

Presenting both sides of the story

A review of
Where Darwin Meets the Bible: Creationists and Evolutionists in America
by Larry A. Witham
Oxford University Press 2002

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There are a multitude of books that in some way deal with the creation/evolution controversy. Many of them cover much of the same ground, and are written for non-scientists. Few of them adequately cover the controversy itself, or review how the scientific debate intersects with science and the problem of theodicy. In my judgment, though, this is perhaps the best work by a secular press that covers the non-scientific aspects of the creation/evolution controversy. By use of the interview format and frequent references to published sources, the author accurately assesses the controversy from a secular viewpoint (i.e. he does not presuppose any religious or theological conclusions) in this highly referenced book (40 pages of footnotes). He does not cover in an in-depth fashion the scientific evidence either for creation or evolution, but objectively evaluates the *conflict* between the two worldviews, helping the reader to understand the relevant issues by frequently citing authorities on both sides of the conflict. Most important, he cuts through the propaganda so often encountered in this issue.

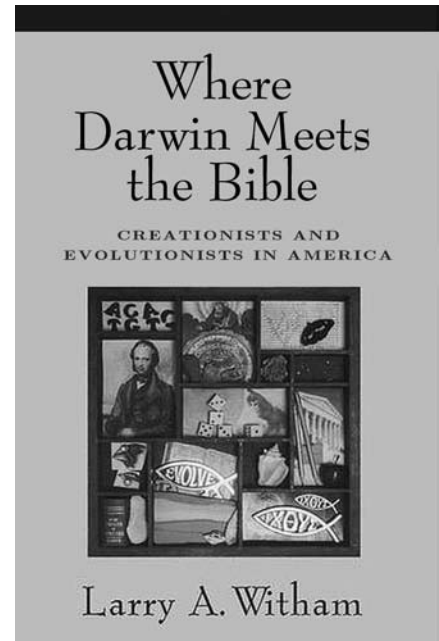
For example, Witham documents that science has been in 'polite turmoil over whether Darwin's mechanism of "Natural Selection" can explain how all things came to be' (p. 3). This work could have an enormous impact in helping both the public and those on

the sidelines to understand the conflict. The information in this book requires the reader to be somewhat knowledgeable about the issues, and able to objectively evaluate the material before the author's case becomes clear.

Witham presents the facts, and it requires some discernment on the part of the reader to understand the *implications* of those facts. Like a knife, his points cut through scores of false misconceptions, stereotypes, and deliberate misrepresentations that typify those in the Darwinist camp. Yet this book has earned the endorsement of everybody from a previous co-author, Edward Larson (the Pulitzer-prize-winning author of two books on the controversy) to professor emeritus David Raup of the University of Chicago, and even Eugenie Scott (atheistic executive director for the National Center for Science Education, the primary organization whose sole purpose seems to be to ensure that the controversy is *not* taught objectively, and indeed, is not taught at all, but only the evidence in favour of a Darwinian worldview is presented in schools, colleges, and everywhere else).

Increased conflict

Witham concludes that the conflict will likely increase in the future. One reason is because the courts' ruling 'on what is secular and what is religious is truly a tangled question' (p. 268). This issue is problematic in view of the courts' past rulings against 'viewpoint discrimination', which 'have given religion a secular standing as a kind of free speech deserving neutral treatment'. Witham concludes that, in spite of these court rulings, established science will 'bitterly oppose' any discussion of the other side. As biologist Kenneth Miller says 'viewpoint discrimination is what science is all about'. The example Miller



gives is 'you cannot teach a flat-earth viewpoint', but he does not say what he means by this statement (it probably is an *ad hominem* argument). My response is, I thought that the roundness of the Earth was demonstrated by teaching what effects would result if the Earth were flat (the 'ship coming over the horizon' being the most common example).

Witham asks, is the reason why evolutionary science 'bitterly opposes' the other side because it is 'a religious view or plain wrong'? One problem is that 'new ideas' (such as Lynn Margulis and Dorion Sagan's new theory of evolution) challenge the foundation of Darwinism. Can Margulis's anti-neodarwinism view be taught in the public schools? Many persons equate her symbiogenesis idea with the flat Earth, and others feel that it is a brilliant solution to the many problems with Darwinism, yet no controversy exists as to its propriety in public schools.

Non-overlapping magisteria

Witham reviews possible solutions to the debate, including NOMA (non-overlapping magisterial) most famously proposed by Stephen Jay Gould. That is, science is about facts, religion is about beliefs, and the two ways of knowing can exist side-by-

side, separate, and in peace. Although this position is ‘happily welcomed’ by most scientists, theologians, and much of the general public, the problem is that religion can more easily be separated in the lab and the sanctuary than in society, where they ‘actively mingle’ (pp. 3–4). Witham shows that this compromise is illogical and that ‘the creationists reject ... evolution’s higher claims on nature—that the human mind, for example, evolved from aimless molecules’ (p. 4). The fact is, as stated by one of the most prominent living evolutionists, Ernst Mayr, that evolution affects ‘almost every component in modern man’s belief system’ (p. 5). More specifically, how can ‘biblical faiths live with science’s rule that God may not intervene in nature? Prayer is often a request that God do just that’ (p. 5). This is why the so-called theistic evolution solution is an oxymoron.

