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RESPONDING TO THE NON-CHRISTIAN BIOLOGY CLASSROOM

by Heather Zeiger

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Many people, Christian and non-Christian alike, believe that faith is antithetical to science. This is based, however, on a purely naturalistic view of science. The naturalist's presupposition is that reality is only described by the physical world; there is no immaterial or supernatural realm. Because of this, many Christians who want to study the sciences often find themselves in an environment that, at its best, excuses the supernatural as a personal preference, and, at its worst, considers religion a crutch for the intellectually dull and weak-willed.

Is There a Conflict between Faith and Science? I dislike the "faith versus science" mentality, because it implies that to have faith is to be unscientific and to be scientific means to abandon faith. Faith and science are not on opposite sides of the spectrum, although I would say that theology and science are different academic disciplines. The real tension is between two different worldviews. One worldview, naturalism, assumes there is nothing beyond nature. This idea is not new. The ancient Greeks had groups (e.g. the atomists) who believed all of reality sprang from matter, but this was a minority position.¹ Historically the predominant worldview in the West was theism. This assumes both natural and supernatural explanations of reality. Some of the greatest scientists of all time operated under theistic presuppositions. Many of them assumed the existence of the Christian God and were motivated to study nature to understand Him.²

What Is Evolution and What Is Darwinism? Different presuppositions can make conversation difficult. The Christian student may find himself at odds with some of the presuppositions in the modern-day science class. One way to foster an effective dialogue in this diverse atmosphere is to understand how the other people with differing views define the same terms you use. Once you define your terms, you have a starting point for conversation. For example, "evolution" is a slippery term. There are several definitions of evolution that are used interchangeably, including but not limited to³ (1) Change over time (the most general definition of evolution); (2) Adaptation of a

species to changes in its environment (microevolution); (3) Natural selection acting on mutations explains the origin of species (Neo-Darwinism); and (4) The first cell or proto-cell arose from nonliving chemical processes (origin of life).

Many scientists do not make a distinction between the various definitions. For example, adaptation to the environment is something that is observed all of the time, and I would argue is one of the strongest contributions from evolutionary theory. However, to say that since this definition is true, therefore all the definitions must be true is to go beyond the data.

Another important distinction that is often missed is the difference between scientific methodology and a naturalistic worldview. Today when someone mentions “evolution,” people usually equate the two. However, there is a difference between a theory that proposes a natural explanation for phenomena and a worldview that holds that there can only be natural explanations for phenomena. There is nothing wrong with saying that God uses natural processes, but there is something wrong with saying that God can only use natural processes. There is nothing wrong with finding a natural explanation, but there is something wrong with having faith in the fact that there must always be a natural explanation, even when the evidence indicates otherwise.

By way of example, during Darwin’s time many people thought that there was some kind of mechanism like natural selection that explained how organisms changed over time or adapted to the environment. However, Darwin’s theory goes farther than that. In *The Origin of Species*, he proposed a mechanism of creativity that accounts for the origin of all living things. Darwin was proposing an origins story for a particular worldview.

What Does the Physical World Show Us? Early scientists conducted research to learn more about the processes that God actually used to create His world. What we are finding is that God did not necessarily use a step-by-step process of random mutations coupled with natural selection to create all of the diverse life that we see today (Neo-Darwinism). For example, DNA is composed of nucleotides that code for amino acids, which make up proteins. There is no known natural process that can create a complex code like DNA.⁴ To make matters worse, studies have shown that even a “simple” mutational change to convert one protein to another is impossible through Darwinian mechanisms.⁵ The problem becomes substantially worse when we start talking about accumulating a large number of mutations to affect large-scale traits like bodily features.

When it comes to dialoguing with someone about science issues, the Bible says that God’s invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, are clearly perceived in this world so that people are without excuse (Rom. 1:20). Just as we can understand the painter by studying his paintings, so we can know something about God from studying the world and nature. The evidences from nature seem to indicate design or engineering, not random processes. As Christians, we believe that they indicate a particular creator. We also believe that part of being a fallen people is that some may suppress the truth. Even though the evidences may seem plain to you,

another person may be blinded to the implications. Observations from nature do not bring someone to a saving knowledge of Jesus, but they do begin a conversation.

