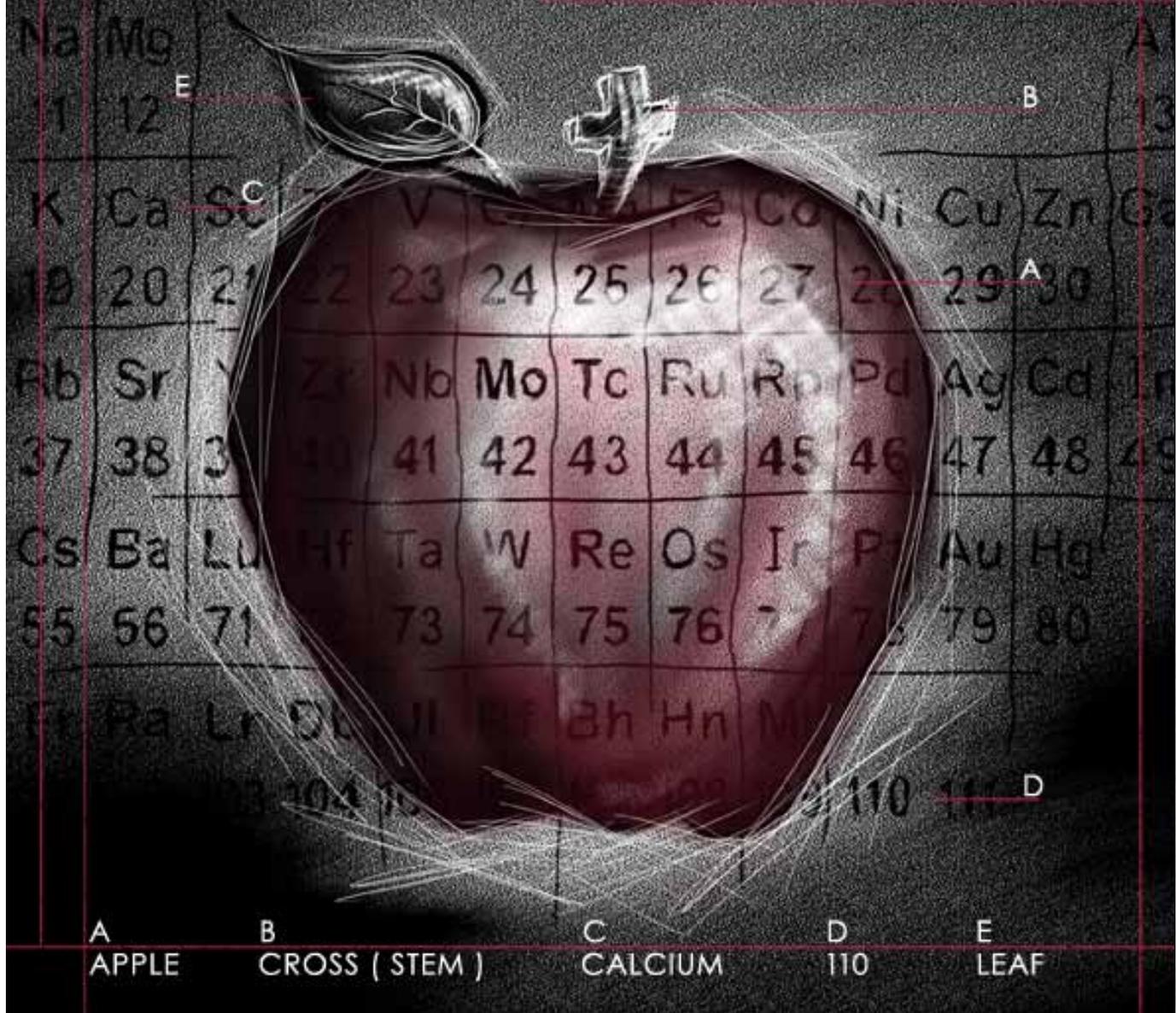


Dr. Brent Royuk

Teaching about
Science & Religion
in
Lutheran Classrooms



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Introduction

In this edition of *Issues In Christian Education*, we have heard descriptions of various points of view in the ongoing Creation/Evolution debate. As a professor of physics at Concordia University, Nebraska, I have been blessed with the great opportunity to teach my students about these issues for the past fifteen years, and always look forward to this topic in my course schedules. It's a rare treat for a teacher of physics to be able to discuss topics that are as controversial and socially relevant as Science and Religion (S&R).

Why does this topic generate so much debate and emotion? As Christians, we sense that S&R issues penetrate to the heart of important questions about the reality of our beliefs, forcing us to think about how we know what we know and how we interpret Scripture.

