Eyewitness to the Debate

Steve Watkins

On February 4, 2014, a rare event took place at the Creation Museum in Petersburg, Kentucky. Bill Nye (“The Science Guy”) and Ken Ham (Answers in Genesis’s chief executive officer and co-founder of the Creation Museum) met to debate the topic “Is creation a viable model of origins in today’s modern scientific era?”

At my arrival time of 5:30 PM, the parking lot was already filling up, but I did not see the scattering of church buses in the lot that are generally expected for such an event. On my many research trips to the Creation Museum, I usually observe church buses from Protestant, low-church traditions (Baptist, Methodist, Pentecostal, and independent Bible churches). I found out later, from staff members at the Creation Museum, that the 900 tickets sold out in about two minutes. Under these conditions, a ticket purchase on a large scale—for example, enough to fill a bus—would be nearly impossible to coordinate in advance, so I suspect that the lack of church buses was due to the difficulty of securing tickets.

Several colleagues who are also researching the Creation Museum told me that I was extremely lucky to have secured the two tickets. Accompanying me to the debate was James Bielo, an anthropologist from Miami University (Ohio). Bielo is also working on a project related to Answers in Genesis.

The event was well-staffed. At almost every turn, Creation Museum staff members and volunteers could be spotted wearing professionally-designed black Ham/Nye T-shirts. I was directed to a check-in desk where I presented my ticket and was issued an orange wristband, and was told this was mandatory for entrance to the event. I also received a glossy orange-and-black flier with the debate format printed on one side and procedural concerns on the other. Bielo made an interesting observation in his field notes: “AiG’s talent for branding was on display through these T-shirts, the wristbands, and all advertisements and promotional material for the debate [were] color and aesthetically themed, very professional” (2014 Feb 4 e-mail from James Bielo to the author).

Bielo arrived at approximately 6:00 PM. We had planned to walk around the Creation Museum and to observe the overall environment informally. However, a staff member suggested that we should promptly proceed to Legacy Hall, the site for the event. Before entering Legacy Hall, we had to pass through an airport-style metal detector. We were allowed to wear our shoes but were required to remove all other loose items and our belts. I noticed four or five detectors, but there was virtually no wait. The staff members at the security screening were polite and even offered some humorous comments. On staffer mentioned that “all flights were on time tonight.” All but one of the other staffers who interacted with us were super positive and friendly.
We proceeded into Legacy Hall and found our way to the very back row, which allowed us to survey the great majority of the room (Figure 1). Legacy Hall is a large room with a multi-purpose stage that is regularly used as a lecture hall for the Creation Museum. For the debate, the room had a central elevated camera and electronics platform to record the event. Two extra screens were place in the top right and left of the wall behind the stage for a total of four large video screens. The stage was exquisitely decorated with several desks and two central podiums for Ham and Nye.

One general observation about the crowd was that it was almost exclusively white. I saw one African American man in the room of 900 seats for ticketed attendees. The crowd was also fairly young—I’m guessing an average age of twenty-five to thirty-five. The crowd was also predominantly middle- to upper-middle class. I use the automobiles in the parking lot and attire to make this assertion. Bielo also agreed with me on this point.

A friendly older couple sat next to us, and we found out that they were Bill Nye supporters. Several men were wearing bow ties as a notable nod to Bill Nye. One group of four attendees wore T-shirts that they had obviously designed for the event. The shirts were white with a blue bow tie centered toward the top. Below the bow tie were the words “Bill Nye is my homeboy.” So there was a quite visible group of Nye supporters in the audience.

**Figure 1.** Legacy Hall at the Creation Museum, as people were making their way to their seats before the debate. Photograph: James Biello.
**The Main Event**

Between 6:00 and 7:00 PM, video clips of Bill Nye’s show were played at various intervals. The Creation Museum also interspersed their own videos clips in between Nye’s. At five minutes before the event began, Steve Ham (Ken Ham’s brother and an employee of the Creation Museum) opened with a few brief introductory statements. Mostly, it was a reminder to silence all portable technologies such as smart phones and to issue a caution not to record or take photos of the event in progress.

The event began at 7:00 PM sharp. Readers interested in a detailed summary of the event can find the entire debate (as well as highlights) at National Public Radio (http://www.npr.org/blogs/thetwo-way/2014/02/04/271648691/watch-the-creationism-vs-evolution-debate-bill-nye-and-ken-ham).

