

Can Adventists believe in theistic evolution and yet proclaim the message of Revelation 14:6-12?

“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” (Genesis 1:1)*

The doctrine of Creation occupies an important place in Seventh-day Adventist message and mission. The reason for this is twofold: First, Adventists believe in a fiat Creation; and second, they are committed to the proclamation of the three angels’ message of Revelation 14.

The Adventist philosophy of origins affirms that God in seven days created the world. Adventists have no room for evolution, naturalistic or theistic, in their belief system. They not only accept that God is the Creator, but also believe that He took human flesh to become our Redeemer, as pointed out in John: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made.... The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us” (John 1:1-3, 14).

Thus in their proclamation of the gospel, Adventists emphasize both Creation and redemption. This emphasis is predominant in their allegiance to the everlasting gospel of Revelation 14. There we have the description: “Then I saw another angel flying in midair, and he had the eternal gospel to proclaim to those who live on the earth.... He said in a loud voice.... *Worship him who made the heavens, the earth, the sea and the springs of water*” (Revelation 14:6, 7, italics supplied).

In this message for the last days, the everlasting gospel calls for the worship of the Creator. Given that context, it is understandable why Adventists cannot subscribe to any kind of evolutionary explanation for origins.

How evolution views origins

Evolution accounts for the beginning of life in one way; Genesis in another way. Evolution teaches that life originated and developed by itself over extremely long periods of time. Genesis teaches a six-day creation.¹ Either random life origin or random life development, or both, or anything in between is in opposition to the three angels’ message.

Consider how the three branches of evolution explain life origin.

First, naturalistic (or atheistic) evolution needs only a combination of atoms, motion, time, and chance in order to bring reality into existence, from the most simple to the most complex forms of life, from the most elemental living particle to human life.

The Adventist message and the challenge of evolution

Second, deistic evolution perceives God as getting the process started by producing the first living matter. He programmed the evolutionary process by fecundating matter with the laws that its subsequent development has followed. Then, God withdrew from active involvement, becoming, so to speak, “Creator emeritus.”²

Third, theistic evolution goes beyond the deistic version by allowing for God’s continual intervention. This and its claim to harmonize the biblical account of Creation with scientific claims have made theistic evolution the reigning paradigm among contemporary evangelical scholarship. Therefore, it deserves a longer consideration.

Theistic evolution

Theistic evolution presupposes that “all material processes are divinely governed and directed; [and] evolutionary processes are no exception.”³ Thus, evolution is not an end in itself; it is just the means through which God brings everything in the universe into existence. It is God’s “modus operandi.”⁴ It is the “ongoing expression of God’s strategy,” for the development of His creation.⁵ It is God’s method of acting in the world⁶ through a *continual* creation.

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In an effort to harmonize biblical and evolutionary positions on origins, particularly with the long periods of time that all branches of evolution require, several Creation theories have been proposed. These include, the Reconstitution or Gap theory,⁷ the Day-Age or Geological Ages theory,⁸ the Artistic or Literary theory,⁹ and the Abridged Genealogies theory.¹⁰

Evolution, in any of these forms, runs counter to the heart of the three angels' message: the good news of the gospel. The news is good only because those to whom it is sent are in a desperate situation. To sinners it offers forgiveness; to those in condemnation because of humanity's fall into sin, it provides salvation. But in the evolutionary process there is no Fall; there is no sin; only continuous progress. Any animal traits present in human beings can be overcome through education and culturization. Hence, there is no need for a Savior.

Even the uniqueness of Jesus can be explained away in an evolutionary perspective. Notre Dame University professor Ernan McMullin writes: "When Christ took on human form, the DNA that made him son of Mary may have linked him to a more ancient heritage stretching far beyond Adam to the shallows of unimaginably ancient seas."¹¹ If this is the accounting for Jesus' first coming, the Second Coming can no longer be a realistic hope.

Yet the Second Coming with its judgment is the focus of Revelation 14, which adds a new dimension to the Old Testament exaltation of God as Creator. Thus Creation and judgment constitute the eschatological motif of the three angels' message. If the world does not glorify God because of the first, it must fear Him for the second. This pattern can be perceived through the three proclamations. The first angel exalts the Creator; the second calls attention to a false system that denies God; the third speaks of the judgment to come. The redeemed adore God for His love in creating. The reprobate tremble before Him because of His righteous judgments.

Creation and judgment

Judgment is not taught just in Revelation, but it, along with the Creation concept, permeates the Bible. The defilement of original creation brought about God's first universal judgment, the Flood. In the last days, God's eschatological judgments are sent "for destroying those who destroy the earth" (Revelation 11:18), with the ultimate purpose of reversing what happened after the Fall and creating a new heaven and a new earth.

Peter speaks of this Creation-judgment motif in strong words. Those who scoff about God's activity in human history "deliberately forget that long ago by God's word the heavens existed and the earth was formed out of water and with water. By water also the world of that time was deluged and destroyed. By the same word the present heavens and earth are reserved for fire, being kept for the day of judgment and destruction of ungodly men" (2 Peter 3:5-7).

