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6-26-2015

Reformed Approach to the Interactions of Science and Religion (cont'd)

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Recommended Citation

Jelsma, Tony N., "Reformed Approach to the Interactions of Science and Religion (cont'd)" (2015). *Faculty Work: Comprehensive List*. Paper 278.

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Reformed Approach to the Interactions of Science and Religion (cont'd)

Abstract

"The relationship between faith and science is not just a scientific or theological topic."

Posting about conflicts between science and religion from *In All Things* - an online hub committed to the claim that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ has implications for the entire world.

<http://inallthings.org/a-reformed-approach-to-the-interactions-of-science-and-religion-contd/>

Keywords

In All Things, religion and science, God, creation, faith

Disciplines

Biology | Christianity

Comments

In All Things is a publication of the [Andreas Center for Reformed Scholarship and Service](#) at Dordt College.

A Reformed Approach to the Interactions of Science and Religion (cont'd)

 inallthings.org/a-reformed-approach-to-the-interactions-of-science-and-religion-contd/

Tony Jelsma

This is post #3 of 3 in the series *“Religion and Science - A Reformed Perspective”*

1. [Models of the Interaction of Science and Religion](#)
2. [A Reformed Approach to the Interactions of Science and Religion](#)
3. A Reformed Approach to the Interactions of Science and Religion (cont'd)

A series exploring the interactions between religion and science.

Dealing with Apparent Conflicts

In my [two previous articles](#) I described four models of religion-science interactions. I argued against the conflict and independence models but noted that the dialogue and integration models also have challenges. The biggest challenge is what to do when, despite our best efforts, we still have apparent conflicts between science and religion. If we should not embrace the conflict model because the same God is revealing his work in both religion and science, how then do we resolve these apparent conflicts? In this final article I will briefly describe some recent scientific evidences that challenge our traditional understanding of the origin and condition of the human race and how we might deal with those challenges.

To begin with a simpler example, when Genesis 1 states that God created the world in six days, are we contradicting Scripture when we say that scientific evidence points to a much longer period of creation? This is a hermeneutical question. While one interpretation holds to literal 24-hour days, others argue that the genre allows for other [concordist](#) interpretations,¹ so getting away from a conflict scenario is not difficult.

However, things get more complicated when biblical scholars argue a non-concordist interpretation, on the basis of comparisons with other ancient near eastern creation stories, that the entire first 11 chapters of Genesis do not have any historical basis but are an origins story created along similar lines.² This view has implications that appear to lead us into a conflict between religion and science.

Was there a historical Adam? The traditional view holds that Adam was the father of the human race and his circumstances were exactly as described in Genesis 2-4. However, the fossil record and genetic evidence argue that the human population was never fewer than a few thousand human beings. Some try to reconcile the biblical story with the scientific story by still holding to a historical Adam while allowing for other contemporaries or even predecessors of Adam.³ For example, Adam may not have been the progenitor of the human race, but was instead a representative chosen by God. However, such an interpretation makes the transmission of original sin – a clear biblical concept – difficult to explain.

Moreover, if Adam never existed, then there was no Fall into sin. That we are sinful creatures in need of a Savior is not in dispute, but how important is the event of the Fall to our theology?

Finally, how can we hold to a non-historical Adam if Paul evidently believed Adam did exist, and made Adam central to his theology in his letter to the Romans?

There are three possible responses to such potential conflicts.

A) We could conclude that, since God's Word is infallible, the science must be in error and so we reject it out of hand. This option may be taken by people who are not familiar with all the scientific arguments, which makes them easier to dismiss.

B) Alternatively, we could accept the scientific explanation over the biblical interpretation. This choice may be made by people who are less familiar with the theological interpretations and their implications, including those who work more closely with the scientific evidence.

C) A third option is to suspend judgment and wait for further understanding, for both theological and scientific claims. This does not mean we should throw up our hands in despair; we should test the various positions, eliminating those that seem untenable, and weigh the implications of accepting one or the other position.

This third position is the most difficult to hold, but I think it is also the best one. It can be a struggle to maintain cognitive dissonance while still striving for resolution. This position also requires hard work in trying to understand and critique both the science and the theology that speak to the issue at hand. We may be able to reduce the cognitive dissonance somewhat but still be left with some thorny questions.

Let us consider the theological consequences of denying a literal Adam. If there was no Adam, how can we explain the Fall as the cause of our depraved human condition? How is original sin transmitted through the human race, if not biologically from parent to child? How do we explain (away) Paul's evident belief in a literal Adam as described in Romans?

On the scientific side, how reliable are the population genetics calculations that claim that the line leading to the human race never contained fewer than thousands of individuals? How similar are the human and chimpanzee DNA genomes? How well do we understand developmental biology in order to construct a plausible mechanism of changes in body plans from apes to humans?

Conclusion

Clearly, there are no easy answers as we strive to bring together evidences from different sources and perspectives. The question of the historicity of the early chapters of Genesis is just one of many potential conflicts between religion and science. If we are to bring about not just détente between religion and science but the recognition that all knowledge comes from God, considerable humility is required. We cannot understand everything, yet I believe we are called to bring together these two ways of understanding God's revelation as much as our limited capacities will allow.

Allow me to make one final comment: the relationship between faith and science is not just a scientific or theological topic. For many it's also emotional and sociological. Changing one's interpretation of a particular Scripture passage can be a traumatic process. Often our whole view of God and his interaction with the creation is affected by such a change. There is also tremendous peer pressure on both sides. The scientists want to maintain integrity and do "good science." Church leaders need to maintain the trust of fellow believers. Sadly, the believing scientist is often caught in the middle. Grace and humility are essential tools to tackle this issue.

Footnotes

1. The most common interpretations are: the day-age position, which holds the days to be long periods of time; the framework interpretation, which argues that the six days are not chronological, but organizational; and the analogical position states that these are God's days, which are not equivalent to ours. More information on interpretations of Genesis 1 can be found [here](#) ↩
2. E.g. Harlow D.C., 2010, "After Adam: Reading Genesis in an Age of Evolutionary Science" *Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith* 62:179-195 ↩
3. The various views on Adam are well laid out (and debated) in [Four Views on the Historical Adam](#) ↩