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# IS ADVENTIST THEOLOGY COMPATIBLE WITH EVOLUTIONARY THEORY?

## Can Adventism harmonize biblical creation to deep-time evolution without changing its essence?

Some assume that Adventist theology is compatible with deep-time evolutionary theory. For them, all it takes to harmonize evolution with Adventist theology is to interpret Genesis 1 theologically—that is, not literally. If we were to make such a small concession, they assert, Adventist theology and doctrines would not only remain unchanged but would also become relevant to those persuaded of the truthfulness of deep-time and evolutionary ideas. Adventism’s intellectual credibility would increase and broaden.

This view assumes that the deep-time theory of origins would not disturb the theological truths of

Scripture or the Adventist theological system and fundamental beliefs. When it comes to the theological understanding of Creation, time would not be of the essence.

Yet, if scientific and methodological convictions caused Adventists to accept deep-time and evolutionary ideas as true, they would have to harmonize not only Genesis 1 but also the entire system of Adventist doctrines. Nothing would remain unchanged.

Those who assume that biblical

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creation and deep-time evolutionary theory are compatible forget that in biblical thinking, time *is* of the essence. God acts historically in human time and space. Biblical theology cannot fit the evolutionary version of historical development without losing its essence and truth. God’s works in history cannot follow evolutionary theory.

Any attempt to accommodate Adventist theology to deep time/macro evolutionary views must ensure that it upholds four principles: (1) It does not change the order of theological causes assumed in Scripture; (2) it does not change the biblical history of God’s acts; (3) it supports the pillars of the Adventist faith; and (4) it strengthens the historical understanding of redemption embedded in the sanctuary doctrine and the Great Controversy metanarrative.

### Rewriting Biblical History

Those who invite us to read Genesis 1 theologically must recognize that theological interpretations spring from our conception of God’s nature and His actions in created time. Usually, theological readings assume that “ultimate” reality is timeless, that God does not act within a historical sequence. Thus, historical events do not belong to what is properly theological. This is why for most Christian theologians the evolutionary rewriting of history does not affect theolog-

ical (religious) contents, allowing them to separate the theological (religious) content of Genesis 1 (its truth) from its historical wrapping (the story). The six-day, 24-hour period and the historical process described in the text are dismissed as non-theological: God’s creative action is displaced from the historical to the spiritual realm.

Yet Adventists read Scripture from the *biblical* understanding of God’s being and actions. When they read the text theologically, they see God creating our planet in a historical sequence of six consecutive 24-hour days. This sequence forms part of the history of God, and, therefore, of the interpretation of Creation that the text conveys. It also forms part of the history of our planet. God is performing a divine act in a historical sequence *within* the flow of created time.

Harmonization of theology with evolution begins by accepting the evolutionary rewriting of the history of humankind. Paleontologists, geologists, and biologists claim to be describing the accurate story of historical realities. Because the Genesis story does not fit the facts as understood by evolutionists, some theologians seriously consider letting biblical history go. Because they accept that God’s act of creation does not take place in history, they classify the biblical history of Creation as myth or literary framework. Yet the inner

logic of theological thinking articulated by God's acts suggests that letting go of the biblical history of Creation entails letting go of the biblical history of redemption and end times.

For instance, theologians working from the historical-critical method of biblical interpretation apply the same evolutionary pattern to the entire sweep of biblical history. They are willing to let go not only of the history of Creation but also of the entirety of biblical history, particularly when it presents God acting historically within the process of human history. Therefore, we should not be surprised that this theological approach posits the new earth not to be historical but spiritual.

### Spiritualizing Biblical Theology

Both theology and evolution revolve around reality and its causes. Genesis 1 explains the origin of the physical world as a historical sequence of divine creative acts in space and time. Evolution explains the origin of the same physical world by constructing a different history with different length, events, and causes. Clearly, the two historical scenarios cannot both be true. Thus, harmonization of biblical creation to evolution requires not only the acceptance of a different account of history but also a different understanding of God's causal role in history. The centrality of this issue for

theology cannot be overemphasized.

