

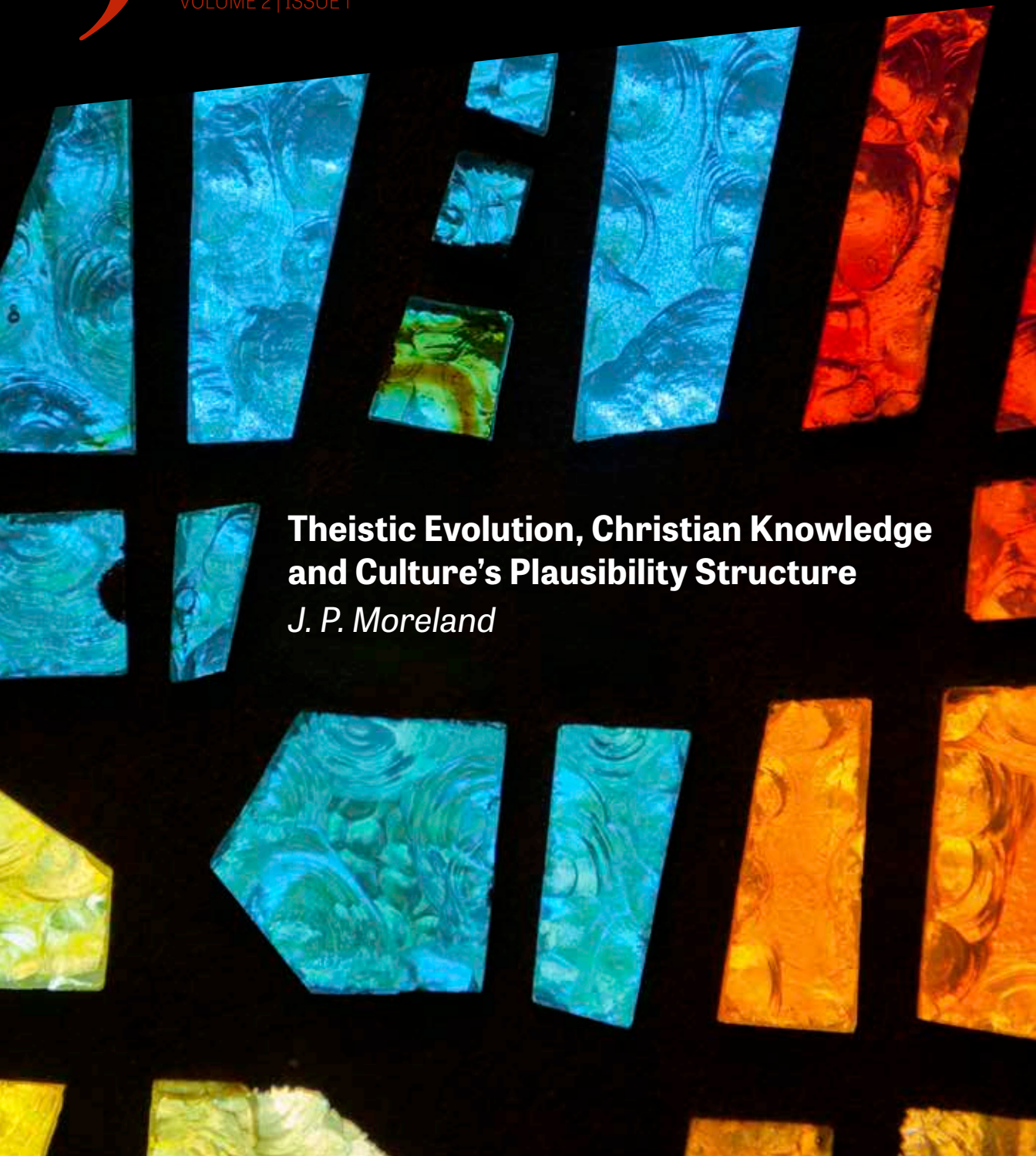
JBTS

VOLUME 2 | ISSUE 1

JOURNAL OF
BIBLICAL AND
THEOLOGICAL
STUDIES

**Theistic Evolution, Christian Knowledge
and Culture's Plausibility Structure**

J. P. Moreland



Theistic Evolution, Christian Knowledge and Culture's Plausibility Structure

J. P. MORELAND

J. P. Moreland is Distinguished Professor of Philosophy at Biola University

Abstract: In thinking about this article, I have decided not to write a technical piece. Over the years, I have done plenty of that on matters relating Christianity and science or the philosophy of science. Instead, as an aging (!) senior scholar, I have decided to reflect on the broader cultural implications of adopting a certain way of integrating Christianity and science, to attempt to offer some wisdom on the matter, and to issue a word of caution to my younger brothers and sisters. That said, here are my central reflections.

Key Words: philosophy of science, theistic evolution, Scientism, Physicalism, knowledge, neuroscience, Christianity, plausibility structure

The State of Our Culture Today

In 1941, Harvard sociologist Pitirim A. Sorokin wrote a book entitled *The Crisis of Our Age*. Sorokin divided cultures into two major types: *sensate* and *ideational*. A *sensate* culture is one in which people believe only in the reality of the physical universe capable of being experienced with the five senses. A *sensate* culture is secular, this worldly, and empirical. Knowledge is limited to the sense perceptible world.

By contrast, an *ideational* culture embraces the sensory world, but goes on to accept the notion that an extra-empirical immaterial reality can be known as well, a reality consisting of God, the soul, immaterial beings, values, purposes, and various abstract objects like numbers and propositions. Sorokin noted that a *sensate* culture eventually disintegrates because it lacks the intellectual resources necessary to sustain a public and private life conducive of corporate and individual human flourishing. After all, if we can't know anything about values, life after death, God, and so forth, how can we receive solid guidance to lead a life of wisdom and character?

