

Reformed Faith and Evolutionary Theory

1. Introduction

- * Modern science in general raises questions concerning the nature and content of the Christian faith. E.g.: ‘Where does all of this leave God?’
- * The Christian community may expect from its theologians to study and discuss such questions and to show meaningful ways in which Christians can take seriously both their Christian faith and contemporary science.
- * My sabbatical at Princeton is aimed at doing this with regard to evolutionary theory.

2. Evolution and Christianity: On Avoiding the Extremes

- * It is conceivable that after having been presented with the overwhelming evidence in favor of evolution, someone decides to become an evolutionist, thinking that this leaves everything else as it is. But is it as easy as that?
- * Some Christians are convinced it’s not, arguing that accepting evolution will destroy your faith. Creationism is not so attractive because of its scientific record, but because it provides a shelter against what many believers see as a deadly assault on their faith.
- * This concern should be taken seriously. Rather than combating or ridiculing creationism (which usually works counterproductive), it is important to make clear how (if at all) evolution affects, colors or changes the faith of the Church.
- * This question cannot be answered in general, since different confessional traditions have different strengths and weaknesses in coping with evolution.
- * Therefore, I focus on the Reformed tradition. First we’ll listen to some voices from this tradition, and then we’ll look at four doctrinal areas which are especially contested.

3. Historical Voices

- * Article 2 of the Belgic Confession (1561):

We know God by two means: first, by the creation, preservation and government of the universe; which is before our eyes *as a most elegant book*, wherein all creatures, great and small, are as so many characters leading us to contemplate the invisible things of God, namely, his eternal power and Godhead, as the Apostle Paul says (Rom, 1:20). All these things are enough to convict men and to leave them without excuse. Secondly, he makes himself more clearly and fully known to us by his holy and divine Word, that is to say, as far as is necessary for us to know in this life, to his glory and our salvation.

This text displays a positive attitude to the study of the natural world → a Reformed Christian should not be afraid of nature, nor of the natural sciences!
- * ‘It is said that the human being stems from the animals. But this has not yet been demonstrated by a single phenomenon’ (Herman Bavinck, 1901).
- * B.B. Warfield went beyond Bavinck by arguing that if evolution were true, Christians could accept it because it does not contradict Scripture
- * Charles Hodge argued that ‘Darwinism is atheism’, but his only reason was that Darwinism (on his definition) was incompatible with divine providence. But what if that presupposition turns out to be wrong?
- * The PCUSA accepted evolutionary theory already in the 1960s.

4. Systematic Issues

A. Evolution and the Exposition of the Bible

* Calvin's theory of accommodation favors 'perspectivism' over 'concordism': we should not look for verse-by-verse harmony between the Bible and science, but take into account the specific aim and perspective of the biblical text – which is not scientific, but related to the faith.

* But then there is still a problem: the Bible's theological perspective connects God's salvation to a series of historical events, starting with creation and Fall →

B. The Human Creature: Are We Still Special?

* Evolutionary biology shows us that as compared to other beings humanity displays a uniqueness of degree rather than a uniqueness of kind

* But this uniqueness still corresponds to incredible differences, of which *religion* is perhaps the most uncontested. Cf. John Calvin: 'It is only the worship of God (...) which raises the human being above the animals' (*Institutes* I 3, 3).

* Evolutionary biology reminds us that the doctrine of *imago Dei* should be connected with a profound notion of embodiment. Here, evolutionary theory helps faith to understand itself more clearly.

C. Should We Drop the Fall?

* 'The Fall, above all, is the place where biology and theology conflict' (R.J. Berry). This is especially the case because of 'polygenism' and the supposed gradual nature of our moral and spiritual awakening.

* The core of the Reformed doctrine of sin (going back to Augustine and Paul): sin 'came into the world' rather than being an integral part of it.

* This notion can be sustained even in an evolutionary context, provided that we see 'Adam and Eve' as signifying the first human population.

D. Evolution, Providence and Evil

* As William Temple already saw, evolution does not rule out providence, since it may just show us how God 'made things make themselves'. Nor does it rule out God's actions in the history of salvation.

* Evolution *intensifies* age-old problems concerning providence, freedom and evil; it does not *create* these problems.

* Recent research reveals the importance of cooperation, sympathy etc. in the evolutionary process (Martin Nowak; Joan Roughgarden). This opens up new possibilities for relating evolution with the notion of providence.

E. The Gift of Existence

* Finally, it is important to place our topic in its proper context: the rich tapestry of the Christian doctrine of creation.

* The creation-evolution debate, with its focus on the how-question, plays only a limited role in the doctrine of creation, which tells us *that* and *why* God created.

5. Conclusion

In brief, we should not underestimate the consequences of evolution for the faith of the Church. But neither should we overestimate them, as if (as the standard neo-atheist narrative goes) Darwin gave the church a deadly blow. On the contrary, it may be argued that evolutionary theory help us to see help more clearly what Christian faith is all about.

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