‘Not Quite’ Theistic Evolution:
does Tim Keller bridge the gap between creation and evolution?[1]

By William M. Schweitzer

Tim Keller’s goal for his apologetic work is to render the Christian faith relevant to contemporary people. This is an ambitious but unavoidably risky business. The potential benefits are great because, if he gets everything right, biblical Christianity will be rendered intellectually tenable to a new generation. Yet there is little doubt that there are major risks involved. Keller must somehow defuse all the main objections to Christian teaching while remaining absolutely faithful to the whole counsel of God in Scripture. Upholding both of these things with equal care has not proven easy in the history of theology.

One of the major obstacles to faith that Keller identifies is the conflict between the doctrine of creation and the theory of evolution.[2] From Keller’s perspective, this is particularly sad because it is unnecessary—the appearance of a war between these camps is largely media-driven, based on misunderstandings, and ultimately proves to be only apparent.[3] In response to this problem, Keller tries to set things straight in his own writing and by championing a New York organization that was created for the very purpose of reconciling Christians to evolution, the Biologos Foundation.[4]

Keller lays out his strategy in his 2008 bestseller The Reason for God,[5] and refines it in his 2009 paper for Biologos entitled ‘Creation, Evolution, and Christian Laypeople’. This strategy is summarized in the following lines:

... there are a variety of ways in which God could have brought about the creation of life forms and human life using evolutionary processes, and that the picture of incompatibility between orthodox faith and evolutionary biology is greatly overdrawn.[6]

In other words, there is no real opposition between Christian faith and evolution. You can believe them both, since evolution is simply the means by which God created. Problem solved.

It would certainly be nice to think that Keller has found a way to solve one of the most troublesome apologetic issues of our time without getting his hands dirty. But does he succeed? That is uncertain, for a few reasons.

First of all, Keller’s framing of the problem is misplaced. He seems to think that the great problem in urgent need of solution is the difficulty people experience when they have to go against the proclamations of prestigious authorities, in this case, secular scientists. Yet such conflicts are neither unexpected nor intolerable; this is simply the normal situation of the church militant throughout the ages. By defining the problem in this way, Keller moves us away from the proper domain of faithful apologetics—clarifying the Christian position in contradistinction to the world’s errors—into something else entirely. In Keller’s framing of the problem, the only possible solution is some form of accommodation.
Second, Keller rightly notices that there is a big difference between the objective findings of biology and a ‘grand theory of everything’ which is an unwarranted extrapolation from them. Yet he does not apply this extremely important insight far enough. The very same line of reasoning would also show us why we need not capitulate when confronted with the Darwinian theory of origins, given just how far it strays from a solid basis in direct observation and repeatable experimentation.

Third, Keller suggests that there is a via media wherein we can affirm both the reality of evolution and also the biblical teaching of God’s creation. But what sort of evolution does Keller think is consistent with Christian faith?[7] An evolution that produced Adam? We certainly hope not, because that would flatly contradict Scripture and would undermine the whole of Pauline religion. Or does he mean an evolution that had nothing to do with Adam? But explaining human origins is the capstone claim of evolutionary science, and any teaching that omits this crucial piece would not begin to solve the problem of tension with secular science that Keller is so concerned with.

For these reasons, we would have to question whether Keller’s ambitious proposal succeeds in what it sets out to do. Let us begin with Keller’s definition of the problem.

1. The Definition of the Problem

In his 2009 conference paper for the Biologos foundation, Keller begins by defining the problem:

   Many secular and many evangelical voices agree on one ‘truism’—that if you are an orthodox Christian with a high view of the authority of the Bible, you cannot believe in evolution in any form at all. [...] If you believe in God, you can’t believe in evolution. If you believe in evolution, you can’t believe in God. This creates a problem for both doubters and believers. Many believers in western culture ... have a very positive view of science. How then, can they reconcile what science seems to tell them about evolution with their traditional theological beliefs? Seekers and inquirers about Christianity can be even more perplexed. They may be drawn to many things about the Christian faith, but, they say, ‘I don’t see how I can believe the Bible if that means I have to reject science.’[8]

Keller notices the mental anguish involved when people think they have to make a choice between the teaching of God in Scripture and the teaching of science in evolution. In other words, the problem he wants to solve is the difficulty that ordinary people—both doubters and believers alike—experience because they think they have to make a choice between these two important sources of authority.

