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The Origins Debate

Part I - Background

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Why does there seem to be a stalemate in the origins debate, also called the creation vs. evolution debate? Several years ago D.G. Jones made the following observation:

Remarkably little appears to have taken place over the last 10 years or so in Christian thinking on evolution. The same camps are still there, their front lines looking remarkably like those of a decade ago.¹

The same observation could be made today: the front lines have not moved very much. Why? We might be able to understand why the positions of Christians and non-Christians on origins do not change. But Jones was correct when he observed that the debate among Christians is stalled.

This debate among Christians need not be stalled. I believe (1) that this debate is stalled because Christians differ in their understanding of the relation of God to creation and (2)

that some agreement on this relation, sufficient for agreement on origins, is an achievable goal for Christians. I do not ask various groups to give up their most cherished assumptions. Rather, I hope to show that what Christians hold in common at present makes it possible for them to provide a united front against unbelief on the origins question. The purpose of this series is to show that achieving agreement is a reasonable goal.

The Plan of This Series

The plan of this series of articles is as follows. The first article consists of a brief history of the origins debate. The second article will describe the present situation and include suggestions concerning which parts of the debate are not central to the question of origins and which therefore are better left out of an already complex debate. The third

article will give special attention to those parts of the debate which are central to the question of origins and which are therefore non-negotiable for Christians. It will then be shown how understanding the relation of God to creation can bring Christians together and make it possible for them to present a united front against non-Christian ideas on origins. The fundamental difference is between Christians and non-Christians, not between Christians.

Misunderstandings on the meanings of terms can add to the confusion in a discussion of origins questions. Following Hayward,³ I use the following definitions of key terms:

Evolution refers to the descent of all living forms from the simplest living form.

Darwinism is the belief that evolution occurred by natural selection.

Atheistic Darwinism is the belief that the forces of nature, have on their own, caused evolution.

Theistic Darwinism is the belief that God used natural selection to create living forms.

Ancient creationism is the belief that although living forms succeeded each other, God created separately.

Recent creationism is the belief that there has been no succession and that all living forms were created recently.

A few persons who accept evolution are not Darwinists, that is, they do not believe that evolution occurred by means of natural selection. But, as Hayward states, natural selection is the only mechanism for evolution which has wide acceptance. Consequently, I shall assume that a person who accepts evolution is a Darwinist; in a few places exceptions will be made.

The Nineteenth Century Debate

Historians of the period which includes the time during which Darwin lived and the decades immediately following conclude that all the views presently held with respect to Darwinism were also held in the nineteenth century.^{4 5} That is not surprising;

what is surprising is the conclusion that popular ideas about nineteenth century "warfare" over Darwinism are largely incorrect. The writings of a few nineteenth century observers, such as William Draper and Andrew White, who stated that science and the Christian faith were at war, are no longer taken to give a correct view of the intellectual climate of that day.⁶ In fact, the nineteenth century discussion of Darwinism among intellectuals was unlike the modern adversarial situation. Various scholars vigorously defended their positions, but there were no battle lines. Individuals spoke for themselves, not parties.⁷ But parties among the rank-and-file did begin to form. Thus, R.L. Numbers has documented the organization of strong opposition to belief in evolution among Seventh Day Adventists during the lifetime of Ellen White, the founder of the movement.⁸ (A later prominent Adventist, George McCready Price, revived the eighteenth century flood geology theory in his writings of the 1920s and 1930s; the current acceptance of this theory by many people can probably be traced to Price's efforts.⁹)

How did it come about that many people accepted Darwinism in the nineteenth century? The principal reason for acceptance lay in Darwin's search for natural explanations. The belief that every phenomenon has a natural explanation was characteristic of the eighteenth century enlightenment, a movement which was largely the product of the seventeenth century scientific revolution. Thus, it was entirely appropriate that late in the eighteenth century Laplace should postulate the "nebular hypothesis" for the origin of the solar system. According to Laplace, the solar system is the result of evolution from the simple (dust) to the complex (the system as we know it). Numbers maintains that this evolutionary hypothesis concerning inorganic matter, even though the hypothesis was abandoned by 1900, paved the way for the adoption of Darwinism.¹⁰

For Darwin, an explanation which is

natural cannot invoke the actions of a god. A god might exist; but let there be no design in the world. Applied to biology, this philosophy meant that natural selection, not a god, determined which species would arise. Darwin claimed that phenomena such as the apparently purposeless large-scale wastage of eggs, seeds, and so forth, prove that no hand guides events.¹¹ ¹² Darwin claimed an intimate familiarity with Paley's classic *Natural Theology*; and so he did not reject design because he did not understand it.¹³ Darwin did not deny the existence of a god; but with respect to the origins question he was, according to the definitions given above, an atheistic Darwinist.

