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Christianity and Evolution — Seeing the Problem

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This month marks the 200th anniversary of Charles Darwin's birth, but the debates over science and religion have only intensified over the last two centuries. In particular, evolutionary theory poses a direct challenge to the Christian faith — if the dominant evolutionary theory and classical biblical Christianity are to be taken at face value.

Numerous efforts to bridge this divide have been offered, and the occasion of Darwin's 200th birthday has brought out still others. Writing in the February 16, 2009 edition of *USA Today*, Pastor Henry G. Brinton of Fairfax Presbyterian Church in Virginia argues that science and religion do not conflict. Indeed, he argues that they do not even deal with the same questions.



He writes:

In my experience, it is better to keep them separate and use them to answer two very different sets of questions about creation: “how” questions and “why” questions. Science answers the questions of how life has evolved on earth, while religion answers the questions of why there is life. When I open my Bible to Genesis, I don't look for scientific information about the structures of life. I read it as a faith-based explanation of why life exists and why we are to care for it.

Later in his essay, Brinton argues that science deals with “things” and religion deals with “words.” While Brinton's point is not particularly well developed at this point, he appears to affirm a form of theological anti-realism, in which theology takes refuge in mere linguistics.

In any event, Brinton's argument is very similar to the theory offered by the late Harvard paleontologist Stephen Jay Gould. Gould, like Brinton, argued that religion and science do not deal with the same questions. Gould named his theory “NOMA,” for “non-overlapping magisteria.” As Gould argued, both science and religion have an intellectual authority, but these never overlap in asking the same questions or covering the same intellectual territory.

In Gould's words:

Science tries to document the factual character of the natural world, and to develop theories that coordinate and explain these facts. Religion, on the other hand, operates in the equally important, but utterly different, realm of human purposes, meanings and values—subjects that the factual domain of science might illuminate, but can never resolve.

So science deals with “facts,” but religion, Gould asserted, deals with something other than facts.

Gould's theory of NOMA has been thoroughly criticized from both sides, and for good reason. The hard fact is that science and religion do often overlap, and that overlap is where the smoke of controversy is to be found. If science and religion did not overlap, all this controversy would be over mere misunderstandings, but this is hardly the case.

Brinton argues that science answers the “how” question whereas religion answers the “why” question. The most obvious problem with this dichotomy is that “why” and “how” are not so easily separated.

The second problem has to do with how Brinton must then reduce the scope of what the Bible claims to be true. He argues that Genesis represents “a faith-based explanation of why life exists and why we are to care for it.” But Genesis claims far more, and the most important missing part here is the special creation of human beings as the only creature made in God’s own image.

In a [recent review essay](#) in *The New Republic*, Professor Jerry A. Coyne of the University of Chicago, an ardent defender of evolution, argues against the intellectually dishonest maneuver of claiming to have solved the controversy while falling far short of that accomplishment. As he explains:

The easiest way to harmonize science and religion is simply to re-define one so that it includes the other. We may claim, for example, that “God” is simply the name we give to the order and harmony of the universe, the laws of physics and chemistry, the beauty of nature, and so on.

But, as Coyne recognizes, this is not the God of the Bible. The God of the Bible is not “simply a name we give to the order and harmony of the universe.” Coyne shows intellectual honesty when he asserts that, for a reconciliation of science and religion to be possible and meaningful, the religion must involve theism.

Brinton likes the argument offered by Francis Collins, formerly director of the Human Genome Project. As Brinton explains, “He sees no contradiction in accepting that humans are the product of evolution and believing that God decided evolution would be the method by which humans would be created.”

The first of several problems with this argument, however, is that the mainstream doctrine of evolution denies that evolution can have any fixed goal at all. Nothing *had* to happen. Collins, others would object, has stacked the deck, so to speak. If God supposedly chose to create human beings through evolutionary processes, then evolution is not really about natural selection at all.

We can eliminate the conflict between evolution and Christianity if we redefine God to be something far less than the Creator he reveals himself to be in Genesis. If we dispense with Genesis as revealed truth, we have no problem declaring a truce between evolution and Christian belief.

Steven Waldman of [Beliefnet.com](#) makes that point well in a [recent column](#). He argues that Darwin’s challenge was not so much a challenge to the idea of God, but to the authority of the Bible. As Waldman proposed, “evolution is not really a challenge against God or Christianity even, it’s a challenge to Biblical Revelation.”

The conflict between Genesis and evolution is not merely over the “how” as opposed to the “why” of creation. Evolution presents a direct challenge to the entire story-line of the Bible. Efforts to resolve this challenge generally involve a misunderstanding of biblical Christianity, a misunderstanding of evolution, or a misunderstanding of both.

