

Theistic evolution—a greater fairytale for mankind

A review of
*Evolution from
Creation to New
Creation: Conflict,
Conversation, and
Convergence*
by Ted Peters and
Peter Hewlett
Abingdon Press,
Nashville, TN, 2003

David Stevens

Recent worldwide media articles on Intelligent Design, in particular in science and school textbooks, have brought the whole creation-evolution debate into the public arena in a fresh way. A recent contribution to this debate is *Evolution from Creation to New Creation* by Ted Peters and Martinez Hewlett. Peters is Professor of Systematic Theology at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, California, and a noted Lutheran theologian. Martinez is Emeritus Professor in the departments of Molecular and Cellular Biology at the University of Arizona, a noted scientist in his specialist fields, and is a committed Roman Catholic.

Although their book discusses views across a broad spectrum from atheistic evolution to creationism, they do so as a background to supporting their own thesis that theistic evolution balances the ‘conflict’ implied in their book subtitle, while moving toward a ‘convergence’ of thought, as they see it.

The book has some value in that the authors attempt to be reasonably even-handed in describing the background to evolution, and presenting the development of the spectrum of views with considerable clarity, thus making their arguments quite understandable to a broad audience.

Theology or science—modern role reversal?

However, although they write on science, theology and philosophy as an integrated system, their position only reflects the post-Enlightenment view, where science is given the paramount role in deciding the truth about origins. Prior to the Enlightenment it was theology that prevailed (the ‘queen of science’, as in knowledge in general).

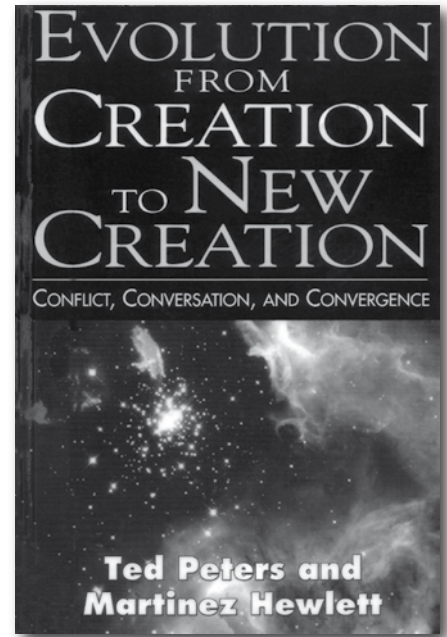
In our times science, theology, philosophy, politics, personal living, etc. are all treated separately. This contradicts Scripture wherein we are not only created in God’s image, but we are seen as ‘whole’ persons in a theocentric universe, indeed as a ‘new creation in Christ’. While the authors are to be commended for trying to at least bring science and theology into a common paradigm, there remains the failure to address a true totality of our personhood. This is a particular failing of Christianity as it has been affected by classical Greek philosophy where mind/spirit was elevated and matter denigrated. Other religions, even animistic ones, do not fall into that trap.

The book’s primary focus is upon creationism, intelligent design, theistic evolution and the various streams of atheistic Darwinism, dealing with the writings of many of the main protagonists from these main schools of thought.

War, really?

‘Is this a war between science and religion? No. It may look like it. Indeed a battle is taking place. Yet, it would be a mistake to describe it as a battle between natural science and the Christian faith’ (pp. 17–18).

This approach seems to beg a serious question. Certainly the statement lines up with the authors’



‘convergence’ focus in this book, but as much as possible the authors practise ‘appeasement and avoidance’ regarding the very real scientific and theological issues that others have raised.

Helpful diagrammatic depiction of views

This reviewer, in response to the authors’ approach, also approached this book from a theological and philosophical angle rather than a scientific standpoint. In this regard, their diagrams depicting the range of views on their wide spectrum were helpful (figure 1). These depicted the range of views from atheism, through deism and intelligent design, to creationism, with their attendant philosophical positions. The various graphics presented philosophical descriptions together with the names of the major protagonists. These ranged from Morris to Darwin and Huxley, Teilhard de Chardin (one of many prominent Roman Catholic scholars up to the present who hold a theistic view of evolution), Aquinas, Aristotle and a seemingly endless list of non-creationist scientists and authors: a very broad overview of the people and views were presented.