From the Young Earth Creationist (YEC) point of view, the rejection of a plain reading of the sequence and chronology of the creation story as presented in the Bible is tantamount to the denial of a central doctrine of the church, and opens the door to the abandonment of any inspired revelation for which a rationalist rebuttal can be fabricated. These believers worry that if we do not teach the YEC perspective to our young students, we fail to equip them for an evolutionary assault on their beliefs, with a godless natural history acting as a wedge that separates the young Christian from God, as has undoubtedly happened to those who have fallen away.

Participants in the debate include Christian proponents of Intelligent Design (ID) who generally agree with conventional scientific measurements of an old Earth while judging that the scientific evidence points toward non-material causes for the complexity we observe in nature. Theistic Evolutionists conclude that evolutionary theory presents a plausible and inoffensive mechanism for God's creative action in history. These interested parties worry

that the YEC approach is tainted by its use of a Theistic Science that allows Scripture to be used in theory formation rather than adhering to a strict definition of science as an empirical enterprise. They worry that YEC is contradicted so clearly by the scientific evidence that it is actually dangerous for students to whom it is taught, possibly undermining their faith by setting them up for profound doubt when some of them encounter clear and convincing scientific evidence that contradicts the Young Earth point of view. There are, no doubt, young Christians who have lost their faith for this reason as well.

These issues are very important, and Lutheran teachers rightly fret about just what approach to take in their classrooms. In this essay, I will consider the question of how to teach about S&R in our Lutheran schools and offer some opinions as to what constitutes a best practice for teaching about this interesting and difficult subject. I offer these opinions humbly, with the knowledge that academic freedom is of utmost importance, and that individual teachers must be allowed to teach in a way that is congruent with their instructional theory and personality, and guided by their own beliefs and conscience.

Framing the Debate

Any Lutheran educator who wishes to teach about issues in S&R would be well-served by having some familiarity with the various points of view espoused by Christians, both within the LCMS and without. I recently published an article in the *Lutheran Education Journal* (available online at <http://lej.cuchicago.edu/research-in-education/ideological-approaches-to-science-and-religion-in-a-national-survey-of-lutheran-high-school-science-teachers/>) describing a survey research project in which Lutheran High School science teachers were asked which of the following four S&R approaches they most agreed with: **Young-Earth Creationism**, **Intelligent Design** (described in the survey as an old-Earth approach), **Compartmentalism** or **Complementarity**. The percent responses for these four categories for 129 teachers at LCMS

high schools were 58.1%, 21.8%, 2.4% and 17.7%. (I encourage readers of this article to click over to the LEJ website for more details and discussion of the survey methodology and results, especially the precise definitions that were used for each of the four points of view.)

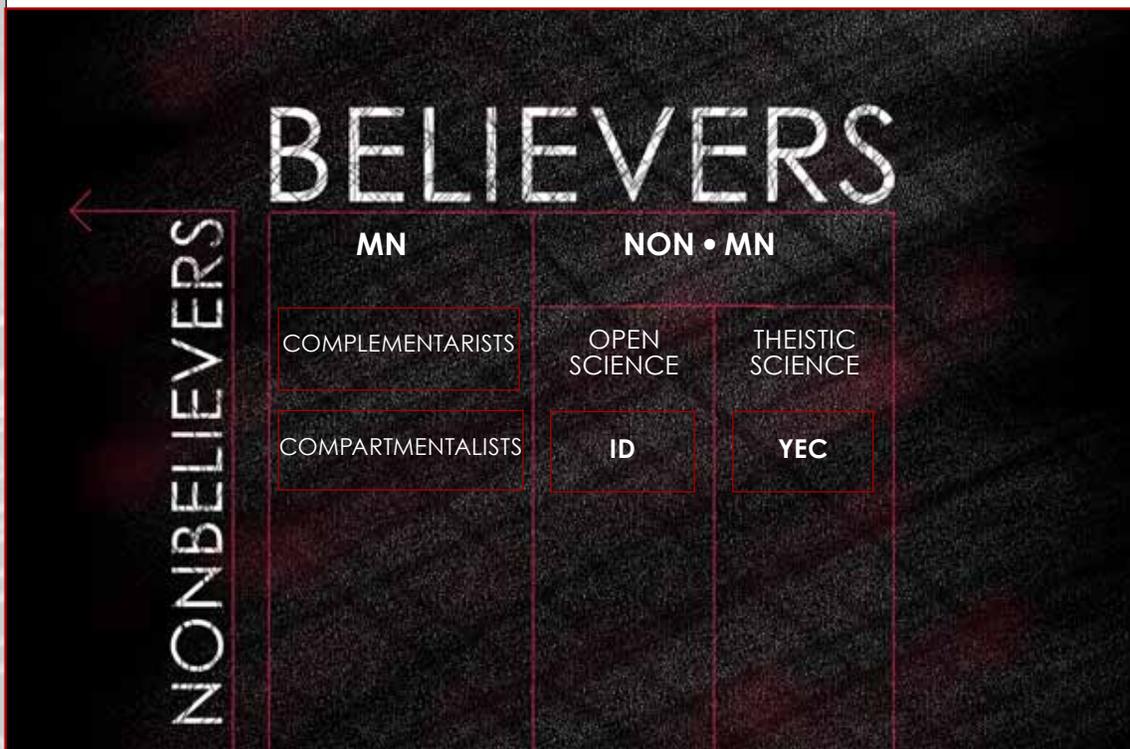
My framework for understanding the S&R differences that divide us is that they are fundamentally ideological, depending especially upon an individual's beliefs about the nature of science. Young-Earthers hold a theistic view of science, which allows revelation to play a part in scientific theory formation. Compartmentalists and Complementarists espouse Methodological Naturalism (MN) for their definition of science, allowing only empirical data and naturalistic explanations. Intelligent Designers generally agree that science should operate only with empirical inputs, but that limiting explanations to only those that are naturalistic is counter-productive and likely to stifle scientific inquiry (an approach that is coming to be known as Open Science Philosophy). The relationship between approach and ideology in this fourfold typology is graphically represented in the following figure, reproduced from my previous article.

