

Making Your Mind Up About the How of Creation

Hopefully as Christians we all agree about the WHY of creation: God made the universe and everything in it, all by himself, from nothing, and made us to be in relationship with him. This is fundamental to our faith, and it's important that we're clear on this. But Christians often disagree on the HOW of creation. For many people this doesn't seem important, it doesn't affect them every day, and you may wonder what all the fuss is about. You may be happy to stick to whatever you were brought up with, or whatever bit of literature you came across first, be it creation science, intelligent design, or theistic evolution. At some point though, you'll probably delve deeper into Genesis and start asking questions, or talk to friends who aren't Christians, and come across questions that you can't answer.

So many people, scientists or not, use evolution as an argument against Christianity, and it doesn't do us any favours as Christians if we counter these using evidence that we only half understand. For scientists, (astronomers, geologists and biologists in particular) it is most important to address the issue of creation properly, as we're surrounded by people studying origins and are often working on these issues directly ourselves. As Christians the challenge is to be able to speak about these things and how they relate to our faith confidently, coherently and logically.

There are three main viewpoints held by evangelical Christians who hold to a high view of Scripture. Theistic evolutionism is an acceptance of evolution as the best current scientific description of the way that God made the world. It is the dominant viewpoint amongst Christians active in academic science or theology (see refs 1,2,3). Young Earth Creationism is a rejection of mainstream science in favour of an interpretation of the Genesis account that takes the 6 days of creation literally (see refs 4,5). Intelligent Design represents a range of views. In contrast to Theistic evolution or Young Earth Creationism, it is not concerned with Biblical interpretation (see refs 6,7,8). This is often viewed as middle ground for Christians, but is very controversial, for a mixture of theological, philosophical and scientific reasons.

Most proponents of intelligent design would accept an old earth (c. 4.5 billion years), but reject the theory of evolution on two grounds: 1) that there is not enough evidence for evolution, and 2) complex biological systems are evidence for a designer. The Intelligent Design movement also use the evidence for fine tuning in cosmology that many theistic evolutionists talk about, so there is some common ground here.

The aim of this article is not to tell you what to think, it's to give you some general guidelines about where to look for answers and how to examine the evidence for yourself. If you're not a scientist this may be particularly daunting. Don't worry, you don't need to master astrophysics or Old Testament Hebrew to understand the basic principles.

When you are asked hard questions about this kind of thing don't ever be afraid to say that's a good question, can I think about that/ask someone? or I'm still thinking this through for myself. Even experienced scientists and theologians will admit that they're still figuring things out in certain areas, and new discoveries in both science and archaeology often throw up new evidence that may alter the conclusions we come to. This is no excuse, however, for keeping your head buried in the sand and not thinking at all. As Christians we should always be thinking biblically, willing to hear new ideas, and different opinions, and be prepared to change our position in the face of truth.

References:

- 1 Beyond Belief, Denis Alexander and Robert White, Lion, 2004.
- 2 The Message of Genesis 1-11, David Atkinson, IVP Bible Speaks Today series, 1990.
- 3 <http://biologos.org/>
- 4 Genesis for today, Andrew McIntosh, Day One, 1997.
- 5 Creation Science Movement (UK), www.csm.org.uk/
- 6 Intelligent Design, William Dembski, IVP, 2002.
- 7 Testing Darwinism, Philip Johnson, IVP, 1999.
- 8 The Discovery Institute, www.discovery.org/

So, here are a few guidelines to help as you think things through:

1. Pray.
2. Read the bible, try to look at it through fresh eyes, and read different versions.
3. Get into some theology. Look at the wider principles of biblical interpretation. This will help you study the bible more effectively in general, so it is time well spent! Then look at different ways of interpreting the creation passages, using a couple of commentaries.
4. There are hundreds of science-faith books and articles out there. Hopefully you don't need to be told not to just pick out the first thing you find on Google and believe everything it says. Read widely, speak to different people, and check out the different sides of the debate.
5. Science changes fast, so make sure you read books or articles that are up to date with the latest discoveries.
6. Try to talk to, and read things by people who are experts in their field.
7. Remember that there are more factors involved here than meet the eye. This can be a highly charged debate in some circles (especially in the USA), influenced by social and political trends. Be aware that evolution has often been turned into a philosophy and used to support contradictory political agendas (e.g. Nazism, Marxism). Atheists also take evolution further than science allows, making it into an ideology. We are concerned with real experimental science and what the Bible actually has to say about creation.

