

***Reformed Academic* Responds to “Ten Reasons”**

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Introduction

A number of pastors published a warning in *Clarion* of January 1, 2010 addressed to the Canadian Reformed community and directed against *Reformed Academic*. It was presented as “Ten Reasons Why Evolution is Dangerous and Evil.” If taken as ten reasons why the philosophy of evolutionism must be rejected by Christians, the reasons make good sense for that philosophy is materialistic and anti-Christian. But the moderators of *Reformed Academic* reject this philosophy. So why was this warning issued? The reason appears to be that the writers misunderstand a number of points of general importance. In what follows we try to explain the two most important ones, namely the distinction between theory and philosophy and the different meanings of ‘randomness.’ We hope this explanation will remove the misunderstandings contained in “Ten Reasons.”¹

The use and abuse of theories

After US health care reform was accepted, Republicans said that the USA had adopted European socialism. Republicans said this despite the fact that the content of the bill does not come close to European health care. So what was going on? It is a classic example of political rhetoric. The Republican strategy was to link the health care issue at hand with the much larger philosophical difference between Democrats and Republicans. This made it difficult to see the distinction between Obama’s health care bill and the philosophy of socialism. Once the health care bill and socialism were equated one could not possibly vote for the bill and be a good Republican.

Political rhetoric also characterizes popular science. For instance, the atheist Richard Dawkins uses it to blur the difference between the theory of biological evolution and the philosophy of evolutionism. The strategy is to link the theory of biological evolution with philosophical materialism. One cannot possibly be a Christian, Dawkins argues, if one accepts the theory of biological evolution. So-called “scientific creationists” agree with this strategy and the conclusion. Both the atheist and the scientific creationist are blinded by the confusion of theory and philosophy. As a result both of them throw the baby out with the bathwater. The atheist rejects Christianity, and the scientific creationist throws out the theory of biological evolution.

This strategy works so well because the distinction between theory and philosophy is complex. It is difficult to distinguish the theory of biological evolution from the evolutionistic religion of materialism or atheism. Yet it must be done. For without the distinction one cannot see how theories can be abused for the promotion of atheism or materialism. The authors of “Ten Reasons” indeed distinguish between the biological theory of evolution and the philosophy of evolutionism; yet in the same paragraph they treat

¹ In the interest of clarity, and to avoid further unnecessary polarization, we presented this response in advance to the authors of “Ten Reasons” to provide an opportunity to identify any misunderstanding or misrepresentation. No response was received.

them as one and the same. This results in confusion throughout the article. As a result, none of the issues raised in the “Ten Reasons” actually addresses the theory of biological evolution or even the views of the moderators of *Reformed Academic*.

Here is the distinction between the theory of biological evolution and the philosophy of evolutionism as described on *Reformed Academic*. “Evolution is no more than a scientific theory. Evolutionism, on the other hand, is an all-encompassing naturalistic philosophy and worldview which goes far beyond the theory of evolution. It claims that nature is all there is, was, or ever shall be. In particular, it claims that there is no God who has created the universe, who governs it or interacts with it or with anything in it in any way” (4 March 2010). The main reason why the two so often get confused is that the theory is abused by people with an atheistic agenda. For this purpose they use a key characteristic of theories, which is that theories go beyond the data they attempt to explain. There are no theories that do not go beyond the data and the theory of biological evolution is no exception. Data offer clues that a scientist may use, but they do not dictate a theory or explanation. More importantly, theories do not dictate philosophies. Likewise, philosophies do not dictate theories.

It follows that the theory of biological evolution does not dictate materialism or atheism. Neither do atheism or materialism dictate the theory of biological evolution. Likewise, the theory of biological evolution does not dictate the practice of eugenics. Thus the objections to evolutionism in “Ten Reasons” do not apply to the views of the moderators of *Reformed Academic*. This should have been obvious for other reasons. How can anyone assume that people who profess the Ecumenical Creeds and the Three Forms of Unity every Sunday would want to adopt evolutionism, materialism, and atheism, let alone promote them? In the communion of saints one does not expect such accusations.

Randomness

Two of the authors of “Ten Reasons” raise concerns about randomness. Here is what we believe regarding randomness. God is sovereign over all of creation. Whatever happens, God brings it about or allows it to happen. There is no chance from God’s point of view. But there are random chance events from a human point of view. Divine guidance and random processes in nature are not mutually exclusive.

The distinction that needs to be kept in mind is that between randomness as the lack of divine providence and randomness as a fundamental characteristic of the created order. Here are some examples of the latter. Every human being has half of his or her chromosomes from the father and the other half from the mother, and the random distribution of these chromosomes results in the genetic diversity we see among the children. But this does not mean that God is not involved in what genetic information every human being receives, including those genes that might result in a life of suffering and disease. Randomness is also a concept that is essential in evolutionary theory as a characterization of genetic variation. It means that the environment does not direct mutations such that it causes an animal or plant to adapt to that environment. That is, genetic varieties of plants and animals arise irrespective of whether they are adapted to the environment in which they arise.

