

# **Natural Theology and the God who Hides Himself**

*Charles N. Stevenson*

## **Abstract**

The Christian church in its many forms has long labored to respond to challenges to the Christian faith based on developments in modern science. Darwinism and related theories are used as a window into these debates. The scientific basis for these theories is examined along with the use of natural science in metaphysical debates. In advancing their case, Christian apologists often cite Romans 1:20 to justify arguments from philosophy and empirical science for the existence of God. But such arguments neglect 1 Corinthians 1:21, where Paul states that it is not possible to know God through human wisdom. God chooses to remain hidden except when he chooses to reveal himself. Because God often chooses to hide himself, beauty and orderliness, chaos and cruelty, are woven throughout creation and history. This weaving together of beauty and cruelty makes it impossible to prove or disprove the existence of God. Christians are instead left with the all-sufficient Word of God.

## **To the Reader**

What follows would appear to be an academic essay, replete with formal language and footnotes. But it is not. It is, instead, the account of my personal journey as an engineer and clergyman from occasionally listening to those who hold natural theology in high regard to joining with the prophet Isaiah who proclaimed: “Truly you are a God who hides himself.” What we know about God is what God has chosen to reveal to us, which Martin Luther would hasten to assure us, is all that is essential for life and salvation.

I wrote this essay as part of personal quest to reconcile my modest scientific and theological learning with one another while living in a culture that is often deeply hostile to Christian belief. The response of some Christian apologists to this antagonism is to fashion various arguments, or “proofs,” for God’s existence. These have a long history in Christian thought. I have read these with interest, but I have come to recognize them as either siren calls to wreck on the shoals of Biblical inerrancy or the seductive danger of becoming mired in the self-reliant swamp of semi-Pelagianism.

I found three reliable guides to sorting through all of the claims and counter claims about the existence of God. The prophet Isaiah, who was given fundamental truths about God to express, the apostle Paul who learned that his will, too, was held in bondage in sin, and the mangy monk, the stormy man of God, who synthesized his novel theology of a God at once revealed yet still hidden, from these and other Biblical authors.

This essay is sometimes focused, while at other times it meanders, in part based on personal interest and academic background. But everything, even the meanderings, drives toward a certain goal - the futility of discerning God’s nature or purpose from observations of the natural world along with some of the implications for the pastoral ministry.

## Summary

The Christian church in its many forms has long labored to respond to challenges to the Christian message based on developments in modern science. Many people in our contemporary society, both inside and outside the church, perceive the challengers as currently having the upper hand in this struggle. But a careful consideration of the basis for these challenges and the corresponding developments in modern science has led me to conclude that many of these challenges are based on certain cultural agendas. Furthermore, the insights stemming from modern science fail to offer a convincing challenge to Christian teachings regarding a God who created and sustains our world and universe. These insights often only serve to affirm a person's already existing belief in the existence or non-existence of God.

The portrayal of religious believers as dangerously ignorant and opposed to modern science has a long and rich pedigree in the United States. One of the best examples of this cultural phenomena is the use of evolutionary theory for attacking individuals and groups as ignorant and for opposing the idea of a creator God. Despite its use as an unassailable rhetorical tool, recent advancements in biochemistry offer serious challenges to the theory itself and, even without these challenges, its effectiveness for challenging Christian claims is overstated. The examination of the current state of evolutionary theory and its cultural use can serve as an entry point to the even larger discussion about the relationship between Christian thought and modern science.

Romans 1:20 is often cited to justify arguments from philosophy and empirical science for the existence of God. But such arguments neglect 1 Corinthians 1:21 where Paul states that it is not possible to know God through human wisdom. The reformers Martin Luther and Philip Melanchthon understood Paul to mean that reasoning is in bondage to sin along with the will and it is not to be trusted. In their view, humanity chooses to turn from its inborn knowledge of God and to instead worship what Luther called "a figment of their own imagination."

Detailed recommendations for dealing with pastoral issues stemming from the awareness of scientific ideas in our culture are offered, but these suggestions might be summarized in two points: (1) Lutherans should never lose sight of the part of their theological heritage that tries to understand God's activity in the world using the distinction between *deus revelatus* and *deus absconditus* because such a framework prohibits proofs for the existence of God; and (2) clergy should try to become conversant with some basic ideas in modern science and to use this knowledge to engage with congregants.

Oswald Bayer describes one consequence of the distinction between the revealed and hidden God as: "For us beauty and cruelty are inextricably woven into nature and history." Proofs from nature for the existence of God rely on beauty and those against rely on cruelty. The intertwining of beauty and cruelty prevent such proofs from succeeding because each form of proof omits the reality of the other. We are left to trust the Word rather than ourselves.

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The church and her theologians have long labored to respond to the charge in 1 Peter 3:15: “Always be prepared to make a defense to any one who calls you to account for the hope that is in you, yet do it with gentleness and reverence” (RSV). Modern Americans often perceive the contemporary church as facing unprecedented challenges from the expansion of human knowledge over the last few hundred years, requiring new responses or a quiet surrender. But the challenge is much less severe than is often perceived because the metaphysical and religious implications of our greater understanding of the natural world are considerably less than claimed by critics of the church. Consequently, the best response to the challenges of modernity is to directly engage with what is known about the natural world and the implications of this empirical knowledge, while resisting the ever present temptation to defend our hope with a resort to inerrancy. Instead, the church should continue to depend on the proclaimed gospel, trusting in the promise of Isaiah 55:11 that the Word of the Lord will not return to him until it accomplishes his purpose.

Perhaps the best known and longest lived challenge to Christian faith from modern thought comes from Darwinism. In its modern form, this is the idea that the development of all life is due to random chance operating on genetic codes. There are really two issues wrapped under one label, the first being the validity of the theory and its details, with the second being the usefulness of the theory for challenging various religious teachings. It is vital to note that Darwin developed his theory from his observations of animal breeding and the diversity of species in the natural world. The underlying chemical and genetic basis for life were completely unknown in his time. As a result, there is an old and a new challenge to this theory. The old challenge is whether or not the fossil record validates his claim that all life descended from a common ancestor through a branching process, commonly called descent with modification. The second challenge is whether or not the biochemical basis for life supports the idea that all the divergent life forms on the earth could have been created by random chance.

The debate whether or not the fossil record supports descent with modification is both vigorous and on-going. Suppose, for the sake of argument, that a clear pattern of descent from a common ancestor with the predicted branching could be established from the fossil record. Then, we might reasonably ask what such a record demonstrates beyond a branching pattern. In of itself, it fails to prove that life is the product of random chance. It may support such a conclusion, but in of itself it is insufficient. The same is true for the metaphysical implications of such a fossil record. Religious believers could simply respond, as many have already done, that the fossil record simply shows how God chose to make his creation.

The crux of the current debate over Darwinism is whether recent developments in biochemistry support or refute the claim that all life forms could be created through random processes. For this reason, in this essay I will focus on understanding and evaluating a contemporary challenge to Darwinism that was cast into a popular form by Steven Meyer in his book, *Doubts about Darwin*. Simply put, his argument is that the chemical basis for life is too complex to have been brought about by purely random processes.

