture, but taking a secular way of thinking to the Bible, they are blinded to the simple answers.

Genesis is the record of the God who was there as history happened. It is the word of One who knows everything, and who is a reliable witness from the past. Thus, when we use Genesis as a basis for understanding history, we can make sense of questions that would otherwise be a mystery.²

While someone who differs from them on these matters, such as those who believe in theistic evolution, may still be a Christian, their view of Scripture is dangerously defective; they are leading others into error, and obstructing many from coming to saving faith in Christ. ‘Theistic evolution’ (and a number of other views, for that matter), are clearly ‘beyond the pale’.³

Are they right? I think not. But to see why they’re wrong, we need to look at what the boundaries are and how they function, and then seek to present a ‘story’ of origins that fits within the boundaries of faithful Christian belief.

¹ The term *theistic evolution* has been criticised by a number of people, both within the camp and without it. Terms such as ‘creation by evolution’, or ‘evolutionary creationism’ have been suggested as better alternatives. I have a great deal of sympathy with these terminological critiques. I will, however, stick with the term *theistic evolution* on the grounds that it is the one most generally used in the debate and so will be the most widely understood term available. Furthermore, other terms tend to be associated with a particular version of this family of beliefs, and so *theistic evolution* is the most general term available. Finally, given that I was asked to discuss theological boundaries on *theistic evolution*, to save confusion I deem it best to stick with *theistic evolution* in the discussion that follows.

² http://www.answersingenesis.org/home/area/tools/cains_wife.asp#f13, By Ken Ham, Jonathan Sarfati and Carl Wieland, Ed. Don Batten; First published in *The Revised and Expanded Answers Book*, Chapter 8; accessed 7/7/2003.

³ Views such as these can be seen in a number of works, such as Henry M. Morris, *Kings of Creation*, San Diego: CLP, 1980; Henry M. Morris (ed), *Scientific Creationism*, El Cajon: Master Books, 1974; Nigel M. De S. Cameron, *Evolution and the Authority of the Bible*, Exeter: Paternoster, 1983; John Ashton (ed), *In Six Days: Why 50 Scientists Choose to Believe in Creation*, Sydney: New Holland, 1999.

Boundaries (or Controls) and Christian Belief.

Before we can do that, however, I need to spell out what I mean by ‘boundaries’. When I speak of ‘boundaries’, I have in mind the notion and function of ‘control beliefs’, as derived from the work of Nicholas Wolterstorff. His central contention is that “the religious beliefs of a Christian scholar ought to function as *control beliefs* in his devising and weighing of theories.”⁴ All scholars have certain beliefs which function as a control on their theorizing: what makes a certain body of scholarship Christian in character is that this control function is performed, in part at least, by Christian beliefs.⁵ He states, ‘*Christian* scholars are not only fully justified but even obligated to govern their own theorizing so as to assure that what they accept will be compatible with authentic Christian conviction.’⁶

These control beliefs function in two main ways. Firstly, they identify beliefs that are to be rejected as conflicting with key beliefs. That means identifying what the key beliefs are and how prospective ideas are to be assessed in light of them. Here it is important to note what Calvinist philosophers have called the ‘principle of proximity’—the closer theories get to the ‘heart’, the more influenced they will be by our fundamental commitments, and so it is more likely that they need to be sifted carefully.⁷ Hence there tends to be little influence of specifically *Christian* control beliefs on physics or basic biology; there are no Catholic frogs—or Reformed ones for that matter.⁸ However, there are theories of humanity and society that clearly either conflict or fit well with Christian control beliefs. An example of the former, in my view, is (hard) socio-biology, which reduces all morality and social relationships to perpetuation of the selfish gene.⁹

Secondly, they identify beliefs that are to be explored or tested as possibly ‘comporting well with’ key beliefs. For instance, views that see many human behavioural patterns as having long-term, group ‘survival value’—in part just because they are part of God’s ‘design plan’.¹⁰ Let me stress: control beliefs are not themselves a *foundation* for scientific theorising; rather they function as a *control*. There are a number of reasons that control beliefs are not best conceived as foundations for theorising. First, scientific theories do not generally directly arise out of Christian commitment—after all they are not *entailed* in Scripture. Second, theories that fit well with Christian control beliefs could be devised by non-Christians; and third, different Christians can come up with completely different theories even though their *Christian* control beliefs are substantially the same—witness debates over ecology within Christian circles or, for that matter, this debate over ‘creation and evolution’. Control beliefs are *touchstone beliefs*, not *foundation stones* for our theorizing.

