

# The American Scientific Affiliation and the Evangelical Response to Evolution

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The American Scientific Affiliation (ASA) is an association of Christians interested in the interaction and integration of their faith with the scientific disciplines. The ASA was founded in 1941 by scientists of evangelical Christian faith who were concerned about the growing influence of scientific materialism and who desired to present science in a theistic context. (*Read a discussion of the early history of the ASA in The Creationists by Ronald Numbers [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992].*) Today, it is an organization that, with another affiliated society, the Canadian Scientific & Christian Affiliation, has about 2000 members. Together they publish the journal *Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith*.

Members have at least a bachelor's degree in a scientific or engineering field or in the history or philosophy of science. As an organization, the ASA takes no official position on specific scientific questions. All members assent to the following doctrinal statement:

We accept the divine inspiration, trustworthiness and authority of the Bible in matters of faith and conduct. We confess the Triune God affirmed in the Nicene and Apostles' creeds, which we accept as brief, faithful statements of Christian doctrine based upon Scripture. We believe that in creating and pre-

servicing the universe, God has endowed it with contingent order and intelligibility, the basis of scientific investigation. We recognize our responsibility, as stewards of God's creation, to use science and technology for the good of humanity and the whole world.

Members of the ASA represent a wide range of disciplines and bring their expertise to bear on a wide range of issues — including such critically important ones as biomedical and environmental ethics. However, issues surrounding evolution, both scientific and theological, have featured prominently in discussions among ASA members since the organization's inception. Articles on these topics are also commonly presented in the pages of the ASA's journal.

In 1997, a subcommittee of the ASA appointed a "Commission on Creation" to draft a general statement on creation that would reflect points of agreement among those representing a wide spectrum of views. ASA members holding the various perspectives on creation were appointed to the commission, and the resulting "General Statement on Creation" was unanimously approved by them. In addition, several more specific statements were drafted to represent the diversity of views in the ASA. These are labeled Young-Earth View, Old-Earth View, Theistic-

Evolution View, and Intelligent-Design View (*see the text of the General Statement on Creation and the views of specific working groups at <[http://www.asa3.org/ASA/topics/Evolution/commission\\_on\\_creation.html#Commission\\_on\\_Creation](http://www.asa3.org/ASA/topics/Evolution/commission_on_creation.html#Commission_on_Creation)>*). Additional statements representing these specific views were written by proponents of the respective positions and appear with the general statement. It is important to emphasize that the general statement is simply a product of the work of the commission, and it *does not* exhaustively represent all the views present within the ASA or within the larger Christian community.

As a member of the commission that drafted the statement, I offer here a few reflections on its value, and on its context within the larger popular controversy over evolution.

To begin, my own position is that there is no inherent conflict between evolutionary theory and a Christian faith with a high view of Scripture. By evolution, I mean the theory that all living things on earth are descended from a common ancestor through a continuous chain of cause-and-effect processes. I believe that there are no necessary breaks or gaps in causal explanations. That is, all transitions in the history of life are potentially explicable in terms of "natural" cause-and-effect processes. This theory is no mere guess or hunch, but an extremely well-supported explanation of the observed record of organic change. It has great explanatory power in drawing together an incredibly wide range of data from many disciplines in an explanatory framework. It has been very effective in generating fruitful and testable hypotheses that have

driven new discoveries and advanced our scientific understanding of the universe.

I also fully and unhesitatingly accept the doctrine of creation: God is the creator of all things, and nothing would exist without God's continually willing it to be. God is intimately and actively involved in all natural processes. Every natural process is as much an act of a personal creator as any miracle. The best term I know for this view of God's creative activity is "continuous creation". Furthermore, I believe that knowing God through creation is an act of faith and cannot be a conclusion obtained through scientific investigation. However, scientific observation provides no proof of the existence of a creator God; indeed it cannot. Nor does scientific description, however complete, provide any argument against a creator. Since God acts through process, evolution and the theology of creation are perfectly compatible. In fact, I see them as mutually reinforcing. An evolutionary understanding of creation illuminates our theological understanding, and theology places our scientific discoveries in a more comprehensive context and provides necessary moral guidance in the scientific endeavor.

Much of the controversy over evolution and creation seems to rest firmly on the widely held view that evolution and Christianity are in necessary and irreconcilable conflict. However, this conflict view has been thoroughly discredited by both theological and historical scholarship. Christian theologians representing many theological traditions (including evangelicals) have long recognized that a faithful reading of Scripture does not demand a young earth, nor does it prohibit God's use of evolutionary mechanisms to accomplish His creative will. Many evangelical

Christians in Darwin's time found no inherent conflict between evolutionary theory and Scripture. In fact, several of the authors of the *Fundamentals* (the set of volumes that gave us the term "fundamentalist") accepted some form of evolutionary theory. Even BB Warfield, a theologian who argued forcefully for Biblical inerrancy, accepted the validity of evolution as a scientific description of origins. The principal advocates of evolutionary theory in America included Asa Gray, George Frederick Wright, and James Dana — all committed Christians.

This is of course not to deny that a number of Christian theologians and scientists both past and present have had significant objections to certain aspects of evolutionary theory. Charles Hodge, a respected and influential theologian at Princeton in the early 1800s, is an example of a highly competent scholar who saw Darwinian evolution as incompatible with the Christian faith. Scholarly theological critiques of evolution such as his, however, provide no basis whatsoever for propounding a "warfare" metaphor for the relationship of evolution and the Christian faith. The history of the evangelical Christian response to evolution is detailed in a number of excellent scholarly books. These include *The Post-Darwinian Controversies* by James R Moore (Cambridge [UK]: Cambridge University Press, 1979), *Darwin's Forgotten Defenders* by David N Livingstone (Grand Rapids [MI]: Wm B Eerdmans Publishers, 1987), and *Evangelicals and Science in Historical Perspective*, edited by David N Livingstone, DG Hart, and Mark A Noll (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

I believe that one of the most important contributions of the "Statement on Creation" is to

combat the tired portrait of evangelical Christians as being driven by their acceptance of the truth of the Bible to oppose the theory of evolution — if not the whole of the modern scientific enterprise. The reality is that there is a very wide spectrum of views, which the ASA statement reflects. Furthermore, people often assume that acceptance of evolutionary theory is a function of the "liberalness" of one's theology. On the contrary, as James R Moore observed, in the late 1800s Darwinism was "accepted in substance only by those whose theology was distinctly orthodox" and rejected by those with more liberal theologies (see the preface of *The Post-Darwinian Controversies*).

There is an extensive scholarly record on the philosophical and theological implications of evolutionary theory by Christian scholars. The fruits of these efforts need to be more widely known and discussed. There is a desperate need for the heated conflict that has surrounded the issue of evolution to cool down. The evolution/creation "warfare" view has effectively inhibited productive popular dialogue on important theological and scientific issues — it is now time to finally lay it to rest!

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