As we move through the early portion of the twenty-first century, it is obvious that the West, including the United States, is *sensate*.¹ To see this, consider the following. In 1989, the state of California issued a new Science Framework to provide guidance for the state's public school science classrooms. In that document, advice is given to

1. See Julie A. Reuben, *The Making of the Modern University* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

teachers about how to handle students who approach them with reservations about the theory of evolution:

At times some students may insist that certain conclusions of science cannot be true because of certain religious or philosophical beliefs they hold... It is appropriate for the teacher to express in this regard, "I understand that you may have personal reservations about accepting this scientific evidence, but it is scientific knowledge about which there is no reasonable doubt among scientists in their field, and it is my responsibility to teach it because it is part of our common intellectual heritage."²

The real importance of this statement lies not in its promotion of evolution over creation, though that is no small matter in its own right. No, the real danger in the Framework's advice resides in the picture of knowledge it presupposes: The only knowledge we can have about reality—and, thus, the only claims that deserve the backing of public institutions—is empirical knowledge gained by the hard sciences.

Non-empirical claims (those that can't be tested with the five senses) outside the hard sciences, such as those at the core of ethics, political theory and religion are not items of knowledge but, rather, matters of private feeling. Note carefully the words associated with science: *conclusions, evidence, knowledge, no reasonable doubt, intellectual heritage*. These deeply cognitive terms express the view that science and science alone exercises the intellectual right (and responsibility) of defining reality. By contrast, religious claims are described in distinctively non-cognitive language: *beliefs, personal reservations*.

In such a culture we now live and move and have our being. Currently, a three-way worldview struggle rages in our culture between ethical monotheism (especially Christianity), postmodernism (roughly, a cultural form of relativism about truth, reality and value), and scientific naturalism. I cannot undertake here a detailed characterization of scientific naturalism, but I want to say a word about its role in shaping the crisis of the West.

Scientific naturalism takes the view that the physical cosmos studied by science is all there is. Scientific naturalism has two central components: a view of reality and a view of how we know things. Regarding reality, scientific naturalism implies that everything that exists is composed of matter or emerges out of matter when it achieves a suitable complexity. There is no spiritual world, no God, no angels or demons, no life after death, no moral absolutes, no objective purpose to life, no such thing as the Kingdom of God. And scientific naturalism implies that physical science is the only way (strong scientism), or at the very least a vastly superior way (weak scientism), of gaining knowledge. Since competence in life depends on knowledge (you can't be competent at selling insurance if you don't know anything about it!),

2. Mark Hartwig and P. A. Nelson, *Invitation to Conflict: A Retrospective Look at the California Science Framework* (Colorado Springs: Access Research Network, 1992), 20.

this implies that there just is no such thing as learning to live life competently in the Kingdom of God. Spiritual competence is a silly idea since spiritual knowledge, as science has repeatedly shown, does not exist. And the same claim would and is being made regarding ethical assertions and moral behavior. Since there is no known spiritual knowledge or competence, Oprah Winfrey feels free to pontificate about matters religious (after all, she is, indeed, an authority about her own private feelings and subjective beliefs), but she would never do this if the topic were a scientific one. Why? Because there are experts she would call in to her show. What is an expert? It is someone with the relevant knowledge. Since there are no experts in ethics or religion, Oprah is free to say what she wants without fear of censure.

In the early 1960s, naturalist Wilfred Sellars announced that “in the dimension of describing and explaining the world, science is the measure of all things, of what is that it is, and of what is not that it is not.”³ Scientific knowledge is taken to be so vastly superior that its claims always trump the claims made by other disciplines. *The key component of naturalism, then, is the belief that scientific knowledge is either the only kind of knowledge there is or an immeasurably superior kind of knowledge. As we shall see in more detail later, combined with postmodernism, scientism raises this central challenge to the Christian church at this time in history: The central issue is not whether Christianity is true (one could claim Christianity is true and based on blind faith and emotion and would probably be tolerated by European and North American elites); the central issue is whether Christianity can be **known** to be true. Is or is not Christianity a knowledge tradition, a set of ideas that through history provide us, in its key claims, with truths about reality that can be known to be true?*

Years ago I was invited to speak at an evangelistic dinner and I was put on notice by one believer that he was bringing his boss, a man who had been a chief engineer for decades, who was finishing a belated Ph.D. in physics from Johns Hopkins, and who went out of his way to attack and ridicule Christians. Upon being introduced to me at the dinner table, he wasted no time launching into me. “I understand you are a philosopher and theologian,” he said in an amused manner. Before I had a chance to respond, he said, “I used to be interested in those things when I was a teenager. But I have outgrown those interests. I know now that the only sort of knowledge of reality is that which can and has been quantified and tested in the laboratory. If you can measure it and test it scientifically, you can know it. If not, the topic is nothing but private opinion and idle speculation!” This is what I mean by scientism. It never occurred to the gentleman that his claim was self-refuting since it could not itself be “quantified and tested in the laboratory.”

Scientism accords the right to define reality and speak with knowledge and authority to scientists and scientists alone. And this posture is, sadly, pervasive throughout our culture. In the June 25, 2001, issue of *Time* magazine, the cover story was entitled “How the Universe Will End”. The universe is winding down, it says, and will eventually go

3. Wilfred Sellars, *Science, Perception and Reality* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1963): 173.

out with a cold, dark whimper. It never occurred to the writer that if something is winding down, it must have been wound up, and if something is wound up, there has to be a winder-upper! But for those with eyes to see, the article's claim about the fate of the universe was not the main issue of concern. It's the article's implicit epistemology (theory of knowledge). It claims that for centuries, humans have wanted to know how all this will end, but because they could only use religion and philosophy, solid answers were unavailable. But now that science has moved into this area of inquiry, for the first time in human history, we have firm answers to our questions, answers that will force religion and philosophy to rethink its views. This same attitude is currently pervasive about the origin and nature of human beings and the ethical views—especially those about sexual ethics—we have inherited from Christianity.