⁴ Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Reason Within the Bounds of Religion*, 2nd ed; Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1984, 70; “Integration of Faith and Science—The Very Idea”, *Journal of Psychology and Christianity* 3/2 (Summer 1984) 12–19.

⁵ Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Until Justice and Peace Embrace* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 166; “On Christian Learning”, *Worldview and Social Theory*, ed. P. Marshall, et al (University Press of America, 1986) 56–80.

⁶ Wolterstorff, *Until Justice and Peace Embrace*, 170.

⁷ The heart is here understood to be the centre of our personal and ‘religious’ identity. At its most fundamental level, it speaks of where we stand in relation to God, whether our lives are committed to him and his purposes and, hence, to what extent our fundamental being is distorted.

⁸ The term ‘catholic frogs’ is taken from Jean Pond, ‘Catholic Frogs’, <http://www.leaderu.com/science/frogs.html>, accessed 10/1/03. I should note, however, that I do not share her view that science and Christian faith operate in independent spheres.

⁹ For a discussion of such views in relation to morality, see Peter Singer, *The Expanding Circle: Ethics and Sociobiology* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1981) 3–53; *How are we to live? Ethics in an age of self-interest* (Melbourne: Text, 1993) 84–105, 129–153. For a refutation of his reductionist conclusions, see Andrew Sloane, ‘Singer, Preference Utilitarianism and Infanticide’, *Rethinking Peter Singer: A Christian Critique*, Downers Grove: IVP, 2002, 68–94.

¹⁰ This is alluded to in Sloane, *ibid*, 84–85.

Having looked at the nature of ‘boundaries’ or control beliefs and their role in theorizing, let me now turn to the specific question of the controls that operate on Christian discussions of theistic evolution.

Key Controls on Theistic Evolution

There are, in my view, key controls on the *content* of accounts of theistic evolution. The first of these is belief in God as sovereign creator of all things. Here, it seems to me, there is a range of views acceptable, such as Howard Van Till’s view of the ‘fully gifted creation’ as an expression of the sovereignty of God’s creative purposes.¹¹ Others are problematic, such as Barbour’s version of panentheistic process theism, which, in my view, is inconsistent with key affirmations of the sovereignty and transcendence of God.¹² Second is a commitment to the authority of Scripture understood in its historical, cultural and theological context. As I will argue below, I see no conflict between this commitment and acceptance of theistic evolution. In this I differ from Plantinga, for instance, who seems to see it as in serious conflict with central affirmations of Scripture.¹³ Third is belief in the dignity and sinfulness of humanity. Again, there are a number of accounts of evolutionary origins of humans that are consistent with these core affirmations. I will present one in my little story below. It is possible, of course, to present an account that is inconsistent with at least one of these notions, as Claus Westermann does in his exegesis of Genesis 2–3, where he presents sin as being inherent to human existence as we come from the hand of God.¹⁴ He believes that the account belongs to the ‘timeless realm of myth’. As such there was no “fall”: rather, sin is inherent to human existence as we come from the hand of God. This, it seems to me, is inconsistent with (well justified) belief in human moral responsibility, and raises insuperable problems for theodicy. Fourth, we need to affirm both the value and the limitations of scientific investigation. Science is not inherently value-neutral, but is imbued with the values of those who practise it. While I do not agree with the implications that Plantinga draws from this in relation to evolution, I think he is right to see that evolutionary science also operates at a metaphysical and moral level, and that we, as Christians, need to assess it *as science* in part in relation to its ‘fit’ with core Christian beliefs. Nonetheless, it seems to me that it is a very powerful tool for understanding and manipulating our environment, and also helps us to understand our own formative history.

There are also, I believe, controls on the *manner of our discussion*, a matter frequently forgotten by all parties in the debate. The first, and most important of these is godliness in debate: that is to say, we need to demonstrate Christian virtues such as charity in our discussions with those with whom we differ. One way this can be expressed is by respecting difference rather than seeking conformity and control. Of course, this needs to operate within certain theological limits; we must not assume, however, that those who differ from us do so because they have transgressed the theological boundaries - whether that be a concern for foundational certitude and intellectual safety or vigorous engagement with scientific and other disciplines. Now, it is true that young earth creationists often transgress this theological boundary in relation to theistic evolutionists, particularly the manner in which their ‘opponents’ are seen to be, in effect, enemies of the gospel who prefer to bow to human wisdom rather than accept the authority of God and his word. It is equally true that theistic evolutionists often transgress this theological boundary in relation to young

¹¹ See, for instance, Howard van Till, ‘The Fully Gifted Creation’, *Three Views on Creation and Evolution*, ed. J.P. Moreland and J.M. Reynolds, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999, 159–218.

