

Confiding in “God’s Word,” Confirming through “Man’s Word”: The Intersection of Religious
and Scientific Discourse among Kentuckian Evangelical Creationists

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On the bitter, icy evening of February 4, 2014, spectators packed into an auditorium in northern Kentucky to witness Bill Nye the Science Guy debate Ken Ham, a founder of the Creation Museum and the current CEO of Answers in Genesis (AiG), an organization committed to defending a “young-earth” model of creation in place of Darwinian evolution. For over two hours Nye and Ham exchanged barbs over various lines of scientific evidence of the past, from geological and stratigraphic dating techniques to molecular biology and astronomical cosmology. The formal question of the debate—namely, whether creationism is a “viable model” of human origins in today’s society—alludes to the implicit epistemological problem raised therein. Although not couched in these terms, the debate boiled down not to the quotidian operation of science (that is, the actual procedures by which scientific knowledge is, to a better or worse degree, produced) but to the axiomatic assumptions governing what constitutes proper evidence in the first place and, I suggest, the role that the idea of “science” plays at the discursive level.

It was in this context and the aftermath of this debate that I conducted ethnographic research this past summer in the vicinity of the Creation Museum, located just outside the town of Petersburg, Kentucky. The Museum’s displays employ an almost whimsical fusion of religious and scientific language that seems, at first, to obliterate any notion of the Augustinian compromise to separate religious from mundane affairs in the City of God and the City of Man, respectively. On closer examination, though, the distance between religious and scientific ways of knowing remain, if only in a different configuration. Based on one part of my fieldwork, I argue here that in the context of the Museum’s rhetoric, religion and science are presented as two interrelated ways of knowing, with the former being the ultimate basis for the latter. Rather than excluding one another, as is commonly thought, the Christians I met posit the category of religion—in their case evangelical Christianity—as the foundation for all science, which flows

rationally from the “starting points” proffered by religion. A conflict between science and religion only appears when the religion is not viewed as such but fades into unarticulated assumptions: that is, when what they call a hidden, anti-God religion underpins secular, mainstream science. It is by engaging with evolutionary science *as a religion* that these creationists are able to contest traditional divisions between science and religion and justify the association of biblical knowledge with scientific process in the marketplace of ideas. In organizing this paper, I first set the ethnographic stage on which I will be trying to reenact these debates and discourses of science and religion. I then clarify some of my own theoretical starting points and methodology before examining the discourse of the Museum and AiG. Finally, I conclude with some thoughts on the role of anthropology and outside disciplines in the study of creationism.

The Creation Museum, which is run by the cross-denominational ministry AiG, takes visitors on a grand tour through key narratives presented in the first eleven chapters of the book of Genesis. After passing through a lobby with various artifacts and displays in the style of a natural history museum, visitors immediately encounter exhibits that lay out AiG’s vision of the intersection of science and religion. The majority of the themes discussed in this paper are portrayed in these first few halls. Only after this theoretical and epistemological background, so to speak, has been laid, are museum-goers taken back in time to a dramatic filmic interpretation of the six-day creation narrative from Genesis 1. The rest of the Museum consists of a chronological movement through what AiG calls the seven “C”s of history, from the creation of the universe to corruption (that is, the Fall of humanity in the Garden of Eden), catastrophe (Noah’s Flood), confusion (the dispersal of nations at the Tower of Babel), followed by the post-Genesis redemptive stages of Christ, cross, and consummation very briefly in the last room of

the Museum (as a film called *The Last Adam*, a reference to Jesus as the one who ends the suffering brought about by the first Adam in the creation narrative, thus bringing the mythic narrative of the Bible full-circle). While visitors of any faith are welcome at the Creation Museum, the majority of guests are Christians who come on family vacations or church-sponsored trips, with the signs of Christian faith being inscribed on the bumpers and sides of the vehicles that carry them to northern Kentucky. Although the primary audience may be Christian, as indicated in the Bill Nye debate, AiG engages discursively with a wider secular audience in the hopes of gaining new converts.

