Book Review

Robert C. Bishop, Larry L. Funck, Raymond J. Lewis, Stephen O. Moshier, and John H. Walton, *Understanding Scientific Theories of Origins: Cosmology, Geology, and Biology in Christian Perspective* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2018), xxiv + 659pp., \$75.00 (hbk), ISBN: 978-0-8308-5291-8.

Understanding Scientific Theories of Origins: Cosmology, Geology, and Biology in Christian Perspective, by five faculty members of the evangelical Wheaton College, is remarkably good. Or perhaps, rather less condescendingly, one should say that this book by five Wheaton College faculty members is unremarkably good. It is fair to say that, finally, historians of the science and religion relationship, like Ronald Numbers and the late David Lindberg of the University of Wisconsin at Madison, have debunked that invention of the late nineteenth century, the so-called 'Warfare Thesis'.¹ This is the claim that science and religion are locked in mortal combat and that science is about to or just has delivered the mortal blow. That favorite of Darwin's bulldog, Thomas Henry Huxley: 'Extinguished theologians lie about the cradle of every science as the strangled snakes beside that of Hercules' (Huxley 1894: 52). Today it is a favorite of the New Atheists. Richard Dawkins in the *God Delusion* (2006) makes the claim about every page and a half. (I exaggerate. Every two pages.)

It just isn't true. From the Middle Ages, at least, if anything science has been the offspring of religion. This continued through the Scientific Revolution. Never forget that Nicolaus Copernicus was a minor cleric, who died in good standing in his Church. Although it is true that late in life Charles Darwin became an agnostic, this was mainly on theological grounds. He could not stomach the thought that his father and brother were doomed to hell fire because they were non-believers. The *Origin of Species*—struggle for existence (Reverend Thomas Robert Malthus), adaptation (Reverend William Paley), division of labor (Adam Smith and the Invisible hand), tree of life (Genesis)—is virtually a poster child for Darwin's Anglican childhood. After the *Origin*, despite some well-known confrontations—Huxley versus Bishop Wilberforce for example—believers got on a side, quickly. Paradigmatic was Charles Kingsley, the author of that childhood favorite the *Water Babies*. He went around telling everyone that it was more Christian to be an evolutionist than not. Apparently, he was a big favorite of Queen Victoria and family.

There was of course one big exception, the evangelicals of the American South, joined increasingly by lower-middle-class folk in the big cities of the north, threatened as they felt by the numbers of immigrants, Catholic and Jewish. They hated evolution and for a hundred years kept up the drumbeat. It represented all the ideas and

1. See Lindberg and Numbers 1986.

philosophies of the industrial, modernist, science-loving North, and was opposed down the line. This led to the famous Scopes Trial of 1925, and later to what became the bible of the second half of the last century, *Genesis Flood* by biblical scholar John Whitcomb and hydraulic engineer Henry Morris. Scientific Creationism was on the way, later to morph into the more user-friendly Intelligent Design Theory.

What then should we expect from faculty at Wheaton College, with good reason generally considered the leading evangelical liberal arts college in America? I now know why there is good reason for this assessment. *Understanding Scientific Theories of Origins* is uncompromising in its commitment to a biblically based Christianity. It is also uncompromising in the belief that being made in the image of God carries deep responsibilities, not the least to try to understand this world that God has created and in which we find ourselves. I am a non-believer—more an agnostic than an atheist. I can truly say that I learnt from nigh every page.

We are taken systematically through the whole story of origins. We start with the origin of the universe, and then of planet Earth. Next we cover the scientific claims about the origin of life, and the subsequent evolution up to the forms we find today. Humans expectedly get detailed treatment and then a final summing up. Again and again, the authors tell us that they do not see a conflict between the Christian religion and science. It is rather between the Christian religion and (what they would regard as) the faith commitment of 'metaphysical naturalism'. This is the philosophy behind the New Atheist attack on religion of all kinds. The world is seen as governed by unbroken eternal regularities, laws, and there is nothing more. There is no deity, within and without. The Wheaton authors regard this as their opponent, their foe, and throughout the book their aim is to show that nothing in their religion clashes with modern science, properly understood.

Take a particularly pertinent example, Adam and Eve. The authenticity of Adam and Eve is crucial to the Augustinian Christianity to which American evangelical religion belongs. Adam, particularly, sinned and as a consequence all humans are tainted by original sin. The grave effects of this could be lifted by the death on the Cross of God, in the form of Jesus. A blood sacrifice. So how do you handle the fact that modern paleoanthropology—the science of human evolution—tells us that there never was a bottleneck of under about ten thousand humans and sin sure didn't come in at once in one generation? Adam and Eve, if such there were, had parents like the rest of us—sometimes nice and sometimes nasty.

First and foremost, none of the science is fudged. There are detailed, accurate accounts of methodology—particularly how today molecular biology is brought to bear so fruitfully on problems of evolution, especially problems of human evolution. You get no pretense from these people that at one point it all got down to a mere couple of humans. More importantly, one never has a sense that our authors have a dog in that fight, meaning that if we cannot get it down to two then perhaps we can get it down to twenty or to a hundred or a thousand or whatever. The science must stand as science not as science twisted to the needs of St Augustine—who incidentally would be appalled if anyone did that. (He is pretty good on the subject of the light coming on the first day but the sun not turning up until the fourth.)

So what about Adam and Eve? We are given four options, none definitive, and the reader—the student—is led through the strengths and weaknesses of them all. One, for instance, is that ten thousand years or so ago, one group of humans was given a divine revelation and Adam and Eve are archetypes for the group. I presume the

point is that from now on sin gets a new meaning. You are not just being mean to your mum and dad—typical teenager behavior—but disobeying your Creator, who takes a much sterner view on these matters. Frankly, I am not sure that I am particularly convinced—but then, I wouldn't be, would I? As one raised a Quaker, I would recommend a turn from atonement theology and a look at incarnational theology (of Irenaeus of Lyons), where the death on the Cross is less sacrifice and more example of disinterested love. No need for Adam and Eve at all.

There are many reasons today why outsiders like myself look upon much that is done and believed by Evangelicals today—their support of various movements and figures, for example—with an emotion close to horror. Can this really be following in the footsteps of Jesus of Nazareth? This book goes a long way towards restoring my faith. I would love to have taken their course. I would probably have disagreed with about 90 percent of it. But isn't that what education is all about?

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