

A fallacious philosophical work

Darwin's Pious Idea: Why the Ultra-Darwinists and Creationists Both Get It Wrong

Conor Cunningham

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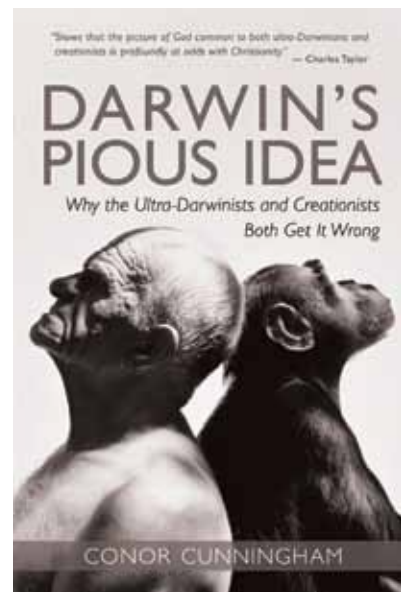
As lecturer of Theology and Religious Studies at the University of Nottingham, author Conor Cunningham is trained in theology, philosophy, and law—not science. He was provoked into studying the interface between Darwinism and religion when an old college friend astounded him by suggesting that Darwin had gotten rid of theology.¹ Cunningham's lengthy monograph, *Darwin's Pious Idea*, is the result of that investigation. Throughout his book, Cunningham makes abundantly clear what he thinks about creationists. He describes them as being critical and cynical (p. 180), heretical (p. 263), and bordering on pathological (p. 330), as well as promoting intellectual barbarism (p. 378). Cunningham therefore may not be too happy to know that creationists agree with several of his salient criticisms of what he refers to as 'ultra-Darwinism'.

For instance, in chapter two, he concludes that the units of selection are not the selfish gene. He acknowledges with Gilbert, Opitz, and Raff that genetics is not enough: "Genetics might be adequate for explaining microevolution, but microevolutionary changes in gene frequency were not seen as able to turn a reptile into a mammal or to convert a fish into an amphibian" (p. 76). Although many creation scientists do not like to use the terms 'microevolution' and 'macroevolution' because they suggest that only quantitative differences exist between the two processes, they agree with the above conclusion, recognizing

that the differentiating trait for variations within the genesis kinds is the loss of genetic information while no direct empirical evidence exists for the gain of genetic information that could lead to the changes needed to produce different kinds.² Cunningham concludes in the third chapter that natural selection is not all-powerful; it cannot purposefully mold every particular part of an organism's phenotype for a precise purpose or function. Creationists concur again, explaining the processes of adaptation and diversification within the biblical model.

A false premise about the Church Fathers' view of Genesis 1

This being said, Cunningham's main thesis of the book is based on a false premise, and many of his arguments follow fallacious logic. The blatant false premise appears even before the book is opened: in the title *Darwin's Pious Idea*. Cunningham says Darwinism is a pious idea because it is of great service to Christianity. What service does it perform? According to Cunningham, Darwinism is an interesting and useful test at this particular cultural moment in that if you are against evolution, then your faith radically diverges (1) from traditional Christianity and (2) from the credal orthodoxy of the church. Thus, because evolution allows us to test the orthodoxy of our faith, it is a pious idea (p. xvi). To substantiate the first part of this thesis, that a creationist's faith diverges from traditional Christianity, the author tries to convince us that the church authorities, such as Thomas Aquinas, Augustine (figure 1), and Basil, read Genesis as myth and metaphor. Then the reader is left on his own to hunt for even one example of the second part of this thesis, namely



an Orthodox Church creed which pays homage to Charles Darwin, or even slightly intimates any form of evolution.

