Written by Matt Lowry
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The following is one of a series of articles by skeptical teachers who use the investigation of the paranormal, fringe science, and pseudoscience to teach methods of science and reason. If you would like to be involved in this project, please contact   rjblaskiewicz@gmail.com

I have spent many electrons typing on my keyboard and posting online about those who would use the government to impose their religious beliefs upon the rest of us by undercutting science education in our public schools. In fact, the most published category on my blog is in reference to creationism , that bugaboo which never seems to go away, like a bad game of Whack-a-Mole that you can't ever finish.

Like many who call themselves skeptics of pseudoscience, the paranormal, and religion, I have some friends who are into one or more of the aforementioned areas. Specifically, I have friends who proudly call themselves creationists, in the sense that they adhere to the most common variant called *Young Earth Creationism* (where their reading of the Bible says the Earth/universe is roughly 6000-10,000 years old). What I want to do here is to recount a conversation I had with one of these friends and how it opened my eyes into how the creationist mind seems to work.

A couple of years ago, I had posted an article on my blog about an upcoming geocentrism conference, which was titled " Galileo Was Wrong " – in the sense that the participants in this conference were actually arguing the Sun isn't the center of our solar system and that astronomy and physics for the last 400 years or so is completely wrong. In my post, after presenting a plethora of scientific reasons as to why geocentrism is outright wrong, I took some time to focus upon one of the primary arguments presented by the geocentrists: their reading of the Bible.

On my blog entry, I stated:

… Last, but not least, it seems that the motivation for modern geocentrists to hold these loony views, despite all of the evidence & science against them, is based in their particular reading of

the Bible. In other words, their particular set of religious beliefs trump all of scientific reality. Or, to put it another way, they are engaging in some really interesting mental gymnastics to come to the conclusion of “the Bible is literally true” and retrofit all evidence (through liberal use of cherry-picking, goalpost moving, and in some cases outright lying) to jibe with their religious views. <p>

Yes, just like Young Earth Creationists (YECs), they call themselves “Biblical literalists” and use their reading of various Bible passages to justify their pseudoscience (by the way, it seems that all of these modern geocentrists are YECs, but not all YECs are geocentrists). I must say that it is nice to see that while most YECs may reject modern evolutionary science on the basis of their “literal” interpretation of the Bible, a large number of YECs aren’t quite so far gone as to go down the rabbit hole of geocentrism. Which, interestingly enough, begs a question: how can two different groups of people (geocentric vs. heliocentric YECs) claim two disparate “literal” readings & interpretations of Biblical scripture? How can the two groups claim to be reading & interpreting The Truth from the Bible, yet also disagree on this topic? Hmmm…

In every interaction I have had with geocentrists, whether it be perusing their “Galileo Was Wrong” website or looking through their literature (my favorite one is a book mailed to me at the school where I teach titled “The Geocentricity Primer: The Geocentric Bible #7”), I have found their arguments placing a heavy emphasis upon their reading of the Bible.

Enter my discussion with my YEC friend. After posting my blog article onto my Facebook page, my friend was among the first to comment that these geocentrists were nuts. I agreed, but then I began to engage him in a deeper discussion as to why he thought they were nuts. His initial response was pretty simple, saying that it was pretty much because of the scientific reasons I outlined in my blog post (i.e. geocentrism cannot explain inner planet phases, parallax, retrograde motion, and is inconsistent with basic physics). Upon seeing his response, I asked him another question: “Did you notice that these geocentrists based most of their arguments upon their reading of the Bible?”

He responded quickly: “Well, they’re wrong.” To which I responded: “Yes, but *wh*y do you think they’re wrong? You stated just now that it was because of the scientific arguments that I presented. Therefore, you must agree that science can trump someone’s reading of the Bible.”

He saw where I was headed with this line of thought, and he quickly changed his tune. “Well, their reading of the Bible is incorrect. That’s why they’re wrong,” came his reply. Never mind the

fact that he never bothered to point out to me any kind of Biblical evidence, such as Scriptural passages, which outlined exactly what was wrong with the geocentrist arguments. When I pointed out to him that he was changing his argument he became increasingly uncomfortable, especially when I followed up with the logical conclusion: if you think that scientific facts can trump a geocentrist reading of the Bible, then why can't scientific facts trump a YEC reading of the Bible?

At that point, I could see that my friend had cognitive dissonance in full swing within his mind, as he kept insisting that "all you need is the Bible to see the truth" and whatnot. I insisted on pointing out to him that the geocentrists, whom *he* labeled as nuts, would make exactly the same argument contrary to his personal reading of the Bible. Once again, he squirmed, merely insisting that he was right and they were wrong. Eventually, I let the matter drop, but not until after I had planted that skeptical seed of doubt. Hopefully, one day, it will start to grow.

This entire interaction taught me something which I hadn't quite internalized until that point, and I think this is something which skeptics and supporters of science often struggle with. We often lament about how many people seem to be almost willfully ignorant of science and its wider implications, as if we simply expect everyone to give science as much credence and importance as we do. Now, don't get me wrong – YECs and geocentrists alike enjoy the fruits of science's labors, such as TVs, computers, the Internet, planes, cars, etc. But what they seem to fight, and where the aforementioned cognitive dissonance seems to come in, is when the questions go beyond the mere "toys" of science to larger issues of one's belief system and/or worldview. Once science starts to encroach upon that territory with its pesky facts and logic, many are willing to either ignore science or even fight against it openly!

So it seems to me that we have a pretty serious communication gap with people like YECs, in that we naively expect them to think like us, when nothing could be further from the truth. In many ways, those of us who embrace the scientific mode of thinking are the exception, and even then you don't have to look far to find a skeptic who all-too-easily slips back into the more common mode of unscientific thinking. Because of this gap, in many ways when attempting to engage in discussion with them, we are literally speaking different languages: we are coming to the issue from a naturalistic, science-based framework, and they are coming to it from what they consider a Biblically-oriented worldview. And, in many ways, never the twain shall meet, as the saying goes.

So, what to do? How can we bridge this gap? I think my interaction with my YEC friend on the question of geocentrism might provide a lesson in how to address this question. Rather than argue with him about how YEC was scientifically unsound, which I had futilely attempted to do

before, I went right to the core of his arguments: I used his own language of “truth in the Bible” against him by providing him with an example of a worldview (geocentrism) which he considered incorrect, even though that worldview made exactly the same kinds of appeals to Biblical literalism which he himself had so often made!

Now, will such argument be effective? I don’t know, only time will tell. But I think it will accomplish two things: 1) it will give my friend some pause to think, in a manner in which he is able to think, and 2) it can keep the conversation going because now we are, in some way, at least sharing the same language.

Matt Lowry is a high school & college physics professor with a strong interest in promoting science education, skepticism and critical thinking among his students and the population in general. Towards these ends, he works with the JREF on their educational advisory board, and he also works with a number of grassroots skeptical, pro-science groups. In what little spare time he has, he blogs on these and related subjects at The Skeptical Teacher.