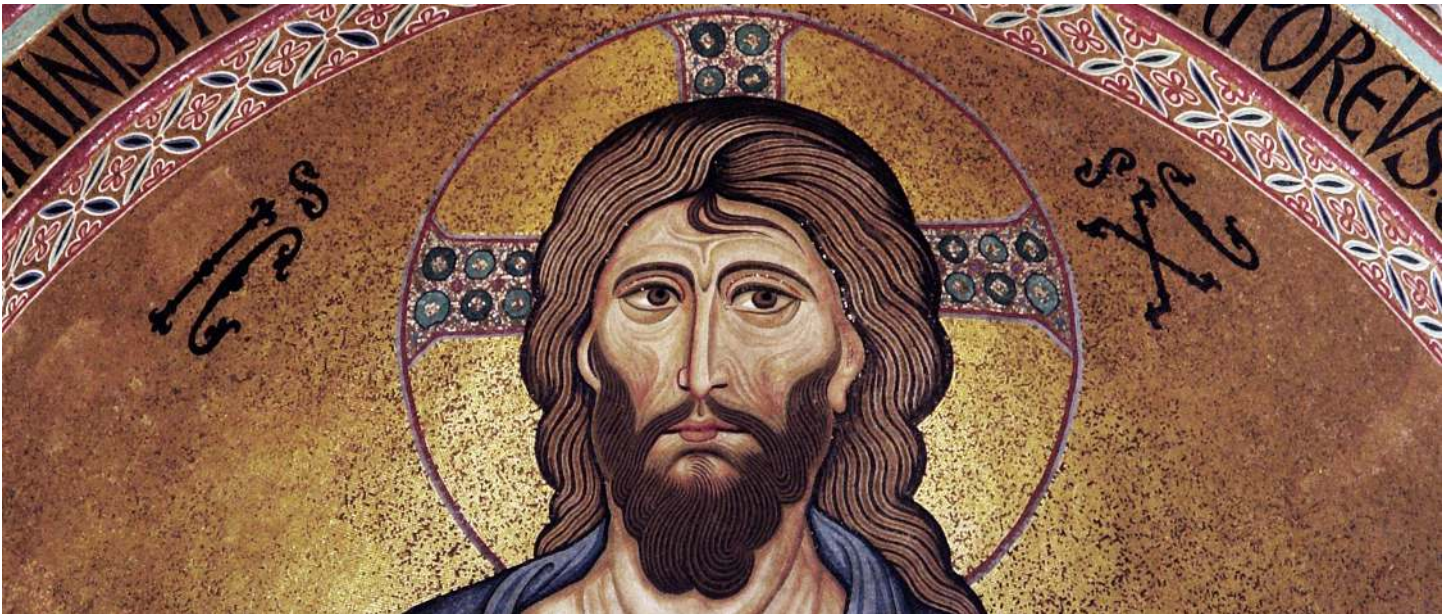


## Why Christians Don't Need to Be Threatened by Evolution



*Christus Pantocrator in the apsis of the cathedral of Cefalù by Andreas Wahra*

By **J. Richard Middleton** July 13, 2016

For too long Christians in North America have thought the Bible was in conflict with biological evolution. Yet many orthodox Christian theologians of the nineteenth century (including Charles Hodge and B. B. Warfield) saw no conflict in principle.

### The Manufactured “War” between Science and Religion

The infamous “war” of science and religion (of which the creation-evolution battle is the most prominent example) is a relatively recent invention, manufactured from the atheist side by John William Draper (*History of the Conflict Between Religion and Science*<sup>1</sup>, 1874) and by Andrew Dickson White (*A History of the Warfare of Science with Theology in Christendom*<sup>2</sup>, 1896) and on the Christian side by conservatives who misread the Genesis creation accounts as scientific.

