

Is Evolution Compatible with the Christian Faith?

Liverpool Cathedral - 8th March 2005

A Brief Report

The main speakers in this debate were Rev. Dr. John Polkinghorne KBE, FRS, Canon Theological of the Liverpool Cathedral and John Mackay, International Director of Creation Research. The chairman was Roger Phillips of BBC Radio Mersyside. The Cathedral staff estimated that around 1100 people attended the evening, about three times the number they had expected and many more than had been present at any previous debate held there.

In his opening presentation, John Polkinghorne gave his reasons for accepting present-day scientific thinking as the authority through which the Bible should be understood. Basing his thoughts on the “Two Books” (Nature and Revelation) approach to science and Christianity, he argued that what is commonly believed to be revealed in the “Book of Nature” should prescribe how the Bible is interpreted, the earth’s history being most accurately understood through scientific research, not through reading what he considered to be the poetry of Genesis. In this light he considered it possible for a Christian to believe, as he does himself, in a creation which has evolved over billions of years.

John Mackay argued against this view by first defining what Christianity is - faith in the facts of Christ’s death, burial and resurrection. He then defined evolution starting with a quotation from one of John Polkinghorne’s books and ending with another from Dr. Kemp of Oxford University, which states that confidence in evolution “requires an extraordinary faith”. He then argued that the Biblical theme of goodness does not allow for processes on which evolutionary theories depend, pointing out that the good Jesus did whilst He was on earth was to overcome these very things - hunger, disease, disabilities, dangerous environments and even death itself. His conclusion was that no version of evolution is compatible with faith in the Creator Jesus Christ, who alone defines the Christian faith.

There were many people eager to ask questions during the next 45 minutes and these cannot all be reflected here. Perhaps the most significant question asked of John Polkinghorne was why he had not mention Jesus Christ at all in his opening statement. His response was that he thought the debate was primarily about evolution. When asked if he believed there was a single Adam, as John Mackay had pointed out that Romans 5 demands, he said it would take a long time to explain what he believed, but in summary it was that Adam was only representative of the whole human race. John Mackay was questioned robustly by several people – one questioner asked how the God John was describing could allow a thing like the Boxing Day tsunami. John challenged Christians to face up to Isaiah’s description of The LORD as the God of the earthquake. He also reminded the audience that Christianity was not about following the example of a good man, but essentially consisted of entering into a relationship with a living God and His Son, Jesus Christ.

It is never easy to give an unbiased report of an event one has been very involved in arranging. It is even harder when that event is a debate at which no poll is taken at the end. This debate was not about winning and losing, but about giving an answer for the faith the two main participants hold. Who was able to do that the best? I know that some left the Cathedral saying they had to reappraise the acceptance of theistic evolution they brought in with them, and that John Mackay was thanked for his clear presentation of the gospel by several Anglican clergymen.

My personal prayer before the debate was that The LORD would achieve whatever He wanted through the evening. He gave the initial vision for a debate to members of the Liverpool John 17:21 committee, who approached Creation Research and the Dean of Liverpool. My prayer now is that The LORD will bless all whom He motivated to make this evening possible and that it will bear fruit in their lives and those of everyone else who was involved.

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