

Science and Religion: The New Dialogue

Week 4: Christendom and Scientific Revolutions: Galileo, Newton, Darwin and What They Mean

Science and Religion: The New Dialogue

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Lecture Four

**Christendom and Scientific Revolutions: Galileo, Newton, Darwin and What They Mean
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A Moment of Reflection

We are at the midpoint in this series, and I want to begin with a moment of reflection on how we are doing.

I light these candles before each class as a reminder of a fundamental goal: to help people who come here in faith to gain at least a little clarity—a better understanding of your faith and of what it means for all the things that make you and your life important.

That goal is achieved when the light flickers on and you say to yourself: “Aha, now I get it.”

Last week especially, instead of having the look of lights flickering on, a lot of you had the look of someone being fed through a fire-hose.

This class is very ambitious.

Sometimes you hear me responding to arguments from philosophers you may have barely heard of, answering questions you haven't asked.

I do that because I suspect that, at some level, those questions are yours as well, even if you haven't had time to put them into words. And I think that when our deeper questions aren't addressed, they eventually become a problem for faith.

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My hope is to address those issues in a way that lets you find that your faith has been strengthened by greater understanding.

My concern is that too often I end up talking over your heads, possibly adding to your confusion, and basically turning into a crushing bore.

One of the things I will ask from you before we're finished is your candid evaluation of where it worked for you, and where it didn't.

I don't have another audience, and at this point don't really want to go and find one. So I am going to keep working on the message. I know I am among friends, and that you forgive me, and maybe even love me, even when I'm hard to understand.

But I *want* to be understood. That's what I am here for. If I keep pushing for that, and you keep telling me when I get through and when I don't, I think we can make this thing into something really good.

Themes

By now, some of the themes for this class have become clear.

- (1) That there is reasonableness in faith and faithfulness in reason; and
- (2) That the Christian faith can transcend the modern liberal-fundamentalist divide; and
- (3) That we should want a comprehensive and integrated worldview, where religion and science cohere and coalesce.

By now you should be repeating that last one in your sleep. I hope all three themes are coming through loud and clear.

Now I want to mention two other themes for this course that haven't surfaced yet, but which are especially important within a comprehensive Christian worldview. They are:

- (4) The centrality of Christ; and
- (5) The value of the classical theological tradition.

We will begin bring in those two themes in today's class, which is titled: "Christendom and Scientific Revolutions: Galileo, Newton, Darwin and What They Mean."¹

¹ When I talk about "the continued viability and value of the classical theological tradition," I am thinking first of Augustine, Aquinas, and the great theologians of the Protestant Reformation: Martin Luther, John Calvin and Richard Hooker. As I think you know, I see Karl Barth as the great 20th century representative of the classical tradition, who re-thinks and re-applies it in the modern context.

Science and Scripture in the Classical Tradition

Unfortunately, we don't have time for Newton.

Both with Galileo and Darwin, we have a chance to see the value of the classical theological tradition. We can also see in both cases that bad things that can happen when its wisdom is disregarded.

That starts with the fact that the classical tradition had some important things to say about the care Christians should take in interpreting the Bible, particularly when the Bible speaks on topics that overlap with science.

Augustine spoke specifically to this issue, and so did Thomas Aquinas.

For both these thinkers, it is absurd to imagine that religion and science could ever be at “war.” Science and theology are both fully committed to the truth, and all truth is united in God.

If religion and science are found making contradictory claims then, obviously, something has to give. So do we then alter the religious claim, or the scientific one? According to Augustine and

There is a new book out on Barth titled *Orthodox and Modern*. I also think that describes the Episcopal Church when we are able to reach back into our tradition and transcend the fundamentalist-liberal divide. Bruce L. McCormack, *Orthodox and Modern: Studies in the Theology of Karl Barth* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2008).

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Aquinas, that will depend on what kind of claim it is, and on what kind of evidence it rests. When there is a contradiction on a topic where science is in a good position to find out the truth with methods we know to be generally reliable, Augustine and Aquinas both think that weighs heavily in favor of accepting the scientific conclusion—even over a position that may have seemed otherwise to make sense for religious reasons.

