

“Fish Wars” and the Science/Religion Dialogue

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Abstract

In recent years, a number of scientists with a high public profile, especially in biology, reflect a philosophical orientation toward what Ian Barbour calls “scientific materialism.” Whether most scientists embrace such a materialistic philosophy is unclear, but public perceptions about science and scientists are probably influenced by the sometimes overt scientific materialism of those in the media spotlight. The public controversies surrounding a topic such as evolution are sustained in part by the philosophical, rather than strictly scientific, aspects of the issue. One prominent reflection of this controversy can be seen in the “Fish Wars,” symbolic battles with automobile emblem display plaques where the traditional Christian symbol of the fish is used to express various editorial messages concerning the origin of humanity, life, and the universe. The best approach to mediating such controversies may lie in a greater effort to understand all sides, and a clearer focus on the distinction between the scientific, and the related philosophical considerations.

Biography

Brian K. Akers, Ph.D. is Assistant Professor of biology at St. Andrews Presbyterian College in Laurinburg, NC. Akers completed his undergraduate work at Western Michigan University and his Doctor of Philosophy at the Department of Plant Biology at Southern Illinois University. His research focuses on mycology and the systematics and morphology of Lepiotaceae. Akers is a member of the Mycological Society of America and the North American Mycological Society. Akers is also interested in scientific photography and illustrations. He chairs the Religion and Science Roundtable Local Society at St. Andrews Presbyterian College.

Ian Barbour “When Science Meets Religion” discusses a kind of hardline philosophy of some scientists, which he calls Scientific Materialism. It holds that the basis of reality is ultimately physical—matter and energy—and that phenomena such as the mind and consciousness are secondary effects generated by and reducible to physical processes. This kind of materialism also holds that science is the only reliable path to valid knowledge.

I think most of us are familiar with the common idea that there is a logical, rational, mechanistic explanation for everything, whether we agree with it or not. It has been a major element of modern Western thought for some time. We can trace its outline in the writings of many noted thinkers in different fields over the last century or so. Freud ... Marx Existentialist philosophers. There seems to be an inevitable potential for tension between this kind of rationalistic world view, with its confidence in the supremacy of reason, and almost any kind of spiritual or religious perspective. Scientific materialism seems to correlate with agnosticism or atheism in various forms.

As a scientist, I’m not convinced that most scientists hold to this kind of philosophy. For one thing, I’m aware of too many scientists who are religious to some extent, or hold on to an open minded attitude about the idea of a spiritual aspect of human existence. Furthermore, scientific discoveries over the last century or so have done a great deal to undermine some of the philosophical assumptions that are implicit in such a narrowly rationalistic view of the universe. Discoveries in physics beginning with relativity and quantum mechanics, have hinted at a fundamental aspect of existence that seems to defy easy understanding, so that the more we’ve learned, the more strange and baffling the universe seems to be. Consider the big bang, a moment of absolute beginning that led to space and time as we know it. What came before the big bang is imponderable, because there was no such thing as time until after the big bang. Likewise, does the universe go on forever in infinite space? We have an idea now that it does not. Yet, what lies beyond its edge is equally a paradox, because there can be no such thing as space beyond that boundary. As discoveries and knowledge accumulate, one would think we should get closer to a comprehensive “big picture” understanding. But ironically, such an understanding seems to draw further away even as we get closer. The more answers we uncover, the more our questions multiply. The sort of scientific materialism that Barbour speaks of strikes me as an intellectual remnant of a bygone worldview, exemplified by the deterministic, clockwork universe that Newton envisioned. It seems ironic that such notions continue to

influence personal views that are scientifically informed, even though science itself has left them behind.

For whatever reason, many well-respected leaders of the scientific community seem especially stuck in this kind of materialistic philosophy. Last year I spoke on evolution, that it was being presented by some biologists as though it were proven fact rather than theory. The late, and highly respected Stephen Jay Gould was one advocate of this position, as I discussed last year. Another famous spokesman for this hardline, no-nonsense kind of scientism was the late Carl Sagan, one of the most beloved and respected popularizers of science in recent decades. I first noticed Sagan's overt philosophizing in the acclaimed PBS series *Cosmos*, where he repeatedly points to the awe and wonder of the universe and various cosmic phenomena, and then goes on to speculate that perhaps this is why primitive people believed in gods and supernatural beings. In "When Science Meets Religion," Barbour points out that Sagan's writings offer "long accounts of belief in demons and witches in past centuries, as well as faith healers and psychics nowadays. But as Barbour notes, Sagan gives "little consideration to the writings of well-educated university based theologians who might be the intellectual equals of the scientists Sagan admires."

