

Disputes or dialog in the contemporary debate

A personal plea: *please* permit the debate!



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Someone asked me recently what I hoped to see happen as a result of the Darwin bicentennial year, with all its special meetings, publications and media opportunities. After a moment's thought, I replied that I hoped that, by the end of 2009, the creation/evolution debate would actually be permitted to happen.

Of course, in some circles a debate is already taking place. Church groups or student groups hold meetings, a creationist speaks and some discussion follows. However, valuable though this is, it is debate of a very limited kind. What I am calling for, and hoping to see happen, is debate on a much wider front, between groups of people who at present hardly connect with each other. I am also hoping to see the debate, when it happens, conducted in a different spirit from what is often the case at present.

Debate in the public realm

A fairly-conducted debate needs to happen at a national, public level. At present, creationism is defined as anti-science, ignorance or wickedness, vilified and then rejected by those who are its enemies, while creationists are never given the same opportunity to present what is really their case. Having set up a 'straw man', the 'enemies' proceed to mock and decry it while the creationists are not permitted any proper right of redress. We have all seen or heard examples of this kind of thing. Numerous examples can be found in the scientific journals when they consider creationism only to declare their opposition. Richard



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Dawkins excels at it. Two instances that I can describe from personal experience both happened on live television. In October 2007, I appeared on BBC One's *Big Questions* programme one Sunday morning. Also appearing was Dr. Jeremy Pritchard from the School of Biosciences at the University of Birmingham, an active promoter of evolution to the general public. When given an opportunity to speak, Jeremy said that it was impossible for creationists to be scientists; belief in the supernatural would make the conducting of scientific experiments impossible because you would never know when God might interfere. Also, he said, creationism

is incapable of making any testable predictions. I was the invited creationist on the panel but was given no opportunity at all to reply to these false allegations. In private, afterwards, I pointed out to Jeremy how many of the world's greatest scientists had been exactly the kind of 'supernaturalists' that he so despised and also made him aware of creationist testable predictions but none of this was permitted to happen on air.

The second instance happened in September 2008. I was invited to appear on Sky News in connection with the forced resignation of Professor Michael Reiss from his position at the Royal Society. This time my opponent was the journalist and programme presenter Rod Liddle. Rod was allowed considerable time to speak very insultingly about people who believed in fairies at the bottom of the garden and who had been brain washed by ignorant church leaders. I was allowed time for a very brief response, but the final word was given to Rod who was then permitted to continue to denigrate me and my position for quite a while.

Which other group in society is treated in this way? Why is it permitted to happen? My plea for 2009 is for there to be a change in the way that the media presents the debate, for the strongest possible creationist case to be given considerable exposure.

Debate in the classroom

I believe that during 'Darwin year' we should take every opportunity to point out how unfair is the kind of treatment

described above and to call for both sides of the argument to be put forward in an honourable and equal fashion. For example, why should Richard Dawkins be allowed to make programme after programme attacking creationism when we are not permitted even one? The answer to that would probably be that evolution is science but creationism is religion. This is the kind of argument that is being used to keep the debate out of the science classroom, so my second plea is that the debate should be not merely be permitted but actively encouraged in schools. I have had the privilege of teaching school science from a creationist viewpoint and have seen how beneficial it can be for the pupils concerned. It gives them the opportunity to weigh the evidence on both sides of the argument and they go on to achieve very well in science exams. Michael Reiss estimates that about ten percent of all state school pupils are creationists and has called for them to be treated with more respect. At present these young people may well have to sit in science classes listening to the kind of mockery that I have described above. They will be told that there is overwhelming evidence for evolution but if they question that evidence they will be told that they have to be quiet and can only raise such issues in the RE lesson. Their concerns are to do with the interpretation of scientific evidence. Why, therefore cannot such issues be debated in the science class as well as in RE? The creation/evolution debate operates at the interface between science and religion and cannot be confined to one or the other. Insisting that evolution is science while creationism is religion has the effect of silencing one party to the debate.

Debate in the wider church

Many Christians are evolutionists of one variety or another. My third plea is that a respectful debate should be permitted and encouraged within the wider church. Dr. Denis Alexander has described the sort of thing I mean in his book *Creation or Evolution: do we have to choose?* where he says (pages 11-12):

The last thing I would want is for this topic to be a matter for dissension or disunity amongst believers. This book is written as a discussion and a dialogue. Of course it expresses a particular point of view, but where there are differences I hope these can be aired amicably in a spirit of Christian love.

My impression of the book is that it is more a monologue than a dialogue, but I certainly agree with the sentiments about loving and amicable debate between Christians. That is exactly what I would like to see happen more. Unfortunately, later in the book, Denis fails to heed his own advice (page 352-3):

Christians who make it their mission to attack evolution, in the mistaken assumption that it is anti-God, are embarrassing and bring the Gospel into disrepute... Christian campaigns against evolution represent a giant 'red-herring', distracting believers from far more important pursuits.

So creationists are embarrassing and disreputable, their concerns are not worth bothering about and Denis would actually like to see them silenced.

The same point of view is expressed by R. J. Berry in an essay entitled *Science in a Christian University* where he refers to creationism as 'sub-Christian' and argues that a Christian university for the UK would present practical difficulties because to permit one might give an opportunity for a defence of creationism (pages 227 and 230). Once again, a Christian expresses a wish for the debate to be silenced.

We creationists could actually learn a lot from the expertise of scientists like Denis Alexander and R. J. Berry. They need to remember that they occupy, or have occupied, privileged positions that would almost certainly be denied to anyone aspiring to be a professional scientist who was also openly a creationist. My plea is that they should stop insulting us and engage with the best of our arguments, not just the points where they think they have an advantage. Let us have a genuine

debate, treating each other as equals.

Debate within the creationist community

So far I have criticised the media, the education system and the theistic evolutionists for their attitudes to creationists. It is only fair that we should also be prepared to turn the spotlight on to ourselves. Within creationism, there are a number of issues which are the subject of legitimate debate. Two examples would be the location of the Flood boundaries in the geological column and the nature and limits of the created kinds. I see the existence of these debates as a very positive sign. It gives the lie to the accusation that we are just promoting a fundamentalist ideology and supports our contention that creationism involves genuine scientific enquiry. It is a reflection of our history. After all, many key figures in the history of science have been young-earth creationists and the position led them directly to very fruitful scientific discoveries. We should not be afraid of debate within our own community. We should welcome it and seek to conduct it 'amicably, in a spirit of Christian love', just as advocated by Denis Alexander.

Conclusion

It might be too much to hope that the media, the educationalists and the theistic evolutionists will heed the pleas that I have expressed, although that is certainly my prayer. I have more confidence in my colleagues in the creationist movement.

In 2009, why should we not aim to model to the world that respect for each other, that teachable spirit and that amicable, Christian love which we would like to see displayed by all parties to this important debate. ■

References

- Alexander, D. (2008) *Creation or Evolution: do we have to choose?* Monarch Books, Oxford.
- Berry, R. J. (2004) *Science in a Christian University*, in J. Astley, L. J. Francis, J. Sullivan and A. Walker (eds) *The idea of a Christian University*, Paternoster Press, Bletchley.