

Assumptions, presumptions and the future of faith

A review of
*Living with Darwin:
Evolution, Design, and
the Future of Faith*
by Philip Kitcher
Oxford University Press,
New York, 2007

Lael Weinberger

Philosopher Philip Kitcher published one of the major critiques of young-earth creationism in 1982.¹ Now, 25 years later, he has returned to the subject with a small volume, *Living with Darwin*. The scientific focus is on Intelligent Design (ID) (not surprisingly), but the most important part of the book is Kitcher's examination of evolution's relationship to religion in a broader sense.

Kitcher's case

From the start, Kitcher's approach is different from the familiar Darwinian apologetics of the past several years. Notably, Kitcher dismisses the normal tactic of writing off ID as 'not science'. 'Simply crying "Foul!" ... shouldn't convince a good referee' (p. 11). This is a point that creationists and ID advocates have been pressing for years, and so Kitcher's concession is notable.

Kitcher thinks that ID's right to be dismissed as wrongheaded should not be assumed; 'it must be earned' (p. 11). Kitcher is convinced ID has indeed earned its own dismissal, and so he presents a historical survey to show how Darwinism trumped previous creationist views. First, Genesis reigned as the ascendant interpretation of history. Second, geology 'revealed' an old earth, so Genesis' hold on science was loosened.² At this point, the reigning perspective switched from 'Genesis creationism' to 'novelty creationism', in which God created at various intervals in geologic

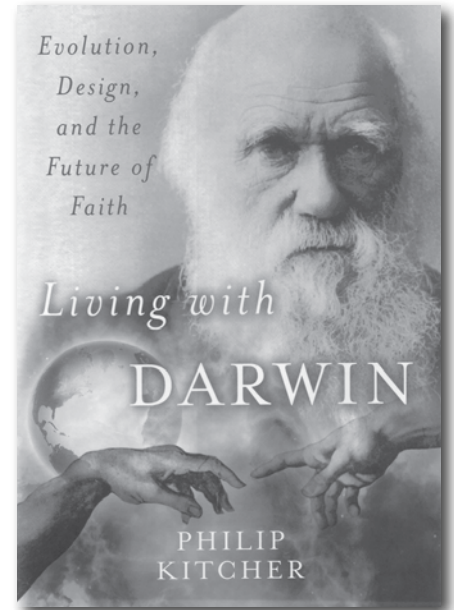
history. Third, Darwin devastatingly critiqued novelty creationism. And finally, Darwin offered in its place a logical, empirically grounded theory of common descent that supposedly explains everything.

Current critics may raise some truly difficult points for Darwinism, Kitcher concedes, but they have their assumptions all wrong. They assume that Darwinism needs to overcome every possible problem before it can be accepted. To the contrary, Kitcher says, Darwinism has *already* explained so much that we *are* justified in presuming that it will be capable of explaining all remaining puzzles.

Kitcher then turns the questions around. Why should we expect that design could give any good explanations for anything? ID theorists suggest that some sort of 'intelligence' did something (because evolution couldn't do it), and here we are. They will not identify 'intelligence', they will not say what it did or how it did it or when it did it or why it did it. In short, aside from very specific criticisms of evolution, there is not much to ID. Not much, except a gigantic opportunity for the religiously inclined to salvage their already-refuted religious tradition by inserting it into ID's intentionally vague 'intelligence'. ID had a time to prove itself, and it proved itself to be dead science. Or so Kitcher's story goes. But all stories have another side, and should be cross-examined (Proverbs 18:17).

The other side of history

The facts of history do not show that the march of scientific progress resulted in empirical evidence disproving the Bible, or that the unbiblical interpretations of the empirical evidence made more sense. Long before geological old ages became popular, Scripture had been unnecessarily separated from science.³ In light of the biblical principle that the



natural tendency of man is to suppress the truth in unrighteousness (Romans 1:18), it only makes sense that reasoning (including science) pursued apart from Scripture will be used by man to try to keep God out of the picture. The turn against Scripture taken by geology, and later, biology, was not the outworking of objective progress, Kitcher's story notwithstanding. It was the outworking of human bias.