If, for the sake of argument, it could be established that the biochemical and genetic process would permit the random generation of life forms, that would still fail to establish that is what happened. It would give considerable credibility to the claim, but not fully validate it. My point is that it is extremely difficult to move logically from observations and theories about the natural world to claims about the existence of God.

### **Background to this Essay**

Over the years, friends and colleagues made many attempts to draw me into discussions regarding the relationship between Christian thought and modern science. While I long resisted these attempts, I knew it was inevitable that I would be drawn into these conversations. After I completed my Ph.D in electrical engineering, I worked in two major research laboratories, two design groups, and taught at three colleges. In these workplaces, other Christians would seek me out for conversations on creation and redemption, life and death. People would also want to discuss the more practical and ethical issues of daily life. These requests became more intense after I was ordained and continued with my secular employment. Often these were highly educated scientists and engineers who strove to reconcile their knowledge of the world around us with the messages they would hear on Sundays from their pastors who often lacked any scientific training or appreciation for the attitudes and values inculcated by such a career.

As my understanding of applied science and Christian thought developed over time, I found these two seemingly disparate thought worlds woven together more than I ever expected. When I was a student at Yale, I was privileged to study with the philosopher Holmes Rolston, who argues for a Christian worldview and environmental ethics based on his understanding of the genetic mechanisms of life, which he sees as analogous to a specific type of computer algorithm. When I worked in automotive research I had colleagues who used these very algorithms to design novel braking systems. One of these former colleagues and I would then go on to write a research paper describing software we developed<sup>1</sup> to further explore and illustrate some of the ideas Rolston offered in his book, *Genes, Genesis, and God*.<sup>2</sup> Later, when teaching computer science courses on algorithms, I would include material and projects based on genetically inspired algorithms. These were always popular sections of these courses, with a high level of student interest.

I spent several years working on the mathematics of robot arm motion. At the direction of my thesis advisor, I analyzed the anthropomorphic arm, a robot modeled on the human arm. When I produced a correct solution that he believed to be overly complicated, I was told to redo my analysis from the beginning because God would never create a human arm that required the human neural system to implement such a complex algorithm. While my advisor was right that I

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“Evolution and Engineering Design: Insights From Genetic Algorithms,” Charles N. Stevenson, William E. Hamilton, Jr., American Scientific Affiliation Annual Meeting, Edinburgh, Scotland, August 2-5, 2007.

<sup>2</sup> Rolston, Holmes, *Genes, Genesis, and God*. Cambridge University Press, 1999.

would find a simpler algorithm, I found myself wondering if such a claim is more a statement about the nature of God than arm kinematics (the study of motion).

While my advisor's remarks were clearly made in jest, they highlight a danger inherent in writing about theology and science, as well as in reading articles on these topics. It is difficult and time consuming to learn about both fields of study and there is a natural human tendency to believe that mastery of one particular field enables a person to offer informed opinions in other areas. The economist Thomas Sowell makes such temptations a centerpiece of his book *Intellectuals and Society*, where he continually warns of the damages done by "the generalization of expertise," when intellectuals cross discipline boundaries and offer seemingly informed opinions on subjects in which they lack professional expertise.

As a parish pastor, I have found it necessary to engage with confirmands and members who use their sometimes marginal knowledge of modern science to challenge or undermine the church's proclamation of the gospel. Such attacks are usually more reflective of modern cultural memes centered on Darwinism than of an in-depth knowledge of science or philosophical reasoning. Such behavior immediately raises two questions, the first being how to respond with facts and lines of reasoning that defend the possibility that a creator God exists. The second question is how best to respond pastorally. Fortunately, recent developments in biochemistry and related fields provide a factual basis for countering these rhetorical attacks and there are now a number of excellent resources that will help the non-specialist to understand these discoveries and their significance.

### **Recent Criticism of Darwin**

An excellent place to begin is with Professor David Gelernter's essay, *Giving Up Darwin*, in the Spring 2019 issue of the *Claremont Review of Books (CRB)*. As Gelernter observes, smart people accept the theory as "settled science" and rubes dispute it. But Gelernter, an accomplished professor of computer science at Yale, has come to disbelieve Darwin after reading Stephen Meyer's meticulously researched 2013 book, *Darwin's Doubt*,<sup>3</sup> as well as David Berlinski's essay *The Deniable Darwin*.<sup>4</sup> Among other developments, Meyer's book explores the implications of recent discoveries in biochemistry and genetics reported by mainstream scientists in credible and peer-reviewed publications; developments which increasingly cast doubt on the ability of Darwinian mechanisms to create the astonishing complexity of life.

Gelernter writes in his *CRB* essay:

There's no reason to doubt that Darwin successfully explained the small adjustments by which an organism adapts to local circumstances: changes in fur

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<sup>3</sup> Stephen Meyer, *Darwin's Doubt*, Harper One, 2014.

<sup>4</sup> David Berlinski, "The Deniable Darwin," *Commentary*, June 1996.

density or wing style or beak shape. Yet there are many reasons to doubt whether or not he can answer the hard questions and explain the big picture - not the fine tuning of existing species but the emergence of new ones. The origin of species is exactly what Darwin cannot explain.

The American cultural debates about Darwinism and its implications have both cast significant doubt on the very idea of a creator God and hindered the proclamation of the gospel message, causing both clergy and laity to distort the basic Christian message in response to these attacks. Consequently, the implications of Meyer's book and the developments he describes are significant for congregational ministry. These recent developments offer an effective means for pushing aside discussions of 19th-century science and returning the conversation to the central focus of the Christian message, the unmerited forgiveness of sin, which has the power to end the self-imposed alienation of humanity from its creator. Lost in the cultural debates, some Christians forget that the gospel "...is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek" (RSV, Romans 1:16).

In his essay, Gelernter reviews three books and several arguments contained therein, but I will focus on one central argument taken up by various scientists and philosophers, such as my teacher Holmes Rolston. Specifically, those who support Darwin's theory believe that the evolution of genes is actually a powerful algorithm for searching out new solutions to life's complex problems. In opposition to them, Meyer and others argue that such genetic searching algorithms can't possibly work in any form because the molecular basis of life creates an inherent time complexity that cannot be explained away.

### **Searching and Genetic Algorithms**

Searching algorithms are fundamental to computer science and programmers engage with them throughout their education and their later work life. For example, the cheap children's puzzle, the eight square, which has eight squares for numbers and tiles numbered one through seven, with a blank space to permit the movement of one tile at a time. A child might attempt to solve the puzzle by moving one square at a time until the seven numbers were in sequence; many children will grow weary and quit if too many moves are made before a solution is found. As the child moves the squares one at a time, a search is conducted through the many possible moves.

Similar to the child, a computer program can easily be written to explore all the possible moves, searching for a path from the initial, jumbled configuration to a final, correct sequence. The sequence of possible moves can be thought of as a tree structure, with the initial configuration as the base of the tree. Each possible successive move causes a branch in the tree structure. The resulting structure grows rapidly in complexity as the searching child or algorithm moves through the branching structure. With two possible moves at each juncture, the complexity or breadth of the tree doubles at each level of the branching structure.

