

Faith and Fact: The Challenge of Creationism

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 August 3, 2008

I am at the Creation Museum in Petersburg, Kentucky with my six year old son looking at a life size diorama the depicts human children peacefully playing outside next to dinosaurs. My old high school friend Pat says, "Wow, I have to get a photo of this." Click. He smiles and moves on. I whisper to my son "Honey, you know dinosaurs and humans never lived at the same time? This didn't happen." He replies "Yes, Mom." We move on. How did I get here?

My old friend Pat, now Professor Patrick Ross, evolutionary biologist came to town for a conference and told me of his deep desire to go to the Creation Museum in between meetings. I agreed, and then almost cancelled the trip when I realized I would have my son with me. Six year olds are impressionable. This is a museum, from what I had heard, a professional, well-executed museum. I asked Pat if he could remedy any scientific inconsistencies in child appropriate language. He assured me that he could and would.

The Creation Museum opened just over a year ago in northern Kentucky. Its founder, Australian Ken Ham, also manages Answers in Genesis, an educational organization that promotes the religious theory of creationism with magazines, books, seminars, and now a museum. Creationism is a specific Christian religious belief, and, as I learned, there are different types of creationists. Pat explained this to me with great enthusiasm as we walked along, "Oh, they are 'Young Earth Creationists.'"

Young Earth Creationists (YEC) believe in a literal interpretation of the Bible. God is all powerful and human obedience is required. Faith in Jesus is part of God's eternal plan. In addition, they believe that God created the universe in six days and it is six thousand years old. Thus the Creation Museum depicts dinosaurs living alongside humans. It then shows a great flood, the flood from the biblical story of Noah's Ark, wiping out life on earth, including all dinosaurs not preserved in the ark.

Yes, I said "dinosaurs not preserved in the ark." We walked by a diorama of Noah's Ark and Pat exclaimed "Oh look Sharon, dinosaurs in the ark. I have to get a picture of this." Click. As he walked away I tried to take in dinosaurs in the ark. I am looking at an ark with dinosaurs in one cubicle. OK.

I am trying to accurately describe what is displayed at the museum. Pat was taking pictures, I was taking notes. We were quite the pair. But some of what I remember is confusing and I don't want to misrepresent creationism. It helps that my notes say things like "Noah's flood covered the world 4,300 years ago," "the universe was created in six days in 6000 years," and here is a couple of quotes from the museum "archeology has repeatedly confirmed that the Bible's historical details are accurate," and "scripture compromised in the church leads to scripture compromised in the home." The one on archeology surprised me.

For example, there is no historical evidence that the Israelites lived in Egypt, were in captivity in Egypt, or fled Egypt. For me, this fact has no affect on either the power of the stories of Moses, Exodus and Passover or my appreciation of them. Nor does it affect my ability to learn from them or be moved by them. In addition, I am open to the possibility that someday archeological evidence will be uncovered that the Israelites were in Egypt or left Egypt. Being able to hold all of this in respectful tension and potential requires faith.

What is faith? The creationists believe that faith is displayed in obedience to God and the resurrection of Jesus. The museum repeatedly tells this story over and over again. There are charts that divide “human reason” on one side from “God’s word” on the other side. We are shown that the flood was a global catastrophe judgment against human disobedience. We are told that Adam disobeyed the Creator (several life sized dioramas of Adam and Eve and the serpent). We are told that God’s word offers hope and that human disobedience explains catastrophes, disease, suffering, and death.

There is a rather grim section entitled “Culture in Crisis” that shows video clips including a woman crying out (I think in childbirth), a tornado, then magazine ads on Terry Schiavo, stem cell research, and gay marriage. Museum goers then walk through a dark, gritty urban scene. The message is that these issues and problems are the result of human disobedience to God’s will. I became sincerely confused by some things such as imaging a tornado having any relation to evolution or God’s will. And since I don’t see gay marriage as an issue or problem I kept thinking “That is a problem you have that I don’t understand and it is not a problem except that you choose to make it one.” This section displayed a fear of diversity, suffering, and change, including things we can’t understand like why innocent people die in natural disasters. Which indicates stronger, loving faith, that natural disasters are caused by God or that natural disasters are a random mystery that cause human suffering?