Keller is not the only one who defines the problem in terms of this tension. Indeed, he is far more restrained than fellow Biologos contributor Bruce Waltke:
I think that if the data is overwhelming in favor of evolution, to deny that reality will make us a cult ... some odd group that is not really interacting with the real world ... To deny the reality would be to deny the truth of God in the world and would be to deny truth. So I think it would be our spiritual death ... it’s also our spiritual death in our witness in the world, we’re not credible, that we are bigoted, that we have a blind faith.’[9]

Waltke thinks that allowing the tension between evolutionary science and Christianity to continue would be absolutely suicidal—it would ‘make us a cult’ and would ‘be our spiritual death’. Keller does not paint the picture quite as black as this, but the essential definition of the problem is the same: the problem is that we are forcing people to make an impossible choice between faith and science.

Whether Keller has good company in defining the problem this way or not, he is nonetheless setting us up for failure. The world is going to oppose God’s truth (1 John 4:5–6). If we define the problem as the mere presence of this opposition then it really does not matter whether what is being taught is right or wrong; the goal is not to adjudicate competing truth claims but to eliminate the tension between them. The only possible solution to a problem posed in this way is accommodation.

Of course, this is not the only way to respond to such issues. Christians have in times past recognized that the world inevitably makes claims that are incompatible with the faith, but concluded that they must courageously hold to the truth of Scripture nonetheless. If there is a cost, it must be endured. In the early church, those in positions of worldly authority were making very dogmatic claims that Caesar was Lord. I suppose that the church could have defined the problem along these lines:

Many pagan and many Christian voices agree on one ‘truism’—that if you are an orthodox Christian with a high view of the authority of the Bible, you cannot believe in Roman civil religion in any form at all. If you believe that Christ is Lord, you can’t believe that Caesar is Lord. If you believe that Caesar is Lord, you can’t believe that Christ is Lord. This creates a problem for both doubters and believers. Many believers in the Greco-Roman world have a very positive view of the Roman Empire. How then, can they reconcile what the Empire seems to tell them with their traditional theological beliefs? Seekers and inquirers about Christianity can be even more perplexed. They may be drawn to many things about the Christian faith, but, they say, ‘I don’t see how I can believe the Bible if that means I have to reject Roman civil religion.’

They could have done this, but they did not. For them, portraying the conflict between Rome and the Christian faith as a problem to be solved merely by an adjustment in their thinking would be amusingly naive. The opposition between these competing claims was not a false dichotomy to be smoothed over but a deadly reality to be sealed with the blood of faithful martyrs.
Now, are the dogmatic claims of evolutionary science really so unparalleled that they demand a completely different approach? The ‘many evangelical voices’ that Keller describes as thinking evolution and orthodox Christianity to be mutually exclusive propositions are obviously not convinced. Keller might respond that evolutionary science is a unique case because, unlike Rome, evolutionary science actually tells us the truth about the world around us. But what authoritative ideology—philosophical, political, or scientific—does not purport to tell us the truth about the world around us? The fact that they make such claims on the basis of something the culture reveres (in this case, science), and that many people therefore believe them, is just the nature of the beast. There is no particular reason why the conflict of Christianity with evolutionary science is a problem demanding a solution any more than the conflict of Christianity with Islam (an ideology which, much like evolutionary theory, was conceived in self-conscious rejection of Christianity).

