

Dembski's god not worth finding

A review of
*The End of Christianity:
Finding a Good God
in an Evil World*
by William A. Dembski
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Andrew Hodge

William Dembski and how he thinks

Dr Dembski is a highly intelligent and accomplished graduate in mathematics and philosophy of several prominent secular and non-secular institutions, effectively guiding the public advance of Intelligent Design (ID) since the mid 1990s. His previous offerings have shown the mathematical impossibility of chance or natural law to produce the design of the creatures we have on Earth, instead proposing the necessary existence of an intelligent designer. This designer has all the capability for design, but in the past ID has not identified this entity as the God of the Scripture, preferring instead to call him 'god' without the attributes of truth, credibility, and trustworthiness accorded Him in the Bible.

The Intelligent Design movement has produced much that is scientifically supportive of the creationist concepts of 'complex specified information' and 'irreducible complexity', but Dembski has also used his considerable philosophical talent to flesh out the theological bases that the science of ID wishes to stand on. This book is the next step in that process.

No mention of a spiritual dimension

One does not have to be a scientist, mathematician or philosopher to assess

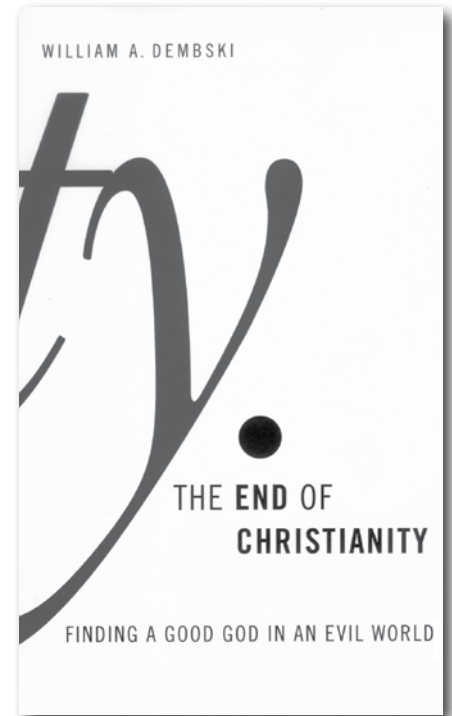
whether Dembski's theology is right or not. All one has to be is a lover of God's Word, applying it to all aspects of life, and living in a personal relationship with Him. All scriptural Christians have the equipment to do this. Dembski omits any reference to his own personal relationship with God and therefore the reader is uncertain who he believes he is looking for.

The Introduction wisely opens with a discussion of worldviews and how our presuppositions influence how we assess our surroundings and how we should live in them. The tone is set in the very first sentence: "We inhabit not just a physical environment but also a moral environment." Period. No spiritual dimension.

Presuppositions

He defines his own presuppositions as a *mental environment* (p. 1) which determines "what we find reasonable or unreasonable, credible or incredible, thinkable or unthinkable". He differentiates mental environment from *worldview* by using the example of the Barna survey on the divorce rate of born-again Christians (Introduction, footnote 3). This survey purported to show that the divorce rate among those defined as 'born-again' was "as prevalent as elsewhere in the culture". This has been soundly refuted.¹

Dembski argues that in spite of the fact that Christians regard marriage as sacred (their worldview) they see no problem with divorce because it is prevalent in their culture (their mental environment). He has not appreciated that being spiritually born-again involves a fundamental change in the way all life is seen and experienced—the Christian worldview is not just the Christian's 'mental environment' but is a paradigm shift of darkness to light, death to life, "all things are become new" (2 Corinthians 5:17). Scriptural Christians regard marriage



as sacred because that is how God has decreed it from creation onward (Genesis 1:27 and 2:24, cited by Christ Himself—Matthew 19:3–6). As we shall see, according to both his mental environment and his worldview, Dembski finds it unthinkable that billions of years should not exist.

The problem of the existence of evil

Dembski considers that atheistic philosophers have a major problem explaining why evil exists (pp. 3–4). Their negative short-term quick-fix is to resolve this by relieving God of His existence—when the Judge of evil disappears, evil becomes irrelevant. But he also points out that atheists regard "belief in a God that does not exist as the root of all evil".²

Therefore his challenge with *The End of Christianity*

"... is to formulate a theodicy that is at once faithful to Christian orthodoxy (thereby underscoring the existence, power, and goodness of God) and credible to our mental environment (thereby challenging the neo-atheists [such as Richard Dawkins] at their own game)" (p. 4).