Note that this is also a misunderstanding of natural law. This is a *description* of observed repeatability of nature, not a real entity. Historically, the founders of science regarded natural law as a reflection of a God of order who *upholds* His creation (Colossians 1:15–17). Miracles are *additions* to natural law.

Witham notes that the Supreme court ruled in 1987 that

‘teaching a variety of *scientific* theories about the origins of humankind to school children might be validly done with the clear secular intent of enhancing the effectiveness of science instruction’, and concludes that ‘remarkably, in the years since, no one in science has proposed what that “variety” of theories might include. One-size-fits all Darwinian evolution rules’ (p. 268).

Compromising clergy

An important area of Witham’s discussion is the contribution that clergy have made in furthering the Darwinist-atheistic world view. Witham notes that natural science concludes that ‘no natural law may be broken’ by God

or by any one else (p. 268), and that ‘Theologians have had to respond by putting God back further and further into the realms of transcendent mystery’. Yet by capitulating to naturalism, Witham concludes, the church ignores the fact that the ‘high rates of belief in prayer and miracles’ in America presume that ‘God interferes in nature’ (p. 269). Yet theologians have either ignored this conflict, or have lost their nerve and, as a result, ‘believing scientists (who know the ambiguity and soft spots in nature)’ and not theologians end up trying to put the divine back into discussions about reality (p. 269).

Witham notes that the problem in most all cases is not a debate over the facts. An example he gives is when the human genome sequencing was completed in June of 2000. Caltech president David Baltimore stated that this ‘should be, but won’t be, the end of creationism’, whereas theists concluded that the enormous amount of information in the genome (that, and the fact it turned out to be more complex than once believed) raised new and major doubts about the ability of the Darwinian mechanism to produce this information (p. 269).

Evolution vs religion

Although it often is denied by religious leaders and many others, Witham persuasively argues that when ‘theism meets evolution ... rivalry is a likely product’ and that ‘polarization seems inevitable and perennial’ (p. 269). Compromises such as theistic evolution do not solve the conflict, and the public is often aware of this. To support this conclusion, Witham quotes Dr Manger of the University of Arkansas who stated ‘scientists have lost every battle involving evolution since the Scopes trial in the arena of public opinion’ (p. 269). This is supported by polls in which over half of all Americans conclude ‘we need more faith and less science.’ Fully 64% of teenagers conclude that, if a scientific and religious explanation disagree, they are ‘more likely to accept the religious answer’ (p. 269). Witham adds that scientists

‘look across the United States and see legions of churches promulgating non-scientific doctrines’ (i.e. theism, miracles, prayer, etc.) (p. 269). Yet evolution is still dogmatically presented in the schools because theism, including even Intelligent Design, is ‘embattled by a battery of superior social forces, especially the lawyers of the American Civil Liberties Union, surely the most effective anticreationist cadre of all’ (p. 270). He concludes that evolutionists spent multi-millions of dollars and have ‘won the support of judges and the cultural elite and, since 1968, has been successful in silencing all attempts to outlaw criticism of evolution in public schools’ (p. 270).

Witham adds that ‘creationists are further marginalized as the evolutionists alone receive federal dollars. Evolutionists control the accrediting agencies, research centers, and nearly all the universities’ (p. 270). Witham concludes that, as a result of these factors, belief in God has been ‘sidelined at research universities and in the courts’, and ‘every department can preach except religious studies’ (p. 270).

Although ‘evolution is the view officially held in research universities and science academies the world over ... the argument is unsettled for the masses, from Muslims in Indonesia to Roman Catholics in Latin America’ (p. 6). As a result of attempts by theists to secure a place at the table of discussion and in the classroom ‘the federal courts put evolution virtually beyond criticism’ (p. 7). Yet, according to evolutionist Eugenie Scott, theists ‘claim’ truth as conscientiously as Darwinists and, she admits, ‘there is truth on both sides’ (p. 270). This cannot be admitted in the schools, though.

Evolution underpins atheism

Witham notes the creationist’s claim that evolution has an affect on belief is supported by the fact that ‘most evolutionary biologists’ are generally ‘agnostics, as Darwin became, or atheists’ (p. 13). The fact is, Darwin’s ideas ‘altered the whole tone of one’s

mind' and evolution 'paved the way for the demise of the preferred belief of Victorian Anglican religion, God as designer' (p. 15). Witham notes that early evolutionists, including Darwin and Thomas Huxley, illustrate this point quite well.