2. What ‘Science’ is Keller Talking About?

A second problem has to do with the way Keller uses the word ‘science’. Keller observes: ‘Many of the strongest proponents for evolution as a biological process (such as Dawkins) also see it as a “Grand Theory of Everything.”’[10] Thus, in his second section, he asks:

Question #2: If biological evolution is true—does that mean that we are just animals driven by our genes, and everything about us can be explained by natural selection?

Answer: No. Belief in evolution as a biological process is not the same as belief in evolution as a world-view.[11]

So evolution as a biological process need not demand belief in evolution as a world-view or theory for everything. One could question the details here—our beliefs about creation usually have something to do with our world-view—but Keller has yet put his finger on something terribly important. He has brought to our attention the fact that men move all too easily from valid observation of nature to unwarranted extrapolation in theories.

Strangely, however, he does not seem to notice that this crucial insight might apply to evolutionary biology itself. To go back to the origins of evolutionary science, Darwin made use of valid observations such as the fact that some Galapagos finches had larger beaks than others. He eventually interpreted this as an example of new species evolving through the mechanisms of random mutation and natural selection. But prolonged observation of the Galapagos islands since then tells a more complex story. It turns out that beak morphology, while influenced by environmental conditions, remains on a limited continuum. A severe drought in 1977 temporarily induced more of the finch population to express larger beaks, but this adaptation was soon reversed when the weather was unusually wet a few years later.[12] In other words, the finches are not evolving into larger-beaked birds, nor are they evolving into smaller-beaked birds, but are simply displaying the limited range of environmental adaptation possible within a stable kind (sometimes called ‘micro-evolution’).
It is not merely the Galapagos finch evidence alone that is thereby called into question, however. All evidence of environmental adaptation which has not actually resulted in a new life form is suspect because it might likewise prove only to be a reversible phenomenon belonging to a stable kind. Not understanding this, however, Darwin extrapolated from precisely this kind of evidence his theory that every living thing on earth has evolved from primitive life forms. This was, to put it mildly, an unwarranted extrapolation. The point is that it is not merely a ‘Grand Theory of Everything’ that we should regard with suspicion, it is any ‘scientific’ conclusion that overreaches the valid limits of the data.

Because of this, we need to define very carefully what we mean by ‘science’. Science could mean:

1. the objective data of nature (‘Science A’), or
2. the consensus pronouncements of recognized scientific authorities (‘Science B’)

Although these may in many cases amount to the same thing, it is clear that this is not always the case. The history of science is littered with confident but erroneous pronouncements, as Thomas Kuhn explains so well in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*.

Yet Keller seems to accept the (erroneous) assumption that these two senses of the word ‘science’ are one and the same. Notice the confusion of these senses of the word in the following paragraph:

Many believers in western culture see the medical and technological advances achieved through science and are grateful for them. They have a very positive view of science. How then, can they reconcile what science seems to tell them about evolution with their traditional theological beliefs?

‘Medical and technological advances achieved through science’ are necessarily grounded in physical reality rather than merely in fallible pronouncements, so this is Science A. On the other hand, ‘what science seems to tell them about evolution’ is Science B.

Keeping this distinction in mind, Keller could have said that our gratitude for technological achievement does not entail a servile deference to whatever the scientific authorities tell us, especially when a theory extends beyond any contemporary ability to test conclusively. For example, the electric light bulb was invented in the 1870s. This was a wonderful technological advance grounded squarely on the realities of nature (Science A) for which we can all be grateful. However, at the very same time in history the official scientific consensus (Science B) was teaching a theory of light that required a notional medium called the ‘luminiferous ether’, later disproved with the advent of better experimental techniques and more accurate theories.