As Dembski will argue, all the evil in the world originated with man. The Scripture is clear that every man has no choice but to inherit Adam's sin nature, therefore being spiritually dead from the moment of physical conception. Victory over evil is impossible from such an unrighteous base—it can only come from outside by salvation in the perfection of Christ—which is what makes the gift of the gospel such Good News.

Dembski's take on this is that "humanity's restoration and Christ's ultimate triumph over evil results from the *sound belief* that divine goodness is perfect [emphasis in original]", and that "The end of Christianity, as envisioned in this book, is the radical realignment of our thinking so that we see God's goodness in creation despite the distorting effects of sin in our hearts and evil in the world" (p. 11).

This unscriptural view elevates Dembski's distorted thinking to the same level as the victory which comes only in Christ.

Sinners are arsonists

In "The Reach of the Cross"—chapter 1—Dembski uses a useful analogy of sinners being arsonists who not only started the fire originally but who keep wanting to light them (using James 3:5–6 as justification—chapter 1, footnote 20). He claims that "God permits this fire to rage ... so that when he rescues us ... we can rightly understand the human condition and thus come to our senses" (p. 26).

The scriptural view of how we "come to our senses" is not by the experiencing of sin (allowing the fire to rage)—which is in fact only a continuation in our natural state of spiritual death—but by the supernatural call to repentance of sin that God desires of each one of us. Having agreed with God that we are indeed dead in sin and incapable of change (for example 2 Corinthians 7:10; Luke 13:3; 2 Peter 3:9), we cast ourselves on His mercy and He applies the supernatural remedy of salvation entirely by His grace, and judicially based on the payment for sin on our behalf paid by Christ on the Cross.

Dembski is right in that "The point is to fix a broken relationship between God and humanity" (p. 26). For a scriptural Christian—one who takes the Word of God literally in its historico-grammatical plain sense—this broken relationship is caused by man but can only be fixed by God.

Where evil comes from

"Evil's Origins"—chapter 2—opens with a conundrum that Dembski finds difficult. He accepts that "Mainstream Christian theology used to explain the origin of evil as follows: Evil results from a will that has turned against God" (p. 27).

- Then he plays a mind game:
- God created everything including the will of man;
 - a good God would only create a good will;
 - how can a good will turn against God and create evil?

He concludes by asserting that "the problem of evil starts when creatures think God is evil for 'cramping their style'" (p. 28). Dembski finds this view "entirely traditional. At the same time, it no longer sits well with our current mental environment" (p. 29).

Since the Fall, all humanity is conceived in Adam's image in the sense that every one automatically inherits Adam's sin nature. We all prove this by sinning and by our ultimate physical death. We are servants to sin (Romans 6:16, 20); therefore human will is *not* naturally free—from conception, not from when creatures think God is cramping their style—and is *always* twisted by our inherited sin-nature.

"Tracing the World's Evil to Human Sin"—chapter 3—reviews orthodox and non-orthodox views, and concludes that: "I will argue that



Sketch by Paul Gustave Doré

Neither Dembski's 'sound belief in divine goodness' nor 'radical realignment of thinking' can triumph over evil, only the actual crucifixion of Christ the Son of God .

viewing natural evil as a consequence of the Fall is entirely compatible with mainstream understandings of cosmic and natural history" (p. 37).

By this he means the necessary billions of years of evolution. Because his worldview/mental environment accepts billions of years *and* some statements in that excellent textbook, the Bible, Dembski needs to play the mind games required to resolve the two. For scripturally, one cannot have both, and Dembski's only avenue is to eisegete the Word of God; for the so-called science of evolution (at least that part supposedly supporting billions of years) is too important to him to be able to do otherwise.

The seriousness of sin

"The Gravity of Sin"—chapter 4—correctly opens with the view that God cannot will evil to exist, for His will is holy and cannot act against itself. Therefore evil arises from the will God placed in His creation.

"The essence of evil is rebellion of the creature" (p. 43). True. Then the mind-game:

“The point of natural evil in the theodicy I am proposing is not merely to assist us in acquiring an intellectual or practical understanding of the sort that schools are typically designed to give their students. The point, rather, is to get our attention, to impress on us the gravity of sin, and, most significantly, to bring us to our senses and thereby to restore our sanity ... Students at a school need to be trained and cultivated. Inmates of an insane asylum need to be cured and delivered ... Sin has rendered us insane” (p. 45).