To the presuppositional Christian, it is no surprise that the historical adoption of 'novelty creationism' was rife with inconsistencies and arbitrariness. Darwin was quite right to criticize it. As Darwin pointed out, it does not make sense that God created different types of finches *in situ* on different adjacent islands, all of which resemble a common mainland finch.⁴ But notice well what Kitcher is doing: he disposes of Genesis by the time he reaches the mid-nineteenth century, before even getting to Darwin. So when he does get to biological evolution and Darwin, he is pitting it against novelty creationism, not biblical creationism. Of course, it's a knockdown. It's also a straw man as far as young-earth creationists go, for we have never advocated anything like novelty creationism. Indeed, Darwin's finches make sense in a real biblical Creation/Fall/Flood/Dispersion model.⁵

Intelligent design novelties

But Kitcher has a good reason for emphasizing novelty creationism: it has some uncomfortable similarities to ID. Kitcher keeps playing off this theme, and to good effect. Kitcher suggests that ID, like novelty creationism before it, prefers criticizing to theorizing: ID advocates have devoted reams of literature to the errors of evolution, but not much to positive hypotheses about design.

Actually, this is not quite true. ID arguments often have both a positive side and a negative side. For instance, Michael Behe has argued not just that (1) the bacterial flagellum could not have evolved in a Darwinian step-by-step fashion, but also that (2) the flagellum exhibits the characteristics of design.⁶ One is negative; two is positive. The positive argument says that ID makes more explanatory sense than mainstream Darwinian orthodoxy.

But, with this important caveat made, Kitcher does have a point. ID has failed to put forward predictions or hypotheses about when and where we might expect design, or why any given feature was designed. ID suffers from its unwillingness to address these issues head on—an unwillingness engendered by ID's aversion to theology. Biblical creationists have no such aversion. Unlike ID, we have a framework (derived from Scripture) in which we can deal with all the questions Kitcher can pose.

A matter of presumption

Creation and ID are very different when it comes to providing a replacement for evolution, but they are usually united in their critiques of evolution. Kitcher responds to the critiques with vigorous rhetoric, but the root problem is one of presumptions. Kitcher believes that Darwinism has already explained enough to justify confidence that it will eventually explain everything that we still wonder about. But it depends what Darwinism is being compared against. Descent from a common ancestor may fit the evidence much better than 'novelty

creation', and this is all that Darwin himself ever bothered to compare his theory against. The problem is that novelty creation is a bad standard of comparison. It's like comparing two cars in a junkyard. One may be immensely better than another, but the fact is that neither will run. And Kitcher gives us no reasons that we haven't heard a hundred times before to believe that Darwinism will run.⁷

When Kitcher does compare the explanatory power of Darwinism with something more like biblical creation, the arguments again rest on assumptions in favour of Darwinism. For instance, Kitcher assumes the conventional wisdom that the fossil record progresses smoothly from simple to complex, and he challenges creationists to explain why whale fossils don't ever occur before fish fossils. This is incredibly trivial. In the first place, as Kitcher points out in a different context, the fossil record is only fragmentary (pp. 67–68). So by his own reasoning, it is unreasonable for him to expect us to have enough whale fossils to make an adequate comparison. Besides, how many whales are there compared to the number of fish in the oceans today?

Why, if creation was true, would you expect whales to occur lower in geologic deposits than fish, as Kitcher does? It would be a nice difficulty for the Darwinists if that were the case, but the fact is that it isn't a *problem* for us to explain. What about other areas where creatures actually *have* been found out of their evolutionary order and the progression of fossils is *not* smooth?⁸ Kitcher would respond that these are anomalies that cannot disprove the whole theory. But in this case, Kitcher had better rethink his critiques of creation.