How did Christians respond to Darwin? James Moore, a modern historian of the nineteenth century debate on origins, has described several different Christian responses to Darwin.⁶ Some orthodox Christians accepted Darwinism, maintaining, of course, that God has always been in control; according to the definitions given above, they were theistic Darwinists. One reason for their acceptance of Darwinism, not often heard today, was that Darwinism agrees with the Christian perception of creation. Their argument was that natural science had Christian origins: the Christian view of an ordered world led to the modern natural scientific view of an ordered world. Darwinism, explaining evolution by natural selection, provided a mechanism for much of what had occurred in the history of biology. Darwinism taught order, not chance, to these Christians, who had always known the world is orderly.¹⁴

Other Christians accepted some of Darwin's ideas in a different way. They combined natural selection with divine agency; they claimed that God interfered to give man his special qualities. Their views were a hybrid of those given in the above definitions: for parts of the origins question, they were theistic Darwinists, but for other parts they were either recent or ancient creationists.¹⁵ Their position was attacked as nothing more than modified deism. That is,

any form of creationism seemed to imply that God created at one time and now allows creation to function on its own, "deistically," except for certain special times, times of creation or catastrophe. Aulie argues that Christians still have the tendency to think certain biological structures so marvelous that they must have been made by God, without, however, making the same claim for less complicated structures.¹⁶ Aulie refers to this as an unconscious type of deism.

Many Christians, such as Charles Hodge, opposed Darwinism.¹⁷ Evidently part of this opposition was based on acceptance of the scientific philosophy of Francis Bacon. For it was Bacon who held that a sure knowledge of the world could be obtained by generalizing from scientific and biblical facts; in short, inductive reasoning could provide information about creation. According to Aulie, Darwin's approach differed from that of his Christian opponents:

True science, said Darwin, can verify hypotheses and theories only to a high degree of probability....For the Christian anti-Darwinians, certainty in science was possible and necessary because the world possessed a definite number of species, which had remained fixed since the time of their special creation.¹⁸

Aulie holds that the certainty of the anti-Darwinians was derived from the idea that a being could think logically what God would do; in fact, prediction was possible.¹⁸

For a while the Roman Catholic Church taught fixity of species as dogma; but gradually Darwinism was adopted as a scientific hypothesis. The Roman Catholic Church made a conscious attempt to divorce Darwinism from materialistic metaphysics. To the extent that the Roman Catholic Church succeeded, it allowed theistic Darwinism.¹⁹

One more point concerning this early

period is important for the present study. Many students of this period, including Young,²⁰ and Moore,⁶ state that many nineteenth century Christian geologists accepted both the special creation of living things and a very old earth. In modern terms, they were ancient creationists.

Continuation of the Debate, 1900-1960

Nineteenth century scholarly interaction gave way in the first part of the twentieth century to the formation of parties. Non-Christian Darwinists became much more stridently atheistic Darwinists. They tended to make a god of nature; for them biology became a substitute religion.²¹ Most of those discussing the issue, regardless of their own position, tended to caricature opponents and listen only to those in their own camp. Very seldom was a Christian approach heard in scholarly circles. Whether this situation arose because non-Christians excluded Christians or because Christians deliberately avoided scholarly discussion can be debated.

In any case, what did happen in scholarly circles was certainly of importance.

