

# Letters

The book was done as part of a research fellowship under the auspices of the University's Post-Modernity Project.

There is much to admire about this book; the author writes clearly and with passion. The polarization argument is well developed, although much is taken for granted. For instance, he posits certain moral positions as obviously "Christian" and other positions as obviously "not Christian." But this is a consequence of his writing for a designated target audience. He expresses his personal unhappiness with American society's opting for "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness" and argues for a state which ought to be one "existing primarily for the glory of God, and to see his will be done on earth as it is in heaven" (p. 63).

This statement made me question whether the author would speak at all of religious pluralism. Somewhat to my surprise, he did not. Indeed, the survey data he cites speaks of America as being made of just five religious groups: evangelical and mainline Protestants, orthodox and progressive Catholics, and secularists. In the world of Adams, it appears, Muslims, Mormons, Jews, Unitarians, American Indians, and a host of other minority groups, do not exist. In my view, this oversight weakens many of the author's arguments.

The timeliness of Adams' book makes it worth reading, but perhaps not keeping. Geoffrey Layman's recent book, *The Great Divide*, does a better job of addressing the issues, if not with the insights that came from the election of 2000. And the book by Robert Fowler, *Religion and Politics in America*, is another recommended read on this topic. I treasure both of these books in my own library.

*Reviewed by John Burgeson, 2295 E. Iliff Ave. #101, Denver, CO 80210.*

**THE AMERICAN SPIRITUAL CULTURE: And the Invention of Jazz, Football, and the Movies** by William Dean. New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, Inc., 2002. 240 pages, index, notes. Hardcover; \$24.95. ISBN: 0826414400.

Dean is professor of constructive theology at the Iliff School of Theology and the author of five previous books, one of which won an award for excellence from the American Academy of Religion in 1995. In this provocative volume, he analyses the spiritual culture of the United States. American citizens are religious, he argues, not only in the obvious ways like attending religious services but also in other ways that reflect their common heritage as a culturally displaced people.

In the introduction, Dean writes: "I describe an America that harbors its own distinctive spiritual culture. This culture has guided America for one simple reason: Americans have believed that it speaks for a truth, even a reality, greater than America" (p. 9). The book is one person's answers to discovering both what that spiritual culture is all about and what the grounds are that support it. The book consists of two separate parts and a somewhat controversial conclusion.

In part 1, "God the Opaque," Dean discusses reductionism, which he labels "America's Reigning Religious Skepticism" (p. 34). He refutes the reductionists' (Durkheim,

Freud, Segal, Guthrie and others) claim that the divine grounding of America's culture has disappeared, that the spiritual culture is based on nothing but itself, and that the claims of religion are "like shouts in an empty canyon" (p. 34). This was, for me, the book's high point. He then lays out the task for the religious critic, one which begins primarily by not adopting the world views of nonreligious inquiries. Subsequent chapters describe the American character as being that of a pragmatic "displaced person." There is a commentary on William James who had explored religious experiences in others without having one of his own. In James' final months of life, he broke through the "irony of atheism" into theistic richness. Dean returns to this theme at the end of the book.

In part 2, "America the Visible," Dean describes the inventions of jazz, football, and the movies as particular forms of the American spiritual culture. He discusses what each of these activities suggest, both about the American culture and about the Ultimate Reality that is active in it. "In their devotion, jazz fans show their appreciation for, among other things, improvisation; football fans suggest their ambivalent negotiation with violence; and movie fans manifest their desire for self-creation through fantasy. In each case, the enthusiasts telegraph their view of what is most (religiously) significant in their world" (p. 114). I read this part of the book several times, each time gleaning more insight into its thesis.

At the book's end, Dean offers a "Conclusion," a four-page brief titled "The Irony of Atheism." Out of secularization, he argues, religious experience often arises. Dean concludes, powerfully, by citing from Thornton Wilder's play, "The Skin of Our Teeth," an ironic look at the history of humankind. In the last speech of this play, the character Sabina speaks directly to the audience: "This is where you came in. We have to go on for ages and ages yet. You go home. The end of this play isn't written yet."

This book is an important contribution to understanding the peculiar American character. Robert Bellah, in a back jacket recommendation, sees it as both "intensely readable" and targeted to a "large audience of scholars and lay people alike." I would not recommend it, however, to less than a college student, and then only one with training in both the sciences and humanities. With that caveat, I recommend the book highly.

*Reviewed by John Burgeson, 2295 E. Iliff Ave. #101, Denver, CO 80210.*



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### An Author Responds to a Negative Book Review

I would like to respond to a review of my book, *Evolution and the Problem of Natural Evil*, which was published in the September 2002 issue of *PSCF* (p. 204). The reviewer, John Burgeson, of Durango, Colorado, clearly did not take the time to work through and understand the various pro-theistic arguments that are put forth in this book. He criti-

cized a mere three statements in the entire book, all three of which are based on a misreading (and hence misunderstanding) of my original text.

