Randy Isaac

An Interview with Randy Isaac, ASA Executive Director, 2005–2016

Christopher M. Rios

This past April the ASA celebrated the retirement and work of its fourth executive director, Randall D. Isaac. An ASA member since 1976, Isaac is a graduate of Wheaton College and the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and was a solid-state physics researcher and executive at IBM before he began serving as executive director in 2005. Shortly after assuming the title Director Emeritus, he agreed to do an interview about his time leading the ASA.

Randy, in a sentence or two, how would you summarize your time as ASA's executive director?

These eleven years have been a most stimulating time for me as I have met and befriended so many extraordinary people with deep insight and understanding. It has been a great joy to see people discover the ASA and to see their spiritual lives enriched through fellowship with other Christians in the sciences.

What were the most important issues you and the group faced? What challenges and accomplishments stand out in your memory?

The most urgent issue for ASA when I joined in 2005 was establishing a clear financial statement to show the current status as well as expectations for the future. The organization could not operate effectively when many payroll days brought uncertainty about sufficient funds. Clarity of funding helped us understand how much funds we needed to raise to meet the committed expenses.

This has been a perennial issue for ASA. How is the financial situation today?

It will always be a challenge to receive sufficient funding for our operations and for all the projects we would like to do. Today we have much better insight into our funding sources and our expenses. Vicki Best has brought us her expertise in development work and has led a very successful funding campaign. She also spearheaded the acquisition of our office condo, saving us a significant amount of expense in leasing space. We are now well positioned to be able to seek and obtain funding for new projects.

Other challenges or accomplishments?

A longer-term issue for ASA was to be transformed into a true internet-based organization. Terry Gray and Jack Haas had begun the ASA website in 1995 but by 2005 it was only a repository of archived publications with no membership management. It was a daunting task but in 2012 the ASA outsourced member management to YourMembership .com and integrated it with the online resources.

A third major challenge was growing the reputation of ASA as a high-quality organization with top-credentialed work in both science and theology. This must be done in the context of an organization with a policy of neutrality and a mission of enabling dialogue among diverse views. We all tend to judge quality by whether we agree with the work, so the

issue is one of generating respect for opposing views. We have not accomplished as much in this direction as I would have liked, but I nevertheless feel that ASA is one of the few organizations in science and faith to incorporate such opposing views.

What would more accomplishment in this area look like?

The scientific enterprise is characterized by a high-level trend of convergence around fundamental ideas as the growing accumulation of data builds evidence for distinguishing among competing theories. This tends not to happen in science and faith debates; it seems that champions of each perspective simply continue to defend their views, with no convergence to agreement in sight. The ideal accomplishment in this area would be for differing camps to acknowledge the weaknesses of their own position and to honestly address them with other groups. At the very least, there should be substantive dialogue toward this end rather than advocates simply continuing to repeat their positions.

Any other major challenges?

Yes. Another was the competition from advocacy groups. When the ASA was founded, there were relatively few organizations focused on science and faith. In 1963, ASA members desiring an advocacy of a young-earth perspective formed the Creation Research Society. Over the years, other organizations were begun, often by ASA members, to advocate for a variety of positions such as concordism, intelligent design, evolutionary creation, et cetera. These groups attracted far more funding and passionate adherents, drawing resources away from the ASA with its focus on dialogue and fellowship.

It is interesting that you describe the relationship with other groups as one of competition. How would you describe the benefits the ASA brings that these organizations lack?

The competition is for the resources of time and money of both the leading thinkers and the audience. The collaboration lies in the mutual focus on harmony of science and Christian faith. The benefits that ASA brings include an openness and acceptance of members, no matter what their view. Some would dispute this, feeling that the majority opinion in the ASA is that of evolutionary creation and, therefore, those with differing views feel uncomfortable. It is indeed a challenge to make minority viewpoints welcome in our journal and at our meetings, but the act of worshipping together despite differences of opinion is a powerful way of bringing unity in the body of Christ.

