

A formless void: Genesis and antitheism

A conversation between Rev. Lyall Perris and Darryl Ward

Have you heard about the new planet that has just been found? Astronomers have discovered an Earth-sized planet orbiting red dwarf star Gliese 581, and they think it might be habitable.

Yes, I did read about that. I gather they don't know whether it has an atmosphere, but it is absolutely fascinating that here's another possible place for intelligent life!

But your Bible does not say anything about extraterrestrial life. If He existed, your God could have created such life had He desired, but it would seem that He did not. Am I expected to believe your God has created the human race, and that's all as far as intelligent life goes? What about the rest of the universe?

There are different views. Remember that the Bible is primarily about God's dealings with humans. Maybe there are other Bibles for other planets? In any case, it has even been suggested by some that the Bible does indeed refer to extraterrestrial life.

Really?

Yes. Some have suggested the Nephilim (and / or the "sons of God"), who are described in Genesis chapter six, verses two and four, (and again in the book of Numbers), were in fact aliens.

That sounds far fetched. Do you believe that?

No, and I cannot say for certain who they were, or if they even existed. There have also been other suggestions. Some have suggested the Nephilim were the descendants of Seth. Others have said they were angels. Then there is the tradition they were giants.

Aliens aside, that book of fairy tales you call the Bible says the earth and all life were created about 6,000 years ago, and if you can get your head around that, there are two separate creation stories in Genesis! So I suppose all fossils are fake?

Let's leave the age of the earth to one side for a moment. But it is true there are two creation stories in Genesis. The familiar 'In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth' story that starts at Genesis chapter one, verse one, is followed by another creation story that starts halfway through

Genesis chapter two, verse four. This second creation story, describes the creation of life after the earth and heavens had been made. This story is believed by many scholars to be the older of the two.

I can't really take seriously either story, for either way, if you work back through the so-called history in your Bible, you can work out that the Earth is around 6,000 years old, but we both know it is much older than that - billions of years old.

Some parts of Bible, including Genesis, are more metaphorical than literal. We need to sift through all the material to find the message.

Surely you are not being serious! Am I hearing you right? Are you saying you believe the Bible is not necessarily literal?

Yes. That is what I am saying. Most Christians would probably agree too.

That is just too convenient. You Christians believed the Bible was completely true for nearly 2,000 years, and then when it becomes obvious that some of it is just fantasy, rather than admit it is all a fairy tale, you suddenly decide that parts that don't stand up are 'metaphorical'.

Jesus taught with parables, so I don't see what is wrong with other parts of the Bible having metaphors as well, especially Genesis; and it's wrong to say that all Christians have always taken all of the Bible literally. Several of the very early theologians made it very clear that parts of the Bible should not be taken literally, but were allegories, pointing towards other truths.

Do you believe in the 'Big Bang' and evolution then?

They are theories, but they seem the most likely ones to be correct on the basis of our current knowledge. However I do believe that the universe is probably around 13.75 billion years, not around six thousand years old. I also believe God created the heavens and the earth, and I think He probably used the 'Big Bang' and evolution to do it.

So let me get this straight. You are saying that I don't have to choose which of the creation stories to believe. Both of them could be metaphors for the creation of the universe.

Maybe not even metaphors, but stories and traditions that helped the ancient Israelites give meaning to something they couldn't understand.

Well, what about Noah's Ark then. It is such a fantastic story that....

(Interrupting). Stories.

What?

Stories.

What do you mean stories? Are there two Noah's ark stories as well, just like there are two creation stories?

Perhaps that might be going a bit far. There are not two separate stories, but there are certainly two separate traditions woven together, possibly even more. In Genesis chapter six, verses 19 to 22, Noah is told to take one pair of every kind of living creature into the ark. In the first three verses of chapter seven, Noah is told to take seven pairs each of clean animals; one pair each of unclean animal; and seven pairs each of birds. Then, we revert back to one pair of everything.

I had never noticed that. The seven pairs would really upset the calculations and models made by some creationists to show how all animals could be fitted on board.

Scholars do not entirely agree how the strands fit together, but there are definitely separate traditions; and as for modelling how even a pair of all living creatures, including fish, might be fitted inside a ship, I don't blame you for being sceptical.

I have to give it to you Christians; you are pretty good at finding excuses for contradictions in the Bible. So I take it from what you've just said that you don't believe in Noah's ark either.

Let's put it this way, I cannot believe there was a flood that covered the whole earth during the time of homo sapiens and I cannot believe in an ark that carried pairs of all living creatures. But I do believe there was a great flood though, somewhere in or near the Middle East.

I didn't think I would hear myself saying this, but I actually agree with you. There are a number of ancient traditions that refer to a great flood, and I think they may well have referred to an actual event; not a flood of global proportions, but something more localised. The drowning of the basin now occupied by the Black Sea is one possibility. I once saw a documentary that showed evidence of a former civilisation on the sea floor. It would seem the Black Sea was once dry land below sea level, much like the

land surrounding Jericho and the Dead Sea, and then the waters of the Mediterranean Sea broke through what are now the Dardanelles and the Bosphorus.

A flood in the Euphrates Valley is another possibility.

So why is the character of Noah in the Bible?

Again, stories and traditions can help give meaning to things people don't understand. We can't be certain, but while the flood would not have happened in the living memory of any of the historical figures in the Bible, there would have been a strong oral tradition of a historic flood, and as you have said, it is present in the literature of other cultures.

Many Christians firmly believe in Noah's Ark.

Many do – and I personally think they are mistaken, but believing or not believing the stories of Noah's ark - or for that matter the stories of the Garden of Eden - does not a Christian make. I like to think the story of Noah tells us of our responsibility to care for God's world.