This issue comes up often when interpreting the Bible. Aquinas didn't even question that the truth of scripture must be held inviolable. How else, except through scripture, could the church now access the truth of God disclosed in Jesus Christ? But, picking up on Augustine, Aquinas strongly cautioned against holding too rigidly to any one particular interpretation of a scriptural text at points where more than one interpretation is possible. And that was because we may later learn something that would lead us to change our interpretation.

This is Aquinas, and I quote: “When there are different ways of explaining a Scriptural text, no particular explanation should be held so rigidly that, if convincing arguments show it to be false, anyone dare to insist that it is still the definitive sense of the text.”²

In saying this, Aquinas is following Augustine, who had made the same point at length, without mincing words.

² Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* Ia,68,1, where he cites St. Augustine, *De Genesi ad Litteram* I,18,19,21 (Patrologiae Cursus Completus, Series Latina, ed. J.P. Migne, 34, 260-62). I take both of these quotations from Stephen Barr, *Modern Physics and Ancient Faith*, 7.

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This is Augustine, and again I quote:

“Usually even a non-Christian knows something about the earth, the heavens, and the other elements of this world, about the motion and orbit of the stars and even their size and relative positions, about the predictable eclipses of the sun and moon, the cycles of the years and seasons, about the kinds of animals, shrubs, stones, and so forth, and this knowledge he holds to as being certain from reason and experience. Now it is a disgraceful and dangerous thing for an infidel to hear a Christian, presumably giving the meaning of Holy Scripture, talking nonsense on these topics, and we should take all means to prevent such an embarrassing situation, in which people show up vast ignorance in a Christian and laugh it to scorn. . . . If they find a Christian mistaken in a field which they themselves know well and hear him maintaining his foolish opinions about our books, how are they going to believe our books in matters concerning the resurrection of the dead, the hope of eternal life, and the kingdom of heaven, when they think their pages are full of falsehoods on facts which they themselves have learnt from experience and the light of reason? Reckless and incompetent expounders of Holy Scripture bring untold trouble and sorrow in their wise brethren, . . . to defend their utterly foolish and obviously untrue statements, they will try to call upon Holy Scripture, . . . although they understand neither what they say nor the things about which they make assertion.”³

I draw these quotations from Stephen Barr’s book, *Modern Physics and Ancient Faith*. Barr uses them to make his point that the church has long—really, always—been committed to giving empirical reason its full due, and has never believed that it should require acceptance of

³ Ibid.

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interpretations of scripture that are in conflict with “what could be demonstrated from reason and
experience.”⁴

Which leads Barr to ask:

“How then, given these very reasonable attitudes of such high authorities as Augustine and Aquinas,
did the Catholic Church end up, in the early seventeenth century, condemning the scientific theories
of Galileo?”⁵

⁴ Barr, *Modern Physics and Ancient Faith*, 6-7.

⁵ Barr, 8.

The Copernican Revolution

Good question. Here are some facts.

In the Middle Ages, the earth was thought to lie at rest at the center of the universe, with the sun orbiting around. That is called the “Ptolemaic” conception of the universe, after the great Egyptian astronomer, Ptolemy, who so carefully mapped the movements of the stars and planets.

In the 15th century, an important medieval philosopher and influential Roman Catholic Cardinal named Nicholas of Cusa (1401-1464) had speculated that the earth was in motion. Nicholas actually went so far as to suggest that both the earth and sun might be in motion in an infinite universe to which there was no center at all.⁶ Even Copernicus wouldn’t go that far.

After Nicholas of Cusa, came Nicolaus Copernicus, an astronomer who was also a lay canon in the polish Catholic Church. In 1543, at the very end of his life, Copernicus published his treatise that the earth revolves around the sun. The book was endorsed by a local Cardinal, and dedicated to Pope Paul III.⁷

According to the historian David Lindberg: “From the Catholic Church . . . there was scarcely a stir. Copernicus had been talked into publishing his book by various friends, including ecclesiastical

⁶ Ibid., 9.

⁷ Keith Ward, *Pascal’s Fire: Scientific Faith and Religious Understanding* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2006), 9. **Verify source. Page number suspect.**

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officials. . . . And except for one or two people, nobody judged his ideas dangerous—foolish, perhaps, but hardly a threat.”⁸ That is to say, this is not “science rebelling against religion.”

