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**NEAR DARWIN'S PORTRAIT IN THE BIOLOGY BUILDING,
WHISPERS ABOUT THE CREATOR:
Deceived by a False Image?**

by Paul A. Nelson

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Here is a seductive picture of the “creation / evolution” origins debate that many readers very likely carry around somewhere in their heads. Imagine sitting in front of a university stage, on which a debate about origins is about to take place. On the one hand, we have the “evolutionists,” led by Richard Dawkins, Larry Krause, Jerry Coyne, Sam Harris, and the other so-called New Atheists. They describe a universe coming to be spontaneously, out of nothing, but wholly without God (who does not exist, by the way), in which undirected physical and material processes bring into being galaxies, stars, planets, and eventually life itself. Roughly 13.7 billion years after it began, the universe brings humans themselves onto the scene. No religion in this story. No theology. Just science.

On the other hand, we have the “creationists,” of various flavors, motivated mainly by religious concerns: the young-Earth advocate Ken Ham and his organization Answers in Genesis, for example, or the old-Earth astronomer Hugh Ross, of the apologetics group Reasons to Believe. Although they don't agree with each other's interpretations of Genesis 1 to 11, both Ham and Ross are outspoken Christians. Their theology drives their science.

So what's up there on stage, then, under the bright lights? Atheism or agnosticism, standing at stage left, appealing to the authority of natural science, but lacking any religious motivations or convictions, versus religion, stage right, which also calls on science here and there, or where it can...but *all* the religious (or theological) content can be found on the creationists' side of the performance space. Cross over to

where the atheists and agnostics are standing, at their podium, and the religious assumptions and presuppositions disappear entirely.

This picture would not be as seductive as it is if it did not draw on some measure of truth. But every false image that draws us in incorporates some truth, along with the underlying falsehood, to gain its attractiveness.

The underlying falsehood in this case is the claim that all the religious content in the origins debate is located on the side of "creationism." But evolution as a worldview — and as a scientific theory, for that matter — has from its inception been deeply entangled with theology. Consider, for instance, the following passage, from the late Harvard paleontologist Stephen Jay Gould's famous 1980 essay on the panda's thumb: "If God had designed a beautiful machine to reflect his wisdom and power, surely he would not have used a collection of parts generally fashioned for other purposes....Odd arrangements and funny solutions are the proof of evolution — paths that a sensible God would never tread but that a natural process, constrained by history, follows perforce."¹

The God-talk here is not incidental to Gould's argument, or mere rhetorical embellishment. Analyze his argument in detail, as I have done, and its theological content plays an essential role for reaching the conclusion Gould wishes to make, namely, that pandas, and all other living things, evolved via an undirected process.²

But that's a discussion for another occasion. This article can be seen as a kind of intellectual warning beacon, or a brief cautionary tale, about how not to fall prey to the false image of "science versus religion" when confronting questions of origins. Recent scholarship — for instance, from my Biola University colleague Cornelius Hunter, and from St. Edwards University philosopher of science Stephen Dilley — has shown how evolutionary theory employs theological concepts and categories.³ The false image of "science versus religion" is damaging because it misconstrues what the origins debate is really about, thereby placing Christians at a crippling disadvantage when they try to explain or defend their faith in a hostile culture. Hunter and Dilley correct the false image (as I did with Gould's panda's thumb essay) by analyzing the logic of evolutionary arguments, demonstrating that the premises of those arguments include theological assertions. "*Any Creator worthy of the name would have done...*" or "*Why would God have made...*" and indeed all similar phrases diagnose an appeal to theology. Once alerted to their existence, a perceptive observer will see such appeals everywhere in evolutionary writings, at the popular and technical levels.

WHEN YOU TALK ABOUT *THAT*, YOU CAN'T AVOID RELIGION

For clarity's sake, we can have our take-home lesson now; you don't have to wait until the end of this article. If the question to be debated is "How did the universe and life come to be?" and one of the possible answers on the table is "They were created by a supreme intelligence, usually named 'God,'" then one cannot avoid engaging in

theology — even if one’s theology is couched in strictly negative terms. To claim that God, if He exists, would *not* do (whatever one’s particular conception of God entails that He would not do) *is to make a theological claim*, even if one is personally an atheist or an agnostic. *Take home lesson*: if evolution employs God-talk for its support and justification, whether there are any theists on the scene or not, the theory and its proponents are committed to theology.

Suppose we define religion as “a set of beliefs concerning the cause, nature, and purpose of the universe, especially when considered as the creation of a superhuman agent or agencies,” which is the first definition of the word found in my desk dictionary.⁴ As Hunter has shown, if we accept this definition as a working description, what may appear at first glance to be outright atheism or philosophical naturalism, and thus, not to fall under the heading of “religion” — “the being known as ‘God’ does not exist” — turns out on closer inspection actually to be what Hunter calls “theological naturalism,” where a God of a certain fashion is still most definitely hanging around. Under theological naturalism, a concept of God still hovers above the room, only he has now been rendered so remote and detached from the universe that he cannot interact with it in any detectable way. As Hunter explains, once one accepts theological naturalism, “God ought not intervene in the creation and care of the world. Nature should operate primarily, or even exclusively, via natural laws, and it is not exclusively God’s design. Naturalism in the sciences did not arise from an empiricist urge [i.e., focus on the evidence]; it arose from several theological axioms and concerns.”⁵

In his new book, *Darwinism as Religion*, historian and philosopher of science Michael Ruse lays this point open for inspection.⁶ While Hunter looks broadly at the rise of theological naturalism in science taken generally, Ruse focuses on the origin and history of Darwinian evolutionary theory in particular. He argues that evolutionary theory began in the eighteenth century as a somewhat disreputable “pseudoscience,” and then raised its status to “popular science” — books about evolution, for example, were best- sellers in Victorian England — but only in the mid-twentieth century did the theory achieve respectable professional standing, as a *bona fide* science.