The tree of possible moves is called the search space, and for real-life problems it can be astonishingly large. The study of searching algorithms is central to computer science and many structured, formal approaches have been investigated, along with a number of ad-hoc approaches based on analogies to physical processes, such as the annealing of metals or the evolution of life. For example, Melanie Mitchell's book, *A Gentle Introduction to Genetic Algorithms*, provides an overview of methods for solving the 8-puzzle with evolutionary programming.<sup>5</sup>

In order to solve a searching problem, such as the 8-puzzle, a programmer must first create the equivalent of DNA, a system of symbols or numbers that represents different configurations of the puzzle. Then a randomized population is created, each with a random potential solution to the problem. Parents are selected from the population and used to create the next generation of puzzle solutions. The genetically inspired operations of mutation and crossover are used in the creation of the next generation. Under mutation, the symbols representing a solution are randomly changed, which is analogous to random changes in DNA. Each parent contributes a portion of the offspring's DNA, or symbol string, under crossover. The cycle then repeats and the solution of a real problem may require several thousand generations.

The use of computer programs analogous to genetics inspired Holmes Rolston in his quest to develop ethical theories that he could use to defend endangered species and fragile ecosystems. Rolston adapted the idea of genes as a "powerful searching mechanism" to argue that species and ecosystems have a high information content that is the result of a sophisticated natural searching algorithm. Such information would be difficult, if not impossible, to re-create, and therefore has great intrinsic value. A collection of his essays following this approach can be found in the book *Environmental Ethics*.<sup>6</sup> In his landmark Gifford Lectures, available as *Genes, Genesis, and God*, Rolston sees evolutionary processes as searching out solutions to the complex problems encountered by species and even entire ecosystems.

Genes search out new solutions using the natural processes of sexual reproduction and random mutation, or genetic change. The natural processes of combination and crossover, the process of sharing genes between two parents to create a new phenotype, are used to create the local variations necessary to adapt to a changing environment or to find new local optima, which is to say, more fit offspring. These processes are what Gelernter calls "small adjustments by which an organism adapts to local circumstances." Genetic or evolutionary processes use naturally occurring random changes to create new genetic codes that describe new proteins, which in turn enable new cellular processes or structures.

Natural selection prunes away genetic combinations or innovations that are less fit and tends to preserve and to pass on genes that offer advantages for survival and reproduction. New genetic

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<sup>5</sup>Melanie Mitchell, *A Gentle Introduction to Genetic Algorithms*, MIT Press, 1996, p. 12-15.

<sup>6</sup> Rolston, Holmes, *Environmental Ethics*, Temple University Press, 1989.



codes that produce phenotypes that are less fit for survival or reproduction will be eliminated from the species.

The fundamental challenge to Darwin's theory of the origin of species, and theories based on it, such as Rolston's ethical ideas, is whether or not searching algorithms based on genes might actually find solutions within the available time. Meyer's book reviews recent advancement in understanding the complexity of the proteins that are the basis of all living things, and he convincingly argues that the search space of proteins is unimaginably vast and viable solutions are few in number and widely spaced apart. For example, only 1 in  $10^{74}$  proteins formed from a modest sequence of 150 amino acids are viable. By comparison, there are an estimated  $10^{80}$  atoms in the known universe.

### **DNA and Protein Coding**

Protein molecules are essential for life; they are used, among other things, for shape, for structure, to catalyze reactions, and to drive cellular metabolism. They are assembled from a sequence of amino acids, with an average or typical length of 250 amino acids. These sequences contain 20 different amino acids. When a protein is formed, it "folds" into a complex shape which is critical to its successful functioning. Sample images of folded proteins may be found in Gelernter's essay, Meyer's book, or any number of online resources. Which amino acids are to be used to assemble a protein is in turn encoded in the DNA of each cell.

Meyer reviews critical research that demonstrates that both the shape of folded proteins and the exterior chemistry are critical for protein functioning. He argues that the most basic unit that evolutionary processes are selecting for are the protein folds or exterior shape. Genetic algorithms would then search for new unique protein folds to solve the problems of life.

How do we move from one protein to discover a new protein? The process is analogous to moving from one puzzle solution to another solution, perhaps a reverse ordering once a solution is found. Along the way the searcher must move through many arrangements, or states, that are not solutions. A computer program can do this, but living organisms cannot evolve this way. Even slight changes in the shape of a protein will degrade an organism's functioning, and such organisms will be eliminated in the struggle and competition that Darwin called "survival of the fittest." Worse, significant changes in protein shape or exterior chemistry will likely produce a non-functioning or dead organism. For this reason, biologists have long accepted that new proteins will not evolve from existing proteins.

Biologists long believed that new proteins must evolve from the junk or non-coding regions of an organism's DNA. These are regions or sections of DNA that are not used to code proteins; Gelernter calls them "gibberish sequences." Mutations and crossover occur in these regions without affecting the organism. These changes accumulate through the generations, or so the theory goes, until a new, useful protein is discovered.

But is there time to search through the space of all amino acid sequences to find new, useful proteins? The search space of proteins is unimaginably vast and viable solutions are few in number and widely spaced apart. It is quite difficult to form proteins with stable folds. Meyer cites peer-reviewed research reported by David Axe, who holds a Ph.D in chemical engineering from Cal Tech, that an estimated 1 in  $10^{74}$  proteins formed from a modest sequence of 150 amino acids are viable. Meyer cites numbers for the age of the universe, the number of organisms that have lived on the earth and so forth to bolster his argument, but the central truth uncovered by Axe's experiments is that it is simply not possible to randomly search through all the possible sequences of amino acids to discover new proteins. The space is too large and the number of viable sequences is too small. The mathematics of protein chemistry simply won't allow new proteins to be discovered by a random search.

Charles Darwin wrote his *Origin of the Species* in 1859, long before anything of substance was known about cellular function. It took almost a hundred years until Watson and Crick identified the structure of DNA in 1951. Axe published his work early in this century. It may simply be necessary for biologists to admit that Darwin's theory is rendered obsolete and discredited by the staggering advances in biochemistry. Gelernter so thinks in his essay, where he writes, "biologists need to get over Darwin."

### **Challenges and Counter-Challenges to Gelernter**

Biologists and Darwinists have long struggled to explain the Cambrian explosion, when an array of new and complex animal forms suddenly appear in the fossil record, with few or no clear precursors to the new forms. The Cambrian explosion was known to Darwin, who believed that the necessary forms would eventually be found, but he also knew that if they were never found, his theory would be disproved. Critics at the time, such as Louis Agassiz, and now, such as Meyer, point to the Cambrian explosion as evidence against evolution. Today, supporters of Darwinism, such as the nationally known Christian scientist Francis Collins, often attempt to use recent fossil finds in attempts to bolster the theory against these criticisms (as I heard Collins do at the 2006 annual meeting of the *American Scientific Affiliation*).

A representative and forceful response to Gelernter's article is found in the online site Quintette by Jerry Coyne, a retired Professor of Ecology and Evolution at the University of Chicago. Professor Coyne argues that there is now fossil evidence supporting the claim of a gradual emergence of novel life forms rather than a sudden "explosion" in the Cambrian era. Coyne is also dismissive of arguments based on probability that new useful proteins would not have been discovered by random mechanisms.<sup>7</sup>

I find it difficult, lacking any substantial knowledge of the fossil record or the anatomy of long-dead animals, to thoroughly evaluate the claims and counter-claims that the fossil record

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<sup>7</sup> <https://quillette.com/tag/charles-darwin/>

undermines or supports Darwin's theory. I would expect many opened minded people to feel the same way.