This is scientism, and *Time* magazine employed the naturalist epistemology without batting an eye or, indeed, without knowing it was doing so. In the same issue, *Time* featured an article defending stem-cell research on human embryos: "These [embryos] are microscopic groupings of a few differentiated cells. There is nothing human about them, except potential—and, if you choose to believe it, a soul."⁴ Note the presupposed scientism. We *know* scientific facts about embryos, but non-scientific issues like the reality of the soul, are not items of knowledge. When it comes to belief in the soul, you're on your own. There is no evidence one way or another. You must choose arbitrarily or, perhaps, on the basis of private feelings what you believe about the soul. In a scientific culture, belief in the soul is like belief in ghosts: an issue best left to the pages of the *National Inquirer*. No wonder people in our churches increasingly fail to take Christianity seriously!

It is on the basis of knowledge (or perceived knowledge)—not faith, mere truth, commitment or sincerity—that people are given the right to lead, act in public and accomplish important tasks. We give certain people the right to fix our cars, pull our teeth, write our contracts, counsel our souls and so on, because we take those people to be in possession of the relevant body of knowledge. Moreover, it is the possession of knowledge (and, more specifically, the knowledge that one has knowledge), and not mere truth alone, that gives people confidence and courage to lead, act and risk. Accordingly, it is of crucial importance that we promote the central teachings of Christianity in general as a body of knowledge and not as a set of faith-practices to be accepted on the basis of mere belief or a shared narrative alone. To fail at this point is to risk being marginalized and disregarded as those promoting a privatized set of feelings or desires that fall short of knowledge.

In 1983, Os Guinness wrote a book in which he claimed that the church had become its own gravedigger.⁵ The upshot of Guinness's claim was that the very things that were bringing short-term growth in the Christian community also were, unintentionally and imperceptibly, sowing the very sorts of ideas that would

4. Michael Kinsley, "If You Believe Embryos Are Humans..." *Time* 157 (June 25, 2001): 80.

5. Os Guinness, *The Gravedigger File* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1983).

eventually undercut the church's distinctive power and authority. The so-called gravedigger does not hurt the church on purpose. Usually well intentioned, he or she simply adopts views or practices that are counterproductive to and undermining of a vibrant, attractive Christian community. In my view, there are certain contemporary currents of thought that risk undercutting Christianity as a source of knowledge, and I shall argue that by its very nature, theistic evolution is the prime culprit. It is one of the church's leading gravediggers (e.g., we think that not "requiring" people to reject theistic evolution before they get saved, an attitude I have never seen in thoughtful Christians, will cause more to come to Christ. In the short run, it may. But in the long run, the price to be paid by such an approach is the de-cognitizing of Christianity with the result that, over the long haul, most will simply ignore Christianity as a silly superstition. Its practitioners caved in to the prevailing contemporary currents of ideas, instead of holding their ground, and eventually winning the argument due to hard-hitting scholarship and confidence in the Bible). To accomplish my goal, I shall, first, clarify the nature of knowledge; second, identify the nature of a plausibility structure along with the central plausibility structure constituting our contemporary milieu; third, identify three intellectual areas that, if embraced, run the risk of turning us into our own gravediggers. As I hope to show, these three areas are natural results of embracing theistic evolution.

The Nature of Knowledge

Here's a simple definition of knowledge: It is *to represent reality in thought or experience the way it really is on the basis of adequate grounds. Knowledge is true belief based on adequate grounds.* To know something (the nature of cancer, forgiveness, God) is to think of or experience it as it really is on a solid basis of evidence, experience, intuition, and so forth. Little can be said in general about what counts as "adequate grounds." The best one can do is to start with specific cases of knowledge and its absence in art, chemistry, memory, scripture, logic, and formulate helpful descriptions of "adequate grounds" accordingly.

Please note that *knowledge has nothing to do with epistemological certainty—the logical impossibility of being wrong— or an anxious quest for it.* One can know something without being epistemologically certain about it⁶ and in the presence of doubt or the admission that one might be wrong. Recently, I know that God spoke to me about a specific matter but I admit it is possible I am wrong about this (though, so far, I have no good reason to think I am wrong). When Paul says, "This you know with certainty" (Ephesians 5:5), he clearly implies that one can know without certainty; otherwise, the statement would be redundant. Why? If I say, "Give me a burger with

6. Psychological certainty is different; it is a sense of complete confidence and rest in an idea. I have psychological, but not epistemological certainty that God exists; as a result, I do not pray "Our Father who probably art in heaven!!

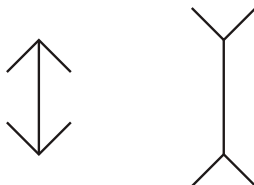
pickles on it,” I imply that it is possible to have a burger without pickles. If, contrary to fact pickles were simply essential ingredients of burgers, it would be redundant to ask for burgers with pickles. The parallel to “knowledge with certainty” should be easy to see. When Christians claim to have knowledge of this or that, for example, that God is real, that Jesus rose from the dead, that the Bible is the word of God, they are not saying that there is no possibility that they could be wrong, that they have no doubts, or that they have answers to every question raised against them. They are simply saying that these and other claims satisfy the definition given above.

The deepest issue facing the church today is this: Are its main creeds and central teachings items of knowledge or mere matters of blind faith—privatized personal beliefs or issues of feeling to be accepted or set aside according to the whim of individual or cultural pressures? Do these teachings have cognitive and behavioral authority that set a worldview framework for approaching science, art, ethics—indeed, all of life? Or are cognitive and behavioral authority set by what scientists, evolutionary biologists, or the members of BioLogos say? Are the church’s doctrines determined by what Gallup polls tell us is embraced by cultural and intellectual elites? Do we turn to these sources and set aside or revise two thousand years of Christian thinking and doctrinal/creedal expressions in order to make Christian teaching acceptable to the neuroscience department at UCLA or the paleontologists at Cambridge?