What about substantive issues in the area of science and faith?

The two most dominant issues that came to the fore in ASA were human ancestry and climate change. The human genome project had barely been completed in 2005, and the implications for human ancestry soon became clear. While nothing new was discovered, the prevailing understanding that historically the human ancestral population was always much greater than two was now substantiated and quantified by genetic analysis. The implications for understanding the historical role of Adam and Eve were significant. ASA played a key role in 2009 when Walter Bradley organized a seminal symposium on the topic.

Climate change was another issue tearing apart ASA members. I had the privilege of being invited to participate in an evangelical-scientist retreat in 2007 that brought evangelical leaders together with top climate change scientists for three days of private consultations. Meeting the renowned scientists and hearing the case in detail had a big influence on me. Not all ASA members are in agreement, but most members are now actively engaged in pursuing strategies that respond to our responsibility in affecting our climate.

You led the ASA during times that saw considerable public attention given to science-religion questions. I am thinking specifically about the rise of intelligent design (ID) and the New Atheism, about legal trials such as the Dover case in 2005, and about the popularity that came to groups such as Answers in Genesis. Did these developments benefit or challenge the ASA in a particular way?

The wide public attention given to the situations you cited was a mixed blessing. On one hand, it generated an awareness in the general public that these issues existed. It generated a broad audience of people who had heard the terminology and wanted to understand more. On the other hand, it helped build stereotypes. People tended to form opinions

that "all" Christians must be YEC or "all" Christians must be ID or "no" Christian can believe in evolution. Without understanding the nuances of the discussions, people were categorized as "good" or "bad" based on their alliance with a particular position. Part of our challenge in ASA is to leverage this opportunity to broaden the audience for dialogue and to educate people about the breadth of ideas within the scope of Christian faith.

Thinking about the past quarter-century, what changes have you noticed in the tenor of Christianity and science discourse, either within or outside the ASA?

The prevailing tone of discourse on science and faith has unfortunately tended to become more and more polarized, perhaps reflecting the way in which politics has become sharply polarized. Within a given community of viewpoints, there is great harmony and good research progress but respect for other views has not grown appreciably. From some measures, it appears that seeing evolution as a viable evangelical position is now much more broadly accepted than a quarter century ago. Unfortunately, the sharper degree of polarization has also made many organizations restrict the range of opinions within their institution.

This brings us back to the ASA's commitment to openness in controversial areas. Many people see this as one of the ASA's strengths. Was it difficult to maintain during your tenure? What do you list among the important controversial issues? Is evolution still one of them?

The oft-stated policy not to take a position in areas of honest disagreement among Christians is an extremely important aspect that characterizes ASA. It is a most difficult one to maintain. For one thing, it is not easy to differentiate an honest disagreement from a dishonest one. My personal preference, though not an official ASA position, was that the reference for honest disagreements was the accepted consensus view of the scientific community for scientific matters and of the Christian theological community for theological matters, in areas that such consensus existed. Perspectives that fall within the bounds of such consensus, but differ on other matters, are clearly honest disagreements. However, perspectives that challenge the established scientific consensus may or may not be an honest disagreement. ASA is not the venue for evaluating scientific ideas. Expert technical communities exist for testing such ideas. The expertise of ASA is to investigate the relationship of scientific consensus with our Christian faith. From this perspective, ideas that challenge heliocentrism or the age of the earth may not be an honest disagreement unless there are new data or analyses that have not been considered by the scientific community.

On the other hand, there is a large community of Christians for whom the scientific consensus on the age of the earth is not correct. Their ideas have not gained traction with the science community. If the ASA were to exclude them, then it could no longer provide an effective forum for discussion of widespread ideas in the church. But for the majority of Christians in the sciences, the age of the earth is a discussion of the past and an organization that would spend time on the topic is viewed with suspicion at best.