But from this point, the plot thickens. The 16th century was one of the more turbulent in the history of Christianity. For a variety of historically complicated reasons, some having to do with the threat the Roman Catholic Church perceived from the rising Protestant Reformation, the Catholic Church began to rigidify its stance on a number of issues, including the question of whether the earth may revolve around the sun.

By 1616, the Inquisition had declared that Copernicus’s “heliocentric hypothesis” was heretical.⁹

Galileo Galilei had been born in February, 1564 in Pisa.

By that time, Copernicus’s ideas were known to astronomers and considered useful, but unproved.¹⁰ In 1608, a Dutchman invented the telescope. Galileo heard about it, built a better one, and trained it on the moon and planets.

⁸ David C. Lindberg, “Galileo, the Church, and the Cosmos,” in David C. Lindberg and Ronald L. Numbers, ed., *When Science and Christianity Meet* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 40-41.

⁹ Ward, 9. **verify**

¹⁰ Lindberg, 39–40.

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According to the historian Robert Westman, Galileo was able to use his telescope to develop “a conclusive argument against the Ptolemaic theory by proving the existence of the phases of Venus.”¹¹

This success gave Galileo confidence that he could do something Copernicus had not tried to do: prove to a level of certainty that the earth revolved around the sun. Copernicus had merely claimed that his hypothesis gave a full accounting for the data, never denying that an alternative hypothesis might do the same. Galileo aimed higher. According to Westman, his success with the phases of Venus, “boosted Galileo’s confidence that a grand demonstration could eventually be found that would establish the Copernican system conclusively against other alternatives.”¹²

Some of Galileo’s later problems would stem from the fact that, although his case was strong, it could never quite measure up to his own high standard. For, according to historians of science like Westman and Lindberg, the fact is that “Galileo’s telescopic observations certainly did not demonstrate the truth of the heliocentric model.”¹³

Bypassing the scientific establishment, Galileo took his case to the public. (“To heck with the National Academy of Sciences—I’ll go on Larry King.”)

¹¹ Robert S. Westman, “The Copernicans and the Churches,” in David C. Lindberg and Ronald L. Numbers, eds., *God and Nature: Historical Essays on the Encounter between Christianity and Science* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 99.

¹² Westman, 99.

¹³ Lindberg, 42.

According to Lindberg:

“Galileo had arguments, rather than proof. . . . [His] aim was not to write carefully reasoned scholarly papers of the sort astronomers and cosmologists now write, but to influence public opinion and win the cosmological debate in the public area. [n] His arguments were as notable for their emotional power as their logical power.”¹⁴

Now the problem, as I’ve mentioned, was that Galileo’s proposals flew in the face of a Catholic Church that had become more insistent on literal interpretations of scripture than Copernicus’s medieval church had been, or than Augustine and Aquinas had recommended.

So Galileo and the church authorities did eventually butt heads. And that was back in the day when the clout was still on the side of church authority.

Even so, much gets lost in interpreting this episode through the lens of science-religion warfare. To begin with, looking through that filter we will fail to see that Galileo’s battle was as much or more with the scientific establishment as it was with officials of the church.

It was a conflict, as Keith Ward writes, “between established Aristotelian science and the ‘new science’ of close observation and experimentation that was threatening the old scientific elite.”¹⁵

¹⁴ Lindberg, 44.

¹⁵ Ward, 9–10.

For Galileo, the problems were compounded because the scientific orthodoxy “was entrenched in the institutions of the church.”¹⁶

The problem, ironically, was that the medieval church actually enjoyed an integrated, comprehensive worldview where theology, philosophy and science could cohere and coalesce. Both the science and philosophy were drawn from Aristotle. As Ward says, Aristotle’s “physics was accepted as definitive, and the biblical account of the universe was largely interpreted in terms of it.”¹⁷

So there were many interests—scientific, philosophical, and theological—aligned against Galileo.

Push came to shove, and in 1633 Galileo was brought to trial and convicted for allegedly disobeying an injunction the church had placed prohibiting him from promulgating Copernican cosmology. He remained under house arrest in his villa outside of Florence for nine years, until his death.¹⁸

¹⁶ Ward, 10.

¹⁷ Ward, 10.