I'd like to share an interesting anecdote that came to my attention recently concerning Sagan and his view of the superiority of science over religion. On a television documentary I saw, the Dalai Lama described an encounter with Sagan in which they had an interesting exchange. Sagan asked the noted religious leader, what would become of the Tibetan teachings about reincarnation if scientific evidence came along that proved it to be a fallacy. After a moment of thought, the Dalai Lama replied that in that event, the doctrine of reincarnation would have to be discarded. This reasonable reply came as a shock, a totally unexpected kind of answer to Sagan, who was apparently expecting something more defensive or obtuse. In the silence that followed, the Dalai Lama now took the upper hand. He asked Sagan, "But how could science investigate whether reincarnation is true? What kind of empirical methods or data could address such a question?" According to his account, Sagan was stumped by this query.

I think this tendency toward scientific materialism on the part of such high-public-profile scientists as Sagan and Gould has contributed to a sense that scientists as a whole mostly see things in a similar vein. We can see the philosophical opposition between hardline scientism and almost any kind of spiritual worldview in many arenas of public discourse. I would like to present for your consideration an example, often referred to as the Fish Wars.

You may recall around the 1960's and 1970's, when a new tradition arose in our automobilized culture: the bumper sticker. Across the fruited plain, all kinds of sentiments and slogans began appearing on the rear end of cars for all to see. Religious and political messages became commonplace subject matter for this new medium. Bumper stickers offering various Christian messages proliferated, as well as various anti-religious bumper sticker retorts. Some of them had blatantly antagonistic tones, such as "Doing my part to p-ss off the Religious Right." Speaking personally, I'm not much of a fundamentalist myself. But I always wondered what good someone doing their part in this way was accomplishing. Isn't the Religious Right already stirred up enough without such help? Like many reasonable people, I have concerns about the social and political influence of the religious right. But isn't this kind of in-your-face taunting only going to make matters worse? On the other hand, I have occasionally seen irreverent bumper stickers that I confess I have found amusing. One that comes to mind, with its message written in an elegant cursive style, reads "Oh Lord, protect me and save me .. from thy Followers."

It seems to me that bumper stickers officially established the rear end of the automobile as a public forum for advertising the owner's editorial views. Since the early days of the first bumper stickers, chrome-painted emblem plaques serving a similar purpose have become popular. The Fish Wars have been a major theme of these plaques, and the fish motif these plaques are based on is the familiar Christian symbol of the fish. There are a number of different products of this type which use the fish to express a Christian orientation. One is simply the fish motif itself, with no extra details. Another has a cross within its head region. Others have the word Christ or Jesus written in the fish, either in English letters or in Greek.

But around a decade or so ago, there appeared on the backs of some cars a new kind of plaque which expropriated the motif of the Christian fish, and turned it to other uses. The first wave was the so-called Darwin fish emblem plaque. Modeled after the Christian fish motif, it featured the name Darwin instead of Jesus. And most pointedly, the fish was adorned with little feet, as though evolving from an aquatic to a terrestrial habitat. This would seem to be a kind of symbolic rebuttal, as though to say "Take that!" to anyone who might experience displeasure at seeing the symbol of their religious beliefs used as a parody.

Recently I've read that Tom Lessl, a University of Georgia communications professor, has conducted a study of the Fish Wars, and the attitudes of people with

Darwin Fish plaques on their cars. His results suggested that some of these people are merely trying to make fun of religion, while others are more serious, aiming to desecrate and profane a sacred symbol. He describes displaying the Darwin fish as an act of ritual aggression, the symbolic equivalent of capturing and desecrating an enemy's flag or banner.

Lessl patrolled parking lots on foot, and leafleted the windshields of cars bearing the Darwin fish plaque with a questionnaire that asked three questions:

Why did you put this emblem on your car?