¹² Ian Barbour, *Religion in an Age of Science*, London: SCM, 1990, 218–270. See also his inadequate Christology, 209–214.

¹³ See Alvin Plantinga, ‘When Faith and Reason Clash: Evolution and the Bible’, *CSR*, 21.1 (1991) 8–32, and the responses by Howard van Till, Pattle Pun and Ernan McMullin, and the rejoinder by Plantinga, on pages 33–45, 46–54, 55–79, and 80–109.

¹⁴ Claus Westermann, *Creation*, London: SPCK, 1974, 20, 26; *Genesis: A Practical Commentary*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987, 22–23.

earth creationists, effectively (or actually) accusing them of intellectual obscurantism or deceit. It seems that some believe that it is not possible to be fully rational and also a young earth creationist. Here I agree with Plantinga that while it is possibly (probably in my view) wrong that the earth is relatively recent in origin, and so on, ‘One need not be a fanatic, or a Flat Earther, or an ignorant Fundamentalist’ in order to believe that it’s true.¹⁵ And so I disagree with, say, McMullin, who thinks that one does.¹⁶ And in part that disagreement is because of how I see such virtues as charity operating in Christian discussions. For the disagreement is not about the substantive issue of whether young earth creationist views are correct; I think they are manifestly false. Rather, the disagreement is about how we as Christians are to conduct conversations about matters on which we disagree.

A second control is a commitment to identifying and affirming the core, that is, central Christian truths, such as those I identified above. It seems to me that the core is reasonably clear and includes belief in God as sovereign creator and us and all other things as dependent creatures, the Scriptures as God’s authoritative word, and so on — roughly, those central truths found in the Apostles’ and Nicene Creeds. That core, however, does not include particular views on how God created all things, or on how the Scriptures function as God’s authoritative word. On such matters, I believe, the core is silent. Which brings me to a third, and related control, namely, allowing for liberty around the edges. This means that, having identified those core beliefs of the Christian, we need then to identify non-central issues and give each other liberty in relation to them. Such liberty extends to the particular views on how God created all things that we hold, and how we see Scripture functioning as God’s authoritative word. I think it is eminently possible to demonstrate Christian virtues such as charity and respect for difference in our conversations on controversial topics—as a number of us in ISCAST discovered recently in an e-mail exchange with a young earth creationist.

‘But You Might Say...’—Dealing with Objections.

A number of questions can be raised in relation to my views. First, creation scientists might ask, ‘what about the Bible?’ The concern here is that accepting evolutionary accounts of origins conflicts with Scripture and arrogantly subordinates it to sinful human wisdom. Let me quote:

The entire Bible bears witness that we are dealing with a source of truth authored by God (2 Timothy 3:16), with the Old Testament as the indispensable 'ramp' leading to the New Testament, like an access road leads to a motor free way (John 5:39). The biblical creation account should not be regarded as a myth, a parable, or an allegory, but as a historical report... The doctrine of theistic evolution undermines this basic way of reading the Bible, as vouched for by Jesus, the prophets and the Apostles. Events reported in the Bible are reduced to mythical imagery, and an understanding of the message of the Bible as being true in word and meaning is lost... The doctrines of creation and evolution are so strongly divergent that reconciliation is totally impossible. The theistic evolutionists attempt to integrate the two doctrines. However, such syncretism reduces the message of the Bible to insignificance.¹⁷

How do we respond to these concerns? Well, this is of course, well-worked terrain.¹⁸ Before I turn to the central issue, let me repeat an observation made by Anthony Campbell.¹⁹ Young earth

¹⁵ Plantinga, 15.

¹⁶ Ernan McMullin, ‘Plantinga’s Defense of Special Creation’, *CSR*, 21.1 1991. pp. 55–79.

¹⁷ Werner Gitt, ‘Dangers of Theistic Evolution’ *Creation Ex Nihilo*, 17.4, 1995, pp. 49–51; <http://www.answersingenesis.org/docs/1305.asp>, accessed 7/7/2003.

¹⁸ See the excellent paper by John Thompson, ‘Genesis 1–3: Science? History? Theology?’, <http://www.iscast.org.au/pdf/ScienceHistoryTheology.pdf>, accessed 10/1/03.