During the twentieth century biology has generally been studied using a Darwinistic framework. The human race, already assumed to be descended from animals, was decades ago held to be at least several hundred thousand years old. Still another aspect of the origins question became very important in scholarly circles. A.I. Oparin, a Russian, postulated chemical processes which can account for the appearance of life from non-life. Belief that life evolved from non-life was not new; but Oparin's detailed mechanism was new. His work was not widely known until his *Origin of Life* was published in English in 1938.²² To many Christians, it seemed that this development was the natural consequence of evil Darwinism. For, they said, Darwinians (without distinguishing between theistic and atheistic Darwinians) adopted evolution from one living thing to another to avoid the idea of creation. Now, to avoid suggesting that the

simplest life was created, it was to be expected that someone would present a non-life-to-life mechanism. To these Christians, it seemed that acceptance of Oparin's idea was but one more attempt by human beings to deny God. In the decades after World War Two, scientific interest in the question of evolution of life from non-living matter greatly increased.

The classic argument against Darwinists is the following: "All that you ever attempt to explain is process. Even if all living things evolved from the simplest kind of life, and the simplest life evolved from matter, creation is not avoided. After all, wasn't matter created?" Instead of being convinced by this argument, many Darwinists took up the challenge and asked about the origin of matter. These Darwinists did indeed want to eliminate the idea of creation, for ultimately "creation" cannot be comprehended. Another theory was available to help them. In the early decades of this century the so-called "steady-state creation theory" was advanced. According to this theory, the universe never had a beginning; the "creation" of this theory was said to be a continual appearance of hydrogen atoms as the universe expands. It was held that such an appearance of hydrogen atoms cannot at present be understood, but that the phenomenon is, unlike biblical creation, not inherently incapable of explanation. For scientific reasons the steady-state theory is no longer accepted; but the idea of explaining everything in terms of laws formulated by human beings lives on. Other no-beginning cosmologies have been advanced.

This was the adversarial environment which existed in 1954, when Bernard Ramm's landmark *The Christian View of Science and Scripture* appeared.²³

Ramm, an evangelical theologian, argued for a high view of Scripture. The position he took with respect to origins, ancient creationism, was not a new position. But he discussed the issues carefully and dispassionately. Evangelicals were affected. (In 1979, twenty-five years later, the *Journal of*

the American Scientific Affiliation published (Volume 31, Issue 4) a commemorative Ramm Festschrift.) They could identify with the man, his approach to the problem, his style, and his conclusions. Wilbur Smith, a prominent evangelical, said that Ramm's book was

The most important discussion of the problems involved in the vast and difficult subject of modern science and the ancient Scriptures that has appeared in this country in the last fifty years. It is the only book that I know of, by an evangelical scholar of today, that can be favorably compared with the masterly, learned works in this field which were produced in the latter part of the nineteenth century.²⁴

Ramm recognized that scientific understanding progresses, and so he would have been the first to refuse to cling to results and ideas widely accepted at the time *The Christian View* was written. The 500,000-year age for man he allowed would later be changed to two million years or more by many.²⁵ The steady-state creation theory held widely by non-Christians in the 1950s was later almost completely abandoned.²⁶ But he predicted that an omnipotent wisdom would be required to explain evolution of life from non-life; and later observers agreed that he was correct.²⁷

Did Ramm obtain the effect he desired? One biologist said that because of Ramm's book he deliberately went beyond Ramm as he accepted biological evolution.²⁸ Is ancient creationism, Ramm's position, of necessity only a way-station on the road toward acceptance of theistic Darwinism and even atheistic Darwinism? This question, even though it is not always asked, hangs over every modern discussion of origins. I shall examine this question later in these articles; what must be seen for the present is that by 1960, partly because of Ramm's book, there was a change in the origins debate. By 1960

the debate took a more scholarly turn among Christians.

From 1960 to the Present

Ramm's book was but one of the causes of the change in the tone of the debate. Consider the following sequence of events. The American Scientific Affiliation (ASA) was begun by a small group of evangelicals during the 1940s for the purpose of relating the Christian faith to the sciences. By 1960 a few thousand persons either in the sciences or with a strong interest in them were ASA members. Ever since its earliest years the ASA included members of widely-different views on the origins question; but by 1960 some recent creationist members felt uncomfortable. As a result, they left the ASA, joined with others, and formed the militantly anti-evolutionistic Creation Research Society (CRS) in 1963.²⁹ This movement has produced the Institute for Creation Research, the *Creation Research Quarterly*, and Christian Heritage College. A related organization is the Bible-Science Association. These organizations became very active in the struggle to have "creation science" and "evolution science" taught as equally-viable alternatives in public schools. This struggle led to many public hearings and extensive public debate in several states, including Arkansas, California, and Iowa.