Peter's point is simple. History has always had its skeptics. In the early days, there were those who "deliberately" forgot that God created the world and that He executed His judgment on wickedness through a universal flood. Similarly, toward the close of history, skepticism regarding God as Creator and judge will be prevalent.

One major source of such skepticism in today's world is the theory of evolution. Indeed it is part of the "maddening wine" (Revelation 14:8) of Babylon with which the world is drunk.

Creation and evolution: current debate

Currently, the Creation-evolution debate is carried on as part of the renewed interest in the relationship of science and Christian faith. This is evident in the creation of new organizations, such as the John Templeton Foundation, with its Humility Theology Information Center (Ipswich, Massachusetts), launched in 1993. This center, whose charter membership includes the world's top authorities in science and religion, holds that theology is incapable of reaching a clear understanding of the mysteries of the universe (hence the label "humility theology"). Therefore the need to turn to science as the source for answers.

Another much older organization is the Chicago Center for Religion and Science, where scientists and theologians alike are committed to evolution without renouncing their faith in God. Based at the Lutheran School of Theology, the center publishes *Zygon*, a leading journal on theistic evolution.

Another periodical devoted almost exclusively to promoting theistic evolution is the *Journal of the American Scientific Affiliation*. The Affiliation, based in Ipswich, Massachusetts, counts over 1,000 holders of doctoral degrees among its members. Originally organized to promote creationism, the affiliation has experienced an "evolution" of its own to become an advocate for theistic evolution.

At an individual level, we can detect a significant shift in the evolution-Creation debate: from a complete denial to a public admission of respect for special creation as a viable alternative to explaining the origin of the universe. This is not to say that the discussion is closed; certainly it is not. Those dominating the debate include Howard Van Till (Calvin College), Ernan MacMullin and Alvin Plantinga (both of Notre Dame University), Philip Johnson (University of California), and William Hasker (Huntington College). Van Till, MacMullin, and Hasker are on one corner of the ring, while Plantinga and Johnson stand on the other.

The first group argues for macro-evolution; the second for the inefficiency of natural selection and the viability of special divine intervention for explaining the complexities of life on the planet. The second group is not advocating an *ex-nihilo* creation with a short chronology. This option has, long ago, been rejected, and those who defend it labeled as fundamentalists and extremists. Plantinga and Johnson argue that God should be seen as interacting with the world.

Thus the trend is twofold: first, to favor progressive creation where divine intervention is required, not only to account for the original life forms, but also to introduce the first individuals of the major life groups in a constantly developing creation; second, to move toward a form of deistic evolution, preserving what Van Till calls "the integrity of nature." This means that God created a universe in which His ends for all creatures, except humans, would be

achieved, exclusively, in a natural way.¹²

The seriousness of the contest between the two groups is seen in the work of MacMullin and Plantinga, who both teach at the same university. They are on the opposite sides of the debate, writing and responding to each other. While Plantinga argues for special creation,¹³ McMullin is convinced that all probabilities point away from this possibility.

The most outspoken voices for a recent, *ex-nihilo* creation are the publications and media productions of the Institute for Creation Research (ICR), based in San Diego, California. Their position, called "scientific creationism," is under constant attack by their opponents.

The Seventh-day Adventist Geoscience Research Institute (GRI) has a similar commitment to Creation, although it differs in some of their positions from ICR. The GRI publishes its research and findings in its respected journal, *Origins*.¹⁴

But these organizations, for the most part, are isolated voices crying in the desert, to which the leading brains and the scholarly community, which favors evolution, are not paying much attention.

Recent publications from Europe indicate that the Roman Catholic Church, which officially endorses theistic evolution, is playing an important role in the current worldwide debate. The church seems to recognize in natural and biological sciences new manifestations of nature's unity, and is urging its members, as well as calling other churches, to correspond with these tendencies. It is on the basis of these new trends, rather than theology, that Pope John Paul II has made the appeal: "As never before in her history, the Church has entered into the movement for the union of all Christians, fostering common study, prayer, and discussions that 'all may be one' [John 17:20 is quoted]."¹⁵ Even evangelical scholars have supported the papal pronouncements.

Important implications

What are the implications of this trend toward a theistic evolution for Seventh-day Adventists? First, by denying a six-day Creation, evolution removes the basis for Sabbath worship, thus preparing the stage for the world

recognition of Sunday sacredness—part of Adventist teaching of last-day events.

Second, if the Bible's authority on origins can be set aside so easily, why not the authority of its moral law and its demands on human life and lifestyle? In a future void of biblical authority, notions of human will, good, and purpose, supported by science and humanism, are likely to dominate much of life, including worship. As Langdon Gilkey has observed: "The most important change in the understanding of religious truth in the last centuries—a change that still dominates our thought today—has been caused more by the work of science than by any other factor, religious or cultural."¹⁶

Third, in view of the subtle onslaught by evolution on the central thrust of the everlasting gospel, the challenge for Adventists is obvious: a renewed, power-filled commitment to worship and proclamation of "him who made the heavens, the earth, the sea and the springs of water" (Revelation 14:7).

