

# ? CULTURE AND THE BIG QUESTIONS

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**CREATIONISM USA: Bridging the Impasse on Teaching Evolution** by Adam Laats. New York: Oxford University Press, 2021. 218 pages. Hardcover; \$32.95. ISBN: 9780197516607.

Historian Adam Laats (a self-described noncreationist, nonscientist) has written a thorough and well-documented account of American creationism, past and present. His frequent use of primary literature and direct quotes assures the reader that s/he is being presented with accurate information.

Laats shows that most Americans don't know much about evolutionary theory and that they have taken the path of least resistance by carelessly embracing positions simply because of the persuasiveness of winsome idea champions. Laats argues that they should evaluate supporting evidence for those positions. He opposes the "missionary attitudes" on both sides of the controversy, pointing out that some creationists link views on origins with salvation, and some atheistic evolutionists wish to convince creationists to abandon religion for science.

Laats posits that the evolution/creation conflict is mostly between young earth creationists (YEC), whom he calls "radical creationists," and everyone else. He says that radical creationists incorrectly conflate the holding of "liberal" social positions on such things as sexuality, abortion, and politics with learning about evolution. In response, radical creationists have built systems and institutions to promulgate their views in competition with mainstream science. Sadly, his use of the harsh moniker "radical creationists" will not lead many YEC adherents to read his book.

Laats theorizes that creationists are such for many reasons, including seeking explanations of first cause, purpose, and the driving forces acting in the created order. He points out that they are also concerned about consciousness and morality. While he gives examples of the uncivil and fratricidal rhetoric between champions of various creationist positions, he also takes the time to describe the hermeneutical approach taken by a majority of YECers (famously promoted by Ken Ham and his ministry *Answers in Genesis*), that is, to understand the intended meaning of the biblical text under consideration. He then shows that while the old earth creationist perspective (championed by Hugh Ross and the ministry *Reasons to Believe*) is quite varied in the particulars, it agrees with the YEC view that speciation events were acts of divine intervention, not evolution. He continues

to show that mainstream evolution gains the strongest support from creationists self-identified as evolutionary creationists (i.e., theistic evolutionists), who are represented by the "non-radical" umbrella organization BioLogos. He shows that intelligent design proponents hold diverse views on the age of the creation and on evolution, but that they share the belief that life is too complex to have arisen on its own. With keen insight he writes: "Radicals, non-radicals, old earthers, intelligent designers, evolutionary creationists all compete to have their creationist vision embraced by religious people who might or might not look askance at evolutionary theory" (p. 17).

While he thoroughly describes the main creationist viewpoints (young earth creation, old earth creation, evolutionary creation, intelligent design), and he quotes evolutionary creationist Kenneth Miller statement that "absolute materialism . . . cannot fully explain the nature of reality" early on (p. 21), for the rest of the book, Laats largely ignores how naturalism, materialism, and teleology affect theists' stances toward evolutionary theory.

Naturalism (ontological) is the view that the universe completely lacks supernatural or metaphysical elements.<sup>1</sup> While many evolutionary creationists are methodological naturalists (science should not address metaphysics), they are not ontological naturalists.

Materialism, while similar to naturalism, posits that the universe consists only of matter and energy.<sup>2</sup> Relating these propositions to science, David Griffin writes:

Science, it is widely agreed in scientific, philosophical, and liberal religious circles, necessarily presupposes naturalism . . . Most philosophers, theologians, and scientists, however, believe that scientific naturalism is incompatible with any religious view of reality.<sup>3</sup>

Teleology (biological progress) is consistent with the theological view that God created the universe and life with purpose.<sup>4</sup> Evolutionary creationists hold a variety of views on teleological evolution, and those who accept it in principle disagree on possible mechanisms of action. Many creationists conflate evolution, materialism, and ateleology. This strengthens their resolve to reject evolutionary theory of any kind.

To "bridge the impasse," Laats prescribes how evolution should be taught in public secondary schools: children should learn about evolution and religious ideas should be kept out of the classroom. Trust in educators should be fostered because Americans doubt mainstream evolutionary theory due to "our fundamental, divisive, enduring lack of trust" (p. 175). But this approach to gain trust of students through the presentation of convincing evidence and arguments has already been shown to be largely ineffective. Teachers

who fail to consider religious presuppositions are likely to build intransigence among their religious students. On the other hand, culturally competent teaching methods have been shown to successfully engage both evolutionary theory and the learner's presuppositions and religious beliefs. A growing body of empirical studies shows that culturally competent evolution educators can gain the trust of their students, who are then less resistant to new or previously rejected propositions about evolution.<sup>5</sup>

In summary, this fine book suffers from a failure to recognize naturalism/materialism as the core conflict between creationists and materialistic evolutionists,<sup>6</sup> and it doesn't promote the building of trust and reconciliation in educational settings through culturally competent evolution instructional methods.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>David Papineau, "Naturalism," in E. N. Zalta, ed., *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2021 Edition), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2021/entries/naturalism/>.