Evolution, death and suffering

All of the arguments over the scientific matters are in some respects preliminary to Kitcher's reflections in the final chapter. Kitcher realizes that the creation-evolution debate is charged with implications for the most fundamental questions of the meaning of life. The debate will last as long as there is a conflict between Darwinism and biblical Christianity. Unlike so many leading evolutionary thinkers that have papered over the issue,⁹ Kitcher acknowledges that there *is* a real conflict. In Kitcher's



'Sue' the *T. rex* suffered from an array of injuries and diseases, a symbol of the suffering that pervades the fossil record. Kitcher points out that one of Darwin's major contributions was greatly enlarging the scale on which suffering took place in Earth history.

view, Darwin is just one part of the larger ‘enlightenment case against supernaturalism’ (p. 131). This ‘case against supernaturalism’ is important to Kitcher, and he devotes considerable space to presenting it.

Kitcher starts with the problem of evil (theodicy¹⁰). Death, pain and suffering are in the world now, and in Darwin’s scenario, have always been here. Kitcher presents the argument powerfully:

‘Many people have been troubled by ... suffering ... and have wondered how those pains are compatible with the designs of an all-powerful and loving God. Darwin’s account of the history of life greatly enlarges the scale on which suffering takes place. Through millions of years, billions of animals experience vast amounts of pain, supposedly so that, after an enormous number of extinctions ... on the tip of one twig of the evolutionary tree, there may emerge a species with the special properties that make us able to worship the Creator. ... Moreover, animal suffering isn’t incidental to the unfolding of life, but integral to it’ (p. 123).

It is positively disturbing to contemplate a creator who has

‘... chosen to use these processes to unfold the history of life. The general inefficiency of the process, the extreme length of time, the haphazard sequence of environments, the undirected variations, the cruel competition through which selection so frequently works, is all foreseen’ (p. 125).

This, Kitcher suggests, is Darwin’s great contribution to religion: theodicy on a massive scale.

Believers may try to rationalize the evil to accommodate Darwinism, but even making this effort assumes that there is still good reason to believe in God. This is where the rest of the ‘enlightenment case’ comes in as a critique of ‘all alleged knowledge of supernatural (or transcendent) entities’ (p. 132). With this, Kitcher launches a barrage of classic sceptics’ criticisms of Christianity and religion in general.

New Testament critic

Kitcher’s section on the canon of the New Testament is perhaps most revealing of his attitudes towards religion. He starts with the assertion that the Gospels are ‘incompatible with one another on many points of detail’, and gives as an example the fact that ‘Jesus does similar things and tells similar stories’ but in different places to different people in different order (p. 135). On the face of it, Kitcher’s claim is not too convincing. Certainly, some professors Kitcher knows have told the same stories more than once, to different people at different times. If several different eyewitnesses wrote biographies of that professor, we might find him doing ‘similar things’ and telling ‘similar stories’ in different places to different people in different order, without proving that anything was fabricated. In fact, Kitcher just shows his crass ignorance by such a criticism: as New Testament scholar Tom Wright pointed out,¹¹ whatever a 1st century Jewish teacher like Jesus taught, he would have taught it hundreds of times with minor variations

according to His audience. Different gospel writers sometimes recorded different events, which explains many of the alleged contradictions sceptics raise.

When discussing ID, Kitcher has a fertile imagination and faults the ID advocates for lacking this. When it comes to the New Testament, Kitcher at the very least ought to take his own advice and use a little imagination before using such weak arguments trying to ‘prove’ the document unreliable.