¹⁹ Anthony Campbell, ‘Evolutionary Theory and Biblical Discourse’, *Concilium 2000/1: Evolution and Faith*, ed. B. van Iersel, *et al*, London: SCM, 2000, pp. 92–101.

creationists are only *selectively* literalist in their approach to Scripture. After all, they do not tend to engage in a *literalistic manner* with those creation accounts that use the imagery of cosmic conflict to present God as creator (see, for instance, Ps 74:13–17, Ps 89:9–12). That, however, is not the central issue, but a passing observation. It seems to me that the basic answer to these concerns relates to questions of the theology and interpretation of Scripture, noting that the debate is over the *interpretation* of Scripture, not its *authority*. And on such matters, Christians can legitimately disagree. Let me give a brief excerpt from something I wrote a while ago.

The primary hermeneutical issue is, “what does the writer use the text to say?” A related question is how do the historical and canonical context of the text influence our understanding of this? Creation scientists *assume* that the writer used the text to make clear assertions about the means God used in creating the cosmos and life. Thus there is a direct correspondence between the words of the text and what the writer is affirming by way of those words.

Is that necessary? Not if there are better explanations of those features of the text which are normally taken to be assertions of scientific fact. Let me give an example: the 6/7-day framework. The pattern of days serves a literary function, ordering the account into two sets of three days: on days 1–3 God “divides” the cosmos (ordering the realms of existence) and on days 4–6 he populates the realms he created. Thus the framework has a clear *literary* function, and tells us important things about God and his creation. Of course this does not mean that it *cannot* also serve to assert that the cosmos was made in six 24-hour periods. It does mean it *need not*; it may serve to mark the writer’s assertion that this is an orderly cosmos, made by an orderly and trustworthy God, and questions of temporal ordering and duration are not of interest to him. To assert that an ancient author must share our concerns is anachronistic and fails to do justice to the historical context of the text and its significance for understanding the author’s intentions. Indeed to insist that Genesis 1–3 be taken as statements of God’s means of creation is, paradoxically, to place ourselves over the text by saying it has to be read in a way that conforms to our expectations of truth. This is *not* to say that faith and science are divorced, rather, it is to say that the understanding of their interaction put forward by Creation Science may be mistaken.

The key theological issue, I believe, is the nature of the Bible’s authority and its relation to our interpretation of key texts. Creation Science tends to conflate the acceptance of the Bible’s authority and trustworthiness and an acceptance of a particular (literal) interpretation of (portions of) it. This, it seems to me, is a theological category error. We affirm that the Bible is authoritative and trustworthy in all it affirms. But this means that we must understand what it *affirms* in order to know what we are to believe and obey. The disagreement is *not* over biblical authority *per se*, but over particular interpretations of the Bible and their truthfulness and authority.²⁰

Others are concerned that this approach leaves ‘no room for God’. The concern here is that, if evolution gives a scientifically full and satisfactory account of the origins of species, and so on, then there is nothing for God to do. This concern is seen in some scientific views, such as those of Richard Dawkins.²¹ He argues that science and theology are alternative *explanatory theories*, hence, whatever science explains is taken away from theology. Science and theology are at war, and science is winning. Thus, evolutionary accounts of origins *replace* theological accounts of God creating the cosmos. It also takes a theological form, as seen in views such as those of Stephen Meyer.²² A commitment to *intelligent design* requires that God does something special that cannot be explained by natural phenomena in bringing life, new species and humanity into existence. Hence, if there is a fully naturalistic explanation, then it replaces a theological or philosophical commitment to divine agency.

²⁰ Andrew Sloane, ‘Genesis and Origins’, <http://www.iscast.org.au/pdf/GenesisAndOrigins.pdf>, accessed 1/10/03. I should note that in the quote ‘creation science’ corresponds to what I call here ‘young earth creationism’.

²¹ Richard Dawkins, ‘Reply to Poole’, *Science and Christian Belief*, 7 (1995) 45–50.

²² Stephen Meyer, ‘Qualified Agreement’ Modern Science and the Return of the God Hypothesis’, *Science & Christianity: four views*, ed. R.F. Carlson, Downers Grove: IVP, 2000, 127–174; c/f Norman Geisler and J. Kerby Anderson, *Origin Science*, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987.

