The Evolution of the Consciousness of God and the Gospel of John

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Alan Culpepper has admirably raised the question of how the recent understanding of the evolution of life impacts the Christian understanding of God in general, and the interpretation of the Gospel of John in particular. Whereas Culpepper focuses on the question of the origin and destiny of human life and the intelligibility of speaking of a Creator, this essay will pose a related question, having to do with the challenges of integrating the evolutionary history of the cosmos with the history that is narrated in Scripture regarding living in the presence of God. Can Christians bring the evolutionary history of life in the cosmos into their narration of life with God taken from Scripture? If they did, what difference would it make in their understanding of God? How would they interpret Scripture in general, and the Gospel of John in particular, if they saw human and cosmic life from an evolutionary point of view?

1 The Challenge of Integrating Evolution with the Narrative of Scripture

There is historical precedent for holding the distinct descriptions of the world in science and Scripture inseparably together, without undermining the discoveries of science or questioning the meaningfulness of Scripture. John Calvin was simultaneously interested in the recovery of Biblical languages and the classical liberal arts in the sixteenth century. As a consequence, Calvin was aware that learned pagans described the universe in a way quite different from the descriptions given in Scripture. For instance, Genesis describes the moon as the second largest body in the sky, whereas classical astronomers inform Calvin that Saturn is larger than the moon. Rather than eliminate the classical description of the universe by asserting the claims of Genesis, Calvin claims that Scripture is accommodated to the capacities of the unlearned, and is therefore uninterested in giving a learned description of the universe.

Here lies the difference; Moses wrote in a popular style things which without instruction, all ordinary persons, endued with common sense, are able to understand; but astronomers investigate with great labor whatever the sagacity of the human mind can comprehend. Nevertheless,
this study is not to be reprobated, nor this science to be condemned, because some frantic persons are wont boldly to reject whatever is unknown to them. For astronomy is not only pleasant, but also very useful to be known: it cannot be denied that this art unfolds the admirable wisdom of God. Wherefore, as ingenious men are to be honored who have expended useful labor on this subject, so they who have leisure and capacity ought not to neglect this kind of exercise.\footnote{Comm. Genesis 1:16, http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom01.vii.i.html.}

Calvin will therefore ask what the accommodated meaning of Scripture is intending to teach us, without claiming that it competes with the discoveries of the learned. “Let the astronomers possess their more exalted knowledge; but, in the meantime, they who perceive by the moon the splendor of night, are convicted by its use of perverse ingratitude unless they acknowledge the beneficence of God.”\footnote{Ibid.} However, Calvin always makes it clear that whenever there are two accounts of the world in play, he understands how the world actually works by means of the discoveries of the learned, and not by means of the teaching of Scripture. “He who would learn astronomy, and other recondite arts, let him go elsewhere. Here the Spirit of God would teach all men without exception; and therefore what Gregory declares falsely and in vain respecting statues and pictures is truly applicable to the history of the creation, namely, that it is the book of the unlearned.”\footnote{Comm. Gen 1:6, http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom01.vii.i.html.} Calvin can do this because he is convinced that God is manifested by God’s works, either as narrated in Scripture, or as more accurately described by the learned. The works themselves represent the powers or perfections of God to us, such as wisdom, goodness, power, mercy, etc. Our experience of the powers of God in God’s works builds on the awareness of divinity God has implanted in every human being, so that we come to know God as the author and source of every good thing. Both Scripture and the learned explore these works and the powers of God represented therein, and it is the powers in these works themselves that manifest God to us.

Can we do today what Calvin did in a previous age, and hold together the two narratives of life in the universe, so that together they mutually enrich our awareness of the self-revelation of God in the universe? I am not sure that we can, as we face several challenges today that Calvin did not confront. To begin, the philosophical investigations of the learned like Pliny and Aristotle develop into the Newtonian method of science, whereby one seeks a natural cause for every natural effect. This makes it very difficult to speak of “the works of God” in the way that Calvin describes them, for Calvin thinks that God can