Searching for God in a Whac-A-Mole Universe

By Jim Brown

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Humans have gone to great lengths attributing things we don't understand to acts of God. Jupiter hurling lightning bolts is a good example. As our knowledge of how things work improves, the stuff that God is good at in the natural world diminishes. This tends to put "God in a Box," and whenever the question of divine intervention pops up we whack it with knowledge, only to pop up again, and so on. Maybe we're using the wrong mallets.

When I first gave this talk to UUs in the Senior Center 24 years ago, I titled it "God is in the Details," which was a play on the expression "The Devil is in the Details," loosely meaning "it's in the fine print," like those "easy to assemble" instructions on Christmas eve, or "your check is in the mail," or "your car is almost ready," or "we're sorry for the delay, but you should have no trouble making your connecting flight."

"God is in the details" has another meaning, often used in the concept of "Intelligent Design, "referring to a natural phenomenon seemingly so complex that in the minds of many that only God could have made it. But then a clever person comes along to demonstrate that a pinch of this and a pinch of that

plus some home-grown ingenuity can create the same thing. Thus we whack divinity's role and move on to the next unexplainable thing until someone explains it in convincingly logical terms and we move on. You get the picture. But wait a minute. What about the wonder underlying all those clever insights. Can't we give God some credit for giving us the tools.

Galileo, who spent the last several years of his life under house arrest for his explanation of details, summed up God's gift as follows:

I do not feel obliged to believe that the same God who has endowed us with sense, reason, and intellect intended us to forgo their use.

In 1967-68 I served as an Adjunct Assistant Professor in the Geology Department of the University of California in Los Angeles. My dictionary says that "adjunct" is "something joined to another thing as an incidental accompaniment but not essentially a part of it." Another definition that fit my status was: "a person, usually in a subordinate or temporary capacity, assisting another to perform some duty or service." Being at the bottom end of the academic feeding chain, I was naturally the person to be called when a Jehovah's Witness appeared at the Geology Department office seeking an interview. I could imagine the glee of the receptionist, with whom I didn't get along very well, when I answered the phone.

In due course, after navigating the labyrinth to my basement office, a neatly dressed young man appeared with a stack of books and a tape recorder the size of a small suitcase. He wished to record my views on "evolution," no doubt to be cleverly edited into sound bites supporting a creationist perspective. Or perhaps I was paranoid. I certainly was an Episcopalian, the two states of mind not being mutually exclusive. At any rate, I agreed to talk with him on the condition that he not turn on his recorder, to which he reluctantly agreed.

As you might imagine, much of our conversation involved his attacks on, and my defense of, the integrity and antiquity of the geologic record. His explanation for the increasing complexity of successive life forms preserved as fossils was truly elegant. During the Great Flood the more advanced animals made it to higher ground before being inundated, leaving the plodders behind. As I've always considered myself a plodder, this worried me.

Another thread of the young man's reasoning was familiar, because over the years his theme has re-occurred in a variety of guises, echoed and

transformed, but nevertheless recognizable, in a variety of writings. I'm going to quote from a passage in a small book he gave me at the conclusion of our visit. The title was: "Did Man Get Here by Evolution or by Creation."

The neuron, or nerve cell, demonstrates how complicated a cell is. There are said to be at least 10 billion such cells in the brain of the person. At one time each neuron was thought to be like a single relay or telephone switchboard. But further research has revealed that a neuron is far more complicated than a complex electronic computer. If scientists invented a self-programming computer of infinite complexity only one thousand of an inch long, would this not be a monumental achievement? Would anyone listen very long to a claim that it came into existence by itself, that it evolved from inanimate matter without the direction of an intelligent mind?"

Bear in mind that the foregoing passage was written at least 60 years ago. Many of you are likely familiar with this line of reasoning. It's called "intelligent design." The implication is that only God can do it. John D, Morris, at one time the president of the Institute of Creation Research, summed up the idea this way: *The more we learn of life, even microscopic life,*

the more we see design and order on an elegant level, impelling us to the conclusion that the universe was created.

That's quite a leap of faith, which or course it is. Humans are smart, too, and have developed some stuff previously attributed to God and have come up with some elegant explanations themselves. Here's an example. Rev. Arthur Peacock, the only Oxford University faculty member to hold both doctor of science and doctor of divinity degrees, sees in the details of genetics a way to unite both Darwin and divinity. He noted that the building blocks of genetics, found in the relationship between proteins and DNA, are common to all living things. According to Dr. Peacock, all life is historically interconnected. God is not separate from evolution, and he states, and I quote: *It isn't as though God is outside, coming in every now and again to kick things and tweak things, pushing them in the right direction. God makes things to make themselves.*

One of the most elegant treatments of evolution that I came across was a sermon by Unitarian Universalist minister Dr. Max Coots of Canton, New York. He wrote: ….*however unfinished the theory of evolution is, it implies a saga of fabulous dimensions that stretches out in time and space farther and more wonderfully than does the once-wondrous firmament on which old Israel's*

God hung the sun and moon and stars. Its details far overshadow the dusty potterings of the old Biblical God with an implication of divinity whose "miracles" are as microscopically amazing as the double helix and so distant as to out-distance our imagination. It speaks of probable processes that leave the creative voice of God mute and make his six-day labors but a blink in the long gaze of creation. It speaks, not of a once and only once miracle by a God who had to rest when it was done, bat a continuation and continuity of which even we are an intrinsic part and product. In intricacy, complexity and magnitude, the unfinished story of evolution sings through the marvelous mind like an endless oratorio rising from the smallest grace-notes of the proteins of life's beginnings to a crescendo as overwhelming as the cosmos. It says to me that 'music of the spheres' is a greater work than the simple song once sung around desert nomads'campfires. Anything else is heresy. Anything less is blasphemy.