From there, Keller could have dealt with the problem by reasoning along these lines: ‘It is true that the great majority of scientists say that all life evolved from non-life. However, like the
“luminiferous ether” of Victorian science, this is a theory that lies beyond the ability of contemporary science to determine conclusively. Despite many efforts, no one has yet been able to demonstrate the creation of life from non-life in laboratory experiments. Moreover, because the origin of life on earth is a singular event that lies in the distant past rather than an ongoing phenomenon like light, it is unlikely that science could ever be in a position to make an authoritative determination on this issue one way or another. This being the case, we need not be overly concerned if scientists currently teach an account of origins that conflicts with Scripture. We can still be thankful for our laptops and vaccines; none of these things depends in the slightest upon Darwinian theory for their existence or efficacy.’ This would have been a very reasonable way to help fellow ministers talk to their people on this important pastoral issue. Sadly, Keller takes another route. Rather than calling into question the pronouncements of fallible scientists, he calls into question a literal reading of Scripture.[18]

3. What Sort of ‘Evolution’ Does Keller Propose?

Finally, we must try to understand what Keller is either proposing or at least defending as legitimate when he talks about ‘evolution’. Let us return to Keller’s introductory statement:

   However, there are many who question the premise that science and faith are irreconcilable. Many believe that a high view of the Bible does not demand belief in just one account of origins. They argue that we do not have to choose between an anti-science religion or an anti-religious science. They think that there are a variety of ways in which God could have brought about the creation of life forms and human life using evolutionary processes, and that the picture of incompatibility between orthodox faith and evolutionary biology is greatly overdrawn.[19]

Keller does not define exactly what he means by God bringing about ‘the creation of life forms and human life using evolutionary processes’, but let us consider the possibilities for the most important issue: Adam. There are really only two options: either Keller includes Adam in his proposal that it is acceptable to believe God used ‘evolutionary processes’ to create, or else he does not include Adam.

The first possibility—that God created Adam using evolution—is the straightforward implication of the quote itself. Keller mentions ‘… the creation of life forms and human life using evolutionary processes’, and that would surely seem to include Adam.[20] Furthermore, the paper goes on to point to a theory that explains religious belief in terms of evolution: ‘It may be that capacity for religious belief is “adaptive” or is connected to other adaptive traits, passed down from our ancestors because they supported survival and reproduction.’ Keller quotes a proponent of this view who says that ‘supernaturalistic belief would be in due course a human universal’, and concurs that his ‘argument is sound’.[21] All of this demands a Darwinian understanding of survival advantages leading to the development of a more advanced form of life. Since it is clear that Adam himself believed in the supernatural, this implies that he was one of many hominids but ended up with a competitive advantage over the others in terms of spirituality.
So we are compelled to consider the possibility that Keller thinks it is permissible for us to believe that Adam was created through evolution. Yet we must be very clear that this would certainly not be an acceptable position. [22] Genesis 2:7 is most unambiguous: ‘And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being’ (Gen. 2:7). Notice the specific elements that are expressed here. Adam was formed from the ‘dust of the ground’ rather than from any living predecessor. God then ‘breathed into his nostrils the breath of life’, life which this collection of dust particles did not previously possess. And just for good measure, Scripture concludes ‘and man became a living being’, a biological status which he previously did not have. It is not that the image of God or a soul was bestowed on an already-living hominid, but non-living dust became a living being. This utterly excludes the possibility of any living predecessors of whatever description.

Moreover, such a proposal is theologically unacceptable. The entirety of Pauline religion is founded upon the existence of a real man, Adam, who was created perfectly good straight from the hand of God and in whose hands the fate of the entire human race rested:

> Therefore, just as through one man sin entered the world, and death through sin, and thus death spread to all men, because all sinned [...] Nevertheless death reigned from Adam to Moses, even over those who had not sinned according to the likeness of the transgression of Adam, who is a type of him who was to come. But the free gift is not like the offense. For if by the one man’s offense many died, much more the grace of God and the gift by the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, abounded to many (Rom. 5:12–15).

The culpability of the human race, the justice of God, the basis of redemption, the identity of Christ, and the gospel itself are all predicated upon a first man, Adam, who was the biological and spiritual father of every human being. Without this biblical Adam we do not have a biblical Christianity.