The question of whether or not Christianity provides its followers with a range of knowledge is no small matter. It is a question of authority for life and death, and lay brothers and sisters are watching Christian thinkers and leaders to see how we approach this matter. And, in my view, as theistic evolutionists continue to revise the Bible over and over again, they inexorably give off a message about knowledge: science gives us hard knowledge based on evidence and with which we can be confident, and while theology and biblical teaching do not give us knowledge, they provide personal meaning and values for those with the faith to embrace them.

The Importance of a Plausibility Structure

Take a look at this diagram and notice what you see:



Notice that the right horizontal line looks longer than the one on the left even though their lengths are the same. Why? Because we see these shapes hundreds of times a day (the right diagram is the inside corner of a room; the left is the outside corner of a building), we are unconsciously used to seeing them as three-dimensional objects,

and so we unconsciously try to adjust to the two-dimensionality of the figures on the page. In this case, our habits of perception and thought shape (note: they don't completely determine, they just shape) what we see. When this diagram is shown to people in primitive cultures with no square or rectangular buildings, they have no such subconscious habits and they see the horizontal lines accurately as being of equal length.

There's an important lesson in this. A culture has a set of background assumptions—we can call it a plausibility structure—that sets a tone, a framework, for what people think, to what they are willing to listen and evaluate, how they feel and how they act. This plausibility structure is so widespread and subtle that people usually don't even know it is there even though it hugely impacts their perspective on the world. The plausibility structure can be composed of thoughts (scientists are smart; religious people are gullible and dumb), symbols (a person in a white lab coat), music, and so forth. For example, a book published with Oxford University Press will be taken by a reader to be more credible and to exhibit greater scholarship than a book by an Evangelical press, even though this assumption is clearly false in certain cases.

Here's the problem this raises for trust in God. Without even knowing it, we all carry with us this cultural map, this background set of assumptions, and our self-talk, the things that form our default beliefs (ones we naturally accept without argument), the things we are embarrassed to believe (if they run contrary to the authorities in our map), and related matters create a natural set of doubts about Christianity. Most of these factors are things of which people are not even aware. In fact, if they are brought to one's attention, one would most likely disown them even though, in fact, they are the internalized ideas that actually shape what people do and don't believe. Our current Western cultural plausibility structure elevates science and scorns and mocks religion, especially Christian teaching. And it has been the acceptance of theistic evolution by many Christians that has contributed to this mess. Why? There are at least three reasons. First, theistic evolution reinforces scientism because it exemplifies the view that when science and biblical/theological teaching are in conflict, we have to revise the Bible. We don't ever revise the science because scientific truth claims exhibit solid knowledge based on facts.

Second, this sort of revisionism—when we change biblical interpretations that have held steady for two thousand years at just the time when there is politically correct pressure to do so, especially when that pressure comes from science—gives off the message that biblical teaching is pretty tentative. We shouldn't hold to it with strong conviction because if we do, we may become embarrassed when we have to revise that teaching in years to come. According to advocates of scientism—and virtually all theistic evolutionists that embrace some form of scientism—biblical/theological ideas, ethical positions, and other claims that fail to have the backing of science are simply personal feelings and blind-faith commitments.

Third, the most pervasive definition of theistic evolution is that the general, naturalistic theory of evolution is true, and God is allowed somehow or another to be involved in the process as long as there is no way to detect his involvement. Design in biology must be unknowable and undetectable! For a thinking unbeliever (or believer, for that matter), the question surfaces as to why anyone should think God had anything to do with the development of life? What, exactly, did God do, and how could we know the answer to this question? If He was “involved”, no one could know it, so God begins to take on some of the characteristics of the tooth fairy.

As a result, for intelligent, well-educated people, commitment to Christianity should not rise above the level of a hobby. And believers in Western cultures do not as readily believe the supernatural worldview of the Bible in comparison with their Third World brothers and sisters. As Christian anthropologist Charles Kraft observes:

In comparison to other societies, Americans and other North Atlantic peoples are *naturalistic*. Non-Western peoples are frequently concerned about the activities of supernatural beings. Though many Westerners retain a vague belief in God, most deny that other supernatural beings even exist. The wide-ranging supernaturalism of most of the societies of the world is absent for most of our people....Our focus is on the natural world, with little or no attention paid to the supernatural world.⁷

There is a straightforward application here for evangelism and church growth. A person’s plausibility structure is the set of ideas the person either is or is not willing to entertain as possibly true. For example, no one would come to a lecture defending a flat earth because this idea is just not part of our plausibility structure. We cannot even entertain the idea. Moreover, a person’s plausibility structure is a function of the beliefs he or she already has. Applied to evangelism, J. Gresham Machen got it right when he said:

God usually exerts that power in connection with certain prior conditions of the human mind, and it should be ours to create, so far as we can, with the help of God, those favorable conditions for the reception of the gospel. False ideas are the greatest obstacles to the reception of the gospel. We may preach with all the fervor of a reformer and yet succeed only in winning a straggler here and there, if we permit the whole collective thought of the nation or of the world to be controlled by ideas which, by the resistless force of logic, prevent Christianity from being regarded as anything more than a harmless delusion.⁸

7. Charles H. Kraft, *Christianity with Power: Your Worldview and Your Experience of the Supernatural* (Ann Arbor, MI: Servant Publications, 1989), 27.

8. J. Gresham Machen, *What Is Christianity?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1951), 162.

The simple truth is that ideas have consequences. If a culture reaches the point where Christian claims are not even part of its plausibility structure, fewer and fewer people will be able to entertain the possibility that they might be true. Whatever stragglers do come to faith in such a context would do so on the basis of felt needs alone, and the genuineness of such conversions would be questionable to say the least. And theistic evolution has helped to place Christianity outside the plausibility structure.

