

Finding Darwin's God

A conversation with biologist Ken Miller.

Interview by Karl W. Giberson

January 1, 2004

Ken Miller is professor of biology at Brown University. In addition to his specialized research, Miller—a practicing Roman Catholic—is the author of Finding Darwin's God: A Scientist's Search for Common Ground Between God and Evolution (HarperCollins, 1999). He is also the coauthor of a series of high school and college texts and has frequently debated opponents of evolution (see www.millerandlevine.com/km/evol/). Karl Giberson spoke with Miller about his faith, his public role as a defender of evolution, and the integrity of science.

Did you ever have any misgivings about the prospects of integrating evolution with your Catholic faith?

It's an interesting question to ask, and the simple answer to it is no. I benefited from the way that Catholics are generally brought up, which is to believe, almost from the get-go, that there is no inherent conflict between faith and reason, between religious doctrine and science. If science seeks truth and religion reveals truth, then how can there be a conflict between these two aspects of the truth?

Even though I saw no particular conflict between science and religion, there were many times when I was disillusioned with religion and frankly left the faith, stopped attending mass, stopped receiving sacraments. And this happened for a couple years at a time, first when I was an undergraduate and second when I was in graduate school. In both cases I had to find my way back to the church after leaving it in the sense of becoming disillusioned with what it had to offer. I simply turned my back on it for a long period of time.

When you came out of that and rejoined the church of your childhood, what was it that brought you back into the sustaining relationship that you have now?

When I was an undergraduate, in addition to being interested in science, I had very serious literary ambitions. I wanted to be a poet, and I wrote quite a lot of poetry. I published a few poems in college literary magazines. Like many people who tried that, the best I can say is that my poetry occasionally rose to the heights of mediocrity!

I'd just as soon forget most of the stuff that I wrote, but in the process of doing this I read a lot of other poets, especially contemporary American and British poets, and one I found particularly attractive was Thomas Merton. I brought several of his poems into a writing workshop, an English course in college, and I showed them to the instructor, who mentioned, almost in an offhand way, "You do know, don't you, that Thomas Merton is a monk, a Catholic priest?"

I was absolutely floored. The poetry was wonderful; it was exciting; it was sensual; it was vibrant and attractive; and I thought I had to learn more about this person. I began by reading a couple books of Merton's poetry. Then I discovered he'd written prose as well, and I picked up a book called [*The Seven Storey Mountain*](#), which described Merton's epiphany as a student at a very secular university—Columbia University—in New York.

Merton's account of how he found his way back to God, and back to the church, struck a very resonant chord within me. In particular—and this sounds strange to say—Merton convinced me that a thoughtful and intelligent person could be a sincere and committed Christian, that becoming a Christian didn't require one to check one's brains at the entrance to the church door, as people occasionally have said. Merton's writings—his poetry, his meditations, and especially [*The Seven Storey Mountain*](#)—were enormously influential in bringing me back to religion.

What is your sense of the place for a Christian in the university today?

The universities that I'm most familiar with—Colorado, Harvard, and Brown, and I've been to lots of other universities as well—are typical of most American universities, I think. They are profoundly secular places in the sense that they are open and committed to the American ideal of free expression, free exercise of religion, and tolerance of religious views.

But tolerance doesn't always mean the kind of acceptance that we would hope for. When I say that universities are profoundly secular, I mean that they are open to religious ideas but not necessarily *respecting* of them. It is difficult to live a life as a committed person of faith in most American universities, not because faith is persecuted or suppressed, but rather because faith is not taken seriously. Students will ask other students when they see them fasting during Lent, or going to church on Sunday morning, or wearing a yarmulke to class, "You don't really believe that stuff, do you?"

I think students who are committed people of faith, whether Christians or adherents of other religions, have a difficult time overcoming that sort of well-meaning disbelief—the incredulity that anyone who is well-educated, "one of us," could take religion seriously.

I'm occasionally visible as a Christian or as a Roman Catholic at my university, and my colleagues are profoundly tolerant. I have many colleagues who are observant Jews, deeply religious Christians in other denominations, and a few who are practicing Muslims. My faculty colleagues respect that, even though many of them respect it in an almost condescending way, as if to say, "Oh, it's fine that you or someone else practices this, but everybody knows that serious scientists are just too smart to give any credence to religion."