From my professional education and experience I can claim knowledge of searching algorithms and mathematics, which I have tried to combine with a knowledge of chemistry, sufficient (barely!) to understand Axe's claims, in order to evaluate the arguments surrounding the possibility of discovering new proteins through a random search. My opinion is that Meyer and Gelernter are correct in their assessment that the search space is so sparse that new proteins will not be discovered by a random search. Coyne dismisses these arguments, but his article in *Quintette* lacks any real acknowledgement that the vast search space is almost completely devoid of workable solutions.

It is also worth noting that Coyne is open about his agenda. In his book *Why Evolution is True and Faith Versus Fact: Why Science and Religion Are Incompatible*, he admits to a life-long antipathy to religious expression of any form and derides all religious belief as mere superstition. While such freely expressed opinions do not prevent him from being correct in his assessment or defense of Darwin's theory, they do challenge his objectivity. Coyne openly challenges Gelernter's objectivity because he holds religious beliefs (Gelernter is Jewish).

Whether or not sufficient pre-Cambrian fossils are ever found seems almost beside the point. Within a short period of geologic time, a large range of new DNA sequences had to be created for these new animals in order for them to be able to synthesize the new proteins required for their new cellular structures. It is hard to imagine how cellular processes driven by random mutations could search through the vast tree of amino acidic combinations to find these new proteins in such a short period of time. If there is not time to search out a new protein during the life of the Earth, how could it be done within the relatively short pre-Cambian period of 70 or so million years?

The contemporary idea of evolution is that of a gradual change of species over time into new and, sometimes, more complex species. Such a process might be driven by gradual searching algorithms, that find new variations on the old solutions, slowly developing new forms and the required protein folds. But, as discussed, anti-Darwinists argue such a theory fails to match the fossil record. The theory describes gradual change, but the history of life is best characterized as the repeated sudden emergence of new species. The philosopher and anti-Darwinist David Berlinski has pounded away at this theme for years in his essays, such as "The Deniable Darwin,"<sup>8</sup> and his books, such as *The Devil's Delusion: Atheism and its Scientific Pretensions*.<sup>9</sup> How could these sudden changes, which the late Harvard professor Stephen Jay Gould described as a punctuated equilibrium, be accomplished with the searching algorithms that we have described?

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<sup>8</sup> David Berlinski, "The Deniable Darwin," Commentary, June 1996.

<sup>9</sup> David Berlinski, *The Devil's Delusion: Atheism and its Scientific Pretensions*, Basic Books, 2009.

## Darwin in American Culture

Despite significant challenges to its validity, Darwin's theory has long been used to attack people in our society as ignorant, a role it continues to play. The late Massachusetts Senator Ted Kennedy used it as cudgel to beat Judge Bork and his supporters in 1987<sup>10</sup>:

Robert Bork's America is a land in which women would be forced into back-alley abortions, blacks would sit at segregated lunch counters, rogue police could break down citizens' doors in midnight raids, schoolchildren could not be taught about evolution, writers and artists could be censored at the whim of the Government, and the doors of the Federal courts would be shut on the fingers of millions of citizens.

One might reasonably ask why Kennedy linked the absence of evolutionary theory in the public school curriculum with racism and other social horrors. The most likely explanation for his wild rhetorical excess is that he or his staff associated knowledge of and belief in Darwin's theory with intelligence and education, and disbelief with the ignorance they found in their political opponents, including religious fundamentalists.

Kennedy's use of evolutionary theory to paint his political opponents as dangerously ignorant follows such a long-standing form of rhetorical attack that it has become a trope. Mark Pulliam, writing in Law & Liberty<sup>11</sup>, revisits the "Scopes Monkey Trial" and the later film *Inherit the Wind* and the popular myth surrounding them. He concludes that anti-religious elites used both to attack religious people living in rural areas. He writes: "What the trial did represent, then and now, is a showdown between religious belief and secularism—as symbolized by the theory of evolution." Darwin's theory has become both a litmus test for sophistication and cudgel for beating political opponents, regardless of its validity in light of recent findings.

The idea of a conflict between religious belief and scientific inquiry would seem to have been embedded into American culture, at least partially, by the work of J. W. Draper and A. D White.<sup>12</sup> In his 1875 *History of the conflict between religion and science*, Draper portrayed science as being driven forward by human curiosity and intellect while being restrained by traditional religious faith. His book was, at least in part, a response to the 1870 announcement from Vatican I that the pope is infallible when he speaks *ex cathedra*. John Hedley Brooke describes Draper's book as "a diatribe against the Roman Catholic Church."

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<sup>10</sup> <https://worldhistoryproject.org/1987/7/1/edward-kennedy-delivers-robert-borks-america-speech-earning-him-the-title-of-liberal-lion>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.lawliberty.org/2019/07/17/inheriting-the-wind-or-reaping-the-whirlwind/>

<sup>12</sup> John Hedley Brooke, *Science and Religion: Some Historical Perspectives*, Cambridge University Press, 1991, pp. 34-6.

White's 1885 *A history of science with theology in Christendom* is commonly seen as response to clerical opposition to his founding of Cornell as a secular university. White saw the struggle more between dogmatic theology and science than simply between religion and scientific inquiry. Brooke sees White's book as "suffused with foolish remarks by uninformed priests." This is surely a cautionary note against speaking from a position of scientific ignorance, a secondary theme of this essay. The historian David C. Lindbergs sees White's book as even more influential than Draper's, in part because, "his impressive documentation gave the impression of sound scholarship."<sup>13</sup>

Perhaps nothing better illustrates the effect of these two books on American culture than the widely held belief that the world was thought to be flat before Columbus and that the institutional church opposed the idea that the Earth is a sphere. White's book popularized this completely false and baseless charge against the Catholic Church.

With such a long-standing and widespread presence in our society, the trope that only the ignorant and superstitious deny Darwinism will inevitably move into our churches. It is no surprise that grumpy confirmands will use it as a canard to push back against a pastor when they unhappily enrolled in confirmation class. The larger problem is that they will harm those around themselves unless an effective response is made, or better yet, if they are preempted with a discussion of these issues and understandable counter points.

In my work as a parish pastor, I have been forced to engage with confirmands who simultaneously insist that Darwin proves atheism, and puzzlingly, that there is a single gene that causes homosexuality. On one hand these confirmands will attempt to use their supposed scientific sophistication to disrupt the class, and on the other, display a woeful ignorance of the mathematics behind evolutionary theory.<sup>14</sup> Such engagements raise the question as to where a pastor may turn for accessible and reliable information on the recent developments in science and the implications of these developments?

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<sup>13</sup> David C. Lindberg, "Science and the Early Church," in *God and Nature*, ed. David C. Lindberg, Ronald L. Numbers, University of California Press, 1986.