I began to wonder if Creationists have less, rather than more faith. Isn’t faith a belief in things that can’t be proven or aren’t yet known? Isn’t faith something we choose to believe in the absence of full knowledge or facts? Why do Creationists works so hard to create facts for their faith? Does this demonstrate an underlying lack of faith? It does seem to show an underlying fear of many.

Here is where I am sympathetic. It is not easy to always know “right” from “wrong.” The world is a very complex place. For example, is capital punishment, a form of murder, justified when a mentally sound adult commits pre-meditated murder? What does it mean that mentally sound adults commit murder? There is a murder in the first family of the Bible, Cain murders Able. I don’t need to believe that this story is factually true or a story of human disobedience in order to understand that it speaks to the complexity of the human condition. “Am I my brother’s keeper?” Haunting, real, ambiguous. Yes, no, sometimes, only when he is in trouble but not when he needs to learn the lesson for himself and I am not in control of him and can’t stop him from hurting another?

This is the same reason that I don’t need to believe that the Exodus factually happened. It doesn’t matter if it factually happened. Is slavery wrong and real? Yes. Have humans been kept as slaves throughout history, even today? Yes. Have they struggled, lost, suffered cruelly and unfairly, and fought again for freedom? Yes. Have a handful beaten the odds and escaped. Yes. Are we, as the Passover *Haggadah* tells us,

all in chains if somewhere someone is not free? Yes. This is the interdependent web of life.

Perhaps my greatest struggle with the Creation Museum (other than humans living alongside dinosaurs) is that it lacks poetry and the ability to make meaning. The Bible is a magnificent scripture because of its mystery and poetry. “Am I my brother’s keeper?” How many stories can be spun from this one question? Ask it at different times in your life and you will come up with different, relevant answers. The ancient Jewish tradition of Torah study encourages new and varied interpretations of every Biblical story. The stories are real, instructional, and open questions. To reduce the story of Adam and Eve down to a story about human disobedience and sin ignores major parts of the story. It is also a story about relationships, truth, blame, responsibility, control, power, ignorance, curiosity, knowledge, maturity and childhood. The serpent never lies in the story of Adam and Eve yet the character of God refrains from telling the truth about all the trees in the garden. Why? Adam blames Eve for his own choices. Why?

At lunch Pat and I discussed these challenges to religion and science. Pat told me that he regularly discusses evolution and creationism in his college biology classes because his students have so many questions about it. He notes that his students want to be certain about religion and science, to know what is true and false. He continually suggests to his students that they observe the knowns, unknowns, and potentials in both before making decisions.

Here is a question, is faith dependent on scientific proof? If so, what happens when the science makes a new discovery? Is the faith incorrect? Here is another question, what happens when once believed scientific theories are proven wrong or changed due to new discoveries? Are all scientific ideas wrong?

People hold onto both science and religion as foundations while the winds of life blow and blow. Yet the larger reality is that blowing winds constantly reveal new angles and information. I asked Pat, “Doesn’t science also depend on faith?” Scientists regularly work with theories that may or may not be true. Scientists who run experiments need to be curious, open, even to the point of disproving their own theories. Pat told me that to scientists, their ideas and theories are like children, and it is often hard for scientists to throw them out when proven wrong. He agreed with me that the best scientists are curious to the point of having faith in the journey that creates any outcome. They are open to change and new developments. They follow the facts wherever they lead, even if it is away from a cherished idea or theory. The best scientists have a strong faith in whatever will be revealed through observation of what is known. I began to wonder if at times scientists have greater “faith” than people who follow religion only if that religion can be proven by literal facts.