But like many other concepts, randomness can also be ‘translated’ into a denial of divine guidance in the service of an atheistic agenda. Discernment is the name of the game. Randomness describes processes in nature in which we cannot see direction, but that does not mean there is none. We are in the fortunate position that on this point the Bible provides a clear example. Both in the Old and in the New Testament God directs the natural randomness of the throw of the lot to convey His decisions (for instance: Joshua 18-21; 1 Sam. 14:41-42; Proverbs 16:33; Jonah 1:7; Luke 1:8-9; Acts 1:26). Divine guidance is a matter of faith. There is no contradiction between natural randomness and divine purposeful providence.

Education

The lack of familiarity with fundamental distinctions and concepts in the theory of biological evolution and in the philosophy of evolutionism underlines Dr. Oosterhoff's point which is the need to include both in the high school curriculum (see *Reformed Academic*, 30 October 2009). Apparently, some seem to assume that if you teach X, then you support X. But it is elementary pedagogy that when X gets included in the curriculum, all the pros and cons will receive attention, and at a Christian school they will be assessed from a Christian point of view. An illustration may be instructive. The claim, "Evolution teaches that all life is descended from a single-celled organism which in turn evolved from inert chemicals," is revealing in more than one sense. It appears in the paragraph of "Ten Reasons" that defines the *theory* of evolution. But before even the philosophy of evolution is distinguished from the theory, the writers have already switched from the theory to the philosophy. A second illustration is the claim that "Evolution *teaches*..." Taken as philosophical doctrine, 'evolution' can be said to be taught just as theologians teach the doctrines of the Christian faith as truth. But when the philosophy of evolutionism is confused with the theory of biological evolution, the teachings of the former are now also attributed incorrectly to the latter. This makes no sense because theories do not teach truth. Rather they explain observations and suggest predictions. This matter is not trivial. The confusion allows the writers to attribute all the evil associated with the philosophy of evolution also to the theory of evolution and that creates serious misunderstanding.

Biblical hermeneutics

The question of biblical hermeneutics was not raised explicitly in "Ten Reasons." But we think it will help the discussion if we clarify our position on hermeneutics. We follow the principle that any interpretation of Scripture must be justified on scriptural grounds.² Various kinds of scholarship, including the natural sciences, can provide the occasion for considering different interpretations of Scripture. But the justification for any particular interpretation has to come from Scripture. This approach has been characteristic for the Reformed tradition and for anyone who takes the Bible seriously as the word of God. The kinds of scholarship that are routinely brought to bear upon the interpretation of Scripture include knowledge of Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek, knowledge of literary genres as in literary analysis, knowledge of the culture, the history and the archeology of Israel and surrounding countries, as well as knowledge of earth history, plants, and animals. For instance, the study of plants and animals has been part of biblical scholarship at least since the sixteenth century, and was undertaken in order to understand their meaning in Scripture.³

A good illustration of this approach was given more than forty years ago by Prof. J. Kamphuis in his treatment of the question whether Noah's flood was global or local. Geologists could find no evidence for a global flood. Kamphuis pointed out that, on the basis of exegetical considerations alone, the expression "the whole earth" could legitimately be interpreted as the whole inhabited earth. He refuses to impose the scientific question of the geographical extent of the flood on Scripture. In his view (and ours) it is inappropriate to expect Scripture to answer this question because it imposes unscriptural expectations on the intentions of the text. For him Scripture teaches a universal flood in the sense of covenantal

² Schilder, K. *Een hoornstoot tegen Assen?* 2nd ed. Kampen. Kok: 1929; for the relevant principles in English, see Oosterhoff, F.G., "Klaas Schilder on Creation and Flood (1)," *Clarion* 52 (6): 137-140 (2003); also posted under Collected Papers on *Reformed Academic*.