¹⁸ Ward, 10.

Reasonable Faith

There are few points about this I would like to highlight, that have to do with our theme of reasonableness in faith.

First, the Inquisition in general and the Galileo episode in particular certainly show the church in a bad light in many respects. In making the case that there is reasonableness in faith, I shouldn't neglect to mention that unfortunately one quite finds unreasonableness in faith too. Religion doesn't always bring out the best in us. My argument has not been to say that the church's hands are clean.

The argument is only that the record will show that there are important nuances in this story that are usually missed. Let's review them.

The first nuance is that the resistance to Galileo was bound up with scientific and philosophical concerns as much or more as with theological concerns. Ptolemy and Aristotle had given the western world a cosmology and metaphysics. Galileo's opponents were defending one science and philosophy against the rise of another.

The second nuance often missed is that Galileo made trouble for himself by claiming more for this theory than his evidence could support. If he had claimed only as much as Copernicus had, that this theory was an "hypothesis" rather than a "proof," he would have the truth solidly on his side in all important respects.

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Science can show that Galileo was correct, of course, in claiming that the earth revolves around the sun. But in retrospect it also shows that in his own arguments Galileo was not able to demonstrate this conclusively.¹⁹

Galileo's opponents included able logicians, astronomers, and mathematicians, and they saw the holes in Galileo's case. Cardinal Bellarmine, head of the Inquisition, wrote his letter to Galileo's friend Paolo Foscarini:

“If there were a real proof that the Sun is in the center of the universe, . . . and that the sun does not go round the Earth but the Earth round the sun, then we should have to proceed with great circumspection in explaining passages of Scripture which appear to teach the contrary, and rather admit that we did not understand them than declare an opinion to be false which is proved to be true. But, as for myself, I shall not believe that there are such proofs until they are shown to me.”²⁰

The point to draw from that is that this was not a case where the church affirmed scripture over and against logic and evidence—“faith against reason.” The battle involved reason against reason, science against science.²¹

¹⁹ Barr, 8, writes: “As a matter of fact, such a ‘real proof’ was not possible in Galileo’s . . . time. Galileo believed he had such proofs, but in fact his proofs were wrong.”

²⁰ Barr, 8.

²¹ See Barr, 8, where Barr concludes: “Whatever else can be said about this lamentable episode, the following is true: the condemnation of Galileo, rather than typifying the Church’s attitude toward science, was manifestly an anomaly. For while the Catholic Church has never been afraid to condemn *theological* positions . . . only in the single instance of Galileo did the Catholic church venture to

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There are many things the Galileo episode can be taken to illustrate: the tragic dimension of history, the fallibility of the church, the ways that petty grievances shape our perception of important issues. If Galileo had been more politic and deferential to the authorities, they probably would have been much more open to his case. It is regrettable, but true, that sometimes in this world diplomacy counts for more than reason.

The Galileo affair has also been used to illustrate what Thomas Kuhn called “The Structure of Scientific Revolutions.” Kuhn showed that there is a powerful sociological dimension in science, that builds in a strong resistance to revolutionary ideas. Big new ideas have to prove themselves on multiple fronts against an established consensus. Science and religion are similar in this respect: they both have battles between the orthodox and heretics.

All of that nuance gets filtered out if we continue to insist on thinking of the Galileo episode as a case of “science-religion warfare.”

condemn a scientific theory. [n] and even in that case it refrained from doing so in its most solemn and formal way, which would have been irreversible.”

Subtle Religious Implications

None of this is to say that the Copernican Revolution held no theological implications.

Keith Ward names two rather subtle differences I would call to your attention, concerning our theology of human nature.

Before Galileo, Christianity tended to see human beings as the most important things in the cosmos, the apex of creation. The whole of nature is created to serve us. Certainly a literal reading of Genesis had supported that interpretation.

After Galileo, we gradually have come to regard ourselves in a somewhat different light. It is not so much that nature is here to serve us, as that we humans were created to conserve and shape nature.”²² And while Christians continue to affirm that we are made in God’s image, it has become much less clear how unique we may be in this respect. Who knows what kinds of creatures may exist on planets circling those other stars? The glory of God’s creation is expressed far beyond our little corner of the universe.²³

I don’t want to overstate the point: this shift in humanity’s conception of its own place in the cosmos is not the difference between night and day; rather, it is a change *within* the Christian worldview. The *revolution* in science led to an *evolution* in theology.