The opponents of recent creationism in these states have answered these claims vigorously; consequently, the amount of creation-evolution literature has grown rapidly. In many cases there has been more heat than light; but it is fair to say that the renewed controversy has produced a considerable body of worthwhile discussion of the subject.

Thus, since 1960 two matters have been particularly important in the origins question: the school struggles and the rapid growth of literature in the field. Let us examine these two developments separately.

In the early 1970s vigorous attempts were made to force California to include the

teaching of creation alongside evolution in public schools. There were hearings, with many witnesses, before the California Board of Public Education, as well as proposals discussed by the California legislature. Members of the ASA, the CRS, the American Humanist Society, and many others were among the witnesses.³⁰⁻³⁵ Following are some of the questions debated: Is creation science? Is an evolutionary origin of the universe possible? Can design be a scientific concept? Is randomness the foundation of all existence? If creationism is true, does that mean that creation took place recently? Is a defense of Darwinistic public school teaching of necessity a defense of reductionism, that is, the belief that everything can be explained in terms of natural science?

These were but a few of the philosophical ideas discussed; all are rather unusual for a political forum. However, part of the discussion—for example, attacks on individuals—was fruitless.

The evolution question was argued in other states as well. In Arkansas, the situation was different in several ways.³⁶ In the first place, Arkansas had mandated that both creation and evolution were to be taught; the court challenge was made by those opposing the introduction of creation into the classroom. The state was therefore on the defense. The state law was found unconstitutional by the court. Also, the law had defined both "creation science" and "evolution science." The former was said to include, among other ideas, the belief that mutation and natural selection cannot account for diversity, that biological changes took place only within fixed limits, that the earth is young, and that earth geology must be explained by catastrophism. The evolution position was generally defined to be the opposite. The two positions defined in the law correspond to recent creationism and atheistic Darwinism, with possibly some room for theistic Darwinism, but none for ancient creationism. Some persons who studied the situation believe that the law

would not have permitted one to pick elements of each position by holding, for example, that biological change took place only within fixed limits but that the earth is very old.

The dispute over public school teaching of evolution is part of a larger controversy over the content of public school education. Perhaps the best example of a crusade to affect the content of public school textbooks, and therefore the content of public school education, are the efforts of Mel and Norma Gabler, who have analyzed textbooks and attempted to affect textbook decisions made for the public schools of Texas.³⁷ The Gablers have become involved in several modern controversies, always insisting that students hear both sides. Besides being concerned with origin questions, they have urged changes in how free enterprise, the Viet Nam War, and sexual promiscuity are discussed in the classroom.

Attempts to affect the treatment of origins in the public school classroom have also been made at the Federal level. In 1980 an organization called Citizens Against Federal Establishment of Evolutionary Dogma proposed to every member of Congress a Federal equal-time program. The law proposed bore the title "An Act to Protect Academic Freedom and to Prevent Federal Censorship in Scientific Inquiry Funded with Federal Tax Monies."³⁸

The other important development in the origins debate since 1960 is the growth of origins literature. Some of this literature is directly related to the teaching in public schools. One example is cited: *Biology: A Search for Order in Complexity*, which teaches recent creationism, is a widely-discussed 1970 biology textbook intended for public high schools produced by the Creation Research Society.³⁹ As one would expect, this book has been analyzed carefully and criticized by those who do not accept the equal-time concept. The book embraces catastrophism as well as the absence of change beyond fixed limits. Some critics disapprove of the divine design which the

book teaches. For other important origins books of this period, see the reference lists at the end of these articles.

In 1980 a new journal, *Creation/Evolution*, was started for the express purpose of answering creationists.⁴⁰ (Evidently, "creationists" in this context usually means "recent creationists.") Articles in the first issues of this journal included a critique of *Biology: A Search for Order*; a discussion of the legal questions concerning teaching in the public schools; and articles on flood geology, the second law of thermodynamics, dating methods, transitional fossils, the question of whether human footprints are found in dinosaur tracks, the probability of evolution of life, the question of apparent age, probability calculations concerning the age of the earth, and what "equal time" would mean were it adopted as a principle in all of education. The validity of these arguments is not my interest here; what is important is the serious effort that Darwinists are making to answer the arguments of some of their opponents.