³ Crowther, K.M. "Sacred philosophy, secular theology: the Mosaic Physics of Levinus Lemnius (1505-1568) and Francisco Valles (1524-1592)," in van der Meer, J.M., Mandelbrote, S. (Eds.) *Nature and Scripture in the Abrahamic Religions: To 1700*. Leiden/Boston: Brill Academic Publishers. 2008. 2 vols.

universality meaning that the flood affected all those who lived in disobedience. But this does not mean that the flood has been global in the sense of modern science.⁴

We draw attention to two important points about what can be expected of biblical hermeneutics. First, no method whether for Scripture interpretation or for scientific study of nature guarantees the correct outcome. We say this because people sometimes argue as if what they consider the right hermeneutics dictates the right exegesis. This is expecting too much if only because one is in need of the illumination of the Holy Spirit and this cannot be reduced to a mechanical procedure. Secondly, and implied in the first point, there are exegetical impasses by which we mean that, everything considered, no agreement on an interpretation can be reached. In such cases integrity calls for an attitude that resists the temptation to impose one's preferred interpretation. It is better to admit our limitations and create room for diversity than to distort the text beyond what it can bear. Just as we reject the ideological abuse of scientific theories, we also reject the ideological abuse of Scripture texts. We see examples of such ideological abuse in modernist and enlightenment thinking that has in recent centuries clouded our interpretation of what the original author(s) and readers and hearers meant and received.

The approach to Genesis taken by the moderators of *Reformed Academic* must be seen against this background. None of us has settled on an interpretation of creation texts in Scripture. "Clearly, we do not know with scholarly precision what happened because the creation stories were not written with the intent to satisfy the requirements of contemporary historical and scientific scholarship. If biblical scholars cannot agree on an interpretation, it seems best that we be open to all proposals that acknowledge the historical reality of creation, fall and redemption. One can suspend judgment about the details of the interpretation of the creation stories in Genesis because the historical realities of creation, fall and redemption are very firmly grounded elsewhere in the entire Scripture."⁵ But none of us is prepared to compromise the doctrines of the Christian faith to achieve harmony with science. We take those doctrines to be taught in the Three Forms of Unity and we take these forms to be the boundaries within which we try to understand Scripture. Within those boundaries there is room for diversity of exegesis.

Unfortunately, the last of the "Ten Reasons" continues to confuse the philosophy of evolutionism with the theory of biological evolution and then argues that "Evolution falls outside the tent of the Reformed confessions." We disagree if this tenth reason is directed against the theory of biological evolution because it closes the door on even raising the question how a Christian has to deal with the biological facts that this theory is designed to explain. If we take that approach we should not be surprised if no member of the Canadian Reformed church is capable of defending God's word on this issue. But we agree of course if the tenth reason is intended against the philosophy of evolutionism.

Biblical authority

The characterization of a Bible passage as myth received a bad name in the early nineteenth-century due, among others, to the work of the German biblical scholar Rudolph Bultmann (1884-1976). It came to mean that if a passage was said to be mythical, it was not true. While the assumption underwriting Bultmann's notion of myth has long been discredited, 'myth' continues to be used at the popular level to convey that something is not true. One only has to look at the work of the 'Jesus Seminar.' Thus the

⁴ Kamphuis, J. "Schriftuurlijke wetenschapsbeoefening." *De Reformatie* 45 (30): 238-39, 1970; see also: Oosterhoff, F.G., "Klaas Schilder on Creation and Flood (2)," *Clarion* 52 (7): 161-164 (2003); also posted under Collected Papers on *Reformed Academic*.

⁵ van der Meer, J.M. "God, Natural Evil, and Biological Evolution," *Reformed Academic* (6 October 2009); see this paper for references within.

writers of “Ten Reasons” have reasons to raise questions as far as this popular use of myth is concerned. However, they add that by accepting the theory of biological evolution one commits oneself to the view that Genesis 1 and 2 are mythological in the sense of Bultmann. We assume they mean to say that if the biological theory of evolution is true, then Genesis 1 and 2 are false. They then falsely attribute this conclusion to the moderators of *Reformed Academic*. There are several issues here that need to be clarified.

First, none of the moderators of *Reformed Academic* has characterized the text of Genesis 1 and 2 as myth in whatever form. Second, the writers could have known that we do not endorse Bultmann’s notion of ‘myth’ had they read the essay book review “Marcus Borg: the Tragedy of Reaction” in which Dr. Jitse van der Meer rejects Bultmann’s exegetical work (posted on *Reformed Academic*, 8 July 2009). Third, no resort to ‘myth’ is needed because one can hold both that the theory of biological evolution and the text of Genesis 1-2 are true by suspending judgment as to how they fit together. This is the position Dr. Jitse van der Meer takes in “Humankind: The Image of God and Animal Ancestry” (posted at *Reformed Academic*, 19 August 2009). Fourth, even if one limits the range of available interpretations of Genesis 1 and 2 to those offered by orthodox Bible scholars, there are various options other than ‘myth’ that respect the historical realities central to the Christian faith. Orthodox biblical scholars are far from agreed on how to interpret the text. We don’t consider this a problem, because the realities underlying the doctrines of creation, fall, and redemption pervade all of Scripture. Their reality does not depend precariously on agreement on how to interpret the minutiae of the text of Genesis 1 and 2. We think there is more integrity in admitting exegetical impasse than in distorting the text to fit one or the other preferred opinion. Finally, students of religious language and biblical scholars no longer use ‘myth’ in Bultmann’s sense. The Hebrews do not turn myth into history. Rather they turn history into myth. This means that in Scripture myth always refers to a historical reality however dim that reality may be. We leave it to biblical scholars to determine whether this new meaning of myth applies to specific biblical passages.