It seems to me that the simplest, and most useful response to this concern is to note that it is an unnecessary *angst*: divine agency is not an *alternative* to physical descriptions of natural phenomena; rather, in many clear instances God works as personal agent *by way of* natural processes. The analogy with rain and snow is here instructive. We believe that God brings rain and snow and achieves his providential purposes in so doing (e.g., Is 55:10–11, Matt 5:45). However, I also believe that they are the result of complex meteorological phenomena, and that we can give a (more or less) comprehensive scientific account of these phenomena. Does that mean that God doesn't do it? Why should we think that? Now, let's apply the same logic to creation-by-evolution. We believe that God created all things, including us and in so doing achieved his creational purposes. However, I also believe that they are almost certainly the result of complex evolutionary processes, and that we can give a (more or less) comprehensive scientific account of these processes. Does that mean that God didn't do it? Why should we think that?

Telling a Faithful Story—Theistic Evolution Within the Pale.

Let me close by giving an account of theistic evolution that is, in my view, consistent with core Christian beliefs, an account that focuses on emergence and God's purposes through humanity by way of what I call 'cosmic colonialism'. By way of reasonably well understood evolutionary processes, primates developed into 'proto-humans', with a corresponding increase in brain complexity and the ability to communicate and order the world. At some point these capacities developed to the point where these creatures are able to enter into interpersonal relationships. God then chose a 'first pair' or community, and entered into the process of 'spiritual uplift', to borrow a term from David Brin's *Uplift* series.²³ By this I mean that God entered into relationship with this couple or community in such a way as to evoke properly interpersonal relationships with him as well as with each other. The image of God is, then, a (partially) emergent phenomenon and either consists or is expressed in *interpersonal* and communal relationships, self-awareness, communication, a stewardship relationship with the world, and properly responsive *relationship with God*.²⁴ God provided the early human community with all they needed to flourish, as well as a blueprint of his purposes for humanity and the world—this, I take it, was the nature and purpose of the garden of Eden. God's intention was that they should be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth so as to subdue it, that is, act as 'colonists of the image of God', bringing the rest of the world into line with God's Edenic blueprint. I think it plausible that one way God might have intended this to happen was for the first true 'spiritual' humans to be the agents through whom God would 'infect' other proto-human communities with the image of God. That is, as those who were able to communicate, enter into relationship with others, and so on, when they encountered proto-human communities they would be able to induct them into properly communal practices, and introduce them to the God who made it all possible. That was not to be.

For no sooner did the first humans receive these gifts than they abused them. The result was a distortion in all the relationships originally blessed by God and the loss of the intimacy with God that had at first characterised human existence. This fundamental alienation, along with their exclusion from the life giving presence of God, and the culmination of this process in physical death, was the death about which God had warned them. The first humans, then, were expelled from the presence of God as 'colonists' of both image and sin: that is, they not only bore the knowledge of God and his purposes for humanity and the world, they also bore the alienating power of sin. So

²³ David Brin's *Uplift Saga* projects a universe in which sentient races 'uplift' presentient client species to full sentience using a combination of genetic and cultural-linguistic manipulation. The notion of uplift is drawn from these works; the precise nature and process is, of course, quite different as I have imagined it here. For the *Uplift Saga*, see David Brin, *Sundiver*, Bantam, 1980; *Startide Rising*, Bantam, 1983; *The Uplift War*, Bantam, 1987; *Brightness Reef*, Bantam, 1995; *Infinity's Shore*, Bantam, 1996; *Heaven's Reach*, Bantam, 1998.

²⁴ I would argue that the first and last of these are most important—namely, interpersonal and communal relationships, and relationship with God.

then, when they encountered proto-human communities, they not only brought communication, the ability to enter into relationship, and so on, but a fundamental distortion of these abilities such that they reflected not only God's good purposes, but the alienating effects of sin. The result was that sin and death became a pervasive phenomenon in all human communities—so, total depravity, or universal human sinfulness.

Is that the way it happened? I have no idea. Is it possible? I think so. Is it *plausible*? Well, it seems to me that it is a plausible way of presenting an evolutionary story that is consistent with the biblical story. It recognises the fundamental theological shape of the early chapters of Genesis, and other key texts, and takes seriously the major concerns of the text in terms of God's relationship with us and the world, and our perversion of his good purposes in sin. As to whether it is scientifically plausible, I am not in a position to judge. Nonetheless, whether this particular story is satisfactory or not, I think I have shown how theistic evolution can be articulated within the boundaries of orthodox Christian faith, staying true to our central convictions both in what we say and how we say it.

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