But this is a serious *genre* mistake. Many atheists treat “science” as a full-fledged worldview that claims to tell us that there is nothing to reality but the natural world and that the scientific method gives us all the valid knowledge there is. Likewise many Christians treat the Bible as a science textbook, when the point of creation accounts in the ancient world (of which Israel was a part) is to explain the meaning of life and how we are to live.

Of course, the issues are a bit more complex than that. And we need to go well beyond a declaration of “peace” between the Bible and science.

In my articles at BioLogos, I will explore – as a biblical scholar and theologian – ways in which we can think seriously, as faithful Christians, about the relationship of biblical teaching and evolutionary science on a variety of contested topics.

But first let me lay out some of the assumptions that will undergird my posts.

## **The Role of Scripture in the Science/Faith Dialogue**

To start with, I take Scripture as providing the normative framework for the worldview of the church, with guidance for how to live in God's world. The overarching biblical story of creation and redemption constitutes the non-negotiable framework for Christian discipleship; and serious immersion in Scripture – through gathered worship, communal study, and private meditation – is indispensable to the life of faith.

One part of Christian discipleship, or the life of faith, is how we think about the discoveries of modern science. How might the Bible guide us in that project?

## **The Positive Role of a Biblical View of Creation**

The biblical view of creation claims that the cosmos is “very good” (Gen. 1:31) and is imbued with God's wisdom and order (Prov. 3:19-20). Indeed, the wisdom literature of the Bible encourages us to understand the world, in which God's wisdom is embedded, that we might live better in it.

Furthermore, God's creation of humanity in his own image, with the task to rule the earth (Gen. 1:26-28) and tend the garden of creation (Gen. 2:15), implies an exalted role for human beings, which includes the possibility of science. As stewards of earthly life, we are commissioned with a vocation that encompasses (but is not limited to) the scientific understanding of the world in which we live.

Not only can the world be studied scientifically, but a biblical view of God's good creation suggests that human knowledge of the world (while not infallible) is possible and (when proper testing is in place) is reliable and trustworthy.

So, far from being threatened by evolution, Christians who embrace a biblical understanding of creation may see the hand of God in the deep time of the cosmos and the complex processes of biological evolution. In fact, we may be in awe of the amazing creativity of this great God of ours.

## **The Limitations of Science and Theology**

Of course, science is an ever-changing field, as new data are uncovered, and not everything that scientists claim at a particular moment will still be claimed in the future. This is certainly true of the details of hominin evolution, including issues like precisely when *Homo sapiens* migrated from Africa or the exact dating of the male and female ancestors of all persons living today. Nevertheless, the general outlines are pretty clear and the fact of evolution is not really in dispute in the scientific community.

Further, the task of exploring how various Christian doctrines relate to what we think we know about science (and especially evolution) is not something defined in any of the ecumenical creeds. It is not a core essential of our faith, but rather a fallible human task to try and *think* biblical faith and evolution *together* – and there is always the danger of simplistic harmonization.

So, in my own exploration of various topics of science and faith, I will endeavor to honor both discourses (the scientific and the theological), while suggesting how we may think *beyond* the evident tensions or contradictions between the two.

## **Topics to Be Explored in Future Articles**

For example, what do we do with the tension between what we know about the evolution of the cosmos over deep time, from the Big Bang to billions of expanding galaxies, and the biblical account of creation in six days,

which seems to assume a flat earth with the dome of the heavens overhead and the sun and moon created after vegetation on the earth? How might we go about thinking of the relationship between these two accounts of reality?

And what are we to do with the biblical idea of humanity created in the image of God, given what we know of hominin evolution? Are *Homo sapiens* the only species made in God's image? What about Neanderthals? And before them, what about *Homo erectus*, or even *Homo habilis*? In other words, which species of hominin should we attribute the image of God to?

Then, what about the "Fall," the disobedience of Adam and Eve narrated in Genesis 3? Does it make sense to still believe in a historical beginning of human sin (in a single event), given the long evolution of hominins (or even just of *Homo sapiens*), including the violence that seems endemic to the evolutionary process, even prior to the origin of humans?