To be open to faith is to be out there, open to transformation. Open to personal evolution. In this spirit I tried to visit the Creation Museum. I did not go to mock the people in attendance. The parking lot was full the license plates that told me people drove hundreds of miles just to visit. While driving there with my son I tried to explain to him what he was about to see and what I thought about it. “Adam, you know we are going to a museum today with Pat. You will need to use your thinking brain at this museum because not all things in it are true. Please remember this when you go to a museum or someone tells you something or you see something on television. Not all things are true and you need to use your thinking brain. Mommy does not believe

everything in this museum. However, we need to be respectful of all the people in this museum and those believe in what it says because as Unitarian Universalists we believe that everyone is special. If you have any questions just ask me. My son said “No Mommy, I am going to ask Pat, he is a scientist.” My son did fine. He really enjoyed the jumping house and the outdoor “Paint a Dinosaur” exhibit.

My observation is that the Creation Museum contains a lot of fear, about difference, suffering, cruelty, death, change, and at times this fear leads to intolerance of what is perceived by creationists to be different. The need for such certainty and obedience can only be matched by a fear of change and uncertainty and the world is a constantly changing, uncertain place. Life is change. At times, like this past Sunday, it makes me afraid. I try to hold my fear in balance with my faith in the potential of life while accepting change, however that develops. This is a challenge. I have great compassion and sympathy for all of us in this human condition.

In working with Creationists or creationist messages, fear is readily available, but not productive. Another friend of mine went through the museum and felt personally attacked when she reached the “culture in crisis” section. I think she felt the creationist fear and it sparked her own fears of their intolerance. I am sympathetic to her own fears, living with attempts to place the Ten Commandments on public property, and hate crimes committed against people perceived as different, such as gays and lesbians and the Unitarian Universalists who support them. The irrational hate and fear is a reality. But it does not need to be our chosen way of living. When you meet fear with fear you have, fear. That’s not going to change or improve anything.

Creationists don’t want anything to change although everything changes all the time which adds to their fear. Creationists live in a continual cycle of fear, obedience; change happens anyway so fear again. I imagine that someone who believes the universe was created in six days six thousand years ago will be staying with that idea for a while, even a lifetime.

The problem for me is when this idea is suggested as a scientific theory appropriate for public school. Creationism is not based on scientific fact. It selectively uses certain facts and disregards other facts. Creationism is a religious belief and religion as belief is not an appropriate topic for any public school class. The history of religion and religious thought, preferably a variety of religions, is an appropriate, necessary topic in public schools. The difference is teaching religion as history, not right belief or truth, because we have constitutional protections on this issue. I was interested to see that the fine print on the Creation Museum membership brochure notes “due to IRS regulations, Creation Museum membership and passes are not tax-deductible.” The IRS must consider the Creation Museum a facility that promotes a religious belief.

We also need to clearly state our position on issues, not in a reactive way, but consistently in our language. I believe in the inherent worth and dignity of all people. I teach my son that all people are special, and we need to see past hate and fear to what is special, humanity. This summer that lesson has included creationists.

Ultimately, faith cannot rely on facts because by the very nature of the meaning of faith, facts cannot validate it. Faith is a belief in things unknown, unseen, and unproven. Therefore facts aren’t an accurate measurement. Which doesn’t mean that faith is wrong? It is human nature to have faith. Regardless of theology, all of us have some degree of faith. You believe you will be alive at the end of this day. You believe people

are mostly good. You believe in God. You believe in the potential of science. Everyone has faith in something. Facts can change faith, but they can't prove or disprove faith, regardless of dioramas, museums, or well-reasoned argument.

I don't think a productive response to Creationism is a "No" to their "Yes" or a "Yes" to their "No." A productive response is to authentically be who we are, attempting to respect all and engaging in a free and responsible search for truth and meaning in our attempts to create justice, equity, and compassion in human relations. We will not like everything, and we do not have to. We will not agree with everything, and we do not have to. We will not control everything, and we do not have to. Be who you are, and live our faith yesterday, today, and tomorrow, to the best of your ability.