Some of the implications of a Darwinian worldview are presented,

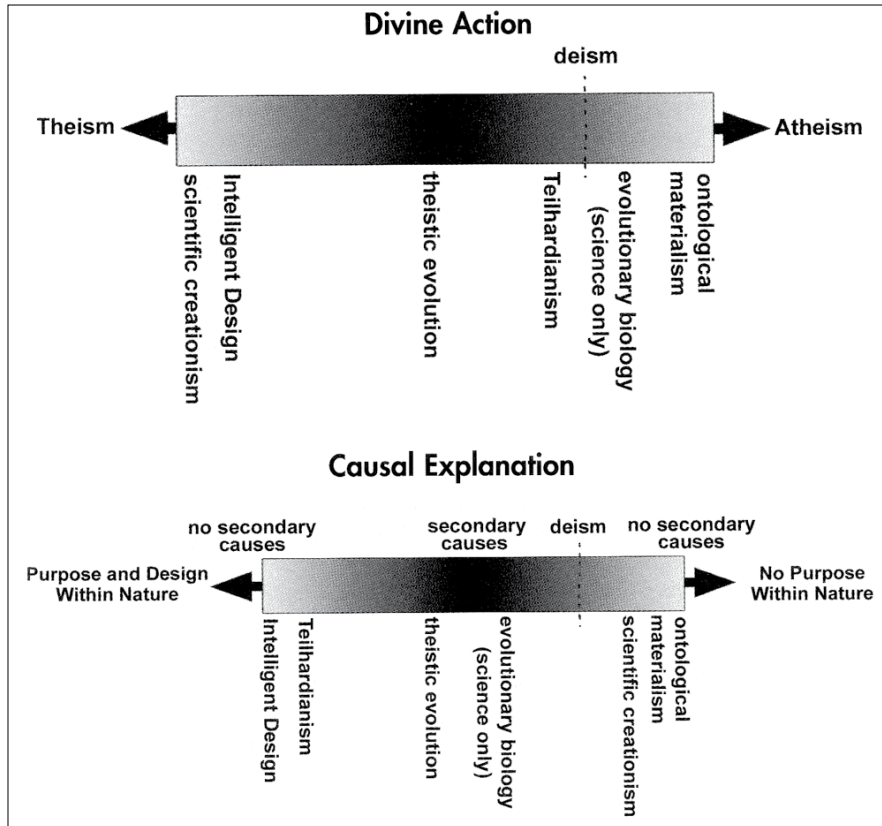


Figure 1. This diagram is central to the book’s theme (p. 31). It shows that the authors are thoroughly confused/ill-informed about scientific creationism, especially in their spectrum of causality/purpose. Or are they deliberately trying to malign this view?

including Galton’s rather bizarre eugenics movement; Spencer’s social Darwinism; Wilson and his sociobiology; and the many subscribers to evolutionary psychology. The results of some of these non-biblical approaches to society, including racism and the Holocaust, are briefly touched upon in a non-approving manner.

Creationism

When addressing the question, ‘Are creationism and fundamentalism the same thing’, the authors claim ‘No’:

‘Central to fundamentalism is biblical authority based upon inerrant inspiration. If this is the criterion by which we measure, then contemporary creationism is not fundamentalism, because creationism appeals not to the authority of the Bible but to scientific evidence to substantiate

its claims’ (p. 71).

The authors then try to justify their statement with passing reference to the Scopes’ Trial (in 1925) and various writings of Henry Morris (d. 2006).

Can you really be a creationist and a scientist?

However, one has to wonder just how much of the writings of modern biblical creationists the authors have read. Dr Morris and others have made it very clear that they start with the authority of Scripture. Certainly Dr Morris has repeatedly stated his adherence to the inerrancy of the Bible. Perhaps the authors limited their reading mainly to *Scientific Creationism*, which was published in 1974 in the context of the debate in the USA over teaching creation in public schools. To get ‘under the radar’ of the US High Court’s ridiculous misapplication of ‘separation

of church and state’, Dr Morris wrote this book to deal only with the scientific evidence in an attempt to demonstrate that creationism could be taught without dealing with its religious implications. The strategy failed. This is like the ID movement’s approach, which is also likely to fail for the same reasons. But Dr Morris made it abundantly clear in almost everything else he wrote that he argued from the basis of biblical authority and the argument revolved around *interpreting* the data within a biblical framework versus a materialistic (uniformitarian) one.¹

‘The contemporary controversy between evolutionary theory and scientific creationism does not center around day-age theory or gap theory. Rather, it centers around speciation through natural selection and related matters’ (p. 79).

Again one has to ask how much they have read of modern biblical creationists’ writings, where the six literal creation days and the corollary of a young earth are pivotal issues. Again, Dr Morris, whom they cite, has written at length on this matter. Indeed the pivotal book that many cite as kicking off the modern creation movement, *The Genesis Flood* (Whitcomb and Morris, 1961), was a polemic for a young earth.