These ideological choices are essentially statements of philosophical belief, axiomatic

statements that do not flow from some higher principle. Each position may have strengths and weaknesses, but adherents are unlikely to be swayed from their position by argument or data. Christians who are not employed in relevant science, theological or church-work careers will likely be content to live their whole lives blissfully unaware of these deep philosophical fault-lines that lie underneath the creation/evolution battlefield.

But which of these approaches is correct? Is this a decidable issue? I would argue that this question is similar to asking whether a conservative or liberal approach to politics is correct. With group membership depending on a system of shared axioms and beliefs about the world, individuals may sometimes change sides. But this happens ordinarily when beliefs change, not simply because one side or the other has empirical data or the best arguments on their side.

Regardless of whether or not you agree with this philosophical understanding of the S&R debate, the fact remains that we are a denomination in which all these varying points of view are represented, and no synodical resolution is going to change that. The survey data cited above gives us some helpful insight into the prevalence of approaches among Lutheran High School science teachers, and since identifying these numbers, I have heard many people



volunteer opinions as to how the distribution would differ for Lutheran pastors, laypeople, professors at synodical institutions of higher education, etc. One important finding of the survey was that the ID point of view is more common among the least experienced teachers (the 19 teachers with 0-2 years of experience were identified as 42.1% YEC and 32.6% ID, perhaps signaling a trend away from the YEC point of view in favor of ID.

**Addressing the Issue
in our Classrooms**

In order to have a productive discussion about S&R in our church, we must first acknowledge that many issues are adiaphora. When we get to heaven we will find Christian believers of all sorts: Young-Earth Creationists will be able to have lively discussions with Compartmentalists while Intelligent Designers enjoy deliberations with Theistic Evolutionists. Perhaps God in his wisdom will straighten us all out about the whole issue. But here on Earth the debate will continue.

I believe that Lutheran science teachers should first of all treat S&R gently, perhaps taking their cue from those who teach civics classes. If a student takes an American Government course, he or she is likely to expect that the teacher won't teach the course from a single political perspective, trying to proselytize and convert students to their own point of view. We have all heard complaints about teachers who do this, and it is generally condemned as an abuse of teacher privilege, with the teacher forcing his or her point of view on a captive audience of impressionable young people, possibly against the wishes of their parents.

When teaching about sensitive subjects that are not core religious issues, we expect our teachers to be informative without being coercive, to present controversial issues in a descriptive way that is fair to the best presentation put forth by each side in the debate. I refer to this practice as "going meta," implying that individuals try to lift themselves above their own points of view in order to give students a broad understanding of all sides in the debate and help them to clarify how their own beliefs and opinions

fit into the bigger picture. When teaching about S&R, I try very hard to "go meta" and sometimes indulge my curiosity by asking my students after we're done with my S&R lectures if they were able to tell what my own opinion actually is. They generally have no idea, and I only share my personal perspective outside the classroom with those curious students who approach me individually.