Before I move forward with my argument I'd like to explicate and draw attention to some of my operative assumptions, as these have important implications for the kind of argument I am making. In terms of the level at which I will be talking, in my work here I am not concerned with the objective truth of propositional statements made by Museum speakers or with the supposed "misuse" of science as means to nefarious ends. I start with the assumption that the practice and discourse of science, as a social product, always articulates with a host of broader processes and domains, such as economics, morality, and religion. While these categories are not mutually exclusive and indeed are themselves social constructions (see Saler 1987 for an example of "religion" as a historically contingent, Western category), I am interested in how particular communities' notions of science and religion intersect, as well as how these communities converse with others with potentially different understandings of these same domains. In other words, I am concerned with what happens when communication occurs (or, as it sometimes happens, fails to occur) between groups that evince starkly different epistemologies and even different definitions of science and religion.

My approach in answering this question consisted primarily of a combination of participant observation and interviews. During my stay in Kentucky I attended church services at an independent Baptist congregation in the vicinity of and closely allied with the Creation Museum (referred to hereafter simply as the “Museum”). There I was able to witness the rhetoric of fundamentalist Protestant Christianity and their self-conscious articulation with the surrounding “secular” world, often caged in oppositional terms. Additionally, over the course of six days I spent time touring the Museum in a visitor’s role, recording the visual and linguistic discourse with which AiG uses this semi-public space to impart its message and interact with visitors. To get a better sense of how AiG conveys its message, I also attended a four-day event called Creation College 4, which taught participants how to defend biblical authority and the young-earth creationism promoted by the Museum. In this talk I mostly describe the language and ways of knowing displayed by representatives of the Museum and AiG. The church at which I conducted ethnographic fieldwork was the site of a similar integration of science and religion. However, there were some differences in the elaboration of epistemological questions; consequently, what I describe here refers only to the discourse sponsored by AiG, even though it overlapped extensively with churches outside the Museum. As a kind of shorthand, I use the term “AiG” as a grammatical subject to refer to the carefully crafted official message presented at the Museum, on the official AiG website, and through endorsed speakers at Creation College 4. This usage runs the risk of implying that AiG speaks with a completely monolithic voice, but to facilitate my thesis, it is a risk I am forced to take, with the caveat that even within AiG’s rhetoric some tensions and disagreements occasionally emerge.

As mentioned in the quick overview of the Museum, the first thing visitors encounter once they enter the main exhibits is a sleek presentation of the foundation of AiG’s

epistemological argument. These first displays invite guests onto a recreated paleontological dig site with evolutionary scientists—who accept what is referred to as “millions-of-years” Darwinian processes at work—excavating alongside creation scientists, or those who believe the Earth to be approximately 6,000 years old. A narrated video and corresponding artifactual displays explain that both groups have the same evidence and look at the same fossils. The reason, Museum visitors are told, that they come to different conclusions about the age of the fossils is that they have different “starting points.” While creationists begin with what is called “God’s Word,” meaning a literal interpretation of the whole Bible (with a special emphasis on the first few chapters of Genesis), secular scientists generally begin with “Man’s Word,” a human pronouncement that ignores the cosmological claims found in the Bible and replaces them with an attitude of hubristic conviction in science’s power alone. In this type of rhetoric, which is repeated in the next room of the Museum as reinforcement, science as a process is separated out from the starting points, or assumptions, that Christians and secularists bring to their interpretations.

Since the actual processes of science itself—the use of observational, empirical data to support new conclusions about how the natural world works—are recognized as the same, AiG concedes that both evolutionary science and creation science are rational. But the system of explanation as a whole makes sense if and only if the assumptions are accepted. This kind of argument evokes a similar point made by the British anthropologist Evans-Pritchard in his 1937 monograph on witchcraft among the Azande. His intervention was not to write off witchcraft beliefs as inherently irrational or even, echoing Lévy-Bruhl (1947 [1922]), to posit them as a different form of rationality entirely. Rather, Zande witchcraft accusations make sense when a social actor assumes that all misfortunes must be caused by human agents. It is important to bear

in mind that Evans-Pritchard did not himself take witchcraft to be real, as he did not accept the Zande axiom about unfortunate events. Nevertheless, he implicitly showed that two systems can be equally rational in terms of their logical processes even if they come to radically different (or, in his view, factually wrong) conclusions. In other words, if two people begin with separate axiomatic starting points, then they can simply follow them out logically and reach two entirely different conclusions from the same data. In the case of the Creation Museum, this means that, on the one hand, fossils may be evidence of gradual change over millions of years, while on the other they reveal a global catastrophe caused by God's dissatisfaction with human immorality. Thus, somewhat surprisingly, AiG establishes parity between the rationality of both secular evolutionary theories and young-earth creationism.