The errors in Cunningham's reasoning on traditional Christianity become apparent when we read his poor efforts at substantiating his claim that the Church Fathers did not believe in a young earth created by the direct command of God as relayed in Genesis one. Take Augustine, for example. Cunningham says Augustine would not have accepted creationism's modern notion of the 'literal'. He says: "According to Augustine, [the 7 days of Creation] were not to be taken as 'solar days'. When Augustine attempts to interpret Genesis literally, he is only trying to establish what the text is telling us humans; and that truth, for Augustine, will always be a revelation of man's relation to God, not some sort of forensic description of so-called historical events" (p. 296).

Cunningham gives no documentation in the text for saying that Augustine's days of creation were not solar days, while the note for this statement merely says to see Augustine's *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, without giving a specific

page number or quotation. However, Augustine discusses these days clearly in his *City of God Book XI*. He wonders what kind of days the first three days of creation could have been, since our days today are measured by the rising and setting of the sun, and the sun was not created until the fourth day. He says:

“And first of all, indeed, light was made by the word of God, and God, we read, separated it from the darkness, and called the light Day, and the darkness Night; but what kind of light that was, and by what periodic movement it made evening and morning, is beyond the reach of our senses; neither can we understand how it was, and yet must unhesitatingly believe it.”³

Here Augustine rightly takes the plain meaning of Scripture in trying to understand the unquestionably historical events described therein. And in this example, at least, he exhorts his readers to accept the words of Scripture even though they seem to contradict their contemporary scientific understanding. One thing Augustine knows for certain, however, is that the length of the days in the creation account was determined by the apparent periodic motion of some light source through the sky. To Augustine, the nature of that light source before Day 4 is difficult to determine, but after Day 4, it is the sun. And then later, in a discussion on the enormously protracted lives of the antediluvian men, Augustine goes on to say, “It is plain that the day then was what it now is, a space of four-and-twenty hours, determined by the lapse of day and night.”⁴ I do not know how Augustine’s understanding of the word day in Genesis could be any clearer than that: a day in Genesis, as now, consists of twenty-four hours.⁵

The following example from Augustine is particularly telling of Cunningham’s illogic:

“God moves His whole creation by a hidden power and all creatures are subject to this movement: the

angels carry out His commands, the stars move in their course, the winds blow now this way now that, deep pools see the beneath tumbling waterfalls and mists from above them, meadows come to life as the seeds put forth grasses, animals are born and live their lives according to their proper instincts, the evil are permitted to try the just. It is thus that God unfolds the generations which He laid up in creation when He first founded it; and they would not be sent forth to run their course if He ceased to exercise His provident rule over them” (p. 299).

Cunningham says that the word unfold here literally means evolve and thus Augustine thought of creation in terms of a form of evolution. Even if it were precisely true that the Latin word translated here as unfold could be translated evolve, the modern reader cannot project today’s Darwinian evolution into Augustine’s meaning of a word used almost two thousand years ago. Thus, Cunningham commits the logical fallacy of equivocation to substantiate his point that Augustine was a proto-evolutionist.

It is debatable that the following quotation from Augustine’s *Literal Meaning of Genesis* could possibly be understood by the uninformed as being an example of proto-evolutionary thought:

“In the seed, then, there was invisibly present all that would develop in time into a tree. And in this same way we must picture the world, when God made all things together, as having had all things which were made in it and with it when day was made. This includes not only heaven with sun, moon, stars ... but also the beings which water and earth produced in potency and in their causes before they came forth in the course of time” (p. 299).

However, this passage is rightly understood only when the reader realizes that Augustine believed

the original creation happened in an instant of time, and that God described it for us as being completed in six normal days for the sake of our understanding, although this interpretation cannot be found in the Scriptures.⁶ In *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, Augustine writes, “Time brings about the development of these creatures according to their numbers, but there was no passage of time when they received these laws at creation.”⁷

Although Augustine strays here from the Bible’s clear teaching that God spaced the time of creation over a period of six days, he is not espousing the countless ages of the infinitely extended past that some in his time taught. Rather, he argues against the false teaching of an infinite universe with statements such as the following: “Unbelievers are also deceived by false documents which ascribe to history many thousand years, although we can calculate from Sacred Scripture that not 6,000 years have passed since the creation of man.”⁸ Thus, Augustine obviously believed in a young earth. The reader also needs to realize that Augustine used the *Vetus Latina*

