A Reflection on the Bill Nye–Ken Ham Debate

John W Patterson

On February 4, 2014, two well-known figures debated the question “Is creation a viable model of origins in today’s modern scientific world?”

Ken Ham, the founder and leader of the Answer in Genesis ministry, repeatedly insisted that it is, that the universe as we know it was created by God in six twenty-four-hour days some 6000 or so years ago. Bill Nye, widely known as television’s “Science Guy,” presented the view that Ham’s biblical creationism is not scientifically viable at all. To the scientifically literate, Nye clearly won the debate by patiently outlining many reasons why the overwhelming majority of competent scientists today regard Ham’s faith-based creationism as scientific nonsense. So successful was Nye, in fact, that Pat Robertson, the famous television evangelist—whose presidential campaign back in the 1980s was heavily supported by young-earth creationists—said, “to say that it all came about in 6000 years is just nonsense. … I think it’s time we’d come off of that stuff and say, this isn’t possible” (http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_detailpage&v=m5XJ2iSnfXc#t=41).

This clip was aired after the debate by Lawrence O’Donnell on his MSNBC program, The Last Word, where readers can also see an interview with Nye about the debate (http://www.msnbc.com/the-last-word/watch/bill-nyes-debate-victory-lap-137819203791).

Having followed creationist debates since the late 1970s—and participated in six or more myself—my assessment of the debate will differ from that of those who, to my astonishment, seem completely unaware that creationism is still being taught as science in many of America’s public schools.

First and foremost, Ham’s honesty and candor sets him markedly apart from any of the creationist debaters I have listened to or debated in the past. Previously, creationist debaters would insist that neither debater should make any reference whatever to religion or the Bible. With this precondition in place, they then proceeded to deliver unsettling barrages of thinly veiled apologetics, polemics, and code phrases that, to the delight of creationists in the audience, provided indisputable “scientific” support for ideas that even Pat Robertson calls nonsense, such as that the Genesis Flood produced the geologic column and that the age of the universe is on the order of 6000 to 10 000 years.

These presentations were invariably couched in scientific-sounding words and phrases, often incorrectly applied, then supplemented with numerous out-of-context quotes deliberately fashioned to misrepresent the scientific authorities being quoted. With all this in place, the entire community of evolutionary scientists would be ridiculed as a group. (Three of the more notorious creationist debaters, in my view, were the late Henry M
Morris and Duane T Gish of the Institute for Creation Science and the still-active Walter T Brown, who is director of his own Center for Scientific Creation, now headquartered in Phoenix, Arizona.) All this explains why groups that support science, such as the National Center for Science Education, and academic scientists consider such debates to be counterproductive at best.

But again, this debate was completely different, and I for one applaud Ken Ham for being the first creation science debater in my experience to be honest about the biblical basis for all young earth creationism. I commend him also because he did not rely on the misquoting of renowned scientists, preferring instead to quote credentialed creation scientists.

Truthfulness has its price. Ham's candor spared Nye the burden of having to refute the kinds of obfuscations and distortions that debaters like Morris, Gish, Brown, and others typically have used in the effort to direct attention away from the biblical basis for creationism. Because of this, some will say that Nye should have done much better than he actually did. But I think Nye deserves the benefit of the doubt here; in my opinion he chose to be much more gentlemanly than a lesser man might have been under the circumstances.

However, I think the Nye–Ham debate will unleash unprecedented divisiveness within the creationist movement. I expect that the “traditional” creation-science ministries, such as the ICR, the CSC, and the less visible Creation Research Society (headquartered in Chino Valley, Arizona: https://www.creationresearch.org/), will condemn Ham's candor as a harmful blunder. Why? Because their less candid polemical debate strategy which tried to obscure the biblical roots of their assertions and pretend to have a scientific basis had been so successful for so long.

Now there will be far less public confusion about the distinctions between legitimate evidence-based science and the faith-based biblical varieties so successfully propounded by debaters from the ICR, the CRS, and the CSC, among others. In this connection, the more recent “intelligent design” variety of creationism stirred considerable dissension when it abandoned the young earth timeline in favor of accommodating, if not embracing, modern science's deep-time perspective. But, like the young-earth ministries that they left behind, the proponents of “intelligent design” also strive mightily to disguise the theological-apologetical nature of their Seattle-based Discovery Institute. In contrast, Ham's approach lays bare what's really behind all creationism. I would not be surprised to see a particularly vicious kind of internecine dissension result from the widely promoted Nye–Ham debate.

The one thing I wish Nye had not left out has to do with why modern science so completely ignores God and supernaturalism in general when striving to explain natural phenomena. In science, interpretations and explanations are deemed credible according to their predictive capacity and how much mystery and fearful bewilderment they eliminate. Nye spoke to the predictive poverty of creationism, but failed to point out that explanations involving supernaturalism (and God especially) necessarily increase the amount of unfathomable mystery and bewilderment beyond anything that ordinary nature can entail.

In science, supernatural explanations are considered worse than none at all for two reasons. First, they tend to stifle meaningful inquiry by any who accept such fruitless explanations. Second and more important, religious explanations do the opposite of what genuine scientific explanations are intended to do. For creationists, a felt need for salvation from the
fearsome mysteries of this world is a good thing. Modern science, by contrast, seeks the opposite. Science seeks to enhance the human understanding and control of nature, not only by eliminating as much mystery and fear as possible, but also by opening new vistas to explore and devising new methods for exploring them. Frequently scientific endeavors lead to unexpected new understandings of fascinating new phenomena and in many cases to a certain betterment of the human condition.

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