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THE CAMPAIGN TO EMBARRASS CHRISTIANS INTO ACCEPTING DARWINISM

by Casey Luskin

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It's not often that Christians join forces with atheists, but in recent decades certain elite members of both groups have formed a loose coalition known as the Darwin lobby.¹ Their common ground is joint alarm over the low numbers of religious Americans who accept evolution. In response, they've embarked on an aggressive campaign to convince Christians to accept neo-Darwinism.

Atheist Darwin lobbyists wage the campaign trusting that increased public acceptance of evolution will corrode religion's influence on society. Religious members of this alliance believe they are saving religion from embarrassing brethren who ignorantly reject the "consensus." Ultimately, these theistic evolutionists hope their campaign will make faith more intellectually attractive to a skeptical world.

Though couched as cultural analysis and buried under piles of recent historical references, the subtext of Randall J. Stephens and Karl W. Giberson's 2011 book *The Anointed: Evangelical Truth in a Secular Age* aims to make a case for the Darwin lobby's campaign.

ONE LONG AD HOMINEM ARGUMENT

According to this Harvard University Press book, "almost two-thirds" of evangelicals are "at war with science" because they reject Darwinian evolution. Evangelicalism purportedly has a "tortured relationship with modern science," where its scholars are "amateur" and "out of touch with their putative fields." In the view of Stephens and Giberson, evangelicals are "unable to distinguish between meaningful scholarship and... 'gibberish,'" and are stuck in "intellectual isolation." In a *New York Times* op-ed, they likewise lament the "simplistic theology, cultural isolationism and stubborn anti-intellectualism" that they claim characterizes evangelical Christians.²

This embarrassing state of affairs cannot be tolerated by Christian scholars such as Stephens and Giberson, who seek favor with mainstream academia. Their solution is to embarrass evangelicals further by cherry picking examples that reinforce the worst cultural stereotypes of Christians. (Ironically, they protest supposed *ad hominem* attacks against theistic evolutionists.) Their strategy extends not just to evolution, but also to

American history, bioethics, and family counseling. They hope readers will be embarrassed into capitulating to the “consensus,” presumably just like they were.

FALSE CHOICES AND ERRORS OF OMISSION

Though Giberson is not a biologist, and Stephens not a scientist, *The Anointed* relies heavily on credentialism. The book opens quoting Don McLeroy, a dentist who chaired the Texas State Board of Education during its 2009 hearings on evolution education, stating, “I disagree with these experts.” In their pejorative style they write, “The self-assured McLeroy” ignored the “several scientists” who testified in favor of evolution, and instead “invoked ‘other’ authorities” who “pointed to Earth’s being 6,000 to 10,000 years old, just as the Bible taught.” Having sat through the Texas evolution hearings, I can self-assuredly say the authors are revising history to suit their narrative.

It’s true that McLeroy is a young-earth creationist, and he did say those words. But context is critical. McLeroy made it unmistakably clear during the hearings that he opposed teaching creationism in public schools. Moreover, the authorities he endorsed were well-credentialed scientists and scholars who were not young-earth creationists.

The hearings invited six experts to testify: three endorsed teaching evolution dogmatically and three encouraged teaching the “strengths and weaknesses.” The latter group included Ralph Seelke, now department chair and professor of microbial genetics at the University of Wisconsin-Superior, Baylor University biochemistry professor Charles Garner, and Stephen Meyer, a Ph.D. in philosophy of science from Cambridge University. They testified extensively about scientific challenges to evolution and presented more than one hundred mainstream scientific papers challenging key aspects of biological and chemical evolution.

Somehow these facts were excluded from *The Anointed*, which instead paints McLeroy as an ignorant, unqualified, crusading fundamentalist who scoffs at credible scientists. These omissions are important for two reasons.

First, theistic evolutionists increasingly frame the debate as *only* between young-earth creationism and theistic evolution. Old-earth positions that doubt Darwinism are intentionally left unmentioned. By presenting this false choice, their hope is that Christians will find theistic evolution comparatively more attractive.

The Anointed thus spends many pages denigrating young-earth groups such as Answers in Genesis (AIG), but only one sentence discussing a leading intelligent design think tank, Discovery Institute. AIG “accept[s] such prominence” as “a badge of honor” — and I sympathize with how they are misrepresented and maligned.³ But perhaps they are the book’s focus because other positions—like the barely mentioned intelligent design viewpoint—offer tougher competition for theistic Darwinism.