The period since 1960 has also been characterized by an increase in the number of people accepting and discussing a wide variety of points of view concerning origins. With this increase, various points of view have been expressed. That there are actually several Christian views, to say nothing of various non-Christian views, was made evident by the 1979 Ramm Festschrift.

Since 1960 recent creationists have become more vocal, especially with respect to the age of the earth; ancient creationists have responded. Opposition to a young earth has taken many forms. Some Christians take the "days" of Genesis 1 to be long periods.⁴¹ Others maintain that the Genesis 1 days were short days separated by long periods.⁴² Still others claim that the Genesis 1 days present a framework of events, not a chronology.⁴³ Hayward suggests a "fiat" theory.⁴⁴ According to this theory, the "let there be" declarations of God given in Genesis 1 were spoken on the days indicated. These words were then inevitably fulfilled

by events which took place over a long period of time. Theistic evolutionists have also written and debated extensively in recent years.⁴⁵

Still others say that there is too much discussion of the issue; sometimes such a claim is made along with a suggestion that certain other scientific questions related to the Christian faith are more important.⁴⁶

Unifying Christians

From the beginning of the debate over origins in the nineteenth century up until the present the main positions—recent creationism, ancient creationism, atheistic Darwinism, and theistic Darwinism—have had adherents. But the amount and quality of the discussion has varied. Since the early 1960s the debate has been characterized by vigorous and often fruitful interaction between those holding to the different positions. The debate over public school teaching of origins and the increased amount of literature in the field are two important components of the origins debate since 1960.

Thus, the origins debate involves people of many different philosophies and encompasses discussion over everything about the universe—its history, its nature, and its destiny. This debate includes discussion of the nature of life as well as its history and future. It is not healthy for Christians to disagree about these things; disagreement on these matters borders on disagreement on the fundamentals of the Christian faith. Therefore, in the next article, after examining the present state of the debate in more detail, I shall attempt to eliminate some matters ordinarily taken to be a part of the origins question, matters which are actually irrelevant to the main question. In that way, progress in the discussion can be made easier. Then, in the last article I shall suggest a way Christians holding to the three main positions—recent creationist, ancient creationist, and theistic Darwinist—can present a unified position over against the atheistic Darwinist position.

Endnotes

¹D. Gareth Jones, "Evolution: A Personal Dilemma," *Journal of the American Scientific Affiliation*, 29 (1977), 73; hereafter cited as *JASA*.²

²*JASA* publishes articles on subjects related to science and the Christian faith, including origins. Because the *Journal* adopts a neutral stance on these questions, and consequently publishes conflicting views, it is an excellent source of material on the origins debate. For this reason many of the references in this series of articles are to this *Journal*.

³Alan Hayward, *Creation and Evolution* (London: Triangle, 1985), p.3.

⁴E. Steve Cassels, rev. of *The Darwinian Revolution: Science Red in Tooth and Claw*, by Michael Ruse, *JASA*, 32 (1980), 239.

⁵Ronald Burwell, rev. of *Science and Religion in America: 1800-1860*, by Herbert Hovenkamp, *JASA*, 34 (1982), 57.

⁶James R. Moore, *The Post-Darwinian Controversies: A Study of the Protestant Struggle to Come to Terms with Darwin in Great Britain and America, 1870-1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979).

⁷Richard P. Aulie, "The Post-Darwinian Controversies," *JASA*, 34 (1982), 24.

⁸Ronald L. Numbers, "Science Falsely So-Called: Evolution and Adventists in the Nineteenth Century," *JASA*, 27 (1975), 18.

⁹Hayward, p. 77.

¹⁰Ronald L. Numbers, *Creation by Natural Law* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1977).

¹¹It is ironic that Darwin, the arch-positivist, used human inability to discern purpose as proof that God does not guide affairs. After all, positivists claim that Christians rest their case on the (ever-diminishing) gaps in human knowledge, that is, on the supposed human inability to explain certain phenomena.