The authors focus on *creatio ex nihilo*, among certain other key criteria, as a cornerstone of the creationist viewpoint. They say that a distinction between ‘macroevolution’ and ‘microevolution’ distinguishes creationism from other viewpoints. However, they themselves have no enthusiasm for this distinction and they posit the apparent impossibility of millions of creatures fitting onto Noah’s Ark as an objection to the creationist position. But again, they show little evidence of having engaged the creationist literature (e.g. Woodmorappe’s *Noah’s Ark: a Feasibility Study*).²

After commenting on Ussher and Scofield’s ‘young earth’ positions (but Scofield promoted the gap theory,

which supposedly accommodated an old earth), we read this amazing statement—‘Biblical literalism does not require creationists to support a young earth; rather, affirming a young earth is optional.’ Again, how much have they read? They certainly did not get that from Henry Morris.

The question of whether or not creation scientists are ‘real scientists’ is presented with plenty of evolutionists supporting the ‘no’ case. They ignore the true worth of creationists’ science degrees, experience and work, which includes many of the founders of the various fields of modern science (Newton, Faraday, Pascal, etc.)

Intelligent Design

The vexed question of ‘purpose in design’ is raised and the authors seem to concede that an evolutionary approach fails to provide any meaningful answer to this important question.

They note that this is more a matter of philosophical debate. Travelling through Aristotle, Aquinas, Paley, Phillip Johnson, Behe and Dembski, the authors seek to provide an acceptable answer. Locating the concept of intelligent design on their graphical depictions of ‘Divine Action’ and ‘Causal Explanation’ spectrums, the various major ID proponents’ views are briefly discussed. The authors demonstrate that the intelligent design concept is not to be classified with scientific creationism, in spite of the majority of evolutionists attempting to do so, and some ID proponents explicitly arguing for a Designer. They say,

‘For the critics of Intelligent Design theory, confining ID within the domain of scientific creationism makes it easier to dismiss ID, since the methodology of science ceases to be at stake’ (p. 114).

Theistic evolution

Taking up almost half of the entire book, Peters and Hewlett then place their arguments before the reader in favour of joining the ‘club’ of theistic evolutionists. They acknowledge that,

in this theory, views range from intelligent design theory through to deism (on another of their helpful Divine Action spectrums). The authors pose ‘Five Questions for Theistic Evolutionists’. Others holding different viewpoints may well seek answers to quite different questions.

The questions dealt with are: deep time, natural selection, common descent, divine action and theodicy. It seems to this reviewer that the first three questions are questions pertaining to history (or historical science), and the remaining two pertain to theology and/or philosophy.

‘... we will see how difficult it is to reconcile theology with all five items. What makes it possible for theology to incorporate evolution is usually an appeal to *secondary causation*. This appeal admits an autonomous world of nature replete with law and chance that can be thoroughly studied by scientific means. God, as primary cause, is not subject to scientific analysis because science is methodologically limited to perceiving secondary causes’ (pp. 118–119).

(It seems more to demonstrate how difficult it is to try and ride two diverging horses at the same time.)

Irreducible complexity—their stumbling block

The apparent end purpose and the complexity of the vast array of natural phenomena, such as the eye, brain and their inter-relationship, basically, of the whole natural order, appears to provide the theistic evolutionist with very serious problems. Frequent use of the Greek word *τελος* (*telos*), usually used to describe ‘finally’, ‘utmost’, ‘accomplished’³ (depending on use of noun or verb form), highlight their dilemma. After all, why would an essentially ‘perfect’ (complete) and complex natural feature such as the eye or brain, ‘evolve’ unless there was not only a purpose but also a Designer? Being an irreducibly complex mechanism,

needing all component parts to be present and integrated to serve any useful function at all, where is the science to answer this conundrum?

Even the authors seem to concede this point when they quote from Ayala, ‘Teleological explanations are necessary in order to give a full account of the attributes of living organisms’ (p. 119).⁴ For this religious philosopher there appears to be a serious flaw in the logic applied when *design* apparently is not meant to imply a *Designer*.

The authors make frequent reference to well-known theologians (e.g. B.B. Warfield and Arthur Peacocke), who were casualties of their liberal times, in a misguided attempt to support their cause. Indeed, Warfield includes John Calvin as, in their opinion, almost certainly a theistic evolutionist, although Calvin predates any Darwinian concept by many years. Quoting Warfield’s *Evolution, Science, and Scripture*, pp. 56f, we read ‘Calvin doubtless had no theory whatever of evolution, but he teaches a doctrine of evolution ...’ (p. 125). However, Warfield was clearly grasping at straws here to give his own departure from orthodox credibility, because Calvin made it clear that he accepted a straight-forward historical view of Genesis and rejected the naturalistic notion of deep time, which is pivotal to evolutionary ideas. Indeed, Calvin’s words are reflected in those of the Westminster Confession: that God created ‘in the space of six days’.⁵

Does theistic evolution undermine God’s essential attributes?