Kitcher’s other arguments on the New Testament are simply regurgitations of the claims of the Jesus Seminar, the demonstrably unreliable,¹² radical liberal wing of popular-level New Testament studies, founded by the antitheist Greek scholar Robert Funk (1926–2005).¹³ For instance, Kitcher claims that the Gospels included in the canon were chosen not for accuracy but for political expediency. But leading New Testament Greek scholar Bruce Metzger (1914–2007) pointed out:

‘You have to understand that the canon was not the result of a



Courtesy of S.M. Davis <drsm@drsm.com>

Is the New Testament historically accurate? Kitcher does himself no credit by drawing heavily on the unreliable Jesus Seminar when he discusses the reliability of Scripture.

series of contests involving church politics. . . . You see, the canon is a list of authoritative books more than it is an authoritative list of books. These documents didn't derive their authority from being selected; each one was authoritative before anyone gathered them together.¹⁴

Kitcher tries to support his conspiracy theory about the canon by claiming that the apocryphal Gospel of Thomas has at least as good a claim for inclusion as any of the canonical gospels. But contrary to Kitcher's sources at the Jesus Seminar, this is hardly established as history. Many scholars (very likely a majority) would tend to date the Gospel of Thomas in the second century, far removed from the events it claims to recount.¹¹ You would never guess that it was even debatable from Kitcher (or the Jesus Seminar¹⁵). Such problems are typical of the Jesus Seminar, and Kitcher's reliance on them should be a significant indication of his own bias.

It is problematic that Kitcher presents his litany of objections to the Gospels as if they represent the 'consensus' of current scholarship, when nothing could be further from the truth. It is even more irritating when Kitcher finally does interact with the 'other side': Kitcher quotes a sentence from a study Bible, dismissing the higher criticisms of the Gospels, then snidely remarks, 'The faithful are given neither an extended account of what the scholarly consensus is, nor of what the "very strong" reasons are for rejecting it' (p. 140). This borders

KITCHER PRESENTS HIS LITANY OF OBJECTIONS TO THE GOSPELS AS IF THEY REPRESENT THE 'CONSENSUS' OF CURRENT SCHOLARSHIP, WHEN NOTHING COULD BE FURTHER FROM THE TRUTH.

on academic dishonesty. Certainly Kitcher knows better than to look for 'extended' scholarly discussions in the notes of a study Bible. If Kitcher wanted to interact with a conservative viewpoint, there are any number of substantial New Testament scholars he could have chosen.¹⁶ For those readers at all familiar with the issues, Kitcher's

excursus into biblical criticism will reflect badly on him.

Comparative religions

When Kitcher moves on to his next argument, he bases it on the idea that he has discredited Scripture's factuality, and on this assumption, argues that all holy books are nothing more than culturally popular traditions. The problem is that he has failed to show that Scripture is not factually accurate. Because of its factuality, it remains *actually different* from the holy books of other religions.

But Kitcher assumes that he has closed his arguments effectively, so he moves on again, considering whether people might have a more direct access to the supernatural than merely 'a tradition originating in the distant past' (p. 144). Kitcher has an easy time pointing out the unreliability of 'supernatural experience'. Yet biblical Christianity does not rest its verification upon supernatural experiences. It rests on Scripture, and because Kitcher cannot debunk the authority, authenticity and reliability of Scripture, it is beside the point that he can show widespread problems with religious experientialism.¹⁷

Moving on once more, Kitcher argues that believers cannot even turn to 'faith' as an affirmation of something without reason. To hold a

belief without reason, when that belief determines conduct, is unethical. Here, we can agree with Kitcher up to a point. Biblical faith is not a leap into

the absurd,¹⁸ and is not opposed to reason and rationality—Jesus' greatest command was, 'Love the Lord your God will all your ... mind' (Matthew 22:37–38 and Mark 12:30). But while Kitcher was right that it is 'unethical' to act without reason, he fails to realize that it is *he* who lacks reason. A Christian has a reason, in Scripture

itself, to reason! "Come now, and let us reason together," says the LORD' (Isaiah 1:18); 'Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have' (1 Peter 3:15).