To see this, consider the following example. A few years ago when I picked up the morning's paper, I found a two-paged feature story entitled "Intelligent Design Debate Heats Up."⁹ The article cites lay Catholic theologian at Georgetown University John F. Haught as opposing ID theory as bad science and bad theology. According to Haught, just as different explanations can be proffered for why water is boiling (the kinetic energy of water molecules are responding to heat and as evidence someone wants tea), so evolution can be seen as both the result of natural selection and part of God's purposes.

I disagree with Haught about the scientific and theological merits of Intelligent Design (ID) theory, but he is entitled to his opinion. If ID theory is bad theology and bad science, then so be it. What troubles me, however, is that Haught and others who opt for theistic evolution seem to do so with little appreciation for the emergence of scientism in our culture and its impact on people's perception of the availability of theological, ethical and political knowledge. Theistic evolution is intellectual pacifism that lulls people to sleep while the barbarians are at the gates. In my experience, theistic evolutionists are usually trying to create a safe truce with science so Christians can be left alone to practice their privatized religion while retaining the respect of the dominant intellectual culture.

And while this may not be true of all theistic evolutionists, the majority of the ones I have met have a view of theology and faith as exhibiting very low cognitive value, while science is the most cognitively excellent approach to knowledge we have. For example, theistic evolutionist, physicist and active member of BioLogos, Karl Giberson has said of science, "...I would argue that it is the most epistemologically secure perspective we have."¹⁰ By contrast, as I have said elsewhere of Giberson:

He also seems to regard theology as a degenerative program forever mired in Kuhnian periods of crisis when no one can agree on the best paradigm, when no progress is evident and when theologians do more to impede the search for scientific knowledge...than to contribute to its progress. It is hard to see how such a view could countenance theological knowledge. In fact, Giberson's understanding of faith seems to include the notion that as rational justification for a particular belief increases, the possibility of faith decreases.

9. Richard N. Ostling, "Intelligent Design Debate Heats Up," *The Orange County Register* (2005): 14-15.

10. Karl Giberson, "Intelligent Design on Trial—A Review Essay," *Christian Scholar's Review* 24.4 (1995): 469.

This is seen, for example, in his contrast between the “limited faith” involved in the inference of water in the bottom of a well from the observation of a splash and the so-called “profound” faith of the theist. For Giberson, such a faith is profound, I suppose, in light of the low epistemological value of theology as a discipline.¹¹

Giberson’s theistic evolution is rooted in (weak) scientism which inevitably results in placing biblical teaching and theology outside the plausibility structure and depicting them as largely non-cognitive fields based on a blind “profound” faith. And I maintain that, however unintentional it may be, this is the posture and result of most theistic evolutionists.

I am not interested in that posture. I don’t want to play not to lose; I want to play to win. I want to win people to Christ and to “bring down strongholds” that undermine knowledge of God (2 Corinthians 10:3-5), to penetrate culture with a Christian worldview and to undermine its plausibility structure which, as things stand now, does not include objective theological claims. While there are exceptions, many theistic evolutionists simply fail to provide a convincing response to the question of why one should adopt a theological layer of explanation for the origin and development of life in the first place. Given scientism, theistic evolution greases the skids towards placing non-scientific claims in a privatized upper story in which their factual, cognitive status is undermined. Thus, inadvertently, Haught and those of his persuasion contribute to the marginalization of a Christian worldview.

This is why apologetics, especially scientific apologetics precisely like what we find in the Intelligent Design movement, is so crucial to evangelism and church growth. It seeks to create a plausibility structure in a person’s mind, “favorable conditions” as Machen put it, so the gospel can be entertained by a person. To plant a seed in someone’s mind in pre-evangelism is to present a person with an idea that will work on his or her plausibility structure to create a space in which Christianity can be entertained seriously. If this is important to evangelism, it is strategically crucial that local churches think about how they can address those aspects of the contemporary worldview that place Christianity outside the plausibility structures of so many. And I believe we will need to rethink the message we are giving to the culture when we constantly fail to have confidence in the knowledge claims of scripture and repeatedly revise the Bible, as theistic evolutionists do, when “scientists” tell us we must.

When science appears to conflict with scripture, we shouldn’t immediately lay our intellectual arms down and wait for scientists to tell us what we can allow the Bible to say and how we need to revise scripture. No, we should be patient, acknowledge the problem, and press into service Christian intellectuals who are highly qualified academically, have respect for the fact that scripture presents us with knowledge (not just truth to be accepted by blind faith), and who want to work

11. J. P. Moreland, “Theistic Science and the Christian Scholar: A Response to Giberson,” *Christian Scholar’s Review* 24.4 (1995).

to preserve the traditional interpretation of scripture and avoid revisionism. These intellectuals should be given the chance to develop rigorous models that preserve historical Christian teaching, unless, in those rare cases, our interpretation of scripture has been wrong. These intellectuals are heroes because they value loyalty to historic understandings of scripture over the desire to fit in with what scientists are currently claiming. The Intelligent Design movement is just such a set of intellectuals.

Adolfo Lopez-Otero, a professor of materials science and engineering at Stanford and an atheist, was once asked what an unbelieving intellectual expects from a Christian thinker. Lopez-Otero said that the Christian should be daring and humble (try not to act like you are superior) in approaching other professors and secular thinkers: “Be as daring as politeness and civilized behavior allows. But, as I implied before, do not be shy to deconstruct the pretentiousness of his [the atheist’s] world in the same way that he is not shy to point out the ‘triumphs’ of science, the Enlightenment, and rationalism over the ‘superstitions’ of religion.”¹² Lopez-Otero goes on to say that Christian thinkers cannot afford to give excuses for their faith; that is the price they must pay for having declared themselves Christians.