Appearing to argue that God is both omnipotent and omniscient, while at the same time arguing that He is ‘self-limiting’ in allowing creation to ‘evolve’ appears to be self-defeating and illogical. ‘Chance’, ‘randomness’ and ‘mutations’ are presented as contributing to the notion of a God who self-limits so that evolution may take place. This concept underlies a significant portion of the theistic argument presented.

Another feature of this part of their argument is that ‘this creation is still under way, not yet complete, not yet what God in Genesis would deem “very good”’ (p. 158), hence the term ‘new creation’ used in the book’s title.

How can a series of *chance* evolutionary events bring about a creation that God Himself describes as ‘very good’.⁶

Following a confusing line of thought about how we should interpret the creation story detailed in Genesis, we read, ‘Augustine nearly approached such a schematization when wrestling with the question: Does creation out of nothing take place in time or in eternity?’ (p. 164).

The authors’ somewhat soft approach to the ‘day-age’ view of Genesis (pp. 79–81), and also the curious ‘gap theory’ (pp. 72–73), indicates that this is certainly ‘much ado about nothing’ because they seem to allow for anyone to choose their own creation story (except creationism, of course, which is treated fairly negatively).

Theodicy question remains unresolved for theistic evolutionists

Finally, the question of theodicy is addressed, which plays an intermittent but important part in their construct of the debate.

‘One of the temptations for theologians when offering a premature reconciliation of evolutionary science with Christian theology is to concede that violence, suffering, and death are merely natural and hence value-neutral. This concession is too much. Just because such things are natural does not make them God’s will’ (p. 171).

‘We must begin with what we do not know. What we do not know theologically is why violence, suffering, and death have had to play such a role in the creation up to this point’ (p. 172).

They do not mention the

remainder of Genesis in which the Fall is discussed. Their only ‘solution’ to this crucial theodicy problem for theistic evolution is to attempt to attribute some vague ‘Theology of the Cross’, as understood by the authors. While commendably subscribing to an eschatology in which pain and suffering and death will be no more, there is a complete absence of solutions to theodicy. Their response?

‘Our answer to the theodicy question is not a logical one. We do not invoke twists of logic to justify God for creating a world of struggle with survival of the fittest and all its accompanying waste. Rather, we point to God’s promise of resurrection and renewal’ (p. 173).

Perhaps this explains their support in the theory of a ‘created co-creator’ (pp. 173–174). That human beings are capable of using the resources available to us from the whole of creation and changing those materials into something else, as in manufacturing and art, does not provide a satisfactory support to ‘*imago Dei*’. It is not a creation of the same order and therefore is not a valid comparison, and yet this concept too is advanced in support of theistic evolution.

Conclusion

A worthwhile read to gain a summary insight into the range of theories being debated and their proponents, with useful graphical depictions of the various positions—with the caveat regarding the poorly researched treatment of the young-earth creationist position. The book’s main thesis and conclusions are neither theologically nor philosophically convincing, as the ‘God of evolution’ described in this book logically has neither the omniscience, omnipotence or even planning ability to accomplish a creation in accordance with the whole of Scripture. Their view of God is at variance with the orthodox understanding of His divine attributes and nature. Although

grappled with, the critical problem of theodicy remains unsolved for the authors’ preferred position, theistic evolution.

References

1. See, for example, Morris, H.M., *The Bible is a Textbook of Science*, *Bibliotheca Sacra*, Oct. 1964, <www.icr.org/home/resources/resources_tracts_tbiatos>, 4 Dec. 2006.
2. Or many other sources, such as the relevant chapter in the widely-distributed *Answers Book* by Batten, Ham, Sarfati and Wieland, 1999 (Master Books), or web articles that deal with the same question, such as: <www.creationontheweb.com/arksize>.
3. *Vine’s Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words*, Vine, W. E., Thomas Nelson Publishers, Nashville, TN, pp. 356f., 1997.
4. Ayala, F.J., Darwin’s Evolution: Design Without Designer; in: Russell, R.J. *et al.* (Ed.), *Evolutionary and Molecular Biology: Scientific Perspectives on Divine Action*, Vatican City State, Vatican Observatory Publications, Berkeley Centre of Theology and the Natural Sciences, p.101, 1981.
5. See Sarfati, J., Calvin said: Genesis means what it says, *Creation* 22(4):44–45, 2000; <www.creationontheweb.com/calvin>.
6. Genesis 1: 31.