Kitcher, who by the end of this section openly declares himself 'a secular humanist' (p. 154), does not give an answer. He fails to tell us what foundation he has for making value judgments, for instance, that irrationality is unethical. In fact, he fails to tell us why, as an evolutionist, he believes he can trust his own reasoning process, which after all was merely evolved for survival benefit, not truth.¹⁹

Kitcher does not acknowledge any room for further debate. Instead, he says, 'The line of argument that I have developed ... shows Christianity in retreat' (p. 149). This is hardly the case—Kitcher has actually been piling one unfinished argument on top of another. He sees the case against the supernatural as closed, but not necessarily the case against religion. Unlike 'Darwin's most militant defenders' (p. 151), Kitcher believes that religion may survive as what he calls 'spiritual religion' (p. 152), a completely non-literal belief system without God Himself.

Whatever is to be done, Kitcher says that we as a society cannot afford to lose what 'religion' has so long offered to people: a sense of belonging, a community of caring, a selfless concern and help for the oppressed.

'... the challenge is to find a way to respond to the human purposes religion serves without embracing the falsehoods ... of traditional religions. We need to make secular humanism responsive to our deepest impulses and needs, or to find ... a ... spiritual religion that will not collapse back into parochial supernaturalism' (p. 162).

Kitcher is very concerned that emotional and social needs be met along with the intellectual needs.

With this, Kitcher concludes the book with the hope that by ‘going beyond supernaturalism ... we can live with Darwin, after all’ (p. 166).

Kitcher’s conclusion is interesting because Kitcher, unlike many more militant humanists, recognizes that the absence of religion (and by religion he really has Christianity in mind) would leave a void in society itself.²⁰ This ought to raise some questions about the real-world workability of secularism. Christianity led to science, technology and hospitals, ended slavery and protected women, to name a few accomplishments.²¹ Full-blown secular humanism has few original accomplishments, except for rather unflattering examples such as Marxism (responsible for the deaths of some 85 to 100 million people²²).

For what it’s worth

Overall, *Living with Darwin* was easy to read and easy to follow. Kitcher is a genial writer, a stark contrast to the bombastic rants we have come to expect from secularism’s best-selling writers (Dawkins, Harris and Hitchens). Yet beneath Kitcher’s veneer of cordiality lies an all-too-typical antitheistic aloofness. The discussion of ID contained nothing particularly original, nothing that has not already received responses from the ID camp. The discussion of young-earth creation was pitifully dismissive and abounded with sophistries (including tired old canards about fitting the animals on the Ark). The presentation of the ‘enlightenment case’ was totally unfair to the other side and rife with misrepresentation.

Still, *Living with Darwin* is worth reading for at least one aspect of Kitcher’s discussion of Darwinism and Christianity. Kitcher demonstrates the basic incompatibility between Darwinism and any traditional reading of Scripture. His powerful description of the problem of death and suffering should cause any Christian to think twice before embracing the compatibility of Christianity and Darwinism.

