

C. Everett Koop—Christian and Darwin doubter

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The career and Christian witness of former US Surgeon General C. Everett Koop was reviewed, focusing on his rejection of evolution and his acceptance of creationism. As Professor of Pediatric Surgery and Pediatrics at one of the world's leading universities, he was a pioneer in his field and an esteemed academic, who effectively articulated his scientific and scriptural objections to evolution in numerous venues. His work has left us a legacy equaled by few persons in his field.

Dr C. Everett Koop served as the Surgeon General of the United States from 1982 to 1989 under Ronald Reagan's presidency (figure 1). For most of his career he was Surgeon-in-Chief at Children's Hospital of Philadelphia and Professor of Pediatric Surgery and Pediatrics at the University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine. He wrote the textbook in his field and, thanks mostly to his work, some procedures that carried a 95% *mortality rate* when Koop began his work have improved to a 95% *survival rate*.¹ For his exemplary scholarly work, he received a total of 35 honorary doctorates.

His research and writing abilities are also legion. Some of his books were written in a single night.¹ He has written more than 200 articles and books on the practice of medicine and surgery, biomedical ethics, and health policy. In 1991 he was honored with an Emmy Award for his five-part film series on health care reform.

Koop has succeeded in nearly everything he has ever attempted. He entered Dartmouth at age 16 and graduated from Cornell Medical School at an age when many people are just completing their bachelor's degree.² At an age when most men retire, he began a new career as the US Surgeon General (Chief of the US Public Health Service), articulating the nation's health care goals and programs. A *Life* magazine author grudgingly admitted that "no man who ever held the office [of Surgeon General] brought to it the conscientiousness, or the background, of Everett Koop".² In a noteworthy tribute to Koop's work as the first Editor-in-Chief of *The Journal of Pediatric Surgery* the new editor, Dr Gans, wrote that Koop completed over a decade

"... of superb editorship of the *Journal of Pediatric Surgery*. We all owe him an overwhelming debt of gratitude for this dedicated performance, not only for untold time and effort, but for what he has given us of his unique endowments as a practicing surgeon and medical educator ... and his special concern for children."³

Gans added that

"No appreciation of Doctor Koop's stature would be adequate without knowledge and understanding of his deep Christian commitment, a most prominent part of his life. This has led him to be an elder of the Presbyterian Church, to be president

of the Evangelical Foundation for almost 25 years His lifelong interest in medical missions has come to its greatest fruition in his association for many years with the Board of Trustees of Medical Assistance Programs, Inc. MAP ... has an ongoing relationship with missionaries in 82 countries and has supplied well over \$100,000,000 worth of medical equipment and drugs to those in need. MAP ... is rapidly becoming involved in every disaster that takes place in the world as well as providing help and relief at other times."³

He becomes a Christian

Koop became a Christian after the birth of his third son. He wrote about his conversion that, regardless of

"... what else I did in life, I would be a Christian.

I soon discovered that people were not content when I told them that I was a Christian; they wanted to know what kind of Christian, what adjective, what denomination. After I became Surgeon General, the press often referred to me as a 'fundamentalist' Christian ... because I affirm the fundamental doctrines of Christianity."⁴

He also wrote that his "spiritual awakening had a profound effect" on his life and influenced everything that he did thereafter:

"As an evangelical Christian, I attempted to evaluate everything in the light of Scripture, and in the Bible I found my guide for faith and conduct, always tempered by God's grace and forgiveness I was a convert, and an enthusiastic one. I wanted to share my new faith with everyone I knew, colleagues and patients alike. At first I'm sure I was labeled by some as too zealous, but others ... sought to share my experience and faith. Although my partners and staff together would represent many—or in some cases no—religions [beliefs], those around me who shared my Christian faith knit with me a close and treasured spiritual bond."⁵

His spiritual journey was fostered partly by the fact that he became pro-life when practicing medicine. Koop explained he was faced "with the pain and suffering of

my patients and their parents”, and “needed the assurance that there was some greater plan—both for them and for myself.”⁵ His concern about the *unborn* followed his

“... concern about the *newly* born. How could I ever accept the destruction of the unborn after a career devoted to the repair of imperfect newborns, knowing the joy and fulfillment they brought to their families? I had watched hundreds of them grow up to be innovative and creative human beings even though they were not always pristine in form and function.”⁵

Likewise, his conclusions about creationism were based on careful research, such as noting that

“All the way back to the dawn of ... history, we find that man is still man. Wherever we turn, to the caves of the Pyrenees, to the Sumerians in Mesopotamia, and even further back to Neanderthal man’s burying his dead in flower petals, it makes no difference: men everywhere show by their art and their accomplishments that they have been ... unique. They *were* unique, and people today are unique. What is wrong is a world-view which fails to explain that uniqueness. All people are unique because they are made in the image of God.”⁶