8. It's important that if you are a student you learn what you are being taught. Not agreeing with your lecturer/teacher is no excuse to give up studying. Be humble, listen, and if you are serious about alternative theories of origins take every opportunity to learn from the experts in the field so that you can be scholarly in your discussions. If you want to challenge what is being said, remember that, as in all academic discussions, you need to be able to defend your points with evidence and examples from the literature.

9. Above all, it is so important to conduct these kinds of discussion with grace and love, recognising that Christians take different positions on all sorts of theological issues. Watch the way that mature, older Christians relate to people with very different views. You will often find that people with completely different ideas, that they are very passionate about, can have a robust debate in a friendly atmosphere.

Resources

Christians in Science, www.cis.org.uk

A professional group, representing over 1000 Evangelical Christians. The resources section of the website contains a large number of articles and talks on origins and other science - faith topics, as well as an extensive list of links to organisations holding the three main origins viewpoints.

Quick introduction - online articles:

Has Science Eliminated God? Richard Dawkins and the Meaning of Life. Alister McGrath
www.st-edmunds.cam.ac.uk/cis/mcgrath/

Science and the Bible: Are They Incompatible? The Creation Story as a Test Case. Ernest Lucas
www.st-edmunds.cam.ac.uk/cis/lucas/

Is Intelligent Design Biblical? Denis Alexander
www.cis.org.uk/upload/Resources/Creation/Is_ID_Biblical.pdf

The Faraday Papers. Various topics addressed by various authors
www.st-edmunds.cam.ac.uk/faraday/Papers.php

Short books:

How to Read the Bible For All Its Worth, Gordon D Fee and Douglas Stuart, Scripture Union, 2003.
In clear, simple language, it helps you accurately understand the different parts of the Bible - their meaning for ancient audiences and their implications for you today - so you can uncover the inexhaustible worth that is in God's Word.

Dawkins God, Genes, Memes and the Meaning of Life, Alister McGrath, Blackwell, 2004.
In only 150 pages McGrath demolishes Dawkins' main arguments. A must read.

Can We Believe Genesis Today?, Ernest Lucas, IVP, 2005.
A good opener: sets out the main arguments. Recommends further reading for all the different viewpoints.

God, Time and Stephen Hawking, David Wilkinson, Monarch, 2001.

Explains recent developments in astronomy in simple terms, and sets out the evidence for fine tuning in the universe.

Beyond Belief, Denis Alexander and Prof Robert White, Lion, 2004.

A brief, helpful insight into the history and politics of the science faith debate as well as the different theological, philosophical and scientific arguments.

Going deeper:

Rebuilding the Matrix, Denis Alexander, Lion, 2001.

A more thorough treatment of the material in Beyond Belief.

The Language of God, Francis Collins, Pocket Books, 2006.

The former director of the Human Genome Project shares his journey to faith and outlines different views on origins. A must-read for his testimony, whether you agree with his viewpoint on origins or not!

Reason, Science and Faith, Roger Forster, Paul Marston, Monarch, 1999.

Aimed at helping students to think through the big questions of science and Christianity.

The Message of Creation, David Wilkinson, IVP, 1999.

Part of the Bible speaks today series, unpacking the main themes in Genesis 1-3.

Discipleship of the Mind, James W Sire, IVP, 1990.

How do we love God with all our minds? A serious look at the academic enterprise from a Christian perspective. Very helpful and thought-provoking.

Test of FAITH, editor Ruth Bancewicz, 2009, www.testoffaith.com

Set of relevant and accessible science - faith resources for the church.

Ruth Bancewicz, Christians in Science

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www.cis.org.uk