For instance, Burgeson makes the claim that I confused methodological naturalism for atheism on page 42 of the text, but this simply isn't the case. Methodological naturalism is entirely consistent with both theism and atheism. However, it has been used by many atheists and agnostics as a reason for excluding the basic idea of a Creator from the realm of modern science. Therefore, when I state that "methodological naturalism is the atheistic paradigm that implicitly forbids any evidence for design from being seriously considered by working scientists" on page 42 of *Evolution and the Problem of Natural Evil*, I am not confusing methodological naturalism for atheism. I am simply stating that methodological naturalism is the underlying concept that is often used to justify the exclusion of God from science. In this sense, it is frequently used as a tool by nonbelievers.

However, it is also true that a broadly defined "theistic science" makes equal use of methodological naturalism, because the very idea of "methodological naturalism" is itself religiously neutral, which simply means that it can be used by both theists and atheists alike. So, while it is indeed the case that some atheists utilize the principle of methodological naturalism as a reason or "excuse" for excluding God from the modern scientific enterprise, it is equally true that many theistically-oriented scientists utilize this very same methodological principle in their accumulation of physical data.

The reason for this is not far to seek—methodological naturalism is simply a methodological tool that is routinely used to empirically study and analyze the physical realm. This is why it is religiously neutral—because the idea of "God" is not a legitimate part of the data-gathering stage of the modern scientific method, as I point out at length in *The God Hypothesis*. It is only in the "data interpretation stage" of the modern scientific method that the idea of God is able to make its way into the realm of physical science at all, and this fact remains true in virtually all forms of "theistic science."

Burgeson's second criticism centers around my claim that a theistic interpretation of the physical data is inherently simpler—and therefore more in keeping with the principle of Occam's Razor—than are virtually all non-theistic interpretations of the very same data. The truth of this claim is self-evident: a single divine Law-Giver is indeed simpler than any conceivable non-theistic explanation of our physical universe, whether it involves billions of years of random selection or a postulated infinity of possible worlds.

It is also true, however, that the simplest explanation for any given phenomenon doesn't always have to be the correct one, and I don't imply anything to the contrary in *Evolution and the Problem of Natural Evil*. I simply point out that in the history of modern science, Occam's Razor has turned out to be an important and valuable means of approximating conceptual accuracy in the physical sciences. Virtually all of history's greatest scientific thinkers have repeatedly utilized this principle of simplicity in their theorizing. It is on the basis of these two facts that I claim that a theistic interpretation of modern science is

more in line with Occam's Razor than is the converse. Moreover, this hypothesis seems to render a theistic interpretation of the physical data more accurate overall, at least when we look to the validity of this principle in the past. But again, this doesn't necessarily mean that the simplest interpretation of the data will always be true, and I never implied this in my text.

In any event, the history of modern science teaches us that theorists who ignore the principle of Occam's Razor do so only at their own peril. But if this is true, and if it is also true that a theistic interpretation of the physical data is more in keeping with this Principle of Simplicity than is virtually any imaginable non-theistic interpretation, then there is nothing wrong with the conceptual "embracing" of this type of theistic interpretation.

Burgeson also asserts that I mistakenly conclude (on p. 136 of my text) that "modern science affirms scientism." This, of course, is a gross over-simplification of what is actually stated in the text itself. To be more precise, I merely stated that "given the development of the modern scientific worldview, which includes an affirmation of the ideals of predictive determinism, reductionism, and scientism, the notion of theistic evolution came to be understood as a contradiction in terms." Now, there is a huge distinction to be drawn between modern science itself, and the modern scientific "worldview" that espouses it. Virtually everyone agrees that the basic units of modern science are the observable facts and laws of the natural world. These empirical facts are, once again, religiously neutral. It is only when we progress to the data-interpretation stage of the modern scientific method that the very notion of a possible Creator (along with other conceivable explanations) come into play. But this is precisely what a "worldview" is in the first place: a philosophically-based interpretation of the empirical facts themselves.

Burgeson thus doesn't appear to appreciate the huge distinction between the empirical facts of modern science itself, and the modern scientific worldview, which is a philosophical interpretation of these very same physical facts. For while the empirical facts of modern science are both religiously and philosophically neutral, and hence do not either affirm or disconfirm the metaphysical belief of "scientism" (which states that the physical objects that modern science studies are the only types of entities in existence), it is an entirely different matter with the modern scientific worldview, which does indeed affirm the philosophical notion of "scientism," since this nontheistic worldview is based upon the underlying presumption that physical objects are the only types of "things" in existence.

It is Burgeson's implicit conflation here of "modern science" with the "modern scientific worldview" that has led him astray. The empirical facts of modern science are clearly not to be confused with any type of philosophical worldview that seeks to interpret the underlying meaning of these same basic facts.

These are the only specific criticisms that Burgeson mentions in his short "review" of my book, yet they were enough to lead him to dismiss the remainder of the book out of hand. Indeed, he explicitly states that he only "skimmed" through most of the text, which is a clear mistake, given the extreme subtlety and complexity of this particular issue.