Sin has certainly made us “insane” when those descended from Adam are compared with Adam’s pre-Fall state. But Scripture does not support Dembski’s reason for sin being expressed in our lives. Expression of sin is the normal outworking of our inherited sin nature. The longer it goes on the *more* degraded we become. Sin is synonymous with spiritual death (which is separation from God) and death does not have *any* capacity to appreciate or acquire spiritual life. The more we are involved with sin the *less* we appreciate how bad it is (1 Timothy 4:2; Ephesians 4:17–20). As an estimate of how bad sin is, the cost to the Trinity of providing Christ as a substitutionary sacrifice is astonishing, even when looked at from our finite level.

Dembski’s view of Scripture

Dembski says he takes the view that “the Scriptures are authoritative and accurate” (p. 51), but there is no doubt that his view is heterodox when compared to standard historical Christian orthodoxy. His kick-in point for taking the Scripture literally is Genesis 12 where Abraham appears on the scene (pp. 169–171).

°His reason for this is:

“[Orthodoxy] presupposes that all evil in the world ultimately traces back to human sin. For this understanding of evil to be plausible within our current mental environment therefore requires an explanation of how natural evil could precede the first

human sin and yet proceed from it ... But first we need to see why the traditional view that all evil, both moral and natural, traces to human sin used to seem eminently plausible. The short answer is that Genesis used to be read as plain history, and therefore no pressing reason existed to doubt the traditional view” (p. 46).

The “current mental environment” forces Dembski to doubt the traditional view and not accept Genesis as history. He makes his position clear:

“Young earth creationism presents a straightforward chronology that aligns the order of creation with a traditional conception of the Fall: God creates a perfect world, God places humans in that world, humans sin, and the world goes haywire. In this chronology, theology and history march in sync so that the first human sin predates and is causally responsible for natural as well as moral evil. But what if the universe is 13 billion years old? What if the earth formed 4.5 billion years ago? What if unicellular life got started after the planet cooled 3.9 billion years ago? What if multicellular life dates from 600 million years ago? In that case, the bulk of natural history predates humans by billions of years. In that case, for hundreds of million [*sic*] of years, multicelled animals have been emerging, competing, fighting, killing, parasitizing, torturing, suffering, and going extinct. Given such a past, young-earth creationism’s harmony of theology and history appears unsupportable. Natural history as described by modern science therefore appears irreconcilable with the order of creation as described in Genesis” (p. 49).

Science and theology

But what if God is right and billions of years is wrong? This is a view that is *equally* scientifically valid—one opinion regarding historical facts versus another’s regarding the

same facts. It is not that answers to Dembski’s questions are not available or scientifically wrong—they are just not *acceptable* to him, because his faith in billions of years as an explanation of origin prevents him from having faith in anything else. He is willing to accept a ‘Christian’ label but will not accept Scripture as it is written. This is the same as rejecting the God that authored it. Dembski is therefore a Christian atheist, in that he totally accepts the atheist view of Earth history, but rejects God’s historical account of it. If he ever had a Christian worldview, he has discarded it.

However, scriptural Christians should not reject the rest of the book on this account. It is an excellent example of the mind-games that are required to reconcile the plain meaning of Scripture with a faith position based on evolution. See particularly chapter 20 (“A Kairological Reading of Genesis 1–3”), where Dembski gives God multiple alternate reasons for creating over millions of years, and chapter 21 (“What about Evolution?”), where he joins multiple other eisegetes who have tried to synthesise orthodoxy with evolution. Dembski prides himself on developing a theology that, in contrast to many others, preserves the Fall (p. 162).

Mind games and logical fallacies

In one of these eisegetical mind-games, Dembski attempts to scripturally support the retroactive effect of the Fall as being responsible for millions of years of preceding evil. He rightly points out that:

“Christians have always attributed the salvation of Old Testament saints to Christ’s sacrifice on the Cross at the hands of the Romans even though Old Testament times predate Roman times by hundreds of years. In this way, an omnipotent God unbound by time makes a future event (Christ’s sacrifice) the cause of an earlier event (the salvation of Old Testament saints)” (p. 50).