The opinion of what topic is controversial and what is not will always be a relative one. Adherents of ideas not accepted by the reigning consensus will always maintain that their ideas are honest disagreements. Those convinced by the consensus will soon dismiss the "controversy" as being beyond useful dialogue. The challenge with regard to such a broad range of opinions is to maintain a perspective of neutrality with quality of work.

For me personally, issues such as the age of the earth, evolution, human ancestry, biogenesis, and others are no longer controversial. But my opinion is not important. Each of these topics is still hotly debated within the body of Christ; therefore, in the ASA we must foster an attitude of openness to discussion of each of them.

Even if it hinders progress in elevating the ASA's reputation that you mentioned before?

These need not be mutually exclusive. A willingness to discuss controversial opinions is different from attributing quality to pseudoscience. Granted, all parties must bring to the table the same willingness to engage in good scientific methodology. If the methodologies differ, then no amount of discussion will lead to convergence or to mutual respect. While scientific consensus is extremely important, it is not rigidly defined and must always be open to discussion. The methodology for challenging the consensus

must be sound, however, and respectful dialogue requires a common agreement on such methodology.

The ASA has long been concerned with the question of origins, but it has also given considerable attention to other important issues that were sometimes overshadowed by the evolution question. What topics do you feel deserved (and maybe still deserve) more attention?

The question of origins, whether of the universe, life, species, or consciousness, is fascinating and will always capture our interest. I feel that it is best considered as a specific application of more fundamental questions. I hope ASA will be able to continue to focus on the primary questions and not miss the forest for the trees. For example, in my remarks at the farewell event on April 8, 2016, I shared four meta-questions that I believe get to the heart of the interaction of science and faith. I will briefly summarize them here.

1. *What does the Bible teach about science and history, and how does that teaching relate to our modern science?*

At one end of the spectrum, concordists believe that there is an accurate correlation between the original text of the Bible and the findings of modern science and history. Apologists for the inspiration of the Bible therefore point to examples of science in the Bible, while skeptics relish in identifying what they see as errors. At the other end of the spectrum are those who feel that the Bible is not a book of science, but a theological book with no necessary accuracy in science or history. Its record of historical events is interpretive rather than literal. Many arguments on origins are rooted in differences of concordism. Without coming to a better understanding of the basis for and the nature of concordism, little progress will be made on origins.

2. *What is the relationship between scientific and theistic explanations of our universe?*

At one end of the spectrum is a belief that these explanations are mutually exclusive. An explanation based on laws of nature removes the need for God, while a miracle by God defies scientific explanation. Mark Noll has termed this "univocity" and traces it back to John Duns Scotus of the thirteenth century. At the other end of the spectrum is the concept of complementarity, championed, for example, by Donald MacKay in the middle of the twentieth century. Just as a boiling teakettle can be explained simultaneously by the thermodynamics of the heat source and by the desire to have a cup of tea, a scientific and a theological explanation can merrily coexist. Many of the origin debates seem to be centered on the univocity end of the spectrum. The inadequacy of scientific explanations to account for origins is portrayed as evidence for God's involvement while skeptics trumpet a successful scientific explanation as evidence for the lack of a divine creator. The essence of the relationship between scientific and theological explanations must be resolved before the origins issue can be addressed. Similarly, this question leads to a discussion of scientific methodology and the role of methodological naturalism. To what extent can design be detected and a designer be inferred from scientific observations?

3. *What is the relationship between purpose and chance?*

The issue of divine providence and randomness has been given renewed importance with modern science. Historically, divine action was thought to be predominant in explaining phenomena. Then the rise of western science, from Galileo to Newton and on, led to the concept of a mechanistic universe, potentially describable with differential equations. The exception seemed to be biology where the apparent vitality of life defied description. Darwin filled in that gap by giving hope to finding a mechanistic explanation for biology as well. The dilemma posed by science at that time was how to understand divine providence in a deterministic universe. Was there room for God to carry out his will?