Keller knows all this. He knows that the line is drawn with Adam. Indeed, he makes the point in a recent interview that he is personally ‘an old earth progressive creationist, who believes there is a literal Adam and Eve’. [23] However, belief in a ‘literal’ Adam—a single human being from whom we all descended—does not necessarily preclude believing that this literal Adam had some kind of sub-human ancestor. This would seem to be what the language in Keller’s white paper is designed to allow for; the idea that evolution was involved in the generation of Adam. In the aforementioned interview he declares that there should be ‘wiggle room’ in terms of acceptability within evangelical circles for ‘an old earth person who still believes in a literal Adam and Eve but there could have been evolution involved’. [24] However, we are again left to guess at the details of this proposal. Exactly how are we to imagine a ‘literal Adam’ who had yet evolved from something else? The first man who was merely the next in a long series, the father of us all himself having a father? Does that mean that Abel would have regarded Adam’s pre-human progenitor as his grandfather? Or, as a mere animal, was his status something more akin to a beloved family pet? We do not wish to be unkind by asking such questions, but we
really must think through the hard implications of this proposal before we can recommend it as orthodox.

In consideration of Keller’s intelligence, no less than his long-demonstrated orthodoxy, let us move on now to consider another possibility. [25] Perhaps he is only talking about evolution somehow being used in various other aspects of creation, but having no role in God’s immediate creation of Adam. This seems closer to Keller’s personal position, which he distinguishes from theistic evolution as ‘a bit more intervention, more God in there’. [26] Not every Christian would be happy with this proposal, but at least it does not cross the final line in the sand. Would this be an acceptable solution? Well, we must keep in mind how Keller has framed the problem. It is not primarily one of adjudicating truth claims, but of resolving the tension between them. It is therefore necessary that the solution Keller comes up with is something to which the advocates of evolution would at least accord some measure of respect.

Yet such a reception is highly unlikely. If evolution is about anything, it is surely about human origins. As far back as the Scopes trial, everyone understood that the theory of evolution taught that we have apes for ancestors. An account that included evolution at some places but left out this capstone of the project would seem to do very little to help Christians live in intellectual peace with the secular elite who regard the evolution of mankind from animals as an inviolable dogma.

While I am not aware of responses to Keller’s specific proposal, we can look at the way a typical hard-line evolutionist regards Biologos in general. In a recent article concerning ‘the accommodationist organization BioLogos’, University of Chicago Professor Jerry Coyne has the following to say:

\[27\]

BioLogos had the goal of turning evangelical Christians towards accepting evolution. They proposed to do this by showing literalist Christians that the Bible and Darwin were completely compatible. It didn’t work of course. Efforts stalled, and BioLogos began engaging in all sorts of crazy apologetics, many of them trying to show how Adam and Eve—a couple that genetics tells us could not have spawned all humanity—could still somehow be human ancestors, ergo that Jesus didn’t have to die for a metaphor. In the end, BioLogos went for the coward’s solution, refusing to take a firm stand on whether Adam and Eve really existed. This, of course, was profoundly contradictory to their pro-science approach.

In the midst of his vitriol, Coyne says some things we nonetheless need to hear. He points out that Biologos’ goal to show how ‘the Bible and Darwin are completely compatible’ failed because it was fundamentally impossible. He says that this insoluble problem led them to engage in ‘all sorts of crazy apologetics, many of them trying to show how Adam and Eve ... could still somehow be human ancestors’. He then notes the inherent inconsistency involved, ‘This, of course, was profoundly contradictory to their pro-science approach.’ It is clear that he neither regards such proposals as intellectually credible nor seems to respect the gesture involved. If this is what we get for our trouble, is accommodation really worth it?
Conclusion

Not every obstacle to faith is a false dichotomy waiting to be bridged. Some ‘problems’ are quite real and admit of no legitimate resolution. The intellectual conflict over the origins of life on earth is a prime example. Hebrews 11:3 reminds us that ‘By faith we understand that the worlds were framed by the word of God, so that the things which are seen were not made of things which are visible.’ Supernatural, special creation is thus an element of faith. And although evidences of God’s existence and power are clearly seen throughout creation (Rom 1:19–20), natural man is never going to receive the truth of it. On the other hand, evolution was conceived by those outside the biblical faith, is currently taught by those outside the biblical faith, and is widely embraced by those outside this faith. If it were hypothetically possible to build a mediating bridge between these radically different perspectives, I am not sure we would want to. In any case, it is highly unlikely that it is indeed possible to build such a bridge. At least, as I think we have seen, no one has yet been able to do so.