²² **Is this or is this not a quote: verify!**

²³ Ward, *Pascal’s Fire* **need page numbers.**

A Not-So-Subtle Religious Implication

A more obvious theological implications in the Copernican revolution has to do with our interpretation of the Bible. At various points the Bible, literally interpreted, clearly has the sun circling the earth.

According to Psalm 19:

In [the heavens God] has set a tent for the sun,
Which comes forth like a bridegroom leaving his chamber,
And like a strong man runs its course with joy.
Its rising is from the end of the heavens, and its circuit to the end of them; and there is nothing hid from its heat.”²⁴

As a metaphor, that works wonderfully well. As a literal description, it is simply false.

“Beyond fundamentalism and liberalism,” as you know, is one of our recurring themes. One of the marks of modern fundamentalism is its tendency to insist that scriptural passages be accepted as true, literal descriptions. One of the marks of modern liberalism is its tendency to downplay questions of truth and to leave texts wide open to an almost unlimited range of metaphorical interpretations.²⁵

²⁴ Psalm 19:4–6.

²⁵ George Hunsinger, *How to Read Karl Barth: The Shape of His Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 45.

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I think it is fair to say that, beginning with Galileo, the requirements for non-literal translations of certain biblical texts, and the need to re-translate Christian doctrine to a new cosmology, made some sort of theological liberalism inevitable.

I believe it is also fair to add that unconstrained liberalism probably made the emergence of some form of fundamentalism inevitable, as liberal interpretations began to recast the faith at central points. Questions about what is essential or definitive for Christian faith would eventually need to be addressed.

So at least to some extent we can look back to Galileo as the point of origin for the liberal-fundamentalist divide.

More implications

Finally, should also recognize that these same developments in science probably opened a door for the emergence of various non-Christian worldviews.

Galileo led to Newton and Pierre La Place, whose science was quite consonant with Deism's concept of a God who created an orderly universe, then left it to its own devices. Deism is religious in both the broad and narrow sense, but it isn't Christian. It did strongly influence Christianity, especially in England and the new United States.

Charles Darwin grew up in England among Christians with strong deistic inclinations. They worshipped God as the great intelligent designer.

It was Darwin's science that called the need for that designer deeply into question.

Richard Dawkins has said that Darwin made it possible to an "intellectually fulfilled" atheist. By that he means that, before Darwin, atheists had no good explanation for many facts about the natural world. Darwin gave them the needed explanation.

[By now I may be beating a dead horse, but all this, again, is devastating to the NOMA thesis. Here again we see that scientific and religious matters overlap in several respects: certain scientific developments have led to changes in Christianity's theology of human nature; they have opened the

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door for the rise of Christian liberalism, and also for the rise of non-Christian religious traditions,
such as Deism and modern atheistic materialism.

The NOMA thesis is fatuous. Are we clear on that?]

The Darwinian Revolution

I only have a few minutes to discuss the Darwinian revolution. If you want more, we'll have six weeks come spring.

Elliot Sober, the philosopher of biology, has said that in essence Darwin offered a combination of two “big ideas.”

The first was of a “tree of life.” This idea comes in stronger and weaker forms. Darwin advanced the “strong form,” according to which “there is a *single* tree of terrestrial life. That is, for any two species, there is a species that is their common ancestor—not only are we related to chimps, we are also related to cattle, to crows, and to crocuses.”²⁶

Or, as I put it, “hippopotami, whippoorwills, and persimmon trees.”

²⁶ Elliot Sober, *Philosophy of Biology*, 2nd ed. (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press / Perseus Books, 2000), 8.

The second big idea, to explain the first, was natural selection.

Natural Selection is an algorithm. Given the variations between individuals of a given species, and given that these variations are inherited; and given that there is a struggle for survival; then the variations that help in the struggle will be passed on and increase throughout the species over time. Gradually, the species will change, and that's what evolution is: "change in properties of organisms over time."²⁷

²⁷ Ernst Mayr, *What Evolution Is* (New York: Perseus Books Group / Basic Books, 2001), 8.