¹²Darwin claimed an intimate familiarity with Paley's classic *Natural Theology*; and so he did not reject design because he did not understand it.¹³

¹³Richard P. Aulie, "The Post-Darwinian Controversies," *JASA*, 34 (1982), 219.

¹⁴Aulie, p. 24 and p. 219.

¹⁵Richard P. Aulie, "The Post-Darwinian Controversies," *JASA*, 34 (1982), 90.

¹⁶Richard P. Aulie, "The Post-Darwinian Controversies," *JASA*, 34 (1982), 163.

¹⁷A.A. Hodge, also a theologian and the son of Charles, apparently gave Darwinism his cautious approval.

¹⁸Aulie, p. 90.

¹⁹H.W. Paul, *The Edge of Contingency: French Catholic Reaction to Scientific Change from Darwin to Duhem* (Gainesville, FL: University Presses of Florida, 1979).

²⁰Davis A. Young, *Christianity and the Age of the Earth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), p. 57.

²¹Paul Fayter, "Scientific Creationism and Its Critics,"

JASA, 37 (1985), 104.

²²A.I. Oparin (tr. S. Morgulis), *Origin of Life* (New York: Macmillan, 1938).

²³Bernard Ramm, *The Christian View of Science and Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1954).

²⁴Quoted from *Moody Monthly* by F. Alton Everest, "Personal Reminiscences," *JASA*, 31 (1979), 187.

²⁵Claude E. Stipe, "Responses in Specific Fields: Anthropology," *JASA*, 31 (1979), 192.

²⁶Owen Gingerich, "Responses in Specific Fields: Astronomy," *JASA*, 31 (1979), 193.

²⁷Gordon C. Mills, "Responses in Specific Fields: Chemical Evolution," *JASA*, 31 (1979), 193.

²⁸Richard T. Wright, "Responses in Specific Fields: Evolutionary Biology," 31 (1979), 194.

²⁹H. Harold Hartzler, Communication, *JASA*, 35 (1983), 107.

³⁰Harald Bredeesen, "Anatomy of a Confrontation," *Christian Life*, (November, 1970), p. 30.

³¹Robert B. Fischer and Richard H. Bube, "Creation and Evolution in Science Education," *JASA*, 25 (1973), p. 68.

³²Ronald S. Remmel, "Randomness in Quantum Mechanics and Its Implications for Evolutionary Theory," *JASA*, 26 (1974), 96.

³³Richard H. Bube, Communication, *JASA*, 30 (1978), 96.

³⁴Dorothy Nelkin, *Science Textbook Controversies and the Politics of Equal Time* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1977).

³⁵Nell Segraves, Fred Jappe, Bette Chambers, Ray Menegus, and Robert Ball, "Biblical Creation: Should It Be Taught in the Public Schools as a Mandated Subject Alongside Evolution?" *JASA*, 33 (1981), 231.

³⁶Norman L. Geisler, *The Creator in the Courtroom* (Milford, MI: Mott Media, 1982).

³⁷James C. Hefley, *Textbooks on Trial* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1976).

³⁸Donald C. Boardman, "Editorial," *JASA*, 33 (1981), 1.

³⁹J.N. Moore and H.S. Slusher (eds.), *Biology: A Search for Order in Complexity*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1970).

⁴⁰For a discussion of the journal *Creation/Evolution*, see a review by Jerry D. Albert, *JASA*, 33 (1981), 189.

⁴¹I take this view; my position is explained in *The Bible, Natural Science, and Evolution* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformed Fellowship, 1970; now published by Dordt College Press, Sioux Center, IA).

⁴²Robert C. Newman and Herbert J. Eckelmann, Jr., *Genesis One and the Origin of the Earth* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1977).

⁴³M.G. Kline, "Because It Had Not Rained," *Westminster Theological Journal*, 20 (1958), 146.

⁴⁴Hayward, p. 167.

⁴⁵See, for example, Richard H. Bube, "Creation (B) Understanding Creation and Evolution," *JASA*, 32 (1980), 174.

⁴⁶J. Michael Wilson, Letter, *JASA*, 29 (1977), 192.