# Letters

In fact, Burgeson eventually contradicts his own conclusion that the majority of the book is simply “useless,” and is therefore “not to be recommended.” How can he coherently make this claim, when he also openly states that my classical Christian approach to solving the theodicy problem is “fairly adequate”? Given the profound complexity of the theodicy problem, it follows that a “fairly adequate” solution is a highly significant one indeed. Indeed, the theodicy problem is widely recognized by virtually all philosophers and theologians as the single most difficult conceptual problem in academia today. Nevertheless, in the very same paragraph in which Burgeson judges my theodicy to be “fairly adequate,” he goes in the very opposite direction by judging the book itself to be “simply useless.” Is it even possible for a “fairly adequate” solution to the problem of evil to be “simply useless” at the same time? I don’t see how.

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## The Reviewer Responds to Author

Michael Corey’s *Evolution and the Problem of Natural Evil* addresses what is, perhaps, the major philosophical question confronting the Christian faith. I commend him for his attempt to address that problem, which has engaged our species for well over 2000 years. It may well be that his book will bring a measure of stability to some Christians who look for more certainty in their theologies than some of us have been able to find.

The librarian at the Iliff School of Theology, a Methodist seminary in Denver, clearly thought the book was of sufficient importance to place a copy in the Iliff library, and it may well be that my assessment is incomplete. I suggest that those with an interest in the problem of theodicy might do well to look at Corey’s book, along with David Ray Griffin’s recent book, *Religion and Scientific Naturalism: Overcoming the Conflicts* (State University of New York Press, 2000). Griffin solves the theodicy problem quite well, but as I see it, at an expense of an inadequate theology. Corey has, likewise, solved the theodicy problem, but at the expense of an inadequate view of the scientific enterprise.

In rereading my review, I agree with Corey that I may have been overly harsh. Perhaps the title led me to expect more than the author was prepared to offer. But serious readers of it will have to decide this for themselves. When you find a copy on the library shelf, take time to look it over.

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## Beyond the Hills of Seely

I thank Paul Seely for his comments (*PSCF Letters*, June 2003) on the interchange between Art Hill and myself on the Noachian Flood (*PSCF Letters*, March 2003). It was my hope to encourage a dialogue between *PSCF* readers on this topic.

I both agree and disagree with Seely about “accommodating the cultural understanding of the time.” The cultural perspective of a biblical people must always be figured into the equation of how to interpret Scripture, but the question still remains: Can the historical accuracy of the Bible be trusted? (By “historical” I not only mean history and pre-history in the traditional sense, but also the historical, time-related disciplines of archaeology, geology, astronomy, etc.). It is my belief that the Bible in its original (autograph) text accurately records historical events, *viewed within the culture (worldview) of those times.*

I’ll give an example. In an upcoming article in *PSCF* entitled “Making Sense of the Numbers of Genesis,” I try to explain that the Mesopotamians incorporated two numbering systems into their world view: (1) a numerological (sacred) system, and (2) a numerical (real) system. Two primary sacred numbers were sixty (the base of the Mesopotamian sexagesimal system) and seven, and the patriarchal ages from Adam to Noah are based on either or both of these numbers in some combination or permutation. In order to understand the very difficult topic of the long ages of the patriarchs and the chronologies of Genesis, one *must* understand the world view of the Mesopotamians—that their concept of the meaning of numbers differed drastically from our own. The biblical statement that Noah was 600 years old at the time of the Flood ( $600 = 60 \times 10$ , a “perfect” number to the Mesopotamians) can be understood numerologically from a Mesopotamian world view, but this “cultural accommodation” does not negate the biblical truth that there was a historical Flood, that God purposely produced this Flood for His own purposes, and that God worked through a specific historical man (Noah) to accomplish those purposes. It seems to me that “cultural accommodation” can be carried only so far if the integrity of the Bible is to be preserved.

Now, to address some of the more specific comments in Seely’s letter.

1. Seely’s comment: “the ‘whole earth’ of Gen. 8:9 that was flooded is the same ‘whole earth’ that the three sons of Noah later populated” (i.e., the extent delineated in Genesis 10). Actually, the geographical extent of the Table of Nations (Genesis 10) may be even wider than specified by Seely. The commentaries I’ve read extend the Table of Nations to Spain in the northern Mediterranean region, to the whole North Africa region, and to all of the Arabic nations. (Or as the Hebrew scholar Cassuto has remarked: “the Table of Nations included only those nations in contact with Israel—not all of the nations of the world”). The key here is that the extent of the “whole earth” expanded geographically over time commensurate with the expanded world view of the biblical writers. In Noah’s time, the “whole earth” meant just the Mesopotamian alluvial plain; later in time when the Table of Nations was written down it referred to the-then geographical extent of the Semito-Hamitic language nations in contact with Israel. In Acts 1:8 time (first century AD), the “uttermost parts of the earth”