Koop was very impressed with the design argument for God. He wrote in a letter to a fellow doctor, ABS News correspondent Timothy Johnson, that “In Psalm 139 David writes about God’s role in his own life before birth: For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother’s womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made.”⁷ Koop also wrote that “all healing is of the Lord” because God has intelligently designed humans with inbuilt systems that enable the body to heal itself.⁸

Evolution is impossible

Koop has also eloquently expressed his reservations about Darwinism. In a letter to Paul Humber, he wrote, “It has been my conviction for many years that evolution is impossible. However, I have never been able to convince anyone who held the opposite point of view.” Koop offered a reason for this, namely that “I am of the firm conviction that until the scales are lifted from the eyes of those who oppose creation, no scientific evidence will be of value in proof.”⁹ Furthermore, “the theory of evolution, the idea that *by chance* there is an increasing advance” teaches that “progress—up from the primeval slime and the amoeba, up through the evolutionary chain, with life developing by chance from the simple carbon molecule to the complex, right up to the



Figure 1. Portrait of Dr Koop in his Surgeon General Uniform

pinnacle, mankind” and he held this was impossible.¹⁰ He concluded that

“... the concept of [evolutionary] progress is an illusion. Only some form of mystical jump will allow us to accept that personality comes from impersonality. No one has ... explain[ed], let alone demonstrate[d] it to be feasible, how the impersonal plus time plus chance can give personality.”¹⁰

Koop noted that evolutionists distract readers “by a flourish of words—and, lo, personality has appeared out of a hat”.¹⁰ He explained that one of his concerns is the moral implications of evolution:

“Unlike the evolutionary concept of an impersonal beginning plus time plus chance, the Bible gives an account of man’s origin as a finite person made in God’s image, that is, like God. We see then how man can have personality and dignity and value. Our uniqueness is guaranteed, something which is impossible in the materialistic system. If there is no qualitative distinction between man and other organic life (animals or plants), why should we feel greater concern over the death of a human being than over the death of a laboratory rat? Is man in the end any higher?”¹¹

The creationist worldview

The creationist worldview was not just an intellectual conclusion with Koop, but affected his life choices. For example, he wrote that

“... when in doubt, *err on the side of life*. With that in mind, my unwavering faith in God and his plan for our lives is a basic tenet of my faith and the way I live and practice medicine. God gave us the ability to invent an aspirin tablet as well as to invent life-support systems such as respirators. These skills, I believe, have been given to be held in stewardship. When I am dealing with a patient, I feel that I have a primary responsibility to him or her, then a responsibility to the patient’s family, but ultimately my responsibility is to God for the manner in which I use the gifts he has given me to deal with the lives of my patients [emphasis in original].”¹²

Christian and creation worldviews directly supported his strong opposition to abortion. He wrote that abortion was a slippery slope that led to evolutionary eugenics and the ‘master race’ idea.¹³ As support for this view, Koop quoted Dr J. Engelbert Dumpy, who wrote, “History shows clearly the frighteningly short steps from

‘the living will’ to ‘death control’ to ‘thought control’ and finally to the systematic elimination of all but those selected for slavery or to make up the master race.”¹⁴

His contempt for Darwin’s theory was clearly partly because of its implications. Koop quoted Robert Zachary, who wrote that “the basis of the present argument for selection of only the least handicapped patients for survival” could be explained as follows:

“The hope that [natural] selection will reduce to a minimum the overall suffering of these patients and their families is a well meant but somewhat naïve wish It may be argued that by not selecting, we artificially increase the number of people with an unhappy future, but can we be sure of this in any given case? It has been further argued that, strictly speaking, selection implies a limitation of resources . . . if selection is practiced, it may not be necessarily the fittest on whom the greatest effort should be expended.”¹⁵

Furthermore, the worldview taught in Genesis gives life meaning:

“The Scriptures tell us that the universe exists and has form and meaning because it was created purposefully by a personal Creator. This being the case, we see that . . . we are not something strange and out of line with an otherwise impersonal universe. Since we are made in the image of God, we are in line with God. There is a continuity, in other words, between ourselves, though finite, and the infinite Creator who stands behind the universe as its creator and its final source of meaning.”¹¹

Another example of where Koop used Scripture to help him understand the reality around us is as follows:

“The Bible tells us . . . that man is flawed. We see this to be the case both within ourselves and in our societies throughout the world. People are noble and people are cruel; people have heights of moral achievement and depths of moral depravity. But this is not simply an enigma, nor is it explained in terms of ‘the animal in man.’ The Bible explains how man is flawed, without destroying the uniqueness and dignity of man. Man is evil and experiences the results of evil . . . because man is fallen and thus is *abnormal*. This is the significance of the third chapter of Genesis. Some time after the original Creation (we do not know how long), man rebelled against God. Being made in the image of God as persons, Adam and Eve were able to make real choices [emphasis in original].”¹⁶

Koop added that the “Fall brought not only moral evil but also” caused humankind to be separated from nature as a

“... consequence of the choice made by Adam and Eve some time after the Creation. It was not any original deformity that made them choose in this way. God had not made them robots, and so they had real choice. It is man, therefore, and not God, who is responsible for evil.”¹⁶

He also stressed the importance of Genesis, noting that “the Bible is the key to understanding the universe and its form and . . . man. Without this key our observations are out of perspective.” As a result, our conclusions about life

“... can be massively in error. Unless we are told about our beginnings, we cannot make sense of our present history. And secular study is incapable of doing that. This is not to say that the study of history and science is irrelevant or useless, but when secular study is finished, the most important questions are left unanswered. It can tell us much of patterns and statistics, but not the reason or meaning or significance of it all This is where the early chapters of Genesis are so important. These chapters give the history that comes before anything that secular historians have been able to ascertain, and *it is this presecular history which gives meaning to mankind’s present history* [emphasis in original].”¹⁷

He accepted a literal, historical interpretation of Genesis, noting that some persons wrongly

“... believe that one can ‘spiritualize’ away the history of the first chapters of Genesis They argue that these chapters are not history but something like parables. This type of thinking depreciates the factual content, which gives information about history and the cosmos. Those who do this sometimes imagine that doing this makes little or no difference. But it changes everything. For these chapters tell us the *why* (the significance and meaning) of all the subsequent history which historians can know through their investigations. These chapters tell us the *why* of our own personal history. For this reason we can say that . . . the early chapters of Genesis are . . . the very foundation on which *all* knowledge rests. So we learn from them that before the creation of the universe, the infinite-personal God existed and that He created the universe (the space-time continuum) by choice, out of nothing. The Creation was not without a cause [emphasis in original].”¹⁷

Koop stressed that Genesis is so critical that if we take away “the early chapters of Genesis . . . even the death of Christ has no meaning.”¹⁸

His view of evolution is based on science

Koop based his rejection of evolution on science. For example, he wrote that two of Darwin’s major important arguments for evolution

“... have now been almost totally abandoned by evolutionists. The first involves vestigial organs, which (it was supposed) had served useful functions in an earlier stage of man’s evolutionary development, but which later became literally useless by the changes brought about through natural selection Certain organs were said to be

‘vestiges’, that is, leftovers from a previous stage in evolution. The simple problem with the argument is that as medical science has developed, most of these organs have been found to serve useful functions in the body.”¹⁸

He added that the second major

“... argument for Darwin ... is the dictum that ‘ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny’. This idea is that the human embryo goes through the stages of evolution inside the mother’s womb, resembling at one stage the fish and so on. The better we understand the embryo, however, the more dubious this argument is seen to be.”¹⁸

Koop notes that, although these two arguments for evolution

“... have been largely given up, many still place their faith in the theory of an unbroken line from the molecule to man by chance. However, they are faced ... with at least two problems. First, the more fossil evidence we find, the more apparent it becomes that there have always been distinct breaks in the fossil record. Darwin admitted that the paleontological evidence in his day was slender, but, he said, as more is discovered the new evidence will support the hypothesis. This just has not happened.”¹⁷

For example, Koop notes that the fossil

“... evidence of pre-man is sketchy, and recent discoveries in Africa and elsewhere have generated some difficult new problems in this area. But it is not just the so-called missing links between man and pre-man that constitute the problem, but *all* the missing links, right down the whole line. Not only are links missing; the chains themselves are missing. If one removes the speculative guesses, rather than links of different chains leading from simple to more complex organisms, one finds virtual explosions of mature life forms at different periods in geological time and many simple forms of life [in the fossil record] that remain unchanged [evolutionists claim] for several millions of years up to their extinction or even to today.”¹⁷

He added that the

“... second major difficulty for today’s evolutionists is that there is no sufficient mechanism to explain how lower life forms can be transformed into higher ones, no matter how much time is allowed. Natural selection cannot bear this weight. Current genetic theories seem even to point to natural selection as working *against* the direction of evolution. Despite the unlikely possibility of mutations that are advantageous, natural selection seems to simplify the genetic endowment of any group rather than lead it to higher orders of complexity.”¹⁷