Darwinians and Darwinists

A point about my terminology:

You will hear me speak from time to time, of “Darwinians” and “Darwinists.” They are not the same thing.

By “Darwinians,” I mean people who accept Darwin’s two big ideas. That means I am a Darwinian because, as I’ve told you, I accept the tree of life and evolution by natural selection.

I am certainly not a Darwinist.

I will have more to say about what Darwinism is next spring, and about the challenge Darwinism represents to us—and the challenge that we represent to Darwinism. For now I will just say that a Darwinist is someone who accepts Darwin’s theory and who considers the theory incompatible with traditional belief in God, and in human beings as creatures made in God’s own image.

Jerry Coyne, a prominent Darwinist, has said that with the publication of *The Origin of Species*: “Man was reduced to an aberrant ape and God to a powerless bystander.”²⁸

²⁸ Jerry Coyne, “Doing Acid,” *New York Times Book Review*, July 13, 2003, 11.

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Darwinists will tell you there is indeed a war going on between Christian faith and evolutionary theory.

My dissertation

My dissertation will tell you the Darwinists are wrong.²⁹

The title is: *Darwin's Science in Chalcedonian Imagination: Barth, Double Agency and Theistic Evolution.*

Someday I hope to turn my dissertation into a book, and if you read it you'll find some of the same themes that I am emphasizing here, including the reasonableness of faith and transcendence of the fundamentalist-liberal divide.

But even more its themes are:

- (1) The centrality of Christ for Christian thinking about God; and
- (2) The value of the classical theological tradition.

I am not going to read you my dissertation, because (a) you would not enjoy it; and (b) it would take a year. I am just going to tell you where it stands.

²⁹ Or to turn it around, it is a long explanation for why the Episcopal Church is right. In 2006, the General Convention of the Episcopal Church affirmed that “an acceptance of evolution is entirely compatible with an authentic and living Christian faith.” See: Episcopal Church in the United States of America, 75th General Convention, Resolution A129: “Affirm Creation and Evolution;” available from http://gc2006.org/legislation/view_leg_detail.aspx?id=136&type=CURRENT (accessed August, 16, 2006). This resolution was enacted in 2006.

Frequently one hears that for Christians to accept Darwin, we must accept a scaled back conception of God's role in creation.

Some of you may have read Robert Wright's article in *The New York Times* this summer, titled "A Grand Bargain Over Evolution."³⁰

On Wright's bargain, the atheists should give up claiming that Darwinian evolution is incompatible with belief in God. Wright says that thinkers like Richard Dawkins "could acknowledge, first of all, that any god whose creative role ends with the beginning of natural selection is, strictly speaking, logically compatible with Darwinism."

Wright goes even a half-step beyond that, offering mild support for what last week I called the "organic" argument for divine design. The atheists, he says "might even grant that natural selection's intrinsic creative power—something they've been known to stress in other contexts—adds at least an iota of plausibility to this remotely creative god."³¹

So what is our part of the bargain? According to Wright, religious believers must "bite the bullet" and adopt a more "modern theology," accepting that "God did his work remotely—that his role in the creative process ended when he unleashed the algorithm of natural selection (whether by

³⁰ Robert Wright, "A Grand Bargain Over Evolution," *The New York Times*, sun. Aug. 23, 2009, "The Week in Review," 9.

³¹ Ibid.

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dropping it into the primordial ooze or writing its eventual emergence into the initial conditions of
the universe or whatever.”³²

In effect, the “bargain” is that Christians become Deists.

³² Ibid.

I do not agree with that.

My disagreement with Wright is not a dispute about evidence, or about the power of natural selection, as was the case in the disagreement between Darwinian theory and Intelligent Design.

It is a disagreement about whether, in accepting evolutionary science, we are actually scaling back our conception of God's action as creator. I say no, because Thomas Aquinas's conception of God's action as creator works perfectly for purposes of accommodating evolutionary theory. "Double Agency," from my title, is the way the classical tradition has understood God's involvement with the world from before the rise of modern science, and it is not at all a stretch to say that it had anticipated modern science's arrival.

Double Agency involves a paradox where God is self-constrained in one sense and purposefully active in another. Augustine, I believe it was, once said that God is higher than our highest thought, and nearer to us than our most inward part. It is not that God is either remote or near, it is that God is indifferent sense both remote and near.