However, they do not leave it at that; the Museum does not simply present two possible worldviews and suggest they are equally moral or true. Like Evans-Pritchard, they favor the validity of one system's starting assumptions over the other. Having suggested that secular assumptions are of the same kind—exist on the same plane—as religious ones, AiG is able to contest secular ones and replace them with those of Christianity. This exchange occurs partly through pointing out inconsistencies and scientific problems with evolutionary models. The philosophy behind this move is that even though scientists cannot prove or disprove axiomatic starting points directly, they can find support for one or the other in whether they produce results consistent with empirical reality. For instance, AiG claims that if fossils are actually millions of years old, they should contain fewer remnants of soft tissue than they actually do. Hence, they position the evolutionary view as less responsive to the evidence than a creationist perspective.

This intellectual move also carries a moral valence: After being presented with the starting assumptions of creationists and evolutionists, guests confront vivid depictions of the

social consequences of evolutionary thinking, which range from teenage pregnancy, drug abuse, and euthanasia to murder and even World War II Nazi genocide. While AiG is careful not to link evolution to each of these phenomena directly, it indicates that the same human-centric assumptions (Man's Word) that propel evolutionary science also produce myriad forms of social suffering. All of these consequences of evolutionary thinking, which range from the distasteful to the horrific, function to illustrate the drawbacks of one worldview versus another, not simply at the philosophical level but at the moral, visceral level.

Even if the coinciding of religion and science at the Museum demonstrates that they are at least seen as not incompatible, the question still remains whether within this cosmological scheme religious and scientific ways of knowing are taken to be ultimately incommensurable. One way to answer this question is to look at the micro-level of language at which AiG articulates these concepts. At the Creation College 4 conference, a piece of advice stressed was that creationist speakers should never argue that science "proves" the Bible is true; instead, they should say science "confirms" the Bible. To say that science proves the Bible would indicate it to be something that could be proved or disproved depending on external criteria: that it was up for debate to begin with. With the notion of confirmation, though, found in books and speaking materials by Ken Ham and other AiG evangelists, they can draw attention to the consistencies between religious and scientific knowledge while not submitting the Bible to the judgment of science.

But what about the key characteristic of science as a *falsifiable* way of knowing? If science is partly defined as a process whereby knowledge that may, depending on empirical evidence, be proven true or false, then how could an *unshakable* faith in God play any part in what we call science? In answering this question, AiG turns the tables by focusing their gaze

back onto mainstream science. Even scientists who are ideally objective must take some assumptions for granted, assumptions that are not themselves falsifiable, even if the empirical results that flow from them may be. As Ella Butler (2010) points out, in making this critique, AiG's discourse shares some affinity with parallel moves in the anthropological and science-and-technology-studies literature showing that science as actually practiced is not as impartial as it presents itself but rather as always mediated by cultural assumptions. While AiG would not likely subscribe completely to this view (since it would weaken their own claims to absolute knowledge), in this instance they happen to coincide with and utilize to their advantage STS critiques of science as more subjective than it would superficially appear.

A curious consequence of putting Christian and secular scientific assumptions on a level playing field is that evolution itself becomes positioned as a religion. At the end of each interview I conducted I would ask people, regardless of their religious background, whether they thought atheism was a religion. I had formulated the question in response to a line repeated by AiG in multiple venues that atheism and evolution are part of a "religion of death." While the people not affiliated with or sympathetic to the Museum reconciled atheism and religion in diverse ways, those who allied themselves with AiG's message invariably described atheism as a religion according to their own definition, thus echoing the Museum's rhetoric. At the risk of oversimplifying, I suggest that AiG argues not that evolutionary science and creation science are both science at heart but that they are both ultimately grounded in religion. To suggest that science could potentially overthrow the Bible as a source of authority is to conflate distinct epistemological levels: Since science depends on a more fundamental axiomatic level, the selection of particular axioms determines the contours of that specific version of science. That is, science and religion are not interchangeable, commensurable ways of knowing, even if there is a

dependence relation between them and even if they come to similar conclusions. To use AiG's rhetoric, we ought to confide through faith in God's Word, but we can still "confirm" that knowledge, in a secondary way, through Man's Word, at least that which uses human-based scientific techniques that accord as much as possible with the assumptions posited by "God's Word." Nevertheless, this human knowledge is still, at the end of the day, only secondary, dependent on a religious way of knowing.