Fourth, theology can no longer flourish in isolation. Theology's interaction with the sciences cannot be avoided. In the context of the church's global mission, we need to look at fresh approaches to people conditioned by scientific method and evolutionary dogma. The Adventist community, including academics, professionals, and administrators, cannot afford to ignore the problems related to theology and science. They need to foster greater openness toward inter-disciplinary interchanges, courses, and research projects in this area.

Finally, the challenge from evolution—natural, theistic, or deistic—is really a challenge to one's faith. Creation is not optional for Adventists; it is a test of faith. Yes, we cannot fully understand all that is involved in Creation, just as we cannot understand everything about redemption. Understanding of both is possible only through faith. Faith in God. Faith in what God has said in the Bible. As Ellen White wrote long ago: "I have been shown that without Bible history, geology can prove nothing. Relics found in the earth give evidence of a state of things differing in many respects from the present. But the time of their existence, and how long a period these things

have been in the earth, are only to be understood by Bible history. It may be innocent to conjecture beyond Bible history, if our suppositions do not contradict the facts found in the sacred Scriptures. But when men leave the word of God in regard to the history of creation, and seek to account for God's creative works upon natural principles, they are upon a boundless ocean of uncertainty. Just how God accomplished the works of creation in six literal days he has never revealed to mortals. His creative works are just as incomprehensible as his existence."¹⁷

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*All Scripture passages in this essay are from the New International Version.

Notes and references

1. For an earlier discussion of the topic in this journal, see Clyde L. Webster, Jr., "Genesis and Time: What Radiometric Dating Tells Us" (*Dialogue* 5:1 [1993], pp. 5-8) and Richard M. Davidson, "In the Beginning: How to Interpret Genesis 1" (*Dialogue* 6:3 [1994], pp. 9-12).
2. See Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1985), pp. 480, 481.
3. Howard J. Van Till, *The Fourth Day: What the Bible and the Heavens Are Telling Us About the Creation* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1986), p. 247.
4. In theistic evolution, sometimes called "biblical evolutionism," the evolutionary process is perceived as the manifestation of the work of God in nature. In this context, God's creative work is considered to have two aspects: (1) The "foundational aspect," in which the finite existence of the natural world is dependent in a moment-by-moment basis on God's activity; and (2) the "progressive aspect," in which new creatures and new characteristics emerge creatively in the process of evolution. See Richard Bube, "Biblical Evolutionism," *Journal of the American Scientific Affiliation* 23:4 (December 1971), p. 141.

5. Van Till, p. 265; see also pp. 249-275 for Van Till's fuller exposition of what he calls the "Creationomic Perspective." Van Till prefers this designation to the term "theistic evolution."
6. See Brent Phillip Waters, "Christianity and Evolution," in David B. Wilson and Warren D. Dolphin, eds., *Did the Devil Make Darwin Do It? Modern Perspectives on the Creation-Evolution Controversy* (Ames, Iowa: The Iowa University Press, 1983), p. 155.
7. The Gap Theory suggests that millions of years elapsed between Genesis 1:1 and 1:2, and that Creation occurred in three stages: a pre-adamic period when the earth was beautiful; an intermediate period in which it became empty and formless; and the "reconstitution" period described in Genesis 1:3 ff.
8. Geological Ages Theory postulates that the Creation days were not literal days but very long periods of time.
9. The Artistic Theory views the Genesis record as a literary and artistic account intended to convey religious truth but not scientific reality.
10. The Abridged Genealogies Theory claims that if genealogies omit generations—as some certainly do—such omissions could account for all the time necessary for evolution to occur.
11. Ernan McMullin, "Evolution and Special Creation," *Zygon* 28 (September 1993), p. 328.
12. See McMullin, p. 325. See also McMullin's article, "Plantinga's Defense of Special Creation," *Christian Scholar's Review* 21 (Special 1991 issue), pp. 55-79.
13. Alvin Plantinga, "When Faith and Reason Clash: Evolution and the Bible," *Christian Scholar's Review* 21:1 (September 1991), pp. 8-33.
14. Readers interested in obtaining a sample copy and subscription information may write to Editor, *Origins*; Geoscience Research Institute; Loma Linda University; Loma Linda, CA 92350; U. S. A.
15. See Robert John Russell *et al.*, eds., *John Paul II on Science and Religion: Reflections on the New View from Rome* (Rome: Vatican Observatory Publications, 1990), p. M3.
16. Langdon Gilkey, *Religion and the Scientific Future* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), p. 4.
17. Ellen G. White, *Spiritual Gifts* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1945), vol. 3, p. 93.