The historicity of Adam and Eve

It is a misunderstanding to assume that acceptance of the theory of biological evolution forces one to deny the historical reality of Adam and Eve. We accept their historical reality. There is a variety of approaches to the interpretation of the text of Genesis all of which incorporate a high view of Scripture and are compatible with a historical Adam and Eve and a historical fall. It would be very important indeed if an understanding could be developed which combines their historical reality with biological evolution. This would remove what is perceived by many as a major obstacle to the faith. Whether this major undertaking can be done remains to be seen. For two partial and preliminary attempts, see the articles by Jitse van der Meer (*Reformed Academic*, 19 August 2009) and by Tim Keller (*Reformed Academic*, 6 March 2010). If after sustained effort it could not be done one would have to live with the problem. Living with the problem is not an option that has occurred to the writers of “Ten Reasons.” That is too bad because it would have kept them from making a long list of unwarranted assumptions about what we are believing and from sounding an unnecessary alarm.

The problem of evil

The existence of biological death before the fall is often denied by so-called “scientific creationists,” and also in “Ten Reasons”. If biological death is not the result of the fall, so the reasoning goes, then “it’s not just a matter of whether to take the first three chapters of Genesis literally. This actually throws into doubt the truthfulness of the rest of God’s Word, including what He did for us through Christ as our Mediator.” We believe that the historic reality of human death, both biological and spiritual, was a consequence of sin. But it is possible that biological death was part of the created order, and that God protected Adam and Eve from it by allowing them to eat from the Tree of Life in the Garden, and that he exposed them to

biological death by expelling them from the Garden after they had sinned. In that case the order of creation does not have to be overhauled as God's response to the fall of Adam and Eve. Understood this way, death as a biological phenomenon (that is, death for plants and animals) does not have to follow after sin in order for human death to be the consequence of the sin of Adam and Eve. In sum, the notion that biological death is a created feature of the cosmos as it existed before the fall does not deny that the exposure of Adam and Eve to biological death is the consequence of the fall. Moreover, the scenario sketched above incorporates the historical reality of the garden of Eden with the two special trees as well as of the snake, of Adam and Eve, and their fall. We are not pretending that this is the last word on the matter. But we are offering it to show that at least hypothetically the historical reality of Genesis 1 and biological evolution are not mutually exclusive, and that it is, therefore, worthwhile to explore this option.

The ethics of the discussion

As we have indicated, we were taken aback by the treatment we received in "Ten Reasons." The writers attribute various views to the moderators of *Reformed Academic* which we do not actually have. All of this without evidence. This is unfortunate, because it led to the speculation that we take the text of Genesis 1 and 2 as myth and that we have adopted the atheistic worldview of evolutionism. We quote from "Ten Reasons": "Scientists who begin by denying God and his role in the creation and preservation of the universe are, to use the words of Scripture, 'the seed of the serpent.' Claiming to be wise, they are actually fools." Is this the tone one uses in the community of saints? None of the authors has asked us if this is in fact the case. Yet these are the ministers who teach that the very first thing you do when you believe a brother or sister is on the wrong path is to express your concern in person.

The goal of *Reformed Academic*

Decades ago there was a Canadian Reformed Student Fellowship. It waxed and waned and eventually died. We have an interest in discussing questions about the relationship of faith and scholarship broadly conceived because no such forum exists for members of the Canadian Reformed Churches. This discussion should include issues in biology such as evolutionary creation (theistic evolution) or the theory of biological evolution, but is not to be limited to them. While we have no interest in promoting either we insist on room for discussing the implications of both from a Christian perspective within the boundaries of the Three Forms of Unity. The moderators of *Reformed Academic* do not see eye to eye about biological evolution but discuss the implications within those boundaries. Likewise, we welcome discussion of many other issues in that way.

This goal ought to be embraced by anyone who wants to give an account of the things he or she believes. Imagine a catechism student asking how it is possible for Jesus to rise from the dead since this is scientifically impossible. No one in his right mind would respond by saying that if you ask questions about the resurrection then you are not a Christian. Instead you explain about the power of God, the limitations of human knowledge, the reasons why there are those who refuse to believe it, and the reasons why the resurrection was necessary. In conclusion, "Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have" (1 Peter 3:15). That is what we have in mind at *Reformed Academic*.