References

1. *Abusing Science*, MIT Press, Cambridge, 1982. See the creationist response in Gish, D.T., *Creation Scientists Answer Their Critics*, Institute for Creation Research, El Cajon, CA, 1993.
2. Things were not really so simple: for another perspective on the geological history, see Mortenson, T., *The Great Turning Point*, Master Books, Green Forest, AR, 2004.
3. See Mortenson, ref. 2, pp. 21–22.
4. See summaries of Darwin’s notebooks in Larson, E.J., *Evolution*, Modern Library, New York, pp. 63–64, 2004.
5. See further Sarfati, J., *Refuting Evolution*, Master Books, Green Forest, AR, pp. 42–45, 1999.
6. Behe, M., *Darwin’s Black Box*, Free Press, New York, 1996.
7. See Holding, J.P., ‘Not to be used again’: homologous structures and the presumption of originality as a critical value, *Journal of Creation* **21**(1):13–14, 2007; <www.creationontheweb.com/homologous>.
8. For examples, see Woodmorappe, J., The fossil record: becoming more random all the time, *Journal of Creation* **14**(1):110–116, 2000, and Woodmorappe, J., Walking whales, nested hierarchies, and chimeras: do they exist? *Journal of Creation* **16**(1):111–119, 2002.
9. Stephen Jay Gould (who claimed that religion and science could not conflict because they occupied different domains) comes to mind as a notable example. So does the National Academy of Science. Despite a preponderance of antitheists, their new booklet *Science, Evolution and Creationism* is big on asserting a ‘no conflict’ thesis, but then recommends this book by Kitcher! See CMI’s detailed rebuttal <www.creationontheweb.com/nas>, February 2008.
10. Literally meaning, the ‘defense’ or ‘justification’ of God. Since Leibniz (1646–1716), this term has often been used generally for the discussion of the problem of evil in theology. O’Collins, G. and Farrugia, E.G., *A Concise Dictionary of Theology*, Paulist Press, New York, p. 262, 2000.
11. Wright, N.T., *The New Testament and the People of God*, SPCK, London / Fortress Press, Minneapolis, MN, pp. 422 ff., 1992.
12. See Craig, W.L., Rediscovering the historical Jesus: the presuppositions and presumptions of the Jesus Seminar, *Faith and Mission* **15**:3–15, 1998.
13. On his antitheism, for which Darwinism was integral, see his own theses: Funk, R.W., The coming radical reformation: twenty-one theses, <www.westarinstitute.org/Periodicals/4R_Articles/Funk_Theses/funk_theses.html>, 1998.
14. Metzger, B., interviewed in Strobel, L., *The Case for Christ*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 1998.
15. See Hays, R.B., The corrected Jesus, *First Things*, May 1994, online at <www.firstthings.com/article.php3?id_article=4452>.
16. Such as William Lane Craig, or Ben Witherington, or most certainly N.T. Wright, the most prolific scholarly critic of the Jesus Seminar and its claims. See Wright, ref. 11; *The Challenge of Jesus: Rediscovering Who Jesus Was and Is*, Intervarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL, 1999; Five Gospels but no Gospel: Jesus and the Seminar, in Chilton, B. and Evans, C.A. (Eds.), *Authenticating the Activities of Jesus*, Brill, Leiden, 83–120, 1999, online at <www.ntwrightpage.com/Wright_Five_Gospels.pdf>.
17. The book of Deuteronomy itself warns of the dangers of such an approach to faith (Deuteronomy 13:1–5).
18. Terminology popularized by Søren Kierkegaard. For a concise overview of how this fit into Kierkegaard’s thought, see McCullough, L., Kierkegaard; in: Taylor, V.E. and Winqvist, C.E. (eds.), *Encyclopedia of Postmodernism*, Routledge, London, p. 202, 2001.
19. This brain-twister has very rarely been addressed by evolutionists. Michael Ruse is one of the few who has tried to answer this challenge, and while he has not solved the problem, I do appreciate his willingness to deal with this important issue. See Ruse, M., *Darwinism and Its Discontents*, Cambridge University Press, New York, pp. 245–248, 2006, and my critique of his book, Weinberger, L., Still discontent, *Journal of Creation* **21**(3):35, 2007.
20. Compare Theodore Dalrymple, a doctor and critic of destructive socialist policies in the West, who describes himself as an unbeliever but is highly critical of leading atheist apologists: What the new atheists don’t see: to regret religion is to regret Western civilization, *City Journal*, Autumn 2007; <www.city-journal.org/html/17_4_oh_to_be.html>.
21. Stark, R., *For the Glory of God: How monotheism led to reformations, science, witch-hunts and the end of slavery*, Princeton University Press, 2003; see also review by Williams, A., The biblical origins of science, *Journal of Creation* **18**(2):49–52, 2004; <www.creationontheweb.com/stark>.
22. See Pipes, R., *Communism: A History*, Modern Library, New York, p. 158, 2001.