What audience did you hope to reach?

What does the Darwin fish mean to you?

More than a third of the questionnaires were filled out and mailed back to him. 2/3 respondents identified Christians as their target audience. From the results, Lessl concluded that deriding the religious was a prime motivation for displaying these plaques. In this connection, the role of Darwin's name in the fish is important. By inserting Darwin in the place normally occupied by Jesus or Christ, "the symbol is ritually profaned or stripped of its religious meaning. It does not express that Darwin or science have a religious meaning or role. Indeed the Darwin fish is an anti-religious message and seems comparable to inversion rituals of a carnival, where a drunken peasant is dressed up as the king. The purpose is not to glorify the peasant, but to make fun of the ruler. Other versions of the anti-religious fish have also appeared. One features the fish with feet, but has the word "Evolve" instead of Darwin. Lessl points out that the evolve-fish plaque is much less popular than the Darwin fish plaque, supporting his comparison with carnival inversion rituals.

Some of Lessl's respondents doggedly maintained that this is all just a joke in good fun. Of course, it may be argued that humor can have a serious point, and indeed some respondents were more candid, even blunt. One stated "Its my way of saying Creationists are all (#%#) idiots. Get a (%#) education. Humans are no better than redwoods, fireflies, algae or salmonella, just because we have opposable thumbs and walk upright." Its ironic to me in this context that someone advocating scientific reason over religious faith, using this argument, makes no reference to the attributes of human reasoning ability, which a redwood or salmonella probably has no capacity for.

These anti-religious fish plaques have not gone unnoticed by the target audience, and a number of religious rebuttal plaques have also appeared. One features the

Darwin fish being gobbled up by a larger fish which has the word “Truth” written in it. Take that, Darwin fish fanciers. Back and forth it seems to go.

The Fish Wars have also escalated from car emblem plaques to other decorative media. By putting “Darwin Fish” into a search engine, one can find all sorts of websites selling whole lines of fish motif merchandise, including jewelry and T-shirts. One of the most recent I have noted seems to express a weary contempt for the whole business by joining the fray. It features the Darwin fish being gobbled up by the Truth fish, with both being eaten by an even larger fish bearing the phrase “Shut up!” If you can’t beat them, join them? From surveying the cyber landscape, I’ve also noticed that there seem to be two types of fish emblem plaque retailers: those who sell religious plaques, and those who sell anti-religious ones. I have not found a retailer who offers emblems of both sides. Incidentally, I have also found accounts of cars being vandalized by removal of fish emblem plaques.

At the SAPC conference last year, I discussed evolution and the place it occupies in the cultural warfare between hardline science and conservative religion. I referred to things I learned while I was a Visiting Professor at University of Oklahoma. For example, it was in the op-ed section of the Oklahoma newspaper that I first read charges by angry parents that evolution was being taught as fact not theory.

During my year in Oklahoma, I also noticed that the fish wars raged hot there, emblem plaques were everywhere. I was curious how my students perceived this, and gave them a writing assignment which offered several options. One option was to do an essay on fish emblem plaques and their thoughts or interpretations about them. One essay I received lingers in my memory. The student related that in her high schooling, she had a young and idealistic biology teacher who gave a fairly straight-forward presentation of evolution as subject matter in her class. This provoked a heated response from some of the parents, and they took matters in hand by complaining to the school principal. As the student explained, this teacher ended up losing his job.

The year after I was in Oklahoma, I was a Visiting Professor at the University of Minnesota in Morris. As I discussed last year, it was in Minnesota that I learned there was some unfortunate evidence substantiating the charge that evolution was being presented not as theory, but as fact in some educational settings. I outlined my concerns about this last year and won’t go into them again here. However, I would like to bring up the matter of a solicitation letter I received in Minnesota, from the National Center for Science Education, addressing what it called the

“antievolution movement.” This letter stated in an alarming tone that “evolution is under attack” and that the Center takes action “to defend the integrity of science in the classroom.” Among the issues raised in the letter were “policies requiring teachers to read or paste into the textbook an intimidating disclaimer about evolution’s being “only” a theory, as if ... students don’t have to take it seriously.”