But then in the twentieth century, with the advent of quantum mechanics and the uncertainty principle as well as chaos theory and molecular randomness, the dominant scientific perspective veered from determinism to randomness and contingency. The central question became how divine providence might operate within the pervasive randomness that we see in nature. At one end of the spectrum, a Calvinist approach sees all randomness as illusory and divine providence as absolute. At the other end of the spectrum, process and open theology see divine providence as subject to randomness. Is there a center ground in which divine providence and randomness coexist? Evolutionists often point to the inherent role of randomness in evolution, arguing only about the degree and structure of randomness.

Too often, both skeptics and Christians see this randomness as antithetical to divine providence, casting evolution as dysteleology so that a belief in God's intentional action in creation must lead to a denial of evolution. This may be a common reason for the rejection of evolution. The issue of evolution cannot be resolved without first understanding purpose and chance.

4. *What does it mean to be human in the context of the world in which we live and in the context of being in the image of God?*

Finally, the broadest question that is most relevant to our daily lives is the question of human nature itself. As the psalmist wondered, what are humans that God should be mindful of them? As we learn with astonishment the vastness of the universe with hundreds of billions of galaxies, each with hundreds of billions of stars, what role could we possibly have? And then we consider that just on this planet Earth, there are tens of millions of species of life of which we are only one. We are closely connected and related to all the others and yet we are distinct. It appears that we are the only species to be aware of all the others and to recognize their interdependence. We also recognize that we can and do influence the environment on both the global and local scale. What responsibilities has God given us toward these species?

And as we turn our attention from the macroscopic to the microscopic, we are equally astonished at the world of atoms and molecules. Genetic information represents a major opportunity and responsibility to affect—or to refrain from doing so—the lives of many. As the findings of science open the door to gene-editing, can we or should we do it at the embryonic level?

Turning from the microscopic and macroscopic, we focus on the practical scale of daily living. How is our behavior in daily life affected by the details of our environment? How do we understand the relationship of our spirituality and our biochemical makeup? The intricacies of the brain and our behavior will long be a source of fascinating research.

Earlier you mentioned funding for new projects. Are there any on the horizon you can talk about?

Perhaps the most interesting possibility is to expand on the initiatives of the CiS and CSCA who recently received funding for increasing the number and activities of local chapters. One of the most effective ministries of the ASA is to foster personal fellowship. Local chapters are one of the best ways to engage our members in dialogue with each other.

Who were some of the key and perhaps lesser-known ASA leaders that you hope current and future ASAers remember?

I am hesitant to mention names. There are so many that to begin would inevitably omit many who are equally worthy. I would suggest that all who have served as ASA Council members are very influential leaders who are often unrecognized. Also, the journal editors over the years, and the annual meeting program chairs.

You have given so much of your own time these last eleven years to the mission of ASA to encourage interaction between the best of the sciences and Christian faith. Has that been worthwhile?

Each time I hear the testimony of some member whose life has been enriched and whose faith strengthened through the work of the ASA, I realize that all the work is indeed worthwhile. Over and over we hear stories of students, early career, and established scientists who express their appreciation for the resources and the fellowship that we provide. Christians are in a minority in the science lab, and scientists are in a minority in the church community. Providing a means for these minority groups to find each other and share their interests is eminently worthwhile.

As you look back over the past few decades, how do you think the relationship between the sciences and theology is better because of the ASA?

I think that the understanding of the relationship between science and theology is much better today. The thoughtful stimulation from *Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith (PSCF)* and the effect of bringing leading thinkers in science and Christian faith to the broader community has had a tremendous influence. In many cases, the ASA has been a leader in generating dialogue on new ideas. Most of the earliest work on intelligent design, for example, was done by ASA members in ASA venues. The

latest emphasis on human ancestry and the historicity of Adam and Eve was most notably triggered by the ASA meeting in 2009 and the subsequent publication of our special *PSCF* issue on human genetics (September 2010).