Theological consistency requires that once we adjust our view of how God relates to evolutionary theory, we will apply the same view throughout the entire range of human history. This brings us to a central issue in any theological harmonization of Genesis 1 to evolution, namely, divine causality in evolutionary theory. Theistic evolution and progressive creationism are the leading intermediate models to harmonize creation and evolution theologically. Both understand divine causality in evolutionary theory spiritually rather than historically.

*Theistic Evolution.* Teilhard de Chardin, a French Roman Catholic priest, imagines a system of theistic evolution in which God works from the inside of nature and history, not from the outside. God works as spiritual energy, which to animate evolution in its lower stages "could of course only act in an impersonal form and under the veil of biology."<sup>1</sup> Thus, divine causality does not operate within history but as hidden energy from the realm of the spirit.

*Progressive Creationism.* Bernard Ramm, an American evangelical theologian, rejects theistic evolution because it springs from a pantheistic view of God. Instead, he suggests progressive creationism as the theory that is the "best accounting for all the facts—biological, geological, and Biblical."<sup>2</sup> He asserts that God

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created by a combination of instantaneous miraculous fiat creation and of a process of creation *outside* history. He suggests that several acts of fiat creation have occurred through deep evolutionary time, which helps to clarify the gaps in evolutionary theory that science cannot explain. Then, Ramm says, God "turns the task of creation over to the Holy Spirit who is *inside* Nature."<sup>3</sup> The Holy Spirit is seen as the energy that brings about the evolutionary side of God's plan of creation.

According to these theories, God works out the events of natural and human history as reconstructed by the biological mechanism and laws of evolution. According to Scripture, however, God created our world by acting not from inside or outside history but from within its historical flow.

The difference between theistic evolution and progressive creationism consists in the way their proponents see God's involvement in the process of evolution. Both, however,

share the conviction that evolutionary science tells the true story of what actually took place in historical reality. Moreover, both views assume that God does not work historically within the sequence of historical events. Divine causality does not operate historically (sequentially) but spiritually (instantaneously).

The way in which theistic evolution and progressive creationism deal with creation demonstrates that harmonizing biblical creation with deep-time evolutionary theory requires more than a theological interpretation of Genesis 1. God's providential activities must also harmonize with evolutionary causal order so that it may fit the actual outcome of the biological mechanism of evolution.

### A Conflict of Metanarratives

All systems of theological interpretation revolve on an inner logic that centers on the way theologians understand the being and actions of God. In theological method this

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conception behaves as an interpretative “template” shaping all theological ideas and doctrines of Scripture. Changes in the template of any theological system unleash changes in the understanding of its theological ideas, doctrines, and interpretations of Scripture. The template, then, ultimately controls whether we can integrate a new idea like evolution into the inner logic of the system of biblical theology.

Roman Catholicism and Protestantism share the same template from which they ground and develop their theologies. For them, the template is metaphysics, in which the notions of a timeless God, sovereign providence, and the immortal soul play a dominant role. Bernard Ramm recognized the defining role that this template plays in the task in his progressive creation model of accommodating evangelical theology to evolutionary theory. “If it can be demonstrated to the satisfaction of all that evolution is contrary to Christian metaphysics then we must

brand theistic evolution [and progressive creationism] as an impossible position. We shall be either Christians or evolutionists.”<sup>4</sup> Obviously, theistic evolutionists and progressive creationists believe that evolutionary theory is *not* contrary to Christian metaphysics. Historical contradictions are not important; metaphysical contradictions are.