His strident opposition to secular humanism

Koop strongly opposed secular humanism because “Modern humanism has an inherent need to manipulate and tinker with the natural processes, including human nature, because humanism” rejects creation, and therefore “rejects the idea that there is anything stable or ‘given’ about human nature”. Furthermore, humanism views “human nature as part of a long, unfolding process of development in which everything is changing [and man therefore looks] for some solution to the problem of despair that this determinist-evolutionist vision induces.” Koop concludes that humanism can find the solution only “in the activity of the human will, which—in opposition to its own system—it hopes can transcend the inexorable flow of nature and act upon nature” and therefore

“... encourages manipulation of nature, including tinkering with people, as the only way of escaping from nature’s bondage. But this manipulation cannot have any certain criteria to guide it because, with God abolished, the only remaining criterion is nature (which is precisely what humanist man wants to escape from) and nature is both noncruel and cruel. This explains why humanism is fascinated with the manipulation of human nature.”¹⁹

Koop wrote it always surprises him as to how readily people accept evolutionary theory,

“... even on the scientific side, as if it had no problems. There are problems, even if these are not commonly realized or discussed. The primary point we are interested in, however, is ... the illusion of [evolutionary] ‘progress’ By chance, this amazing complexity called ‘man’ has been generated out of the slime. So, of course, there is progress! By this argument people are led into imagining that the whole of reality does have purpose even if, as we have said, there is no way that it really can have purpose within the humanistic world-view. Evolution makes men and women feel superior ... but in the materialistic framework, the whole of reality is [ultimately] meaningless Even if, within the humanist world-view, people are more complex than plants and animals We are left with everything being sad and absurd.”¹⁰

His background

Koop was born in Brooklyn, New York, on 14 October 1916, and after graduating from Dartmouth University he received his M.D. degree from Cornell Medical College. After serving an internship at the Pennsylvania Hospital, he pursued postgraduate training at University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine, Boston Children’s Hospital, and Graduate School of Medicine at the University of

Pennsylvania, where he received the degree of Doctor of Science in Medicine in 1947.

After a series of promotions, he was named Professor of Pediatric Surgery at the School of Medicine, the University of Pennsylvania in 1959, and Professor of Pediatrics in 1971. He was the Editor-in-Chief of the *Journal of Pediatric Surgery* from 1964–1976, and the former president of the surgical section of the American Academy of Pediatric Surgery. He was one of the founding members of the Surgical Section of the American Academy of Pediatrics, and served a term as chairman of that section. He is also a founding member of the American Pediatric Surgical Association and served as the Association's second president.²⁰ He is presently the Elizabeth DeCamp McNerny Professor at Dartmouth.

Koop was appointed Deputy Assistant Secretary for Health, US Public Health Service (PHS) in March of 1981 and in November was sworn in as the US Surgeon General. As Surgeon General, oversaw the activities of the 6,000 member PHS Commissioned Corps and advised the public on a variety of health matters: smoking and health, diet and nutrition, environmental health hazards, and the importance of immunization and disease prevention.

Koop continues to be a force for public health and health education through his writings, public appearances, personal contacts, and as Senior Scholar of the C. Everett Koop Institute at Dartmouth. He has accepted the prestigious Frank Netter Award for Outstanding Contribution to Medical Education and also is Medical Director of *Time-Life Medical* and Chairman of Patient Education Media, Inc.

Dubbed 'the most beloved physician' in America, Koop was awarded the Denis Brown Gold Medal by the British Association of Paediatric Surgeons; in October 1976 the William E. Ladd Gold Medal of the American Academy of Pediatrics—the Academy's highest surgical honor—in recognition of outstanding contributions to the field of pediatric surgery; and a number of other awards from civic, religious, medical and philanthropic organizations. In 1980 he was awarded the Medal of the Legion of Honor by the government of France, was inducted into the Royal College of Surgeons of England in 1982 and the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Glasgow in 1987. In September of 1995, President Clinton presented him with the nation's highest civilian award, the Presidential Medal of Freedom.

Conclusions

Koop recognized the importance of Genesis, stressing that the entire

“Bible flows out of the information given in the early chapters of Genesis. If we are to understand the world as it is and ourselves as we are, we must know the flow of history given in these chapters. Take this away and the flow of history is lost. Take this away and even the death of Christ has no meaning.”²¹

Another concern of Koop is the fact that evolution has caused, and is causing, much harm in society, which

“serves as a chilling reminder of Hitler's Germany, which was built on the social conclusions logically drawn from the Darwinian concept of the survival of the fittest.”²² Last, Koop has recognized that the scientific evidence does not support Darwinism, but rather it supports an intelligent creator.

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