

Philosophy of Religion (Christianity)
6. Religion and science

Scientific account of creation

- Cosmology is about the origins of the universe.
- Scientists believe that the universe began 13.7 billion years ago in a massive explosion of matter and energy - 'The Big Bang'.
- After the Big Bang the Universe began to cool and clouds of gas collapsed under the pull of their own gravity to form stars.
- About 4,500 million years ago the Earth condensed out of the gas and dust swirling around our star, the sun.
- Fossil records show that the first signs of life appeared soon about 4,000 million years ago.
- Lightning and ultra-violet light from the sun began to break apart the simple molecules of the primitive atmosphere.
- These fragments recombined to produce complex molecules which could eventually reproduce .
- For over 3,000 million years the dominant organisms were bacteria and blue-green algae.
- About 600 million years ago and enormous proliferation of new life-forms began.
- The first vertebrates appeared, then as some plants spread from the oceans to colonize the land, the first insects evolved.
- About 120 million years ago dinosaurs became the dominant species.
- Birds evolved soon after, then mammals, then primates - the ancestors of monkeys, apes and humans.
- Tool-using primate 'man' goes back well over a million years.

The biblical accounts of creation

There are two accounts of creation in the first few chapters in the first book of the Bible – The Book of Genesis:

- The account of God creating the universe in six days – Genesis 1:1 – 2:4
- The account of God creating Adam out of the earth and placing him in the Garden of Eden

Different interpretations of Genesis

- There is a variety of interpretations of the biblical accounts of creation among Christians today.
- Most believe that God brought the universe into being from nothing (ex nihilo); some believe that it was created from matter that already existed (ex materia).
- Some Christians are Creationists.
- Creationists take the biblical account of creation to be literally true i.e. God really did create everything in six days.
- Other Christians take a more liberal view.
- A liberal might regard these accounts as more like parables or symbolic accounts that tell (in story form) the profound truth that God brought the universe and all that is in it into being, and sustains his creation.
- A liberal approach might understand the biblical account of creation as myth.
- These Christians might look to science to help them understand how God did this.

Own point of view and different points of views

- In order to get full marks on the last 12 mark question it is necessary to give another point of view, your own point of view as well as references to Christianity in your answer.
- Many atheists think that it is impossible to reconcile science and religion. They believe that science has proved religion wrong especially on the origins of the world. Scientists like Richard Dawkins often criticize Christian fundamentalists for ignoring the full weight of scientific evidence for evolution.
- Other scientists such as John Polkinghorne believe it is possible to reconcile one's Christian faith with science "Genesis is not there to give short, technical answers about how the universe began. It gives us the big answer that things exist because of God's will. One can perfectly well believe in the Big Bang, but believe in it as the will of God the creator."
- Some believe that science and religion attempts to answer two very different sets of questions: science tries to answer "how" things came into being while religion tries to answer "why" things came into being.

Evolution

- In the 4th century CE St Augustine wrote that God probably only created very simple life forms and that these developed over time.
- Today evolution is associated with Charles Darwin who wrote 'On the Origin of Species' in 1859.
- Darwin argued that life began with very simple cells and later developed, by natural selection, into what we see today.

Creationism

- Some Christians found Darwin's theory a threat to their faith because it appeared to challenge the authority of the Bible.
- If the Bible was wrong on this matter, might it be wrong on other things too? These Christians preferred to maintain a 'literalist' or 'creationist' understanding of Genesis.
- A belief in various forms of creationism is quite strong in the USA and this had led to a number of attempts to teach creationism (in one form or another) in schools.
- It is still illegal to teach creationism in schools run by the state though this does happen in some private religious schools.

Conservative/Liberal view

- Other Christians don't see any problem with their understanding of Genesis and the scientific theories such as evolution.
- This goes for scientists who are also Christians, as well as Christians who are not scientists.
- If science and religion are asking different questions, then they see no contradiction.
- Christians who take this view see religion trying to answer the question "why", science attempts to answer the question "how"
- Christians who don't see any problem with evolution see the Bible as an authoritative account of God's relationship with human beings and the wider universe.
- They see it all as part of God's plan, and that humans have special rights and responsibilities as a result.
- This view is perhaps currently the view of the majority of Christians.

Six days of creation

The first chapter of the book of Genesis gives a very clear account of how God created the world. The writer wanted to show the order within God's creation. The sun moon and stars govern light and darkness. Fish, sea monsters and birds have dominion over the sea and the sky. While the land is governed by animals and humans.

Day 1 – Separates Light and Darkness	Day 4 – Creates sun, moon and stars
Day 2 – Separates the waters and creates the sky	Day 5 – Creates fish, sea monsters and birds
Day 3 – Separates the sea from the land	Day 6 – Creates animals and humans
Day 7 – God rests	

Intelligent Design

- Intelligent design is a theory put forward by many fundamentalists in America as an alternative to evolution.
- It is not dissimilar to the teleological argument put forward by William Paley.
- It argues that evolutionary explanations of the origins of life can't explain all the differences between the species.
- It argues that certain features of the universe and of living things are best explained by an intelligent cause, not an undirected process such as natural selection.
- Intelligence design argues that science as to accept a supernatural force within the universe.
- One of the arguments it puts forward is irreducible complexity - that certain biological systems are too complex to have evolved from simpler, or "less complete" predecessors, through natural selection acting upon a series of advantageous naturally occurring, chance mutations.
- Michael Behe argues the flagella of certain bacteria is a prime example of an irreducibly complex structure defined as "a single system composed of several well-matched, interacting parts that contribute to the basic function, wherein the removal of any one of the parts causes the system to effectively cease functioning", and argues that since "an irreducibly complex system that is missing a part is by definition nonfunctional", it could not have evolved gradually through natural selection.

People and animals

- Recent scientific discoveries of DNA have shown how close humans are 'related' to some primates and other animals.
 - Humans share 97% DNA with some apes.
 - The book of Genesis sets humans as being quite separate from the rest of the animal kingdom.
 - Humans are told to:

"Rule over the fish of the sea and birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground."

Genesis 1:28
 - Many Christians are beginning to think again about their responsibility towards the rest of creation.
 - Many Christians are concerned about:
 - Hunting animals for sport
 - Wearing fur coats for fashion
 - The treatment of animal in intensive farming
 - Over fishing
 - The use of animal testing for cosmetics
 - Some Christians choose to be vegetarians pointing to God's original instructions to the first humans:

"I give you every seed-bearing plant on the face of the earth and every tree that has fruit with seed in it. They will be yours for food."

Genesis 1:29
- It is only after the flood that God commands Noah:
- "Everything that lives and moves will be food for you. Just as I gave you the green plants, I now give you everything."
- Genesis 9:3

Environmental issues

- Christians believe they have a responsibility towards the environment as 'stewards' of creation.
- St Francis of Assisi saw himself as part of God's creation and talked about 'brother sun and sister moon'.
- In 1979 Pope John Paul II made Francis the patron saint of ecology.
- Some Christians have chosen to join organisations such as Greenpeace or WWF.
- Traditionally Christians have thanked God for creation in Harvest Thanksgiving festivals.