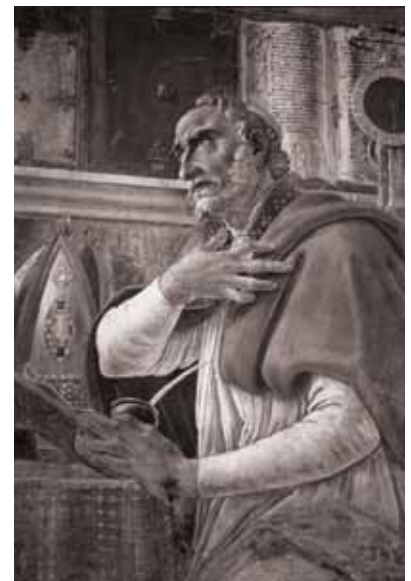


Figure 1. Contrary to Cunningham’s distorted attempts to show the opposite to be true, it is evident that Augustine espoused a recent creation.

translation of the Bible which states, “Let the waters produce reptiles of live souls and flying things over the earth along the solid structure of heaven.” In contrast, the Hebrew text does not attribute the creation of these animals to the waters themselves, but rather simply states that the creatures would abound in the waters.⁹

It is also clear from primary sources that Basil and Thomas Aquinas accepted literal creation days.^{10,11}

Mishandling the Fathers' view of Genesis 2

Cunningham's handling of the Church Fathers' beliefs in a literal Adam and Eve and the Fall is equally as dubious as his handling of their beliefs in the creation account of Genesis 1. He says if we are to remain faithful to the Fathers, we must see that there was neither a historical Adam nor a real event of original sin known as the Fall, for, as he puts it, “according to the Church Fathers, Adam was Christ and Eve was Mary, while paradise is the church and the Fall signals humankind's redemption in Christ” (p. 379). My first reaction to this statement is that I do not desire to be faithful to the Church Fathers, but rather to Christ, the Living Word, and to His written Word, the Bible. Christ Himself warned us not to put the traditions of men before the Word of God (Mark 7:13). My second reaction to this statement is to ask if it is even true that the Fathers did not believe in a literal Adam and Eve and a literal Fall? Cunningham's rationalization for his position goes as follows:

“... before Christ there was neither death nor life nor even sin. For all such concepts find their truth only in the passion of the Christ, and for one very simple reason: creation is about Christ, and nothing else. Jesus, as the Word of God, is the metaphysical or ontological beginning and end (telos) of all that exists” (p. 378).

In case you were thinking that this reasoning sounds like some ‘wishy-washy religious nonsense’, Cunningham assures the reader that this is not the case (p. 379). In so doing, he hedges his debate by acknowledging the problem (that his reasoning sounds like verbose malarkey) and then denying it. But the astute reader is not at all convinced. Cunningham concludes the discussion simply by asserting his argument is perfectly logical, thereby leaving the reader on his own to discover the logic that isn't there.

Are creationists Gnostics unaware?

The author opines that the creationists of today are analogous to the Gnostics of the past. In his twisted reasoning, he says that the Gnostics exhibited ontological pride in the way they rejected identifying essential humanity with the matter of the created world. He says that creationists in turn exhibit Christian Gnosticism in the way they object to the idea of ‘common descent’. Then Cunningham asks the rhetorical question, “What is wrong with matter? Why do we wish instead to be angels?” (p. 23). Later, he asserts that those who see man as being important because he has an essence different from the animals are displaying their “Luciferian link with Gnosticism” (p. 165). Contrary to Cunningham's assertions, however, biblical creationism is not akin to Gnosticism. In fact, biblical creationists accept without a qualm that man's body is made of dust, as are the bodies of animals. Of course, they also accept that God formed man separately from the animals and breathed the breath of life into him, making him a living soul made in the image of God. This is what makes us different from the animals: we carry God's image; animals do not.