The analogy I use is, Where is Mark Twain in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*? As Huck and Jim raft their way down the Mississippi, Mark Twain is nowhere but everywhere—higher than their highest thought, nearer than their most inward part. That is an analogy to the classical conception of God's relation to the world.

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I agree with a theologian named Elizabeth Johnson, who has said that because of its classical theological tradition, Thomas Aquinas in particular, Christianity was intellectually prepared to accept Darwin, with, I quote, “almost surprising ease.”³³

The other thing I will tell you about my dissertation is that it answers the fundamentalists challenge. Earlier I suggested that fundamentalists are not being unreasonable when they challenge the rest of us to become more clear and convincing as to what beliefs we affirm as central to the Christian faith.

My answer is: the beliefs that we celebrate at Christmas, and through Holy Week, and on Easter Sunday. At Christmas, we celebrate the birth of Jesus as human Incarnation of the Eternal God.

“In being gracious to man in Jesus Christ, God acknowledges man; He accepts responsibility for his being and nature. He remains Himself. He does not cease to be God. But He does not hold aloof. In being gracious to man in Jesus Christ, He also goes into the far country, into the evil society of this being which is not God and against God. He does not shrink from him. He does not pass him by as did the priest and the Levite the man who had fallen among thieves. He does not leave him to his own devices. He makes his situation His own.”³⁴

That, Virginia, is the meaning of Christmas.

³³ Elizabeth Johnson, “Does God Play Dice? Divine Providence and Chance,” in *God and Evolution: A Reader*, ed. Mary Kathleen Cunningham (New York: Routledge, 2007), 297.

³⁴ Barth, CD IV.1, 158.

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In Holy Week, we see what happens to the Son of God in the Far Country, and what Barth means in describing society as “evil” and “against God.” In Holy Week, we remember and celebrate Christ’s Saving Passion. On Easter, we remember and celebrate his glorious Resurrection. Incarnation, Passion, Resurrection: that is the core of our tradition.

I find those themes interwoven throughout the Book of Common Prayer. I also find them interwoven throughout the theological writings of Karl Barth, which is why I tend to mention him a lot and why he too is in my dissertation. In my dissertation, I claim these themes are also reflected in the history of natural evolution.

Last week, I said that the best reasons for believing in God I really hadn’t come to yet, and these “were the stuff of revelation.” Incarnation, Passion and Resurrection: that’s the “stuff” of revelation.

When people like Wright try to inform Christians that we can keep our faith if only we are willing to scale it back a bit, they fail to understand who we think God is, and what he does, and how he works, and why. If you look at Christ and what he means for who God is, and what God does, and how God works, and why, you find that no scaling back is called for. And you find that, while God invests creation with its own autonomy and independence—making a space, for example, for the algorithm that drives natural evolution—God is never actually inactive or, heaven forbid, “remote.”

This again is Barth, listen:

This Lord is never absent, passive, non-responsible or impotent, but always present, active, responsible and omnipotent. He is never dead, but always living; never sleeping, but always awake; never uninterested, but always concerned; never merely waiting in any respect, but even where He seems to wait, even where He permits, always holding the initiative.³⁵

We certainly do not need to abandon or minimize the core beliefs of our tradition in an attempt to make Christianity compatible with evolutionary science. The opposite is more nearly true. It is only as we look more deeply at the heart of the gospel proclamation that we find that not only the two—our religion and this science—in some weak sense “compatible,” they actually cohere, and coalesce.

The end.

³⁵ Barth, CD III.3, 13.

At the End

Again, these housekeeping points.

- (1) I hope you were able to find last week's lecture notes. They are not, I repeat not, on the itssm.org website. We have a new site under construction that will be able to handle posting notes and whatnot, but it won't be ready until the class next spring.
- (2) If you would like to be kept abreast of future offerings, including next spring's class, please sign in with your email address on the sheets I am passing around. It would help if you could give me the sheets you are holding in your hand at the end of the class.
- (3) At the end, as we approach time for the service, if we could continue discussion in the Welcome center, that would allow people coming in for worship to settle in and say their prayers with a little peace and quiet.