The argument that I have been developing so far establishes two epistemological levels. The first, more primary, level is that of worldview, or axiomatic "starting points" encapsulated in the terms juxtaposed by AiG of "God's Word" and "Man's Word." The second is the scientific, empirical way of knowing that relies upon a scientist's starting points. Thus, AiG consciously moves the debate from one over the value of empirical science to one over the choice of axiomatic worldview. Despite the move away from quarreling over science *per se*, science may be employed as an evangelistic tool to not only show people the "marvels of creation" but to provide an impetus for people to come into the Museum. As Ken Ham frequently says, dinosaurs, which feature prominently throughout the Museum, serve as a great evangelistic tool, as kids and adults alike are fascinated by them. He points out that most natural history museums use dinosaur displays to impart a sense of time reaching back millions of years, a symbol of evolution. In self-reflectively co-opting this symbol, AiG engenders a role reversal in which now fossils can be used to communicate biblical truths, a proverbial "handmaiden of religion."

On a deeper level, though, the need to resort to science at all in the deployment of the Gospel message points toward the sheer power of science as a way of knowing in the twenty-first century. Jumping back momentarily to the large-scale power of "science" as a discourse, I follow Stanley Tambiah (1990) in drawing attention to the power of science to impose on or invade

other so-called domains of knowledge. As he writes in the conclusion to his Lewis Henry Morgan lectures, “Science invades the economy, the economy invades politics, and now politics is alleged to inform us on morality, choice and the values to live by. And there’s the rub” (1990:150). Not only can science ultimately invade morality, at which Tambiah cautions us, but it is powerful enough also to reach religion. It is seen as so pervasive that it must be addressed when making knowledge claims, without being able to rely wholly on religious ways of knowing. When Christopher Toumey (1994) conducted ethnographic fieldwork among young-earth creationists in North Carolina in the 1980s, he concluded that his interlocutors needed to address science rather than make knowledge claims independent of it, as religious groups have done in the past. In fact, they appropriated the credibility ascribed to science as a way to increase the appeal of their own position among the secular public. Again, the operative idea is that evangelists who live in a secular, fallen world must be conversant in science in order to speak in the idiom of those they hope to convert. To bring people to higher spiritual truths, God’s people must sometimes engage with the science of this world.

I’d like to end with three brief thoughts that, in one way or another, relate to my home discipline.¹ First, a strength of anthropology is its ability to utilize particular or, to use a somewhat problematic term, “local” discourses to shed light on the fuller possibilities of human action, in this case the possibilities for imagining science and religion. I hope that my ethnographic work with a particular community of creationists can expand the scope of what it means to articulate empiricism and faith within an overarching secular community. I am less interested in science and religion as universal categories but rather in how people conceptualize them in a certain setting. Second, this research in general, and the epistemological argument I

¹ I thank the participants and attendees for their constructive comments on the work, especially Professor Ahmed Ragab at Harvard Divinity School and Lan Li of the MIT program in History, Anthropology, and Science, Technology, and Society.

have presented here in particular, remains a work in progress and, as such, is open to revision. I am especially eager for feedback from this interdisciplinary audience, and I hope that hearing perspectives from outside anthropology can strengthen my work and direct my attention to matters that might remain invisible to an anthropologist. Finally, I want to end on a note of gratitude to the people whose words I have tried to reanimate. Acknowledging the friendship and contributions of informants in an anthropologist's work is commonplace to the point of being trite, yet in the case of my work—which features, in a sense, a religious minority marginalized by wide swatches of academia—it becomes especially vital to convey. Not only do I hold a debt to all the Christians I met in Kentucky, since without them there would be no research project at all; at a deeper level, they proved themselves to be more compassionate, helpful, and welcoming than I think is commonly acknowledged. I encourage us to keep in mind behind the sometimes-vitriolic debate between creation and evolution lie real people with strengths and faults, who simply want people to listen with an open mind and an open heart. This project, besides being an intellectual endeavor, is a step in this direction.

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