Some evolutionists are unabashedly open about their motivations. In the words of Cornell professor William Provine, 'evolution is the greatest engine of atheism' and that, as a result of evolution, attempts to 'join evolution with God are futile' (p. 23). Provine also concludes that 'the public should know that evolution is a slippery slope to disbelief' (p. 23). Nonetheless, he feels the debate should go on in the classroom because, as a practical matter, you cannot 'shut up a half or three-fourths of the kids in your class' (pp. 23–24).

In the chapter on evolution and morals, Witham touches on some of the major concerns in this area. One that illustrates the profound implications of the origins issue is: 'MIT psychologist Steven Pinker's assertion that women have been driven by genes to kill their children, and the argument by ... biologists that rape is compelled by male biology, not by a so-called need for power'. Many persons are motivated by their Darwinism to be heavily involved in politics and social change. A good example of this is the humanist manifesto that supports 'abortion, euthanasia, and homosexual families, but it also endorses international entities to redistribute wealth' (i.e. Communism or Socialism). The document was signed by several leading Darwinists, including E.O. Wilson and Richard Dawkins (p. 247).

The U.S. Senate also expressed its doubts about the ability of evolutionism to explain everything when it 'almost unanimously urged teachers of biological evolution to "prepare students to distinguish the data and testable theories of science from philosophical or religious claims that are made in the name of science"' (p. 9). The problem is, 'the two sides don't generally talk to each other', and thus 'there's no decent devil's advocate' (p. 10). The problem

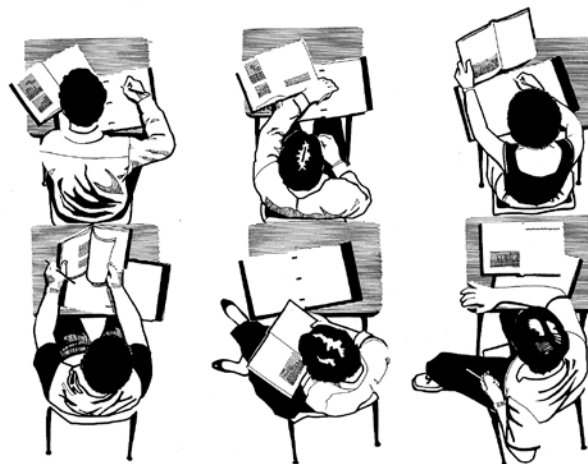
actually is that the evolutionists do not want creationists to be part of the dialogue, they only want to dialogue with each other.

Witham also does a good job summarizing creationist credentials and arguments. In short, creationists agree with Bill Gates when he said 'DNA is like a computer program, but far, far more advanced than any software we've ever created' (p. 9). They also agree with Celera Genomic's top computer scientist who 'mused' that the complexity of DNA 'suggested "design"' (p. 9) because 'there's a huge intelligence there'. In Darwin's words, evolution 'will never be capable of a strictly scientific proof. No more can the opposite doctrine of supernatural creation, and therefore the main point to insist on now is toleration, and no dogmatizing' (p. 16).

Evolution irrelevant to most biological research

The message that Darwinists convey to the public is often very different than what they recognize as true among themselves. They state to the public that, 'nothing in biology makes sense except in the light of evolution', yet most scientists can 'conduct their work quite happily without particular reference to evolutionary ideas' (p. 43). One 'notable aspect of natural scientists in assembly is how little they focus on evolution. It's day-to-day irrelevance is a great "paradox" in biology' (p. 43).

Witham also covers the evolutionists' side, such as the fact that evolutionists 'are loath to display publicly their internal divisions'. An exception is a challenge by mathematicians at Philadelphia's Wistar Institute of Anat-



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omy and Biology that 'drew evolutionists of some note'. The result of the conference was 'the mathematicians and the biologist agreed to disagree' (p. 37). In short, the mathematicians believed that, in contrast to the evolutionists, it 'seemed improbable that the mere shuffling of genes could yield such combinations as a DNA molecule of the human brain, or move through populations and produce dramatically new species' (p. 37).

Conclusion

The fact that presenting both sides may convince many students to reject the Darwinist side is a major motivation for the almost fanatic efforts by Darwinists to ensure that only one side of the controversy is taught. Eugenie Scott, in contrast to the empirical literature (and the experience of most teachers), argues that only pure unadulterated evolution should be taught (and should be taught as fact) because 'using creation and evolution topics for critical-thinking exercises in primary and secondary schools is virtually guaranteed to confuse students about evolution'. Her real concern is that teaching both sides 'may lead them to reject one of the major themes of science' i.e. Darwinism (p. 23). In this she is probably correct.