Well this brings up a more fundamental issue: God. Richard Dawkins has done well to show how you invented God.

I might have expected you would draw Dawkins into this conversation at some stage. He is a fundamentalist, you know.

'Fundamentalist'? (Spoken with rising volume). Are you calling Dawkins a fundamentalist?

'Fundamentalist' is what I said and it is what I meant. There are Christian fundamentalists; there are Muslim fundamentalists; and there are many other kinds of fundamentalists. Dawkins is an antitheist fundamentalist.

What the...

(Interrupting). Now just let me finish please.

In the words of Ian S. Markham, fundamentalists have "... an unambiguous worldview in which the authors are entirely confident that they are right". Markham also says that Dawkins is "An Oxford Don who doesn't feel the need to represent the positions of others fairly before taking issue with them... [and that he is] committing an act of betrayal to the very traditions of academic enquiry at Oxford".

I still object to you labelling Richard Dawkins as a fundamentalist. Now I will accept he takes no prisoners, but he has still come up with some pretty impressive arguments. Believing in God is like believing in Father Christmas or the Tooth Fairy. They are childish beliefs that people give up when they are capable of adult reasoning; and the same logic can be applied to the concept of God.

Many of Dawkins' arguments are as childish as that example. Molecular biologist and theologian Alister McGrath has shown this argument is flawed. He points out that many people come to believe in God when they are adults, himself included; but you never hear of anyone starting to believe in Father Christmas or the Tooth Fairy when they are grown up.

The existence of God is just so improbable though.

Indeed. But as McGrath has also said, we ourselves may be highly improbable, but we are here. The issue is not really whether God is probable. It is whether God is real.

Just to backtrack a little, you said just before you don't have a problem with evolution. Well Dawkins has suggested that what he calls a 'selfish gene', intent on its own preservation, is the real driving force behind evolution.

That does not surprise me. He has long been a proponent of the gene-centric view of evolution. His argument that randomness coupled with cumulative selection is quite different to pure randomness, as proposed in his book 'The Blind Watchmaker', does make sense, but it does not disprove the existence of God. Now do you realise that the 'selfish gene' idea is anthropocentric – suggesting that the genetic material has purpose and intent? Where did that come from?

I don't agree with you, of course. Now another prominent atheist, Christopher Hitchens, would argue that suggesting God is behind evolution turns him into a "fumbling fool of their pretended god, and makes him out to be a tinkerer, an approximator, and a blunderer, who took aeons of time to fashion a few serviceable figures and heaped up a junkyard of scrap and failure meanwhile".

There is no easy response to that. Like Dawkins, Hitchens is coming from an emotional and dogmatic position rather than a rational one. I would suggest that God has always existed, God was in no hurry, and any social order would take aeons to develop.

Alright, let's leave evolution; neither of us rejects it, even if we disagree on what drives it.

Parents indoctrinate their children to believe in God, which Dawkins is brave enough to suggest is child abuse. That is why religion has survived as long as it has.

I think you'll find the Soviet government said something very similar, and for the better part of a century it indoctrinated children with atheist dogma. Yet today, scientific atheism has all but disappeared, and the Russian Orthodox Church has emerged as one of the dominant institutions in post communist Russia.

Belief in God is surely irrational though. What did Dawkins call it again? "A persistently false belief held in the face of strong contradictory evidence".

Dawkins has adopted a dogmatic position that a faith position is irrational, but he seems to have trouble finding evidence to support this assertion. He used to claim that the third century Christian Tertullian had said "it is by all means to be believed because it is absurd", but stopped saying this when someone pointed out that Tertullian had never actually said this. Not surprisingly, Dawkins stopped mentioning Tertullian and started misrepresenting Luther instead!

Sam Harris was a bit more to the point. "Religious faith is simply unjustified belief in matters of ultimate concern – specifically propositions that promise some mechanism by which life can be spared the ravages of time and death".

I will accept that believers often use a faith argument when they have nothing more considered to stand on, but that still does not disprove the existence of God.

No disrespect intended, but I think you can't see the wood for the trees and are missing the main point. Science has disproved the existence of God. Those who can't see this are in denial.

Who says? Many scientists disagree. In March of this year a group of eleven New Zealand scientists published a statement affirming that science and Christianity are not incompatible. This group included Professor Jeff Tallon from Wellington, winner of the 2010 Prime Minister's Prize in Science. What gives Dawkins the right to say all these eminent people are deluded, and he alone is right?

Well. (Deep breath). Perhaps I have underestimated you a bit. I don't agree with what you've said, but I guess I have to accept that you have reasons for thinking the way you do. As much as it pains me to do so, I am going to have to accept that I cannot disprove the existence of your God.

I am not saying I believe in him, but I will – somewhat reluctantly - accept that perhaps there are grounds for believing in a God of some sort.

I appreciate you saying that and I also appreciate that you are prepared to put science and the search for truth ahead of dogma.

Sadly there are those that do not and they claim to speak for science. The difference between those who genuinely search for the truth - and those who only claim to - is quite ironically perhaps best described in some words from Genesis: a formless void.

A formless void is about right too. I guess I have to concede that Genesis might have some truth in it after all.

Rev. Lyall Perris and Darryl Ward (2010)

Questions for Discussion

- 1 The story of Noah's Ark is one of the best-known of all children's stories in our society. How do you think Christians should present this story?**

- 2 The book of Genesis is only one of the books in the Bible, yet it seems to be the most discussed and debated of all the books in the Old Testament. Do you agree with this analysis, and if so, why do you think this is the case?**

- 3 Where do you stand on the idea that God has used the mechanism of evolution to create life on earth?**

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