The scriptural position agrees with this, but Dembski has failed to



Sketch by Paul Gustave Doré

Adam and Eve banished from Eden. Why should God put the blame on them if they are just the product of Dembski's billions of years of evolution and evil? Dembski has therefore found a bad god in an evil world.

understand the spiritual significance of what God does for OT saints. God in His holiness requires the draconian measure of the Cross to satisfy His justice for the sin of any saint who has or will ever live, including all those pre-Cross. He not only has the ability, but also the right to apply the atonement of the Cross to individuals fulfilling His criteria for salvation before the Cross.

Adam has neither the right nor the ability to impose the horrors of his rebellion on otherwise innocent creatures who lived before he existed. And lest Dembski should feel that God Himself applied these terrors to His own creation (contrary to his view that God's holy will cannot initiate evil—as above p 43), how then, after Adam and Eve appeared, could He turn around and call it “Very Good”? This would prove God to be both bad and untrustworthy. It therefore follows that in order to find a Good God in an Evil World one can have neither millions of years nor evil before the Fall. The scriptural chronology is endorsed and Dembski's argument collapses.

In chapter 20, Dembski recognizes the problem he has created for himself and slips around it by claiming that “God himself wills the disordering

of creation, *making it defective on purpose* [italics in original]” (p. 145). And, “It is painful to accept that God bears at least some responsibility for natural evil and that he brings it about (whether actively or by permission) in response to human sin” (p. 150).

Then he stops being slippery and states that “The natural evil that God (by anticipation) introduced into the world on account of the Fall...” (p. 175). And “theodicy isn't so much a matter of justifying God's action in the distant past (as when God brings about natural evil prior to the Fall) ...” (p. 177).

Further, chapters 16 to 20 (Part four, “Retroactive Effects of the Fall”) contain Dembski's lengthy arguments that only God could act in time past to influence foreknown events in the future, thereby excluding Adam and installing God as the only agent of evil before the Fall. The reader can almost hear Dembski requiring God to declaim “All this evil is not *My* fault—blame Adam [who would evolve in a few billion years time]”!

Whose responsibility is it?

Lest Dembski should claim that evil in his theodicy is somehow not God's *responsibility* he provides proof of God's culpability. In discussing Ayala's problem with special creation, Dembski notes:

“Ayala worries that a God who creates by direct intervention must be held accountable for all the bad designs in the world. Ayala's proposed solution is therefore to have God set up a world in which evolution (by natural selection) brings about bad designs. But how does this address the underlying difficulty, which is that a creator God has set up the conditions under which bad designs emerge? In the one case, God acts directly; in the other, indirectly. But a Creator God, as the source of all

being, is as responsible in the one case as the other” (p. 163).

Dembski's billions-of-years god is therefore responsible for the evil before the Fall.

Satan's modus operandi

Two things should be noted in passing. First, Dembski is well versed in what the Bible says and is repeatedly stating the orthodox traditional view of what Scripture teaches, and at the same time agreeing that if it were not for his mental environment that view would be a very satisfactory explanation of evil. Second, the logic he employs to put a case always starts with the truth of Scripture (as he sees it), then arrives at his own conclusion by a mind game (as above where he makes evil predate the Fall). This *modus operandi* of Satan is perfectly capable of making his ministers appear as “angels of light” (2 Corinthians 11:13–15).

Uniformitarianism

“Nature's Constancy”—chapter 6—is Dembski's confirmation of his uniformitarian worldview. He states:

“To reconstruct the past (whether as scientists or historians), we have little choice but to invoke the constancy of nature: We know how nature operates in the present. We infer how nature operated in the past by projecting its present operation onto the past (it is our best and only shot at understanding the past)” (p. 60).

He then opines that in order to explain the supernatural, young-earth creationists embrace instead “an inconstant nature”, by which he means that natural laws do not always apply:

“For instance, one day, when cyanide acts as a poison, surviving its ingestion is a miracle. The next day, when cyanide acts as a supernutrient, surviving its ingestion becomes fully natural and even healthy” (p. 59).

To state that this is obviously not the young-earth creationist position is superfluous. What is more important is that Dembski's well-informed and

well-read intelligent rationalism causes him to create the absurd.