In my opinion, advocates of the Intelligent Design movement are doing exactly what Lopez-Otero correctly describes. Rather than tucking their tails between their legs at the first sign of a conflict between the Bible and science, and standing ready (even eager) to let the scientists tell them what they must revise, the members of the ID movement have the intellectual courage and confidence in biblical teaching not to back down. Rather, ID advocates “deconstruct the pretentiousness” of truth-claims that go against biblical assertions that are properly interpreted (and they don’t grab for an interpretation that, all by itself, gives in to the other side of the conflict.) And they don’t make excuses for the Bible; they advance arguments in its support.

It should be clear that naturalism is not consistent with biblical Christianity. If that’s true, then the church should do all it can to undermine the worldview of naturalism and to promote, among other things, the cognitive, alethic nature of theology, biblical teaching and ethics. This means that when Christians consider adopting certain views widely accepted in the culture, they must factor into their consideration whether or not such adoption would enhance naturalism’s hegemony and help dig the church’s own grave by contributing to a hostile, undermining plausibility structure.

Consider as an example the abandonment of belief in the historical reality of Adam and Eve. Now, if someone does not believe Adam and Eve were real historical individuals, then so be it. However, my present concern is not with the truth or falsity of the historical view, though the issue matters greatly. Rather, my concern is the readiness, sometimes eagerness, of some to set aside the traditional view, the ease with which the real estate of historical Christian commitments is abandoned, the unintended consequences of jettisoning such a belief. Given the current plausibility structure set by scientific naturalism, rejecting the historical

12. Adolfo Lopez-Otero, “Be Humble, Be Daring,” *The Real Issue* (1997): 10-11.

Adam and Eve contributes to the marginalization of Christian teaching in the public square and in the church and thereby those who reject Adam and Eve unintentionally undermine the church. How so?

First, the rejection reinforces the idea that science and science alone is competent to get at the real truth of reality; theology and biblical teaching are not up to this task. If historically consistent understandings of biblical teaching conflict with what most scientists claim, then so much the worse for those understandings.

Second, the rejection reinforces the privatized non-cognitive status of biblical doctrine, ethics and practices—especially supernatural ones that need to be construed as knowledge if they are to be passed on to others with integrity and care. Since the church has been mistaken about one of its central teachings for two thousand years, why should we trust the church regarding its teaching about extra-marital sex, homosexuality or the role of women in the church? Admittedly, the history of the church is not infallible in its teachings; still, to the degree that its central teachings through the ages are revised to that degree the non-revised teachings are undermined in their cognitive and religious authority. The non-revised teachings become more tentative.

Finally, the rejection reinforces the modernist notion that we are individuals, cut off from our diachronic community, and we are free to adopt our beliefs and practices in disregard of that community and our adoption's impact on it.

If I am right about the broader issues, then the rejection of an historical Adam and Eve has far more troubling implications than those that surface in trying to reinterpret certain biblical texts. The very status of biblical, theological and ethical teachings as knowledge is at stake in the current cultural milieu as is the church's cognitive marginalization to a place outside the culture's plausibility structure. Those who reject a historical Adam and Eve, inadvertently, harm the church by becoming its gravedigger.

Two Things to Avoid If You Don't Want to Become a Gravedigger

I suspect that most Christians still accept an historical Adam and Eve (but the same scientism and methodological naturalism that leads to embracing theistic evolution also leads most naturally to (though it does not entail) a rejection of an historical Adam and Eve). But there are two areas of reflection that involve revisionist views that may be more acceptable to Christians that, in my view, seriously undermine the plausibility of Christian teaching in general and undermine a growing, vibrant church. As we shall see, the adoption of theistic evolution contributes to the other area of revision.

Theistic Evolution

It is widely acknowledged that evolutionary theory, to be clarified in more detail shortly, has “made the world safe for atheists” as Richard Dawkins put it. Whether theistic or atheistic, when properly understood, evolutionary theory entails the denial of a scientifically detectable Christian God, and as a result, places the detection of divine design outside of science. Given widespread cultural scientism, this is tantamount to saying that the proposition “God designed the world” belongs in an Alice and Wonderland novel. In this way, evolutionary theory has funded the growth of an increasingly aggressive form of atheism. Thus, former Cornell biologist William Provine proclaimed:

Let me summarize my views on what modern evolutionary biology tells us loud and clear....There are no gods, no purposes, no goal-directed forces of any kind. There is no life after death...There is no ultimate foundation for ethics, no ultimate meaning, and no free will for humans, either.¹³

It can hardly be doubted that the impact of evolutionary theory is its significant contribution to the secularization of culture, a shift that places a supernatural God who makes Himself known through Creation, intervened or made his actions detectable at various times in the creation of life, and who still intervenes today in answered prayer, miraculous healing and so on, outside the plausibility structure of Western society. In light of that, why would any Christian want to flirt with theistic evolution? There are three general understandings of evolution: change within limits (microevolution), the thesis of common descent, and the blind watchmaker thesis. The first is accepted by everyone, the second is not yet established and the third seems to me to be wildly implausible, especially given Christian theism as a background belief. Why? Because the blind watchmaker thesis is the idea that solely blind, mechanical, efficient causal processes are sufficient to produce all the life we see without any need or room for a god to be involved in the process, and there are good reasons (e.g., probability considerations) to reject this thesis. Recently, even the atheist philosopher Thomas Nagel has weighed in on the matter and claimed that this Darwinian thesis is implausible.¹⁴ Theistic evolution is the view that the blind watchmaker thesis is true, there is no scientifically detectable evidence for God being involved in the process of evolution (remember: theistic evolutionists are committed to methodological naturalism), and we are free to reject metaphysical naturalism, I suppose by blind faith, even though we accept methodological naturalism while doing science.