Gnosticism was built on Greek philosophy that taught matter was evil and spirit was good. Christian

Gnostics said since matter was evil, God could not really incarnate in a human body. They heretically believed He only appeared to be in human form and only appeared to suffer, but it was an illusion.¹² In contrast, the Bible does not teach that the body is evil because it is made of matter. Rather, it teaches that sin reigns in our members because we are sons and daughters of a literal Adam who has passed on to all his children the corruption resulting from his literal Fall in the Garden of Eden. Christ, though His body was made of regular matter just as ours, did not have an earthly father, and thus He did not carry original sin in his body. Trying to equate today's biblical creationism (which does not accept that man is descended from animals) with yesterday's heretical Gnosticism (which did not accept that spiritual God would become material man) is a slanderous straw man argument that is based only on the fallacious logic of a desperate detractor.

More erroneous argumentation

Another example of Cunningham's perplexing dialectic is his assertion that the existence of a designer deity would elicit atheism from a Christian, for any such deity would only be a big version of us (p. 151). He thinks that the modern musings of Intelligent Design lead to an idol god who is very large and powerful, but not worthy of worship because he can be proven—a limiting conception of God (p. 278). First of all, evolutionists are the ones who try to apply known processes to give a naturalistic explanation of life, while the creationist viewpoint allows much room for the wonder and miracle of special creation. In other words, the infinitely powerful and intelligent God of Genesis is much less comprehensible to our finite human minds than the god of Darwinism, who is confined in his methods by the ephemeral theories of man. Secondly, God never tries to prove His own existence in Scripture. Yet His eternal

power and Godhead are evident in creation so that men who do not accept Him as the Designer Deity of the created universe are without excuse.

One last illustration of Cunningham's misrepresentations is almost humorous in its falsehood, but the author does not appear to be joking. He says that the creationist interpretation of Genesis is a secular, arguably atheist worship of science. He tries to substantiate his case with a quote from Daryl Domning, saying, "Scientific creationists ... have imbibed the modern spirit of rationality in their daily lives, and have ironically and mistakenly accepted that not even the Bible can be 'true' unless it passes muster as 'science'" (p. 279). Without doubt, the principal creation science organizations hold the exact opposite position, as is exemplified in Creation Ministries International's statement of faith, which says, "By definition, no apparent, perceived, or claimed evidence in any field ... can be valid if it contradicts the Scriptural record." Even ardent evolutionist Michael Ruse is forthright enough to admit that this complaint correctly rests not against creationists, but rather against evolutionists:

"Evolution is promoted by its practitioners as more than mere science. Evolution is promulgated as an ideology, a secular religion—a full-fledged alternative to Christianity, with meaning and morality ... Evolution is a religion. This was true of evolution in the beginning, and it is true of evolution today."¹³

Conclusion

In conclusion, let me relate that, while Conor Cunningham claims creationism causes Darwinists to have contempt for all religion, I found that the reading of his book *Darwin's Pious Idea* caused me to have contempt for philosophy, if his type of twisted reasoning is typical of the work done in that discipline. His unabashed use of



Figure 2. Contrary to Cunningham's accusation, when there is a choice between what God says and what modern science says, biblical creationists choose God's Word.

logical inconsistencies throughout the book make many of his conclusions despicable. Cunningham says that he believes Jesus is God and that He was resurrected from the dead. While the original source of these truths is Scripture, Cunningham's unfaithful handling of God's Word makes the testimony of his faith enigmatic. He seems to allow himself free range in interpreting Scripture based on the false premise that orthodox Christianity has always read Genesis as myth and metaphor. But one is hard pressed to find substantiation for this thesis. Even within Cunningham's own Roman Catholic Church, the Pontifical Biblical Commission of 1909 rejected arguments that denied the literal history of Genesis 1–3.¹⁴ It would behove today's Christians to take this same position and to leave Conor Cunningham's contorted arguments against young earth creationism behind.

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