The McLeroy episode raises a second framing strategy, where theistic evolutionists assert *all* credible scholars support neo-Darwinism. For example, Giberson and Stephens praise “respected and deeply religious scientists—like Francis S. Collins or Nobel laureate William Phillips,” who are “not at war with science” because they accept evolution. In their view, Christians should only listen to theistic evolutionists, “who have earned doctorates, won Nobel Prizes, become tenured at Ivy League

universities, or otherwise acquired professional and secular acclaim.” Giberson also took this approach in *The Language of Science and Faith* where he co-wrote with Collins affirmations such as, “We are equally unfamiliar with any premier scientists who reject evolution.”⁴

But *The Aointed* neglects the eight hundred-plus well-credentialed Ph.D. scientists who courageously signed a list dissenting from neo-Darwinian theory (see www.dissentfromdarwin.org). These scientists hold Ph.D.s or tenured positions from respected universities; some are members of national academies of science in Russia, Czech Republic, Hungary, India (Hindustan), Nigeria, Poland, and the United States. *The Aointed* omits these inconvenient truths to construct a distorted narrative where evolutionists monopolize all credibility.

BAD ARGUMENTS FOR THEISTIC EVOLUTION

Because there is a critical mass of credible scientific dissent from Darwinism, appeals to authority cannot settle this debate. Giberson and Stephens thus present us with a first bad reason to accept evolution: because someone else (often named Francis Collins) does. In science, what matters isn’t vote counts, but the evidence.

A second misguided reason to accept evolution is the fallacious belief that if God *could have* used evolution, then that settles the issue. Ignoring tensions in claiming God guided an unguided Darwinian process, God can do whatever He wants. A better question is, “Did God use evolution?” Again, this must be answered by the evidence.

A third poor reason to accept evolution is the misconception that science and religion deal with separate realms and can never conflict. Often called the “nonoverlapping magisteria” (NOMA) model, this view holds, as Collins has argued, that “science’s domain is to explore nature. God’s domain is in the spiritual world, a realm not possible to explore with the tools and language of science.”⁵

NOMA is flawed because religion makes factually testable claims about reality, and science’s claims often overlap with religion’s. To endorse NOMA is to ignore that Christianity makes testable historical claims (e.g. the Resurrection) and invites us to test those claims.

NOMA is often deployed to trick religious persons. Bora Zivkovic, an evolutionary biology lecturer at Wesleyan College, admitted this when saying, “NOMA is wrong, but is a good first tool for gaining trust...to help [religious students] accept evolution.”⁶ Thus, Phillip Johnson insightfully commented that under NOMA, science and religion are “‘separate but equal’ of the *apartheid* variety.”⁷ NOMA cannot resolve the debate; only the evidence can.

A final dubious reason to accept Darwinism is the misguided argument that if rejecting evolution is unnecessary for Christian salvation, then Darwinian evolution is irrelevant. Paul Copan promotes this position, saying, “Evolution is a secondary concern; we Christians should remember this when engaging with unbelievers rather than getting side-tracked.”⁸

Darwinian evolution might be a “secondary” matter, but that doesn’t mean it is an unimportant one. According to mainstream biology textbooks, neo-Darwinism is a

“random,” “blind,” “uncaring,” “heartless,” “undirected,” “purposeless,” and “chance” process that acts “without plan” or “any goals,” and requires accepting “materialism” because we are “not created for any special purpose or as part of any universal design,” where “a god of design and purpose is not necessary.”⁹ If that doesn’t entail implications that cut against theism, what does?

Moreover, if Darwinian evolution is irrelevant to Christianity, why do so many atheists cite it as a reason for abandoning faith? A 2007 poll of 149 evolutionary biologists found that only two “described themselves as full theists.”¹⁰ Likewise, a survey of biologists in the U.S. National Academy of Sciences (NAS) found that more than ninety-four percent were atheists or agnostics.¹¹ It’s no coincidence that Eugenie Scott—the *de facto* head of the Darwin lobby—signed the Third Humanist Manifesto, or that the world’s most famous evolutionary biologist (Richard Dawkins) is also the world’s most famous atheist. In Dawkins’s own words, “Darwin made it possible to be an intellectually fulfilled atheist.”¹²

Copan’s logic is like saying, “We need roof tiles that reflect light, therefore so long as a roof tile isn’t black, we’ll take it—even dark gray ones.” But just because a roof tile isn’t black doesn’t mean it’s a beneficial color. Likewise, just because some purport to reconcile evolution and Christianity doesn’t mean Darwinism is theologically neutral.