13. See Dallas Willard, *Knowing Christ Today* (New York: HarperCollins, 2009), 4.

14. Thomas Nagel, *Mind and Cosmos* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); cf. J. P. Moreland, “A Reluctant Traveler’s Guide for Slouching Towards Theism,” *Philosophia Christi* 14. 2 (2012): 431-38.

But theistic evolutionists fail to provide sufficient reasons for rejecting metaphysical naturalism, given that “we have no need of that (the God) hypothesis” in any of the sciences. Why be a theist in the first place? After all, while evolution is logically consistent with theism, there is nothing in evolution that would lead one *to* theism, and if “the God hypothesis” isn’t needed until humans appear, it is less credible to think it is needed subsequently. Given (1) the presence of a very vibrant, intellectually sophisticated interdisciplinary Intelligent Design movement, (2) the atheistic implications that most naturally follow from accepting general evolutionary theory (and many, perhaps most draw those implications), and (3) the fact that the blind watchmaker thesis is far from being justified, why would a believer want to embrace something that undermines the plausibility of Christianity?

Sometimes theistic evolutionists claim that by embracing evolution, they are actually contributing to the plausibility of Christianity by removing an unnecessary stumbling block—the rejection of evolution—before one can be a well-informed Christian. In my experience, nothing could be further from the truth. While there are exceptions, my experience with theistic evolutions is that they have a weak faith, do not see many answers to prayer, and lack a vibrant, attractive Christian life. Ideas have consequences, and if one knows he had to revise the early chapters of Genesis, it will weaken his confidence in the rest of the Bible. More on that later. But more importantly, by adopting theistic evolution, people become the church’s gravedigger: their strategy may bring short-term success by keeping a handful of scientists from leaving the faith, but over the long haul, it will contribute to the secularization of culture with its scientific epistemology, and to the marginalization of the church. After all, if we have to provide naturalistic revisions of the Bible over and over again, why take the yet-to-be-revised portions of scripture seriously? This approach significantly weakens the cognitive authority of the Bible as a source of knowledge of reality.

If science has shown that since the Big Bang until the emergence of *homo sapiens*, there is no good reason to believe in such a God, isn’t it special pleading to embrace this Deity when it comes to biblical miracles? Surely, history, archeology, and related disciplines, have, under the same methodological naturalist constraints, “shown” that biblical miracles are legendary myths that helped Israel and the early church make sense of their subjective religious experiences. And surely there are naturalistic accounts of the Big Bang, the universe’s fine tuning, the origin of life, etc. If theistic evolution applies methodological naturalism to evolution, why not also apply it to cosmological issues and biblical miracles? It seems to me that the naturalization of biblical teaching and miracles is much more consistent with theistic evolution (e.g., they both adopt methodological naturalism, they both place religion is a non-cognitive upper story of faith) than with Intelligent Design.

If we want to be consistent and to contend that core biblical teachings provide us with items of knowledge, it seems to me that we should not let the naturalist camel’s

nose under the tent from the Big Bang up to the appearance of human life. Clearly, if we need to postulate an active God to explain the origin and development of life, as Intelligent Design advocates claim, then before we step into the door of a church, we are already warranted in believing biblical supernaturalism, and biblical teaching fits easily in our worldview. But if we come to church as theistic evolutionists, a supernatural, intervening God and a knowledge-based Bible are less at home in our worldview and, indeed, may fairly be called *ad hoc*.

Neuroscience and the Soul

The great Presbyterian scholar J. Gresham Machen once observed: “I think we ought to hold not only that man has a soul, but that it is important that he should know that he has a soul.”¹⁵ From a Christian perspective, this is a trustworthy saying. Christianity is a dualist, interactionist religion in this sense: God, angels/demons, and the souls of men and beasts are immaterial substances that can causally interact with the world. Specifically, human persons are (or have) souls that are spiritual substances that ground personal identity in a disembodied intermediate state between death and final resurrection.¹⁶ Clearly, this was the Pharisees’ view in Intertestamental Judaism, and Jesus (Matthew 22:23-33; cf. Matthew 10:28) and Paul (Acts 23 6-10; cf. 2 Corinthians 12:1-4) side with the Pharisees on this issue over against the Sadducees.¹⁷ In my view, Christian physicalism involves a politically correct revision of the biblical text that fails to be convincing.¹⁸

Nevertheless, today, many hold that, while broadly logically possible, dualism is no longer plausible in light of advances in modern science. This attitude is becoming increasingly prominent in Christian circles. Thus, Christian philosopher Nancey Murphy claims that physicalism is not primarily a philosophical thesis, but the hard core of a scientific research program for which there is ample evidence. This evidence consists in the fact that “biology, neuroscience, and cognitive science have provided accounts of the dependence on physical processes of *specific* faculties once attributed to the soul.”¹⁹ Dualism cannot be *proven* false—a dualist can always appeal to correlations or functional relations between soul and brain/body—but advances in science make it a view with little justification. According

15. J. Gresham Machen, *The Christian View of Man* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1937): 137.

16. See John W. Cooper, *Body, Soul & Life Everlasting* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000).

17. See N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection and the Son of God*, 2003.

18. See Joel B. Green, *Body, Soul, and Human Life: The Nature of Humanity in the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008); cf. John W. Cooper, “The Bible and Dualism Once Again,” *Philosophia Christi* 9.2 (2007): 459-72; John W. Cooper, “The Current Body-Soul Debate: A Case for Holistic Dualism,” *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 13.2 (2009): 32-50; John W. Cooper, “Exaggerated Rumors of Dualisms Demise,” *Philosophia Christi* 11.2 (2009): 453-64.