<sup>14</sup> Common sense would argue that a single gene that causes homosexuality will never be found, for if such a gene existed, it would be quickly eliminated from a population. A gene that causes an individual to seek sexual relationships with members of the same sex would naturally result in fewer offspring than from individuals that seek relationships that result in children. Indeed, a recent extensive study involving 470,000 individuals would seem to support this idea reached through deductive reasoning—(<https://pjmedia.com/trending/there-is-no-gay-gene-comprehensive-scientific-study-finds/>) (<https://quillette.com/2019/09/14/there-is-no-gay-gene-but-sexuality-is-affected-by-many-genes-of-small-effect/>). The mathematics of natural selection are unforgiving and are sometimes discussed in scientific literature prepared for general readers (for example, *The 10,000 Year Explosion* by Cochran and Harpending, who try to preserve some physical causation by postulating a virus). There would seem to be a small statistical relationship between five genetic markers and sexual behavior, but many questions remain as to the significance, if any, of such a finding.

## Resources for Pastors and Parents

A possible place to begin defanging confirmands is with Frank Pastore's four-minute video, *Does God Exist? 4 New Arguments*<sup>15</sup>, found on the web site run by Dennis Prager, Prageru.com. Pastore argues there were four "big bangs," not just one, that must be accounted for in an explanation of how everything came to be. Different people count the big bangs differently, but his count includes the origin of matter and energy (time, too), the emergence of life, the emergence of complex life forms, and the origin of the human brain.

Pastore doesn't have time to delve into detail, but it is extremely difficult to see how the gradual searching mechanisms that seek to optimize organisms for their current environment would have produced highly complex brains out on the African savannah. These searching algorithms would seek to maximize the chance of survival in the existing environment and brains large enough to create quantum mechanics or evolutionary theory require lots of resources to grow and support. What is the evolutionary advantage? And why would such complex brains have come about so suddenly?

Pastore's attention to the development of the human mind is not unique to him; he notes that he has read famous theologians, such as Thomas Aquinas. Lutherans will be pleased to know that Philip Melanchthon raises the same point in his Romans commentary as evidence for God.<sup>16</sup>

Pastore's short video would certainly give pause to someone arguing for atheism based on evolutionary theory. His discussions of the second and third big bangs are simply short-hand summaries of the problems with Darwinism discussed here and in Gelertner's essay. His short video turns the tables on those who attack the existence of God with vague references to modern science by requiring them to explain abrupt changes in the history of life on this earth.

The Hoover Institution has produced two videos where the genial Peter Robinson interviews David Berlinski,<sup>17</sup> and in the second video, Berlinski, Stephen Meyer, and David Gerlernter.<sup>18</sup> These videos offer a conversational and easy-to-follow format for clergy and other outsiders to these debates.

A thorough and academically grounded reflection on the sudden emergence of the complexity that led to human life can be found in Rolston's book, *The Three Big Bangs*.<sup>19</sup> He explores and

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<sup>15</sup> <https://www.prageru.com/video/does-god-exist-4-new-arguments/>

<sup>16</sup> Melanchthon, p.76-7.

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.hoover.org/research/uncommon-knowledge-david-berlinski-deniable-darwin>

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.hoover.org/research/mathematical-challenges-darwins-theory-evolution-david-berlinski-stephen-meyer-and-david>

<sup>19</sup> Holmes Rolston, *The Three Big Bangs*, Cambridge University Press, 2010.

reflects on the meaning of the sudden emergence of matter-energy, the sudden emergence of life on the Earth, and the sudden emergence of the complex human brain. At the end of his book, the Oxford-educated Rolston follows well-known theologians and concludes that the emergence of a mind which can comprehend the universe around it points to the existence of God. Such a reflection can surely open the conversation once again to consideration of the Christian message, with a cautionary note against any simple proofs for the existence of God.

### **Sophisticated Arguments for God**

Sophisticated arguments for the existence of God have a long history in Christian thought. Gregory of Nyssa wrote that we might know of God's existence through the order found in the natural world.<sup>20</sup> Aquinas, famously, attempted to prove God's existence using the idea that God is the first cause.<sup>21</sup> Scientists are often attracted to these arguments, because of their reliance on deductive logic, as exemplified by Werner Heisenberg's conviction: "The first gulp from the glass of natural sciences will make you an atheist, but at the bottom of the glass God is waiting for you."<sup>22</sup>

Contemporary scientists want to get in on the fun as well, for example the evangelical Christian astrophysicist Sarah Salvider with her web site Six Day Science.<sup>23</sup> Dr. Salvider writes that she was "utterly awed" by the order in the universe. She cites Psalm 19 as a summary of her experiences as an astrophysicist, "The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands."

According to her testimony, Salvider was strongly influenced by the writings of the Jewish physicist Gerald Schroeder. He has labored to reconcile the Old Testament and various Talmudic writings with his knowledge of modern physics, writing "We will never discover an absolute proof for or against the existence of a creator by looking through a microscope or a telescope. We can, however, study trends in science and determine if they tend toward confrontation or confluence with the Bible's unchanging worldview."<sup>24</sup> Schroeder's thorough analysis and carefully reasoned conclusions set a fine example for other scientists and engineers who wish to reflect on the implications of their knowledge for their religious beliefs.

But Schroeder is aware that many physical scientists disagree with him that modern trends in science point to a confluence with the Bible. He cites the example of the Nobel laureate Stephen

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<sup>20</sup> Wolfhard Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 1, Erdmans, 1991, pg 347.

<sup>21</sup> <https://www.ccel.org/a/aquinas/summa/cache/summa.pdf>

<sup>22</sup> Werner Heisenberg, *Physics and Philosophy*, Harper, 2007.

<sup>23</sup> [sixdayscience.com](http://sixdayscience.com)

<sup>24</sup> Gerald L. Schroeder, *The Science of God*, Free Press, 2009, pg. 22.

Weinburg, an atheist who believes the universe to be pointless, but who readily acknowledges that the laws of the universe show “an incredible fine tuning,”

The evangelist Hugh Ross, with a Ph.D in astrophysics, is considerably more brash than Schroeder with his claims that he can prove the existence of God. He founded *Reasons to Believe*, which publishes books and offers speakers to interested groups in order to advance his agenda.<sup>25</sup> In his books and public speaking Ross claims that he can create models of the universe from his reading of the Bible and that these models can be tested and be verified to show that the Bible is trustworthy.<sup>26</sup>

In October of 2005, I heard Ross speak to a friendly group at Grace Chapel in Lexington, Massachusetts. He claimed to have found references to the existence of dark matter in Job with verses such as 38:17b, “Have you seen the gates of the deepest darkness?” These references to the existence of dark matter were written into the Bible 2500 years before the existence of dark matter was offered as a simple fact. After I recovered from my shock at his rhetorical license, I was disappointed to learn that he refused questions from the floor and instead directed interested listeners to his books, available for purchase at a nearby table. In its own way, his rhetorical excess was just as extreme as that of Senator Kennedy when he claimed that the nomination of Judge Bork threatened to turn America into a nation of dummies by prohibiting the teaching of evolution in the public schools.