Along the way, however, Ruse continues, “Evolutionary thinking became something more. It became a secular religion, in opposition to Christianity. In the second half of the nineteenth century and into the first part of the twentieth century Darwinian evolutionary thinking...became a belief system countering and substituting for the Christian religion: a new paradigm.”⁷

Ruse adduces abundant evidence in support of this thesis by inspecting how authors such as the novelists George Eliot and Thomas Hardy used an evolutionary lens to interpret human behavior, morals, and the purpose of our existence. His theme is identical to the one I have already sketched: when Party A in a cultural debate talks about matters traditionally within the province of religion, and Party B, his opponent, engages those same matters, but from an opposing perspective, Mr. B is going to find it difficult (if not impossible) to avoid becoming entangled in religion himself. Ultimate commitments do not cease being ultimate when one changes perspective. Tell me you

don't "follow any religion," and after thirty minutes of Socratic dialogue, we will identify just what religion you follow.

Ruse ends his fascinating book with the following claim: "In the past 300 years, something really important has happened. People have come to see that there are no miracles, no Creator God pleased with the job He has done, no promise or guarantee that we humans are special. Like all other organisms, we have been produced by a long, slow, gradual process of change, of blind evolution and that is it."⁸

Speak for yourself, Michael.⁹ Or look over your shoulder: here comes Robert Wright.

RELIGION NEVER REALLY GOES AWAY, BECAUSE IT CAN'T

In December 2016, writing in the *New York Times*, science writer and public intellectual Robert Wright mused that maybe evolution has a "higher purpose" after all.¹⁰ He was motivated to write his speculative piece after happening to watch, for the first time since it was taped, an interview he had conducted in the early 1990s with the late evolutionary biologist William Hamilton, an enormously influential figure in neo-Darwinian theory.

Although a thoroughgoing Darwinian and agnostic, Hamilton had surprised Wright in the interview by taking seriously the possibility that Earth was a "kind of zoo," as he put it, "for extraterrestrial beings who dwell out there somewhere." The biology of this planet is their ongoing intelligently designed experiment, into which, on rare occasions, they intervene. "And maybe," said Hamilton, "those are the miracles which the religious people like to so emphasize." While allowing that he put the idea forward "in an almost joking spirit," Hamilton stressed that "it's a kind of hypothesis that's very, very hard to dismiss."

In his article, Wright explains why: ultimate questions — why are we here, to what end is our existence, and so forth — once asked openly, will admit of a range of answers that cannot be foreclosed, except (I note) by someone in a position of control slamming his fist down on the tabletop and commanding us not to speak about them. In other words, by *stipulating* what topics we may discuss, an authority may cut off debate, but the questions will be alive in our minds nonetheless, only now with the added kick that we know they are forbidden fruit (so to speak). Questions can also become unfashionable, Wright observes, which turns out to be an even more effective way of censoring them.

Take, as an example, the hypothesis given wide currency in 2003 by philosopher Nick Bostrom, namely, that we are living in an intelligently designed simulation. "You may scoff," notes Wright — scoffing, of course, being a powerful form of social censorship — but with a bit of tailoring in language, Bostrom's hypothesis becomes technological, not theological in form, and hence "intellectually respectable."

Wright then draws out the inescapable irony: “If you walked up to the same people who gave Bostrom a respectable hearing and told them there is a transcendent God, many would dismiss the idea out of hand. Yet the simulation hypothesis *is* a God hypothesis: An intelligence of awe-inspiring power created our universe for reasons we can speculate about but can’t entirely fathom....Theology has entered ‘secular’ discourse under another name.”¹¹

Truth be told, theology never went away, because the questions themselves never go away. The healthy state for the origins debate, therefore, is total candor: everyone puts his or her ultimate commitments on the table for inspection. Don’t tell others you have no such commitments; you do.

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NOTES

1. Stephen Jay Gould, *The Panda’s Thumb* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1980), 20–21.
2. Paul A. Nelson, “The Role of Theology in Current Evolutionary Reasoning,” *Biology and Philosophy* 11 (1996): 493–517.
3. Cornelius G. Hunter, *Darwin’s God* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2001), *Darwin’s Proof* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2003), and *Science’s Blind Spot: The Unseen Religion of Scientific Naturalism* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2007); see also Stephen Dilley, “Charles Darwin’s Use of Theology in the *Origin of Species*,” *British Journal for the History of Science* 11 (2011): 1–28, and “Nothing in Biology Makes Sense except in the Light of Theology,” *Studies in History and Philosophy of Biological and Biomedical Sciences* 44 (2013): 774–86.
4. *The Random House College Dictionary* (New York: Random House, 1988), s.v. “religion,” 1114.
5. Cornelius Hunter, *Science’s Blind Spot*, 20.
6. Michael Ruse, *Darwinism as Religion: What Literature Tells Us about Evolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).
7. *Ibid.*, 82.
8. *Ibid.*, 281.
9. Full disclosure: Ruse is an old friend of mine. We met in 1987, when I was a second-year graduate student at the University of Chicago. The occasion was a debate between us about evolution and creation, held at Duquesne University in Pittsburgh and sponsored by the American Jewish Committee. We’ve had many debates since then.
10. Robert Wright, “Can Evolution Have a ‘Higher Purpose’?” *New York Times*, December 12, 2016, accessed online at https://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/12/opinion/can-evolutionhave-a-higher-purpose.html?_r=0.
11. *Ibid*