Following the moderator’s remarks, Ham opened with a five-minute introduction. It’s interesting that Ham tended to use the words “biblical creationist” instead of “young-earth creationist” (YEC). Ham played several clips from YECs with PhDs in the sciences. This was central to his attempt to redefine science—his main strategy in the debate. His central argument was that science must be divided into two realms—experimental (or observational science) and origins (or historical science). This was one of several “classic” arguments by YECs (see Scott 2009:287,292–295). He also asserted that science has been “hijacked” by secularism which “arbitrarily defines science as naturalism”.

Nye opened with a humorous anecdote about his trademark of wearing bow ties, then made the counter-argument to Ham’s. He used the television hit CSI to explain that dividing science into observational and historical realms is a false dichotomy that secular scientists do not accept; scientists use the same materials and methods to study past events that were not witnessed. He noted that all it would take to change the entire scientific paradigm would be contradictory evidence: it could be as simple as finding more recently evolved fossils randomly distributed in all different rock layers, rather than in the historical sequence required by evolutionary models. I thought that he made an effective point by stating that the scientific model is always ready to change if the evidence supported it.

The two men made their thirty-minute presentations with Ham going first and Nye following. The basic cores of their arguments did not really interact with the other’s arguments. Ham repeatedly asked Nye how life could come from non-life. Nye repeatedly asked Ham to make predictable statements that could be tested by scientists. Ham repeatedly appealed to the Bible as the ultimate source of authority for science and any other matter it spoke to. The debate was essentially a stalemate between what Stephen Jay Gould has termed two different magisterial voices—science and theology.

One of the most telling questions for me was the last one asked by the moderator to both Ham and Nye. He asked the following: “What is the one thing more than anything else upon which you base your belief?” Ham’s reply was essentially that the Bible was the perfect record of all history and that what it said was undeniable. Nye responded that he based his beliefs on the process of science.

Bielo made an observation with which I agree—that Ham’s PowerPoint presentation was much more polished and sophisticated than Nye’s. Ham’s use of testimonial clips from creationist PhD scientists struck me as a particularly effective strategy as well. I thought
that Nye did an admirable job in boiling down some rather difficult aspects of evolutionary science. I say that as a non-scientist but also as one who has read popular-level books by scientists like Gould and others.

**Reflections**

The overall feel of the debate was positive. Nye and Ham were both cordial with one another and kept the tone serious but not derogatory or demeaning ... on the whole. The audience never got rowdy nor were there any individual outbursts or booing by anyone. The only unfortunate situation was due to weather: a winter storm began right as the event was starting and by the end, Boone County was under a level-2 snow emergency. Unfortunately, this meant that I was not able to stay after to ask questions of other audience members because people were just scrambling to get home in the midst of the storm.

I found the debate to be quite predictable. These two competing sources of authority—the academic scientific community and personal interpretations of the Bible—are dealing with entirely different epistemologic bases. In this respect, I think the Creation Museum scored the most points because it made it appear that there was an actual debate within academic science, even though Nye pointed out that the terms Ham used to define science were simply nonexistent in the scientific community.

The debate was really a set of talking points that were prepared and polished by both men in advance. It was more like a presidential debate where questions can be easily avoided in favor of returning to a given agenda. They did not react to one another’s ideas in a more discursive, emergent way.

A Creation Museum staff member told me that in the days following the debate, hits on the Answers in Genesis and Creation Museum websites spiked by hundreds of thousands. Further, during the debate a friend texted me that the debate was trending number one internationally on Twitter. At the end of the day, I doubt any evolutionists were convinced that YEC was true science. Nor do I think any committed YECs were won over to the evolutionary point of view.

So the question about whether to hold “debates” like this one remains: If we do not expect (or generally observe) that anyone’s mind has been changed, then what is the purpose? If there is no serious engagement of one’s opponent’s ideas and just a repetition of “talking points”, then is it even a “debate”? Perhaps we are too conditioned by what we see in legislative sessions or political campaigns under the guise of “debating”, but even if we accept the value of confronting creationism’s masquerade as science in public events, these events seem to do little more than “show the flag”. And that is not nearly enough.

**References**

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