The foregoing statement by Dr. Coots was a bit presumptuous, but you get the drift. He turned the tables on creationists when he used the terms "heresy" and "blasphemy." I think that was too harsh.

When I lived in Scotland I participated in the Unitarian "Building Your Own Theology" workshop. At the end we were asked to write a credo statement on

"Ultimate Reality," which I think was supposed to mean "God." Even British Unitarians, whom I found to be closer to the Christiam mainstream than their American counterparts, couldn't bring themselves to use the "G"word. My credo statement read: ***I believe that the more we understand the threads of existence through scientific inquiry, the more we marvel, and this sense of awe will in itself be the Ultimate Reality.***

Intricacies, complexities, details. To the extent these conjure up a sense of awe and wonder in the natural world, the observer can perhaps infer the hand of a creator. But beware the Whac-A-Mole consequence when we discover that Joe did it. But on the other hand, Hamlet was on to something when he said to Horatio: ***Yhere are more things in Heaven and earth…that are dreamt of in your philosophy,***

Maybe it's not how smart we think we are, or the degrees we hold, but simply the frame of mind we need to get into in order to SEE the details that make us receptive to those ***more things*** **that Hamlet referred to. I think that Kahlil Gibran was suggesting a frame of mind when he penned these words:** ***Among the hills, when you sit in the cool shade of the white poplars, sharing the peace***

and serenity of distant fields and meadows, then let your heart say in silence:'God rests in reason.'

Years ago an article in US News and World Report featured "Hunting for God on a Creation Safari," a field trip led by the Creation Science Foundation of Mid-America. Field trip participants were invited to collect fossil shells from outcrops on the southeast side of Kansas City, Missouri. They were told that the fossils are formed by rapid burial in water-deposited sediments --- the kind of conditions that existed ONLY during Noah's flood.

Well, I happen to know a little about the rocks southeast of Kansas City, Missouri. If I were leading the field trip, I would have called their attention to the layering of the rocks, and upon close inspection the more observant might discern that there were different kinds of rocks: black shales, limestone, sandy shale or sandstone with maybe coal in it --- and that these layers were stacked one upon the other in a regular order from bottom to top. I'd tell them that the shale was deposited in quiet undisturbed relatively deep water and on top of it, limestone, a product of calcium carbonate precipitation in warm shallower water, and on top of that, sandy shale or sandstone with coal, representing beach and swamp environments and, on top of that, deep water

shale again. I'd tell how their orderly repetition made up something like a cycle, and that these cycles were repeated 55 times, meaning that the sea advanced, deepened, became shallow, and retreated 55 times. You could not see all of the cycle layers in one place, but if you had time and looked at enough outcrops around Kansas City you could piece them together. I'd tell the participants that these cycles have been recognized in rocks of the same age in many parts of the world by geologists of various religions, ethnicities, and nationalities with no theological axes to grind. And if the field trip participants had sharp eyes they would see that the fossils contained in the limestone changed little by little from the bottom to the top of the outcrop despite having been laid down in similar environments.

I'd tell them that in my graduate school I knew a crazy guy who found evidence for glaciation
in rocks of the same age as these Kansas City cycles in Africa, South America and Australia, and that when scientists finally figured out continental drift, low and behold the parts of the continents that contained rocks with glacial evidence clustered together in an area which at that time was not far from the south pole. I'd tell them that a scientist trying to figure out why glaciers waxed and waned in modern times noticed a correlation with

climate changes related to changes in the inclination of the earth's axis of rotation, changes in the plane of the earth's orbit relative to the sun and changes in the eccentricity of the earth's orbit. In response to the combined results of these variations, the climate became somewhat cooler or somewhat warmer in cycles of 20,000, 40,000 or even 100,000 years, enough to explain the waxing and waning of modern day glaciers. I'd tell them that the cycles of shallowing and deepening of seas that they could see in the rocks southeast of Kansas City were correlated to the waxing and waning of ice caps around 300 million years ago, related to the signs of glaciation my friend had observed in the rocks of Africa, South America, and Australia. The glaciers back then tended to melt rapidly as they do today, adding water to the oceans and causing the beaches and swamps evidenced by sandstone and coal to be rapidly drowned and buried beneath clay which eventually became shale. As the climate cooled, the glaciers re-formed rather slowly, gradually locking up ocean water so that the seas became shallower in the area of present day Kansas City, allowing first limestone and eventually beach sands to be deposited as the water withdrew, finally leading to swamps where coal eventually formed. I'd tell them that careful dating of these cycles by scientists of various religions, ethnicity, and nationalities with no theological axes to grind revealed that the cycles of waxing and waning of ancient glaciers and

the resulting rising and falling of sea levels, as recorded in the rocks of Kansas City, were pretty much the same duration as glaciers in modern times. And finally, I'd assert that God's glory resides as much in the details of how those Kansas City rock cycles formed as in the story of Noah's flood.

In conclusion, I'm still playing whac-a-mole where my knowledge suggests God isn't, but am open to where God might be. For example, you can't convince me that when I drop a bar of soap it is simply falling along a path of curved space-time, as asserted by Einstein. Maybe gravity is God, until we prove otherwise.

Amen