I read this with a sense of puzzlement, because I’m not sure we can effectively monitor whether students take teachings about evolution “seriously” or not, whatever that means. But even if we could, it would begin to resemble something like thought control. I’m not sure it would really be our business. As an instructor, I’ve always limited my concerns to whether students understand evolutionary theory and evidence pertaining to it. What they think of it personally, in the privacy of their own conscience, is a matter of interest. But trying to make sure that they “take it seriously” is beyond my purview. It sounds a little too much like trying to enforce some kind of content-specific thought or belief, which doesn’t strike me as a valid educational goal. I think students have an inalienable right to decide for themselves how they “take it.” If they can demonstrate on an exam or other assignments that they know and understand the material, I’m satisfied. To me, the integrity of science is just as important as freedom of religion, but the tone of the letter I received from the NCSE reminded me a little too much of Chicken Little sounding the alarm that the sky is falling down. As you may guess, I did not send in my charitable donation to the NCSE office.

But in reflecting on the letter’s mention of “intimidating disclaimers” I thought back on the story recounted by my student in Oklahoma, of the high school teacher who taught evolution, and lost his job. It occurred to me that if the textbook used in that class had been furnished with a disclaimer that evolution is presented not as fact, but only as theory, things could have been different. Suppose the principal would have liked to defend the teacher’s presentation of evolution without risking his own political fortunes in the school district. A disclaimer of the type cited as a problem by the NCSE could have been a powerful tool. If he could have shown the angry parents that the textbook had such a disclaimer, it could have served to refute any complaint about evolution being taught as fact not theory. He might have been able to address their concerns enough to preserve the function of that teacher. I wonder if this kind of consideration ever occurred to the NCSE. To me, this is just another example of how the “evolution is fact” faction fails to comprehend the dynamics and complexity of the cultural warfare surrounding issues of science and religion in our society.

So how do I conclude, what lessons can I draw from any of this?

On the one hand, the shrill tone of these fish wars, and the tensions between science and religion, convince me that freedom of speech, thought, and belief are alive and well in this country, which is something to celebrate. On the other hand, it seems disappointing that the best use of this freedom that some can make is to antagonize others and build walls instead of bridges. In a perfect world, we would all devote ourselves to the pursuit of better mutual understanding. I suspect most religious traditions would offer support for such a pursuit. Titus 3:10 “Avoid foolish controversies and genealogies and arguments and quarrels about the law, because these are unprofitable and useless.” Likewise, referring to teachings of the Buddha, many of the debates between hardliners on both sides might qualify as “questions not tending toward edification” which he warned us about.

Nonetheless, I don't want to wall myself off from everyone I disagree with, so I continue to seek a more sympathetic understanding of both fundamentalists and scientific materialists, even if I don't join either of them in their views. It doesn't do any good to be drawn into a dichotomy of us versus them, as far as I can see. It would be too much like following the example that ideological hard-liners set with each other. Indeed, as long as there is bickering and conflict, we can be assured that the world is still spinning around, and we still have our humanity. I propose that we not take that for granted. In this age of alienation and dehumanization, where meaning itself is at stake, I can take some modest measure of comfort. Our society and its conversations have their share of rancor and contentiousness, but I don't see this as a disaster. Our existence may not be paradise, but it is certainly human, and perhaps that's the best word for it.

The human potential is full of promise. But it doesn't offer the kind of intellectual or moral perfection we all dream of. We may wish for a utopian society, but its not our destiny, and failure to realize this has historically resulted in tragedies. It's a paradox, and to sum it up, perhaps I can do no better than to quote the words of a character from TV's *Northern Exposure*, Chris Stevens, DJ of the radio station in the fictional town of Cicely, Alaska:

There's a dark side to each and every human soul. We all want to be Obi-Wan Kenobi, and for the most part we are. But there's a little Darth Vader in all of us. Because the thing is, this ain't no either/or proposition. Because we're talking about dialectics, the good and the bad merging into--us. You know, you can run but you can't hide. My experience: face the darkness, stare it down and own it. It's like brother Nietzsche says, being human is a complicated gig. So give that old dark night of the soul a hug. And howl the eternal yes.