And connected with the idea of the "Fall," can we attribute all the problems of the natural world (including sickness, predation, and biological death, generally) to the consequences of human sin – as has often been done in Christian theology? And even if we don't go this route, how do we reconcile a loving, providential God who made the world "very good" with a seemingly random evolutionary process that thrives on the suffering and death of billions of organisms, not to mention the mass extinctions of entire species?

Although there are many other such tensions between science and theology, let me mention just one more. How do we take seriously the Bible's vision of new creation (a new heaven and a new earth), including the promise of resurrection and immortality, in relation to biological organisms whose very nature is mortality and decay in the context of a finite universe characterized by entropy, a universe which (as far as we understand scientifically) will gradually cool and die?

These are just a few prominent places where the truths of science and theology seem to overlap or rub up against each other. Indeed, *rub up against each other* is a bit of an understatement. Are we simply to hold these supposedly distinct sets of truths together, without further thought?

These are some of the questions I plan to explore in this series of blog posts.

## Living with Unanswered Questions

I'm honestly not sure where I will end up in each case. It isn't even clear to me that there are fully satisfying answers to these questions. However, I come to these questions trusting that the God of all truth will sustain us in the process of exploration and even deepen our faith through the questioning.

Expecting to have definitive and immediate answers is a decidedly modern form of *hubris*. Instead, Christians need to learn the virtue of patience, and to take a long view of things. If we trust in the God of creation, revealed supremely in Jesus Christ, the incarnate Word, we can learn to *live with* the unanswered questions we have – indeed, to *love* the questions, as the poet Rainer Marie Rilke suggested<sup>3</sup>, until that day when we live into the answers.

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## Notes & References

1. *History of the Conflict Between Religion and Science* – <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/1185>
2. *A History of the Warfare of Science with Theology in Christendom* – [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A\\_History\\_of\\_the\\_Warfare\\_of\\_Science\\_with\\_Theology\\_in\\_Christendom](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A_History_of_the_Warfare_of_Science_with_Theology_in_Christendom)

3. In his *Letters to a Young Poet*, Rilke pleaded with the young man to whom he was writing (back in 1903) “to have patience with everything unresolved in your heart and to try to love *the questions themselves* as if they were locked rooms or books written in a very foreign language.” The Role of Doubt in the Journey of Faith – Living with Unanswered Questions, Part 4 – <https://jrichardmiddleton.wordpress.com/2014/06/21/the-role-of-doubt-in-the-journey-of-faith-living-with-unanswered-questions-part-4/>

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**Richard Middleton** (PhD Free University of Amsterdam) is Professor of Biblical Worldview and Exegesis at Northeastern Seminary (Rochester, NY). He is adjunct professor of Old Testament at the Caribbean Graduate School of Theology (Kingston, Jamaica) and is past president of the Canadian Evangelical Theological Association (2011-2014). He holds a B.Th. from Jamaica Theological Seminary and an M.A. in Philosophy from the University of Guelph (Canada).

Middleton is the author of *A New Heaven and a New Earth: Reclaiming Biblical Eschatology* (Baker Academic, 2014) and *The Liberating Image: The Imago Dei in Genesis 1* (Brazos, 2005). He coauthored (with Brian Walsh) *The Transforming Vision: Shaping a Christian World View* (IVP, 1984) and *Truth is Stranger than It Used to Be: Biblical Faith in a Postmodern Age* (IVP, 1995), and has co-edited (with Garnett Roper) *A Kairos Moment for Caribbean Theology: Ecumenical Voices in Dialogue* (Pickwick, 2013). He has published articles on creation theology in the Old Testament, the problem of suffering, and the dynamics of human and divine power in biblical narratives. His books have been published in Korean, French, Indonesian, Spanish, and Portuguese.



**J. Richard Middleton**

**Academic Affiliations**  
Northeastern Seminary

**Specialties**  
Biblical Theology

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