Stephens’s and Giberson’s heavy negative stereotyping of Darwin-doubters reflects a strategy designed to cherry pick examples and thereby embarrass readers into accepting neo-Darwinism. More dangerously, it encourages people to stop thinking for themselves. I wasn’t sure if they intended this message until I read Giberson writing: “To suggest that this ‘data’ can be handed over to non-specialists so they can make up their own minds is to profoundly misunderstand the nature of science.”¹³ So laypeople shouldn’t “make up their own minds”? When we accept evolution simply because it is popular among certain elites, then it is not the evidence or careful thinking that shapes our views, but fear of man.

IS THE CAMPAIGN WORKING?

The Darwin lobby’s proselytizing efforts enjoy support from the highest echelons of the scientific community and the media, but have borne little fruit.

Since 1984, the NAS has issued booklets making proclamations such as “the evidence for evolution can be *fully compatible* with religious faith” (emphasis added).¹⁴ But Gallup polls during that same period reveal the percentage of Americans who accept theistic evolution has remained constant—roughly forty percent.¹⁵ Indeed, a 2011 Lifeway Research survey found seventy-three percent of Protestant pastors disagree “that God used evolution to create people,” and only twenty percent “agree that most of their congregation believes in evolution.”¹⁶

Meanwhile, the percentage of Americans that accepts evolution where “God had no part” increased from nine percent in 1982 to sixteen percent in 2010, whereas the percentage that totally rejects evolution dropped from forty-four percent to forty

percent.¹⁷ While these shifts are small, they suggest that when cultural units convert, many skip right past theistic evolution and go straight for unguided evolution.

Theistic evolutionists who believe their position saves theism from Darwin are wrong. The only force that can stop Darwin's "universal acid" is a compelling scientific rebuttal based on a rigorous examination of the evidence. This is precisely what intelligent design offers—which is precisely why the Darwin lobby doesn't want people hearing about it.

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NOTES

- 1 See Casey Luskin, "Smelling Blood in the Water," in *God and Evolution: Protestants, Catholics, and Jews Explore Darwin's Challenge to Faith*, ed. Jay Richards (Seattle: Discovery Institute Press, 2010).
- 2 Karl W. Giberson and Randall J. Stephens, "The Evangelical Rejection of Reason," *New York Times*, October 17, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/18/opinion/the-evangelical-rejection-of-reason.html>.
- 3 See Georgia Purdom and Mark Looy, "Exposing the Anointed" (October 4, 2011), <http://www.answersingenesis.org/articles/2011/10/04/exposing-the-anointed>.
- 4 Karl Giberson and Francis Collins, *The Language of Science and Faith* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2011), 31.
- 5 Francis Collins, *The Language of God* (New York: Free Press, 2007), 6.
- 6 See Anika Smith, "Lying in the Name of Indoctrination," August 27, 2008, http://www.evolutionnews.org/2008/08/lying_in_the_name_of_indoctrin.html.
- 7 Phillip Johnson, *The Wedge of Truth: Splitting the Foundations of Naturalism* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 99.
- 8 Paul Copan, "Creation and Evolution: Keeping the Main Thing the Main Thing" (December 23, 2011), <http://www.reclaimingthemind.org/blog/2011/12/creation-and-evolution-keeping-the-main-thing-the-main-thing/>.
- 9 For citations, see note 1, at 344.
- 10 Gregory Graffin and William Provine, "Evolution, Religion and Free Will," *American Scientist* 95 (2007): 294–97.
- 11 Edward Larson and Larry Witham, "Leading Scientists Still Reject God," *Nature* 394 (1998): 313.
- 12 Richard Dawkins, *The Blind Watchmaker* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1986), 6.
- 13 Karl Giberson, "On the Integrity of Science: A Response to Bill Dembski," Patheos.com (May 11, 2011), <http://www.patheos.com/Resources/Additional-Resources/On-the-Integrity-of-Science-Karl-Giberson-05-11-2011>.
- 14 *Science, Evolution, and Creationism* (Washington D.C.: National Academy Press, 2008), xiii.
- 15 "Evolution, Creationism, Intelligent Design," <http://www.gallup.com/poll/21814/evolution-creationism-intelligent-design.aspx>.
- 16 David Roach, "Poll: Pastors Oppose Evolution, Split on Earth's Age," *Lifeway Research*, January 9, 2012, <http://www.lifeway.com/ArticleView?storeId=10054&catalogId=10001&langId=-1&article=Research-Poll-Pastors-oppose-evolution-split-on-earths-age>.
- 17 *Ibid.*, n14.