### **Paul and the Limits on Natural Theology**

Despite their rhetorical excesses, the preceding examples demonstrate that there are severe limits on natural theology. These limits were set by God as boundaries on the ability of human reasoning to determine his divine nature from the created order. These boundaries are necessary due to the enslavement of the will and reason to sin. Yet proponents of natural theology often cite Romans 1:19-20 as evidence that complex theology and the accompanying proofs for the existence of God are indeed possible. But other passages in Romans and 1 Corinthians contradict such a claim by indicating that it is not possible to discern God’s nature through reason because the human will and reason are enslaved, and because in response to this enslavement God desires to be known through the foolishness of the cross.

In Romans 1:20 Paul wrote: “For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse.” But in 1 Corinthians 1:21 Paul also wrote that human reasoning will not move us closer to God, “For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe.”

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<sup>25</sup> [reasons.org](http://reasons.org)

<sup>26</sup> Hugh Ross, *More Than a Theory (Reasons to Believe): Revealing a Testable Model for Creation*, Baker Books; Reprint edition, 2012.



Luther, in his Romans commentary, resolves the apparent conflict between Romans 1:19-20 and 1 Corinthians 1:21 by using Romans 1:21, where Paul wrote, “For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him.”<sup>27</sup> Humanity chooses to turn from its inborn knowledge of God and to instead worship “a figment of their own imagination.”<sup>28</sup> For Luther, pagans choose to worship idols because their inborn sense of God’s nature has become corrupted. In response to the corruption of human reason, God in his wisdom chooses to be known in the foolishness of the cross.

A central Christian claim is that God desires to be known through his self-revelation in Jesus Christ, a claim which Paul clearly articulates in his writings. Following this line of thought, Kaseman argues that reading Romans 1:19-20 as advocating a direct natural theology contradicts both Paul’s Christology and his eschatology.<sup>29</sup> Paul sees a humanity in revolt that runs from the the divine power of its creator, but then runs into its judge at the eschaton.<sup>30</sup> Both Romans 1:18 and Romans 1:21 emphasize that humanity is in revolt against God, challenging the idea that people are even capable of reasoning about God. In response to God’s divinity revealed through creation, humanity turns away, loosing its inborn sense of God.

In Romans 2:15, the apostle wrote that gentiles demonstrate the law is written “on their hearts” when they follow the law. Again, a defense of natural theology could be attempted using Romans 2:15, but to do so risks confusing law and gospel. Melanchthon wrote in his 1540 Romans commentary that it is possible through human reason to know the law, but never God’s forgiveness.<sup>31</sup> For him, any attempt to move from natural reason to the Christian gospel is to confuse the distinction between law and gospel. It is simply not possible to move from the decalogue to the cross using the power of human reasoning.

Melanchthon’s scholarly life suggests that attempts to prove the existence of God are sometimes linked with a semi-Pelagian theology. Over time Melanchthon moved from two to three uses of the law; similarly over time he moved from stating that the order in nature could reassure Christians to stating that the human will is one of three causes for Christian conversion. Both theological moves are attempts to justify ourselves and our faith by moving the focus away from the Word onto our own efforts.

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<sup>27</sup> Martin Luther, *Lectures on Romans*, *Luther’s Works*, Col. 26., trans. Walter G. Tillmanns, Jacob O. Preus, Concordia, 1972, p. 154.

<sup>28</sup> Luther, p. 159.

<sup>29</sup> Ernst Kaseman, *Commentary on Romans*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromily, Erdmans, 1980, p. 41.

<sup>30</sup> Kasemann, p.43.

<sup>31</sup> Philip Melanchthon, *Commentary on Romans*, trans. Fred Kramer, 2nd. ed., Concordia, 2010, p. 76.

In the first edition of his *Loci Communes* in 1521, Melanchthon followed Luther's thought carefully, using part of the canon of invention, the *topoi*, in a new way. This first edition explicitly rejects the idea of civil righteousness and ethical readings of the Bible. In the second edition in 1535, and subsequent editions, Melanchthon fully embraced the third use of the law.<sup>32</sup> In his 1540 commentary on Romans, Melanchthon sees the ordering of nature as affirming an already existing Christian faith,<sup>33</sup> what a modern person would call "confirmation bias." But by 1543, in the third edition of his *Loci Communes*, Melanchthon offered a proof for the existence of God.<sup>34</sup> He also spoke about the "three causes of conversion," which he listed as, "the Holy Spirit, the Word of God, and the will of man."<sup>35</sup> Such a statement directly contradicts 1 Cor. 1:21, where Paul wrote it is not possible to know God through human reason.

### **Deus Revelatus et Deus Absconditus**

Natural theology often attempts to understand God's actions in the world. Yet many books that I have read and the discussions that I have followed about natural theology lack any concept of the hiddenness of God. But the concept of a God who hides, and reveals himself only when and where he chooses, is deeply embedded in the Old Testament. A key passage is Isaiah 45:15, which proclaims: "Truly, you are a God who hides himself" (RSV). For Luther, the distinction between *deus revelatus* and *deus absconditus* is crucial to understanding God's activity in the world,<sup>36</sup> yet it is a theological construct conspicuously missing from many discussions about modern science and Christian faith.

The Latin word *absconditus* carries an active sense that is lacking in the English word "hidden."<sup>37</sup> To abscond is to depart and to take everything of value and to leave behind an emptiness. Both Forde and Luther cite Exodus 33:21-23, where God allows Moses to see his "back" but not his "face."

And the Lord said, "Behold, there is a place by me where you shall stand upon the rock; and while my glory passes by I will put you in a cleft of the rock, and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by; then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back; but my face shall not be seen."

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<sup>32</sup> Bernhard Lohse, *Martin Luther's Theology: Its Historical and Systematic Development*, trans. Roy A. Harrisville, Fortress, 1999, p. 270.

<sup>33</sup> Melanchthon, p. 79.

<sup>34</sup> Pannenberg, p.113.

<sup>35</sup> Robert Kolb, Forward, to the First Edition, Philip Melanchthon, *Commentary on Romans*, trans. Fred Kramer, 2nd. ed., Concordia, 2010, p. 9.

<sup>36</sup> Lohse, p. 215.

<sup>37</sup> Forde, Gerhard, *Theology is for Proclamation*, Fortress Press, 1990, p. 16.

The Exodus narrative uses an anthropomorphic description of God's activity to emphasize that God remains hidden even when God is noticeably present.

Commenting on Genesis 39:21-22 Luther describes God's propensity for concealing his actions and motives:

But I [God] shall act in such a way that it will seem to you that some fool has done this, not God. You must see My back, not My face. You must not see My works and counsels with which I am fashioning and refashioning you according to My good pleasure. It would seem foolish to you. But you will not accept and understand these things in any other way than if they were death and the devil himself.<sup>38</sup>

For Luther, his understanding of the God who slips away after wrestling with Jacob in Genesis 32 is essential to understanding monotheism. The one good God works in all things, including using evil to accomplish divine ends.<sup>39</sup> Bayer expounds on this theme in Luther:

God's terrifying hiddenness, experienced as equivocal and uncertain, lies in the fact that he accomplishes evil as well as good (Lam 3:38), life as well as death, light as well as darkness (Isa. 45-7), happiness as well as misfortune, (Amos 3:6). For us beauty and cruelty are inextricably woven into nature and history.