Adventist theology also has a theological template. It implicitly rejects the metaphysical template on which Christian theology stands and replaces it with the Great Controversy metanarrative found in Scripture itself. Ellen White testified to the existence of an Adventist template when she explained that “the subject of the sanctuary . . . opened to view a complete system of truth, connected and harmonious, showing that God’s hand had directed the great advent movement, and revealing present duty as it brought to light the position and work of His people.”<sup>5</sup>

There is one main difference between the classical metaphysical

template and the biblical metanarrative template: the former places God and His acts in a spiritual and timeless non-historical reality; the latter places God and His acts in the historical continuum of created reality. This helps us to understand why Roman Catholic and Protestant theologians argue that since evolution fits the template of classical metaphysics, they can harmonize it to Christianity without changing its theological structure and inner logic.

Evolution does not fit the biblical template embodied in the Great Controversy metanarrative. Evolution is a metanarrative about the origins of human history that fits well in the timeless non-historical template into which Roman Catholic and Protestant theologies fit. By the same token, the evolutionary metanarrative collides with the Great Controversy metanarrative because both attempt to explain the same historical reality using different views of the causes involved in the process. Evolution and creationism are incompatible metanarratives.

### **The Role of Cosmology in Theological Interpretation**

To understand the way in which deep-time evolutionary theory would affect Adventist theology and doctrines, we need to realize the over-arching role that cosmology—

the study of the physical universe in time and space—plays in Christian theology. In theological thinking, cosmology is not a side issue but an issue that informs the understanding of all biblical teachings. Changes in these far-reaching ideas necessarily unleash changes in the entire theological system. To accommodate Genesis 1 to deep-time evolutionary theory, theologians implicitly modify the way they assume God acts in history. And this elicits massive reinterpretations of the entire system of biblical theology that articulates the history of God’s actions.

### **The Real Issue**

From the theological perspective, the issue is not to decide between a literal versus a theological interpretation of Genesis 1 but between two different theological interpretations: a spiritual (philosophical), and a historical (biblical) understanding of divine activity in human history. Deep-time evolutionary theory and Genesis 1 are essential components of two incompatible metanarratives that attempt to explain the history of reality. Adventism cannot harmonize biblical creation with deep-time evolutionary theory without changing its essence and theological system. Harmonization with deep-time evolutionary theory affects the entire sweep of theological and scientific understandings.

Adventists who insist that our

theology should reject Genesis 1 as theological history and accept deep-time evolutionary theory should explain to the rest of the worldwide body of believers the systematic consequences of such a paradigmatic change *in theological detail*. Such study would reveal the incompatibility of evolutionary theory and Adventist theology.

If Adventism were to adopt the deep-time evolutionary theological paradigm, the Great Controversy metanarrative on which the Adventist system of theology stands would be replaced. The pillars of the Adventist Church would be changed. The *sola-tota-prima Scriptura* principle would be replaced with the authority of science. In time, a reinterpretation would be required of the entire content of Adventist theology and fundamental beliefs. For instance, God's act of redemption may become a continuation of His act of creation. In this context, Adventist doctrines such as the Sabbath, the law, the nature of sin, the sanctuary, redemption, and end times would no longer be speaking of historical realities but would become metaphors pointing to spir-

itual realities. Evil would be a part of God's design and method of creation. The cross would no longer be the historical cause of eternal salvation but only a part in the process of historical evolution through which God is achieving the plan of creation. There would be no real historical heaven but a spiritual timeless contemplation of God.

Adventists need to reaffirm the fact that a theological understanding of Genesis 1 as describing the literal, historical, six-consecutive-24-hour-day period, through which God created our planet is essential to the theological thinking of Scripture, and therefore, to the harmonious system of truth that gave rise to Adventism and its mission. □

#### REFERENCES

<sup>1</sup> Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The Phenomenon of Man*, Bernard Wall, trans. (New York: Harper & Row, 1959), pp. 291, 292

<sup>2</sup> Bernard Ramm, *The Christian View of Science and Scripture* (London: Paternoster, 1967), p. 293.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 116 (emphasis in the original).

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 292.

<sup>5</sup> Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy*, p. 424.