A teacher in a Lutheran school does not suffer the disadvantage of those in public schools who have to maintain a careful separation between course content and religious beliefs. We are able to teach from a point of view that affirms an omnipotent eternal God who is the creator and sustainer of our physical world. Christian teachers are fortunate to be able to see the wonderful design God has created for his universe, and Christian science teachers have the unique blessing of seeing God's world through the eyes of faith, which allows our scientific inquiries to become an act of worship of our magnificent creator-God.

Our shared belief in God provides enhanced clarity as we view and teach about the scientific enterprise, allowing us to carefully distinguish between faith and sight—those things we know through God's revelation and information we gather with our senses. We can rejoice that God has given us science as a wonderful and helpful tool for understanding our world and allowing us to enhance the lives of fellow humans through technology. Without this faith perspective, we wouldn't know who to thank for this great blessing in our lives.

When teaching evolution in a Lutheran classroom, teachers must also make sure to provide their students with a clear understanding of what a scientific theory is. Scientific theories are frequently misunderstood by lay people and are sometimes even defined incorrectly by science teachers. The misconceived definition of a theory that is commonly propagated comes from a confounding of experimental method with what the meaning of a theory actually is as used by practicing scientists. In this mythical formulation, students are often told that theories originate from experiment, in which a scientist

formulates a testable hypothesis, so that experimental support allows a hypothesis to somehow graduate upward to become a theory. This is only crudely true. Theories are actually quite a bit more conceptually lofty, providing an overarching explanatory (and naturalistic, depending upon your ideological persuasion) framework that generally includes many tested hypotheses, facts and laws.

Creationists who wish to denigrate evolutionary theory sometimes mistakenly dismiss it as “just a theory.” This phrase has resonance with those who do not have a comprehensive understanding of what a theory is, confounding the word with its everyday usage as some sort of speculative statement. On the other side of the debate, activist evolutionists who wish to push a materialist agenda sometimes mistakenly assert that “evolution is a fact,” or that evolution is a theory in the same way that Music Theory is a theory. It should also be acknowledged that scientists of varying religious persuasions hold a wide diversity of opinions as to the importance of preserving a careful set of categories for scientific knowledge, and many arguments have their genesis in differences about definitions for words like fact, theory and law.

As Lutheran science teachers address the topic of evolution in their classrooms, they have the freedom to teach their students about the variety of approaches taken by Christians to explain how evolutionary theory relates to our belief and understanding of God’s creation of the world. They can “go meta” in order to make a balanced presentation of all the various points of view, describing each without judgment.

Lutheran teachers have the freedom to describe the profound respect for biblical revelation represented by Theistic Science in the YEC approach, along with misgivings that YECers have about dating techniques and their understanding of the physical importance of the Noachian flood. Lutheran teachers have the freedom to expose their students to the latest ideas from ID, including the idea of Irreducible Complexity, and the Open Philosophy of Science that allows not only empirical inputs but also the ability to choose supernatural scientific explanations when the data call for it. They have the

freedom to explain that some Christians embrace Methodological Naturalism, and how this often leads to Theistic Evolution, and what that means.

I believe that Lutheran teachers have a unique responsibility to exercise scholarship in this area, familiarizing themselves with the best arguments among the many Christian perspectives. I have sometimes encountered Christians who endorse multiple points of view that are incompatible with each other, simply because they perceive various authors and researchers to be part of their “tribe,” without recognizing the conflicting nature of these different approaches. If teachers have no interest in this subject and wish to remain ignorant, that is their own choice, but hopefully they can at least recognize the imperative to do no harm to their students by proselytizing for positions they don’t understand.

Twelve years ago I gave a talk to some science teachers in the Lincoln, Nebraska, public schools on how to teach about the nature of science. During the discussion, we talked about the creation/evolution controversy, and I was surprised when they told me that many public school biology teachers in Lincoln stay away from the teaching of evolution because it is too controversial. I pressed them on this issue, but they insisted that it was so. I don’t know how common this practice was at the time or if it continues twelve years later, but I hope that Lutheran science teachers embrace the freedom we have in the Gospel to engage all the scientific and religious viewpoints that are relevant to the great S&R debates that continue in our society, and treat ideas that differ from their own with respect and tolerance.

In a recent faculty forum at Concordia, Nebraska, a respected theology professor said: “The love of Christ constrains us to be open to communication on topics that are important or of concern to others, even if it makes us uncomfortable. If we are not able to do this, we should be prepared to point to people more equipped to address the subject.” Our conversation had nothing to do with S&R, but I believe that these issues also belong in the category of “uncomfortable topics” that will continue to require open and balanced communication in our Lutheran classrooms.

LUNGS OF A BIOLOGY TEACHER

