

A Somewhat Higher Opinion of God

A conversation with biologist Ken Miller.

February 9, 1998

Interview by Karl W. Giberson

*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. Here we conclude the two-part conversation that began in the previous issue.*

Why do you think that critics of Darwinism were so interested in debating you if you carried the day decisively in your first encounter with Henry Morris, the founder of the Institute for Creation Research?

What Morris wrote in his newsletter, *Acts and Facts*, was that I was the most effective evolutionist debater that he had encountered to date. The praise was from his own lips, and other people who read *Acts and Facts* interpreted that as they wanted to, but clearly they thought I'd given him a hard time! They immediately tried to set up a debate with Duane Gish, whom they regarded at the time—this was more than 20 years ago—as their most effective debater. I was very happy to do that, and I think I did reasonably well against Duane Gish as well.

But I think there is a reason why people from the ICR or from Ken Ham's Answers in Genesis or from another group called the Discovery Institute are eager to engage in debate. They would like very much to promote a sense of equivalence between their arguments and the scientific theory of evolution; they very much like to play to the American ideal of fair play and open-mindedness and hearing both sides of the story. They like to say that on one side we have evolution, on the other side we have Scientific Creationism, or Intelligent Design. "See, members of the general public, what you have here are two equivalent ideas." That's the conclusion that any debate fosters, that the ideas are equivalent.

Were you concerned that by participating in this debate you were, in a sense, playing along with their attempt to set up that

juxtaposition?

Yes, I was concerned about that, but on the other hand, I was concerned about something else as well. I was concerned about an image of the scientific community in which the members of that community hold themselves aloof from criticism and are unresponsive to questions from the general public.

Science is first and foremost an open enterprise, and one of the things that I feel is very important when arguments against evolution are being promulgated, is for people in science to get the message across to the general public that we have the answers to those arguments. We, in fact, consider them ourselves. Part of the mission, I think, of members of the scientific community in a free and open society like ours, is to make sure that the general public understands exactly why and how scientists have accepted or rejected certain theoretical ideas and what the basis is for that acceptance or rejection.

Why do you think so many in the scientific community have no interest in doing what you just described?

One simple and practical reason is that people in the scientific community are very busy. Doing science well is really hard work. I have colleagues who work 60, 70, 80 hours a week, yet are not paid for that many hours. That's simply work they do because they have to and work they do, quite frankly, out of love.

Another reason is that not everybody in the scientific community is gifted in communication. There are many people who do absolutely brilliant scientific work but are not good at explaining that work to the general public. In fact that's almost the caricature of the scientist—that he can't explain himself! So, scientists are not often seen in public in large measure because they're doing the work they love, and they're working hard at it. And some of them are not that good at communication. And others, quite frankly, simply cannot bring themselves to believe that the theory of evolution, which has been accepted as the unifying principle of biology for more than a century, is actually coming under serious attack. Without the realization that it is, they're inclined to just go on, doing their research, teaching their students, and trying to advance the frontiers of science as quickly as they can.

The Intelligent Design people who have moved to the cultural center-stage recently make a lot of hay out of the writings of Richard Dawkins, Peter Atkins, Steven Weinberg, and other scientists who are harshly critical of religion. How justified is that?

It is always the case, in any political debate, that the two extremes tend to justify and validate each other. I think the Intelligent Design movement has

seized upon the most extreme views of the meaning of evolution to argue that this is an inherent aspect of evolutionary theory.

They recognize what is going on when Dawkins and others in that vein make the statements they do about the meaning and the purpose of life and the irrelevance of religion. What they are doing is essentially abandoning science and pushing a philosophical point of view. Now it is a philosophical viewpoint that these people have every right to hold. But what is important is that the philosophical viewpoint should not be confused with the science that is behind it.

What the Intelligent Design movement has done all too often is to conflate the science and philosophy, to argue that within evolutionary biology there is a philosophy of anti-theism and a pro-materialist or an absolute materialist philosophy. That is simply not true. The fact is that the philosophy and the science are separable. Evolutionary biology is very, very good science. The philosophy that one draws from that, however, depends upon one's own philosophical point of view, and not so much on the science itself.

An interesting thing occurs when you say, "ok, let's teach our children about Intelligent Design theory." What happens very quickly as you try to assemble a curriculum is you realize that there is nothing to teach. Intelligent Design theory is empty. Intelligent Design theory is really nothing more than a set of half-baked arguments against evolutionary biology. It has no coherent, theoretical or factual or scientific basis of its own, and once that is realized the air comes out of the blimp.

I'm sure that the unsettling conversations and disputes about evolution will go on, but I am equally sure that Intelligent Design theory, as it is critically examined by more and more people, is going to lose steam in a very big way.

When ordinary people who might be inclined to accept evolution think about it, they have to think about it as the way that God created us. But it doesn't look that way to them. How can we think about the role of God in evolution and still validate this concept that he is the creator?

I would ask people who are concerned about the issue of how God could have created us if our species arose by evolution to have a somewhat higher opinion of God. What I mean by that is that the God that we know through Christianity is not someone who acts like an ordinary human being, who simply happens to be endowed with supernatural powers. We are talking about a being whose intelligence is transcendent; we're talking about a being who brought the universe into existence, who set up the rules of existence, and uses those rules and that universe and the natural world in which we live to bring about his will.

The overwhelming scientific evidence shows very clearly that all species did not appear simultaneously. They appeared gradually over time and often appeared to take the places of other species that had been lost to the earth by extinction. We human beings—created from the dust of the earth, the Bible says—arose in exactly the same pattern. We are part of the natural world, and I think one aspect of God's message to us is that we have to look to the natural world to understand our relationship with God.

If someone says, "So, how did God create me?" I would ask them to raise their view and look instead at a Creator who brought an incredible evolutionary process into being—that he created not just me and not just you as individuals but he created us as part of the fabric of life that completely covers this planet. I think that's a bold and expansive vision and the one that I hold to.

What about those aspects of evolution that don't seem to be reflective of a God of power and majesty: the enormous suffering, the waste, and the bizarre cruelties that emerge?

There are all sorts of things in nature that at first glance seem to be hard to attribute to a powerful and majestic Creator. I live on a farm out in the country, and we have cats in our barn, and I can assure you those cats commit the most unspeakable cruelties to the vermin that you find in our hay loft and in our grain bin. But those cruelties and the things in nature of which you speak, those are observable facts. None of them were invented by Charles Darwin.

It is a fact that life is rough and that some organisms die so that other organisms may live. The meals that you and I and our readers ate this morning were composed almost exclusively of living organisms, sometimes animals, sometimes plants, but those living organisms gave up their lives for us, or to us, in one sense or another. So, the acts of cruelty of which you speak are not part of Darwinian theory. They are not part of evolutionary biology. Those are aspects of life itself.

Any religious person who is astounded by the cruelty that we see in the world has to find some way to account for the presence of a knowing and loving God alongside that cruelty. I actually think that evolutionary biology helps a Christian to account for that in a remarkable way. Evolutionary biology shows that all life is interrelated and that life, unfortunately, only comes at the expense of death. Therefore the cruelty and some of the death that we see in the world is inexplicably bound to our own emergence as living beings. I'm not convinced that the competing theories, such as Creation Science or Intelligent Design, do nearly as good a job as evolution does at explaining that.

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Science and Spirit. With Donald Yerxa, he is the author of Species of Origins: America's Search for a Creation Story (Rowman & Littlefield). This interview first appeared, in a slightly different form, in Science & Theology News. Used with permission.

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