Proofs for the existence of God invariably rely on the beauty and orderliness of nature. The corresponding proofs against God's existence invariably rely on the cruelty and seeming chaos of nature and history. These two opposing proofs always seem to balance each other out. The Darwinist argues from the seeming absurdity of various creatures and anatomical structures that are found in nature; many Christians counter by asking how a mind that can conceive of quantum mechanics could have evolved on the African savannah. Stalemate.

If Luther's understanding of God's presence and activity in the world is correct, then proofs for and against God's existence must balance out. If beauty and cruelty are woven into the fabric of creation, it is a strong denial of reality to try to pull one out of the tapestry and to ignore the other. Both are always there.

In ancient times, Gregory of Nyssa and Augustine, among others, argued for the existence of God based on the orderliness of nature. Such arguments have continued to the present time, in the form of the intelligent design movement. David Meyer's book, *Darwin's Doubt*, contains two major theses, the first arguing Darwin was wrong and the second seeking to fill the void created by the first thesis with his theory of intelligent design. But a highly visible weakness of the

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<sup>38</sup> Luther, Martin, LW 7:104.

<sup>39</sup> Bayer, p. 202.

intelligent design movement is that it currently lacks any attempt to explain the brokenness of creation. In essence, they need to explain the cruelty of nature as well as its orderliness.

We are left with a conundrum: the riddle of creation and our desperate, inborn, need to find God. Where might we go to find God who “dwells in inaccessible light (1 Tim. 6:16)?”

As Wolfhart Pannenberg writes, only God’s self-revelation in the Son makes the incomprehensible God present to us.<sup>40</sup> The God who is hidden is made known and comes to us in the Son, yet hidden in this revelation as well. There is a profound eschatological aspect to these two aspects of the divine nature in that the apparent dichotomy between the hidden and revealed God will only be resolved at the consummation of all things. The existence and nature of such a deity could only be known through revelation; it is absurd to believe we could reach such conclusions by deductive reasoning from the results obtained by various forms of empirical science.

Lutheran thought has much to say in the conversation about modern science and Christian faith, but few contemporary pastors or seminary faculty are contributing to this conversation. A notable exception is Pastor George Murphy (a personal acquaintance, who was once the subject of an academic paper of mine), who has written books for laity and clergy.<sup>41</sup> Murphy has worked to bring Luther’s theology of the cross, as expressed in the Heidelberg Disputation, into the conversation.

Lutherans bring to the table our thoughts about the distinction between *deus revelatus* and *deus absconditus*, as well as Luther’s teaching that scripture comes to us under two fundamental forms, law and gospel. Luther’s strict adherence to only two uses of the law, found in many of his writings, provides a tool to resist the use of Biblical inerrancy as means to escape a hard conversation.

### **Luther and the Bible**

Luther repeatedly stated that the purpose and meaning of the Christian Bible is as a witness to Christ; indeed, the entire content of the Bible is Jesus Christ. In his remarks on John 3:14 Luther writes: “He [the Lord] teaches us that Moses points and refers to Christ in all his stories and illustrations. His purpose is to show that Christ is the point at the center of the circle, with all eyes inside the circle focused on Him.... All the stories of the Holy Writ, if viewed alright, point to Christ.”<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Pannenberg p. 339.

<sup>41</sup> George Murphy, *Models of Atonement: Speaking about Salvation in a Scientific World*, Lutheran University Press, 2013.

<sup>42</sup> Martin Luther, *Sermons on the Gospel of St. John*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan, trans. Martin H. Bertram, *Luther’s Works*, Col. 22., Concordia, 1957, pg. 339.

Prior attempts to defend the faith by turning the Bible into a false authority subtly undermine the Lutheran approach that understands the Bible as a witness to Christ.

The American scholar Gerhard Forde, a prominent 20th-century interpreter of Luther, was to write: “In any case, Lutherans have always been uneasy with infallibilist solutions to faith’s questions. Even where they have flirted with the ideas of scriptural infallibility they have had some anxiety and suspicion that it might be contrary to a gospel appropriation of the scriptural message.”<sup>43</sup>

Attempts to defend Christianity against attacks based on 19th-century science by using the opening sections of Genesis in a literalist manner undermine our Lutheran heritage and ultimately are unconvincing to many members of our society.

Instead, the Bible should be used to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ, for that is its purpose. Luther wrote bluntly: “Scripture is not to be understood as against, but for Christ, hence it either refers to him, or is not to be reckoned true Scripture . . . For if opponents have pleaded Scripture against Christ, let us plead Christ against Scriptures . . . For it is the duty of a genuine Apostle to proclaim Christ’s passion, death, and office, and to lay the foundation of faith in the same.”<sup>44</sup>

### **From Here**

Despite Gelernter’s call for biologists to give up on Darwin, his ideas will be with us for a long time as a cultural force, similar to how the crackpot Freud never seems to go away. When one of my daughters was in third grade, she returned home to report that her teacher told the class Darwin proved that God didn’t exist. While we might disagree on how the American evangelical community responds to these challenges, they are correct in their assessment that clergy and parents need to respond to such wild and illogical assertions. But such defenses should be grounded in modern science and follow clear lines of logical argumentation, rather than seeking to interpret ancient Hebrew scriptures with patterns of thought foreign to them.

Augustine, in his *Confessions*, asserted that Christians should not endorse obviously foolish ideas about cosmology, such as he found in Manichaeism, lest the validity of the Christian message be undermined. Similarly, contemporary Christians should also not allow themselves to be portrayed in the surrounding culture as embracing foolish ideas from ignorance or superstition, lest the proclamation of the gospel be hindered.

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<sup>43</sup> Gerhard I. Forde, “The Catholic Impasse: Reflections on Lutheran-Catholic Dialogue Today,” *Promoting Unity. Themes in Lutheran-Catholic Dialogue*. Eds. H. George Anderson and James R. Crumley Jr., 1989, 67-77.

<sup>44</sup> <https://crossalone.us/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/TheKeytoScripture.pdf>

## Advice to Pastors

I offer six suggestions for responding to, and possibly even preempting, issues that arise from the cultural impact of Darwinism, and from the general movement of ideas in modern science into the popular culture.

1. Take Augustine's advice as still relevant and timely. Parish pastors, without a scientific background, will only improve their ministry by working to increase their understanding of modern science. A pastor could solicit help from members of his or her congregation who are pursuing scientific careers, which might produce a surprisingly supportive response.

The books by Gerhard Schroder are readable and reliable, carefully written. His book, *The Science of God*, cited earlier, is particularly worthwhile.

The Teaching Company offers a twelve-lecture course on Science and Theology by Professor Lawrence Principe, from Johns Hopkins University.<sup>45</sup> This course is suitable for self study or use in a congregation. Principe devotes an entire lecture to the warfare thesis stemming from the writings of Draper and White.

Professor Joshua Hershey at The King's College, in Manhattan, is developing an e-book, *Faithful Science: A Christian's Guide to the Study of Creation*, which is intended to be an accessible guide to modern science and to offer what he terms, "... a clear understanding of the relationship between science and the Christian faith."<sup>46</sup> It is well worth investing time and effort in.