Do you have a specific hope for the ASA in the future?

My hope is that ASA will continue to maintain a focus on quality of research and ideas in the relationship between science and faith, with a primary emphasis on supporting and strengthening each other's commitment to Christ. The enabling of fellowship with each other is crucial to growing the body of Christ as it seeks to understand science.

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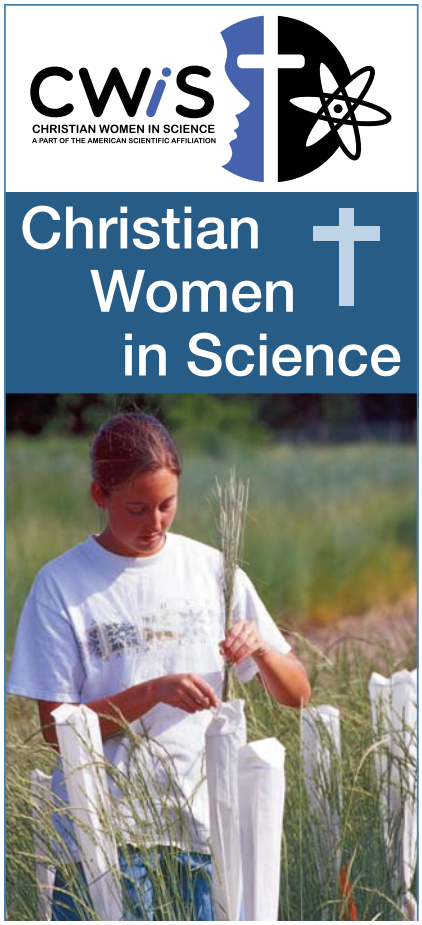

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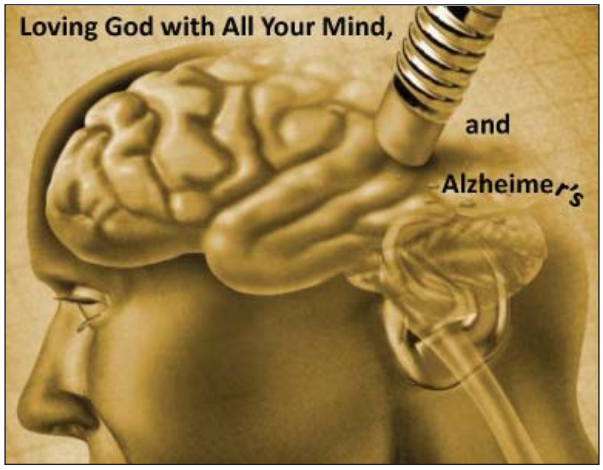

Bryan C. Auday, PhD, is Professor and Chair of the Department of Psychology at Gordon College, Wenham, MA, and is also the founding director of the neuroscience program there. He recently completed, as co-medical editor, the *Salem Health Magill's Medical Guide*, 7th ed., vols. 1–5 (Hackensack, NJ: Grey House, 2014).

In his essay, "Loving God with All Your Mind and Alzheimer's" at http://www.csca.ca/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/Auday2016.pdf, Auday describes for us the latest developments and challenges from Alzheimer's disease for the sciences, our society, and Christian faith. The essay is intended as an invitation. Readers are encouraged to take up one of the insights or questions, or maybe a related one that was not mentioned, and draft an article (typically about 5,000–8,000 words) that contributes to the conversation. These can be sent to Auday at Bryan.Auday@gordon.edu.

Auday will send the best essays on to peer review and then we will select from those for publication in an Alzheimer's science theme issue of *Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith*.

The lead editorial in the December 2013 issue of *PSCF* outlines what the journal looks for in article contributions. For best consideration for inclusion in the theme issue, manuscripts should be received electronically before **December 31, 2016**.