<sup>2</sup>William Jaworski, "Why Materialism Is False, and Why It Has Nothing To Do with the Mind," *Philosophy* 91, no. 2 (2016): 183–213, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819116000036>.

<sup>3</sup>David Ray Griffin, *Religion and Scientific Naturalism: Overcoming the Conflicts* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2000), 11.

<sup>4</sup>Sy Garte, "Teleology and the Origin of Evolution," *Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith* 69, no. 1 (2017): 42–50, <https://www.asa3.org/ASA/PSCF/2017/PSCF3-17Garte.pdf>.

<sup>5</sup>For example, M. Elizabeth Barnes and Sara E. Brownell, "A Call to Use Cultural Competence When Teaching Evolution to Religious College Students: Introducing Religious Cultural Competence in Evolution Education (ReCCEE)," *CBE – Life Sciences Education* 16, no. 4 (2017), <https://doi.org/10.1187/cbe.17-04-0062>.

<sup>6</sup>See M. Elizabeth Barnes et al., "'Accepting Evolution Means You Can't Believe in God': Atheistic Perceptions of Evolution among College Biology Students," *CBE – Life Sciences Education* 19, no. 2 (2020), <https://doi.org/10.1187/cbe.19-05-0106>.

Reviewed by Michael Tenneson, Department Chair and Professor of Biology at Evangel University, Springfield, MO 65802.

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**DAWN: A Proton's Tale of All That Came to Be** by Cees Dekker, Corien Oranje, and Gijsbert van den Brink. Translated by Harry Cook. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2022. 166 pages, discussion questions. Paperback; \$22.00. ISBN: 9781514005668.

Imagine that you could witness the entire history of the universe first-hand, from the big bang to the end of time. Perhaps, if you were a sentient yet patient proton, you would have the necessary longevity and attention span, and this idea could become your reality. Such is the premise of *Dawn: A Proton's Tale of All That Came*

*to Be*. "Pro," as the proton protagonist is known to his chatty neighboring subatomic particles, is born from quarks in the first second after the big bang, blind and knowing nothing, but with an insatiable curiosity about what is happening, and why. Conversations with other particles born a split-second earlier soon produce in Proton a deep admiration for a skilled Creator, and a sense of wonder and anticipation about what they have seen and what will happen next.

Throughout several chapters, Pro confusedly and vividly experiences the onset of light, nuclear fusion, a supernova, and incorporation into a molecule as part of a carbon nucleus. Pro ends up in the dust cloud that forms Earth, eventually witnessing the origin of terrestrial life as part of an RNA molecule. A rumor among the subatomic particles that the Creator wants to make personal contact with one of the creatures generates a guessing game as they witness the progress of evolution. Which lifeform will it be?

When *Homo sapiens* arrive on the scene, the story shifts to tracking biblical narratives, and the subatomic particles begin asking each other more theological questions. The Creator makes contact with two humans, a chieftain couple in Africa. The Fall ensues when the couple and their tribe reject the Creator's instructions, much to the subatomic particles' surprise and horror. Pro and his neighbors are then able to witness key moments in the progress of redemption, becoming fly-on-the-wall observers to events in the lives of several important biblical characters. "How is the Creator going to fix things?" the particles ask each other.

At this point it becomes apparent what a colossal challenge the three authors (a nano scientist, a novelist, and a theologian)<sup>1</sup> have taken upon themselves. They have tried to produce a gripping narrative in which the protagonist does not know the outcome, but Christian readers will. They have set out to tell an entertaining story of the history of the universe from a Christ-centered perspective, filled with imaginative details that are consistent with modern science but also with the biblical witness. They have charged into a literary no man's land between fiction and nonfiction.

Do they succeed? In many ways, admirably so. The merging of science and biblical witness is skillfully accomplished, respecting the integrity of each source of knowledge. To readers of this journal, the idea of a Creator patiently guiding the evolution of the universe and of life over billions of years in order to generate Earth and its humanity, followed by the increasingly intimate involvement of that Creator in redeeming humanity, is familiar. To many others, this idea will be revelatory.