19. Warren S. Brown, Nancey C. Murphy, and H. Newton Malony, *Whatever Happened to the Soul?: Scientific and Theological Portraits of Human Nature* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998): 17.

to Murphy, “science has provided a massive amount of evidence suggesting that we need not postulate the existence of an entity such as a soul or mind in order to explain life and consciousness.”²⁰

One of these pieces of evidence is evolution. It is widely agreed that if evolution is the story of how we got here, then we are creatures of matter–consciousness and the self (if such a notion is still used) are entirely physical. I repeat: It is well known that one of the driving forces behind physicalism is evolutionary theory. Evolutionist Paul Churchland makes this claim:

the important point about the standard evolutionary story is that the human species and all of its features are the wholly physical outcome of a purely physical process...If this is the correct account of our origins, then there seems neither need, nor room, to fit any nonphysical substances or properties into our theoretical account of ourselves. We are creatures of matter. And we should learn to live with that fact.²¹

One might think that theistic evolution has the resources to solve this problem because God could add consciousness or a soul at any place in the evolutionary process. But it must be remembered that according to theistic evolution, God is allowed to “act” as long as God’s actions are not detectable and we don’t need to postulate God’s action as the correct explanation of some phenomenon that resulted from His act. As I have already pointed out, it is almost universally acknowledged that naturalistic evolution cannot explain the origin of consciousness or a soul. Since humans are merely the result of an entirely physical process (the processes of evolutionary theory) working on wholly physical materials, then humans are wholly physical beings. Something does not come into existence from nothing, and if a purely physical process is applied to wholly physical materials, the result will be a wholly physical thing, even if it is a more complicated arrangement of physical materials! And claiming that consciousness is emergent is just a name for the problem, not a solution. Thus, if God were to insert consciousness or souls into the evolutionary process, we no longer have evolution, strictly speaking.

I cannot undertake here a critique of physicalism and a defense of dualism.²² Suffice it to say that dualism is a widely accepted, vibrant intellectual position. I suspect that the majority of Christian philosophers are dualists. And it is important to mention that neuroscience really has nothing to do with which view is most plausible. Without getting into details, this becomes evident when we observe that leading

20. Ibid., 18.

21. Paul M. Churchland, *Matter and Consciousness: A Contemporary Introduction to the Philosophy of Mind* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2013): 35.

22. J. P. Moreland and Scott B. Rae, *Body & Soul* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000); J. P. Moreland, *The Soul: How We Know It’s Real and Why It Matters* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2014).

neuroscientists—Nobel Prize winner John Eccles,²³ U. C. L. A. neuroscientist Jeffrey Schwartz,²⁴ and Mario Beauregard,²⁵ are all dualists and they know the neuroscience. Their dualism, and the central intellectual issues involved in the debate, is quite independent of neuroscientific data.

The irrelevance of neuroscience also becomes evident when we consider the recent best seller *Proof of Heaven* by Eben Alexander.²⁶ Regardless of one's view of the credibility of Near Death Experiences (NDEs) in general, or of Alexander's in particular, one thing is clear. Before whatever it was that happened to him, Alexander believed the (allegedly) standard neuroscientific view that specific regions of the brain generate and possess specific states of conscious. But after his NDE, Alexander came to believe that it is the soul that possesses consciousness, not the brain, and the various mental states of the soul are in two-way causal interaction with specific regions of the brain. Here's the point: His change in viewpoint was a change in metaphysics that did not require him to reject or alter a single neuroscientific fact. Dualism and physicalism are empirically equivalent views consistent with all and only the same scientific data. Thus, the authority of empirical data in science cannot be claimed on either side.

For example, the overstatement of neuroscience's authority is increasingly recognized from various sources, including some neuroscientists. As Alissa Quart's Op-Ed in the *New York Times* observes, "Writing in the journal *Neuron*, the researchers concluded that 'logically irrelevant neuroscience information imbues an argument with authoritative, scientific credibility.' Another way of saying this is that bogus science gives vague, undisciplined thinking the look of seriousness and truth."²⁷

Given this, and given the fact that Jesus believed in a soul as did the other biblical writers, it is hard to see why believers would reject dualism in favor of some form of Christian physicalism. Moreover, loss of belief in the soul has contributed to a loss of belief in life after death. As John Hick pointed out, "This considerable decline within society as a whole, accompanied by a lesser decline within the churches, of the belief in personal immortality clearly reflects the assumption within our culture that we should only believe in what we experience, plus what the accredited sciences certify to us."²⁸

What is the motive, the reasoning here for those believers who reject dualism? The answer: Evolution entails or strongly underwrites anthropological physicalism.

23. Karl R. Popper and John C. Eccles, *The Self and Its Brain: An Argument for Interactionism* (London: Springer-Verlag, 1977).

24. Jeffrey Schwartz and Sharon Begley, *The Mind and the Brain* (New York: HarperCollins, 2002).

25. Mario Beauregard and Denyse O'Leary, *The Spiritual Brain: A Neuroscientist's Case for the Existence of the Soul* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007).

26. Eben Alexander, *Proof of Heaven* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2012).

27. Alissa Quart, (November 25, 2012): http://www.nytimes.com/2012/11/25/opinion/sunday/neuroscience-under-attack.html?_r=3&.

28. John Hick, *Death and Eternal Life* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1980): 92.

But if the church's teaching on this has been wrong for two thousand years, why should we believe her teaching when it comes to various doctrinal and ethical claims? As with theistic evolution's accommodationism, physicalism accedes to science a hegemony it does not deserve.

Here's the important takeaway: Acceptance of theistic evolution (which entails or strongly supports physicalism), along with irrelevant appeals to neuroscientific authority undermine the view that theology, biblical teaching and commonsense views of the mind and so on can stand on their own without the need for scientific backing. Such appeals (that we have to accept theistic evolution and the physicalism that comes along with it) reinforce the non-cognitive nature of theology and biblical teaching, and they contribute to the placement of biblical teaching outside the culture's plausibility structure. It seems inconsistent and *ad hoc* to allow science to revise theological anthropology while not allowing it to do the same regarding demonization and religious experience.