Endnotes

2. Keller devotes one of his seven chapters dealing with objections in Reason for God to ‘Science Has Disproved Christianity’ (Reason for God, pp. 87–95).
3. See Reason for God, p. 87.
4. Keller has spoken at several of the main Biologos events, Keller’s white paper on the subject is hosted by the Biologos site, and Keller’s Redeemer Presbyterian Church is listed as a financial supporter of Biologos (http://biologos.org).
5. See Reason for God, pp. 84–96.
7. Keller does not make the details of what he has in mind entirely clear in the 2009 paper. He has recently clarified that ‘... my position is, I am an old earth progressive creationist, who believes there is a literal Adam and Eve’, although even this does not answer every question (‘2012 New Canaan Society Fireside Chat’). In this chapter, rather than focusing on what Keller personally believes, we shall deal with the more important issue of what he defends as being an acceptable position for Christians to hold.
13. One might reply that this is a very high standard of evidence; after all, it takes thousands of years for one species to evolve into another. How are we supposed to demonstrate conclusively that this is
actually happening before our eyes, and that our (peppered moth, Galapagos finch, domestic dog, hypothetical something) evidence is not merely another example of reversible adaptation within a stable kind that proves to be an evolutionary dead end? Precisely. This is yet another reason why the theory of evolution lies beyond the possibility of definitive demonstration, and why Christians should feel no particular demand to compromise over the issue.


17. See the discussion in Kuhn, *Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, pp. 73–76.

18. See ‘Creation, Evolution, and Christian Laypeople’, pp. 3–5. Keller’s reasoning is essentially that the author of Genesis did not intend for us to take Genesis literally, so we need not. Keller’s protestations notwithstanding, this is an instance of special pleading that does nothing to preserve the plenary authority of Scripture.


22. In any full-scale evaluation of a doctrine of creation, we should consider whether all of the elements of the biblical doctrine of creation are upheld. From the Westminster standards, there are something like seven elements: (1) the Worker: creation was the sole work of the Triune God (WCF 4.1; WLC 15); (2) the Purpose: creation was done for the manifestation of the glory of God’s eternal power, wisdom, and goodness (WCF 4:1); (3) the Time: creation was accomplished ‘in the beginning’ (WCF 4.1; WLC 15); (4) the Duration: the universe was created within the space of six days (WCF 4:1, WLC 15); (5) the Means: creation was effected by God’s powerful word (WLC 15); (6) the Material: the universe was created of nothing, man from the dust of the earth, and woman from man (WCF 4:1, WLC 15, 17); and (7) the Quality: God declared that his creation was all very good (WCF 4:1, WLC 15). Theistic evolution constitutes a denial of most, if not all, of these elements.


25. Note also Keller’s relevant comments in *Center Church*: ‘The world is not an accident, but the creation of the one God (Genesis 1)’ and ‘You see, if we are merely the product of evolution—the strong eating the weak—on what basis can we object to strong nations oppressing weak ones, or powerful people oppressing marginalized ones? This is completely natural to the world if this material world is all there is. And if people are not made in the image of God but are simply the accidental product of blind forces, why would human beings be more valuable than, say, rocks and trees?’ (*Center Church*, pp. 33, 129). However, these statements are not quite as unambiguous as we might hope for—the qualifications ‘merely’, ‘accidental’ and ‘blind’ mean that a theistic evolutionist could probably say them in good faith.