Dialogue. Here are some practical points for how to foster healthy communication that promotes free inquiry and academic discussion in an environment that approaches the subject with different fundamental assumptions than do you. In many ways, both Jesus and Paul modeled this form of dialogue with the right balance of humility and respect:⁶

Don't try to confront a teacher or professor in public. As someone who teaches high school students and who has taught adult/college classes, I have two priorities: (1) maintaining control of the classroom, so that all students feel comfortable interacting and participating and (2) covering all of the material at an appropriate academic level.

This means that arguing with a teacher or professor during class could be seen as disrespectful and a waste of other students' time. Also, not all professors welcome discussion or dialogue in a class, particularly if it is a content-heavy class, such as microbiology or organic chemistry. Furthermore, in college, many of the students are paying to take this class. They are not paying to hear another student wax eloquent on his personal opinion. However, asking good questions that spark thoughtful consideration can make for a dynamic and vibrant classroom, and usually teachers like interested students. Talk science. Particularly in the university setting, you are going to have a diversity of people in the classroom. For all of your differences, the one common ground you have is that you are taking biology (or geology, or chemistry, or biochemistry, and so on). So talk about biology. Even if you want to delve into a discussion on worldview assumptions, start with talking about evidences from biology.

Know your subject. You need to know your subject very well before you are in a position to critique it. It is okay to say "I don't know" or to not have all of the answers, but you need to have a certain level of knowledge before you are in a position to evaluate a subject. Whenever I write a book review, I end up reading the book twice to make sure I know the subject well enough to critique it. I have read book reviews where the author obviously didn't read the book. It is just embarrassing for him and discredits his opinion, even if his points are valid. The same thing goes in the academic setting. You may think Darwinism, for example, is incorrect, but the burden is on you to back up your statements. If someone is unconvinced, let it be because they are suppressing the truth, not because you are trying to fake being an expert.

A little philosophy of science goes a long way. Knowing the difference between observation, interpretation, presuppositions, and opinions can go a long way in framing a discussion.

Be Patient and Allow for Processing. The types of people who enter into science tend to be "processors," which means that they usually chew on information and process it for a long time. While your initial conversations with instructors and fellow students may not seem to make much headway, you are likely giving them something to process. Also, by listening to their perspectives, you are learning more about them and

engaging in healthy dialogue, as opposed to preaching to them. I know, for me, the Holy Spirit does a lot of His work during those processing times.

—Heather Zeiger

Heather Zeiger, M.S., served for four years as a research associate at Probe Ministries after completing graduate school (University of Texas at Dallas) and is currently working on an M.A. in bioethics from Trinity International University's distance program. She teaches, tutors, and writes.

NOTES

- 1 John West, "Nothing New Under the Sun," in *God and Evolution*, ed. Jay Richards (Seattle: Discovery Institute Press, 2010).
- 2 Nancy Pearcey, *Saving Leonardo: A Call to Resist the Secular Assault on Mind, Morals, and Meaning* (Nashville: B and H Publishing, 2010). Another resource is *For the Glory of God* by Rodney Stark (whose studies are quoted in *Saving Leonardo*) (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003).
- 3 Jonathan Wells, *The Politically Incorrect Guide to Darwinism and Intelligent Design* (Washington, DC: Regnery Publishing, 2006).
- 4 For an excellent discussion on information and design, see Stephen C. Meyer, *Signature in the Cell* (New York: HarperOne, 2009).
- 5 Ann K. Gauger and Douglas D. Axe, "Evolutionary Accessibility of New Enzymes Functions: A Case Study from the Biotin Pathway," *BIO-Complexity* 2011 (1): 1–17.
- 6 Luke 20:3; Luke 2:46; Paul's use of rhetorical questions in Romans (throughout) and his dialogue reported in Acts 17:16ff.