If I had to say anything about the general intellectual climate of American universities with respect to faith, addressed to young believers entering such an institution, I would warn them. I would say, "Watch out, because they are going to kill you with kindness." You'll be allowed to practice and express your faith openly, but you will not be taken seriously.

In addition to your career as a teacher and a research scientist, you have become deeply embroiled in America's controversy over origins. What led you to enter into the fray of creation and evolution?

I had just begun to teach general introductory biology during my last two years at Harvard, so that meant I was speaking to a crowd, which I enjoyed. I enjoyed teaching very much, I enjoyed working with students, and I enjoyed teaching what you might call general biology because it forced me to expand the range of what I understood. Rather than just talk about my own specialties, suddenly I had to learn something about muscle contraction, the way the nerve impulse works, the way the digestive system works, and even the way in which organisms are structured in the ecosystem.

When I started teaching at Brown, that was one of the kinds of courses I taught. In my second semester here, a group of students came to me. They said that a fellow named Henry Morris, the founder of the Institute for Creation Research from California, was coming to campus, and he had challenged anyone in the department of biology or geology to debate him on the validity of the theory of evolution. Several of these students who had taken a class from me the previous semester said, "You're a pretty good public speaker. You seem to know something about science. Would you like to debate him?"

Had you heard of Henry Morris before this point?

No, I had not. I hadn't heard of him at all, and I immediately said no to the students. I told them I was a cell biologist and I didn't know anything about evolution. And they came back to me and said, "Well, does that mean he's right?" And I said, "No, of course he's not right."

After thinking about it some more, I said, "I'll tell you what. I'll make you a deal. I don't know who this man is, or where he's coming from, or what he means, but if you will get me an audio tape of one of his speeches or, better still, an audio tape of him at another debate, maybe I'll say yes." So they got the tape of Henry Morris debating the eminent Princeton anthropologist

Ashley Montague sometime in 1978 or 1979. I actually knew Montague very well. I had read several of his books. I had a very high opinion of him. I thought, "Surely Montague will have the answers to these questions."

But to my astonishment, Henry Morris completely outflanked Ashley Montague in debate and clearly carried the day with the weight of argument. I was astonished by a whole series of what I would call "tiny little arguments" that were made by Morris, as if there were no answers for them scientifically. And the lack of answers to these little problems he argued, meant that evolution was somehow flawed, and scientifically incorrect. Well, I knew better than that—even though I didn't at that moment know the answers to the questions Morris raised—simply because I already understood that science is a *competitive* and a *contentious* enterprise, and if there really had been serious flaws in the theory of evolution, those flaws would have been exploited far sooner by people within what is often called the scientific establishment.

When you say competitive, do you mean that people are looking to make a name for themselves at the expense of others in the scientific establishment?

That's exactly right. In science, one of the surest ways to build your career and make a name for yourself is by discrediting a strong and established theory. In a way that's a safety valve on the intellectual honesty of science, because as long as young people can make a career by trashing an existing theory, it means that every existing theory—and evolution is no exception in this regard—has to stand up to a constant barrage of criticism. The fact that evolution has survived suggested to me that it didn't have fundamental flaws as a theory.

So what I did, after accepting the invitation to debate, was to take three or four weeks and listen to all of Morris' arguments, go to the library, visit my colleagues, read as much as I could, and gradually assemble answers to one objection after another. When I finally ended up debating Morris, in April of 1981, it turned out to be, believe it or not, in front of a crowd of almost 3,000 people! I had two carousel trays filled with slides to

amplify my points and to make it really clear what the nature of the scientific evidence was.

As far as I can tell, I carried the day. Henry Morris in his newsletter *Acts and Facts* let on as much, and that led to several invitations to debate other scientific creationists, including Morris again, but also Duane Gish, on several occasions over the next couple of years. That was how I was drawn into the evolution debate, and the further into it I got, the more I realized that I wanted to keep doing it. This concern was close to my heart; fundamentally it's a matter of the integrity of science.

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