The English mathematician John Lennox has written several slim volumes on the relationship between Christian faith and modern science, including: *God's Undertaker: Has Science Buried God?* and *Seven Days that Divide the World*. I found the second volume to be particularly interesting with its careful reflections on the opening part of *Genesis*. Noteworthy are his reflections on an issue that troubles evangelicals and others to no end, specifically, interpreting Paul's statement in Romans 5:12, "Therefore as sin came into the world through one man and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all men sinned."<sup>47</sup> (RSV) If the earth is very old, and *Homo Sapiens Sapiens* only emerged at the end of the long history of life, how might we explain all of the animal death that occurred during the long history of life on the earth? In short, Lennox responds to these issues by careful exegesis where he notes Paul refers to humanity in Romans 5:12 and to creation in 8:21-2. He also notes that when Adam and Eve were expelled, they were driven into a world that was already populated with people.

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<sup>45</sup> <https://www.thegreatcourses.com>

<sup>46</sup> <http://www.faithfulscience.com>

<sup>47</sup> John C. Lennox, *Seven Days that Divide the World*, Zondervan, 2011, p. 75-85.

2. Be prepared to encounter “Young Earthers” and other Christians who embrace a literal understanding of *Genesis*. Clergy coming from an ELCA or similar background may not have encountered such people, but they are out there and they are passionate and convinced of the rightness of their cause.

While I serve a culturally liberal congregation in the northeast, I had a member who was involved with the Creation Research Society.<sup>48</sup> I’ve also had members who were strongly opposed to the idea of evolution as anti-religious. In order to provide pastoral care for such members, a pastor should be ready to deal with the inevitable conflict that such strongly held views may bring to a congregation. In a culture where many people believe such views represent a poor education or low intelligence, creating a space where such individuals can express their point of view in an environment of mutual respect and Christian love can be a daunting task. But it should be undertaken.

Concordia Publishing offers a title for sale in this genre, *In Search of the Genesis World*, by Erich A Von Fange. It is fairly representative of such writings. The LCMS site Concordia Theology offers a “travel guide” to these discussions.<sup>49</sup>

Ken Ham has gained some national attention with his *Answers in Genesis* program, which he terms a “ministry.”<sup>50</sup> He made me (I’m sure along with many others) a gift of his book, *Gospel Reset: Salvation Made Relevant*. In this small 125 page book, he links the decline in church attendance to an unwillingness of many churches to understand Genesis in a strictly literal fashion.<sup>51</sup> I was left wondering if he had read Augustine’s *On the Literal Interpretation of Genesis*, or if he would consider reading such a document to be a waste of time. In it, Augustine struggles to reconcile the two accounts of creation in *Genesis*, unlike Ham.

The preceding discussion may seem esoteric or useless in a Lutheran context, but it is quite relevant to ongoing struggles in North American Lutheranism. The well-known web site [exposingtheelca.com](http://exposingtheelca.com) engages in the socially useful task of criticizing the various follies of the leadership of that particular denomination. On numerous occasions the site has criticized clergy and leaders of the ELCA for their enthusiastic embrace of evolutionary theory.<sup>52</sup> The site’s editor notes some of the reasoning behind their support, which is that to deny evolutionary theory “...is

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<sup>48</sup> <https://creationresearch.org>

<sup>49</sup> <https://concordiatheology.org/2018/02/a-travel-guide-to-the-evangelical-creation-debates-what-is-young-earth-creationism/>

<sup>50</sup> <https://answersingenesis.org>

<sup>51</sup> Ken Ham, *Gospel Reset: Salvation Made Relevant*, Master Books, 2018, p. 90.

<sup>52</sup> <https://www.exposingtheelca.com/exposed-blog/revealed-elca-leadership-on-evolution-creation>

to deliberately embrace scientific ignorance and transmit such ignorance to our children.” In response, the site actually sites Ken Ham as an authority on “Scriptural truth.”<sup>53</sup>

The reasons given by the ELCA clergy for embracing evolutionary theory sound like the thoughts given by Senator Kennedy in his “Bork” speech, the criticisms found in the film *Inherit the Wind*, and more than a little bit like the warfare thesis espoused by Draper and then White. The corresponding counter-punch to the ELCA’s claims is based on a literalist, or “Biblicist,” understanding of the Bible. Their argument is simply an expression of contemporary American culture, devoid of any particular Lutheran understanding of the faith.

3. It is far better to deflect arguments based on the 19th-century science of Darwinism using discoveries made in the late 20th and early 21st centuries than to turn the Bible into a kind of paper pope. The danger is always to go too far in using human reason, which is held in bondage to sin, when defending Christianity.

Instead, pastors may choose to refuse to enter the arena that pits a literalist interpretation of the Bible against the culture’s received wisdom about scientific authority and Darwinism. It is reasonable now to counter atheist arguments against the existence of God, based vaguely on Darwinian theory, which are unconvincing because Darwin’s theories lack a modern understanding of cellular chemistry. A scientific theory from the 19th century that fails to explain the origin and development of life is of little rhetorical value in any argument or debate.

The new developments in molecular science that challenge Darwinism have significant implications for parish ministry. Some previous attempts to defend the historic teaching of the church relied on literalist interpretations of scripture that would pit these understandings of the Bible against the powerful cultural forces that see science as a final authority. Lurking in the cultural background are always the arguments, such as those found in *Inherit the Wind*, that only the ignorant rely on such lines of reasoning. More frequently than not, young people in the contemporary culture will select “science” as the final authority over a fundamentalist understanding of the Bible.

4. Encourage science and engineering graduates to enter the ministry. My suggestion is directly contrary to the practices of some denominations. When I entered the ELCA’s candidacy process, I was told by the local bishop’s assistant that a Ph.D in electrical engineering was a “terrible education.” He was completely confident that I would never make it through an ELCA seminary because I lacked the necessary academic skills (he was at least right about making it through an ELCA institution). Such an attitude is completely wrong. The church as an institution and the various denominations need their clergy to bring a wealth of ideas and understanding to their discussions regarding the church’s response to modernity, as well as all of the problems they face. That is the whole point of requiring a college degree for entry into seminary.

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<sup>53</sup> <https://www.exposingtheelca.com/exposed-blog/ken-ham-comments-on-and-shares-exposing-the-elcas-blog-about-the-elca-youth-gathering>



5. Resist all temptations to resort to Biblicism for defending the Christian faith. When struggling with an impulse to Biblicism, reread “Forde got out of Biblicism, you can too,” found on the Cross Alone web site.<sup>54</sup> Always recall: “The cross alone is our theology.” (Luther, WA 5:176.32). While Forde’s ideas were developed and expressed to create a proper understanding of the role of law and gospel, they are easily applied to resisting attempts to move away from a Lutheran understanding of scripture to a fundamentalist understanding.

6. Remember purpose of the church - to proclaim the gospel. Christ is to be proclaimed, not proven. That is why Luther was to write: “All upright sacred books agree on one thing, that they all collectively preach and promote Christ.” Preach and proclaim, not prove with arguments based in philosophy, word play, or modern science.

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<sup>54</sup> <https://crossalone.us/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/biblicism2012.pdf>