Religious perspectives on the science of human origins – how old is the universe

Audience member: 00:17 My name is David Abraham, and I volunteer at this museum. For me, I think my only real question with respect to science and religion is whether, on the religious side, there is an insistence upon a lifetime of the planet and the universe that is out of sync with science. For those religious people for whom the scientific answer, the big bang, 4 billion plus years for the earth and the story of evolution, for those religious people who were accepting of that, I don't know that there's a big debate in my mind. My only sense of the debate is whether or not we have a creationistic, young earth theory as to religious beliefs.

Connie Bertka: 01:21 Randy, I think you're the most knowledgeable on our panel to address that question. Okay.

Randy Isacc: 01:26 Your question was fairly broad in terms of, is there a problem from a religious point of view about the age of the earth? Well, the fundamental piece from a Christian perspective, the evangelical perspective, is a real focus on the gospel of Jesus Christ and the Bible as being revelation of the Son of God. Included in that Scripture is a wide variety of interpretations as to exactly all the details that are being said. And there is a diversity of opinion here, and there is a segment that says, yes, the Bible also teaches us scientific facts, including the age of the earth. (02:06) But I think as I heard Elliot Orr say earlier, there are 70 interpretations of a lot of the texts, and Genesis one is certainly one of those. And I think what evangelicals are united about is the focus that God is the Creator of the universe and of humans. That humans are distinguished by having the image of God, though, we may differ quite a bit in terms of what that means. But as far as the age of the universe, yes, there are those who say that this is what the Bible teaches, and therein does lie a conflict. That is one that has to be resolved. (02:47)

But I would say a significant portion of evangelicals would recognize that the teaching of the Bible is not on a scientific level in a specific timeframe. And that the discrepancy really comes about because of our imposing a modern, scientific interpretation to the ancient literature.
Elliot Dorff: 03:12 Just as an aside, in my tradition, the vast majority have no trouble whatsoever understanding of the earth as being millions of years old, but there is the very right-wing Orthodox. The former Chabad rabbi who died in 1993, said that fossils were there to deceive you and to test your faith. That the earth was only, now 5,670 years old. Don't ask me how they got... I can tell you, but it's not important. But that's a real minority within my tradition.

Connie Bertka: 03:49 Are there any other committee members who want to comment?

Randy Isacc: 03:52 I would just add that this concern is not just a concern for human origins, that it also reflects on astronomy, too. So that if one takes the view of the young earth, one is also taking the view of the young universe. So we’re talking about a universe that is 10,000 years old or younger in the strict young earth creationist view. And so this isn't just an issue for the human origins part of this museum. It carries over into astronomy. So you just need to understand that the implications are quite broad.

Audience member 2: 04:27 [inaudible 00:04:27] how much impact this has had in the Catholic Church?

Connie Bertka: 04:36 Sure.

Father tom Weinandy: 04:36 Do you mean evolution or the exhibit?

Audience member 2: 04:40 The young earth. No, just what we were talking about, young earth, creationist.

Father tom Weinandy: 04:45 Well, from a Catholic point of view, the Catholic Church would have no problem with the Big Bang theory or the millions of billions of years for the age of the cosmos of the universe. The only question that the Catholic church was asked, "Well, the universe could have started with a big bang, but how did what banged get there in the first place?" And so we'd want to still uphold that some creator who brought something out of nothing. And what came afterwards could've evolved over billions of years. Does that answer your question?

Audience member 2: 05:26 Yep.

Randy Isacc: 05:26 May I add one more-

Connie Bertka: 05:27 Sure.
... point? Because it's worth commenting a little bit about the philosophical presuppositions that go along with this. Let me take the role of a young earth creationist at the moment. And they would point out that the 13.7 billion year age of the universe is predicated on the presupposition that the laws of nature are constant.

Their view then is that this is a "atheistic presupposition" that everything has to be constant, and that you can trust the extrapolation backwards. They will say that the speed of light and the various laws of nature constants were actually variable. And so that you can get this kind of consistency in terms of what appears to be 13.7 billion years ago. Really, it wasn't. (06:20)

So the view from a Scriptural perspective, that there's a teaching that the constants of nature changed. Now, you can also turn that around, however, and say that the constancy of the laws of nature are the real Christian presupposition because of a God, a Creator God, who is the same yesterday, today, and forever and upholds the universe in a consistent manner. So I think western science is largely based on that kind of presupposition, which is a very different perspective. But it really gets down to those presuppositions when you start comparing the views.