The age of the cosmos and the scientific method

“The Appearance of Age”—chapter 7—is Dembski’s opportunity to ridicule young-earth creationists (YECs Henry Morris, Barry Setterfield and Russ Humphreys pp. 65–70) for their differing explanations of the apparent age of the cosmos. Their views represent application of the normal scientific method. Of necessity, scientific hypotheses proposed to explain facts vary with worldview and fact availability, and creationists are no exception. As a hypothesis, it is expected that the framework of evolution may change in order to accommodate new facts. Young-earth creationism does not need to vary from the framework provided by a plain reading of Scripture, and none of these YECs did so. New facts merely fall into their place, increasing understanding of why the YEC framework is true.

God faultlessly reveals Himself

In chapter 8—“Two Books”—Dembski correctly argues that the ‘Books’ of nature and Scripture cannot be separated and must be considered together, within a scriptural framework. Then he states:

“A young earth seems to be required to maintain a traditional understanding of the Fall. And yet a young earth clashes sharply with mainstream science. Christians, it seems, must therefore choose their poison. They can go with a young earth, thereby maintaining theological orthodoxy but committing scientific heresy; or they can go with an old earth, thereby committing theological heresy but maintaining scientific orthodoxy” (p. 77).

This is hardly within the scriptural framework.

Because of his scriptural blindness Dembski can not appreciate that there is no dichotomy between science and the Scripture and that the same Creator

made both to be in perfect harmony. The science of origins related to a scriptural framework makes excellent *scientific* sense, in all cases equal to or better than the scientific fit of the same facts into an evolutionary framework.

Chapters 10 to 15—“Divine Creation and Action”—discuss how God created using His Word and boils the specificity of creation down to the God-given information it contains. Dembski suggests that all creative acts begin with the mental concept (the ‘first’ creation) issuing in the physical constructs (the ‘second’ creation).

He then falls into a ditch of his own making, asking what if “Rebellion of the creature sabotages the second creation by preventing the first creation from fulfilling its purpose”? (p. 108). He is unaware that God’s purposes were set in eternity past and are not changed by man’s sin. Man defiles, but cannot sabotage, God’s purposes.

Conclusion

The points of the argument in this book are:

1. God is inherently good, and not evil or bad.
2. Evil was introduced by man at the Fall.
3. The history of the earth is billions of years (of ‘being red in tooth and claw’) and therefore evil predates man’s Fall.
4. God applies man’s evil retrospectively to His creation before the Fall, thus providing a Good God in an Evil World.

Dembski stops there, but the next logical step is:

5. God is the agent of evil (with which Dembski agrees) and therefore bad.

In fact, in this scenario there could never be a time which God could call “very good” (Genesis 1:31), and Dembski has only found a Bad god in an Evil World. The reason why such a logical thinker arrives at this logical fallacy is his overriding faith in billions of years.

He is no stranger to controversy and he expects dissension from those who disagree with him. However on

this occasion his disagreement is not with men.

Given what he believes in this book, Dembski has personally avoided any beginning of scriptural Christianity in his own life and therefore as a prominent Christian atheist, he is true to his faith by playing the necessary mind games needed to reconcile the text of Scripture with his billions-of-years view.

‘Christian atheism’ is not an oxymoron, but ably describes the multitude of Western ‘civilized’ humanity who comfortably accept the Christian label but reject the God behind it. For those who are ‘cultural’ Christians only—as admitted by Richard Dawkins—the atheism is obvious. “Unscriptural Christian” is perhaps a better label for those who are at the other extreme—religiously involved in Christianity but wilfully ignorant of the God of the Bible.

This book is for them. In 1986 Richard Dawkins in *The Blind Watchmaker* stated that “Darwin made it possible to be an intellectually fulfilled atheist.” Equally, William Dembski has completed the spectrum with *The End of Christianity* enabling unscriptural Christians to be intellectually fulfilled evolutionists.

Quite apart from challenging neo-atheists at their own game, Dembski has joined them.

If William Dembski is pretending to be a scriptural Christian then his theological position does not matter. But as he claims to represent Christianity, then the bottom line for ID is not whether the philosophy in this book is true. It is whether or not this philosophy glorifies God, increases trust in Him, and is consistent with His commandment to preach the Gospel to every creature. I believe it not only fails on all counts, but actively opposes them.

References

1. See: creation.com/atheism.
2. Clinton Richard Dawkins, creation.com/the-greatest-hoax-on-earth/introduction.php, www.channel4.com/culture/microsites/C/can_you_believe_it/debates/rootofevil.html.