Contesting the Secular Other, Constructing the Creationist Self: Scientific Discourse and Religious Narrative among Kentuckian Evangelical Christians

By

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Acknowledgments

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Abstract

In northern Kentucky a cross-denominational, “fundamental” Christian apologetics ministry known as Answers in Genesis (AiG) operates the Creation Museum, an interactive public attraction dedicated to the defense of a young-earth creationist worldview. Using a combination of religious and scientific discourse, this organization variously shifts its stance with respect to visitors from a conveyer of religious authority to an exemplar of scientific knowledge. In combating evolutionist ideas, they explicate an epistemological scheme that sets religio-philosophical ways of knowing at a different discursive level than the scientific process. At the former level, two different axiomatic ways of approaching the world are differentiated—referred to by AiG as “God’s Word,” the witness testimony of God as collected in the Bible, and “Man’s Word,” a hubristic set of human-made starting points. Both sets are acknowledged to be assumptions—tinted lenses through which physical evidence of human and cosmic origins is interpreted—and, consequently, biblical creation comes to occupy an equal level as secular evolution. This metapragmatic regimentation aims to effect a change in interlocutors’ beliefs and stances toward creationism. At the same time, AiG enacts a soteriological narrative centered on sin, death, and redemption through the employment of visitors’ everyday lives onto a religious teleology. Synthesizing these two functions, I argue that the Creation Museum can be read as a mechanism for reinforcing a particular religious framework—glossed as “God’s Word” and embedded within this larger epistemological scheme. I examine the operations of this discourse in two interrelated settings: AiG and an independent Baptist congregation in the vicinity of the Creation Museum. In both places a single cultural system reinforces the epistemology and religious narrative unique to this brand of creationism, and in the process a well-defined notion of the creationist self is developed in opposition to the secular “other” outside the community.
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Introduction

On the bitter, icy evening of February 4, 2014, spectators packed an auditorium in northern Kentucky to witness Bill Nye the Science Guy debate Ken Ham, a founder of the Creation Museum and the current CEO of Answers in Genesis (AiG), an organization committed to defending a “young-earth” model of creation in place of Darwinian evolution. For over two hours Nye and Ham exchanged barbs over various lines of scientific evidence of the past, from geological and stratigraphic dating techniques to molecular biology and astronomical cosmology. One strange aspect of this encounter was the degree to which religious evidence was interspersed, at least within Ham’s rhetoric, with science. Within a public culture devoted not only to a putative separation of church and state but to a strict distinction between religious and scientific ways of knowing, this seemingly casual juggling of God and empiricism evokes an uneasy closeness between two domains separated, at least in theory, by a discursive chasm: the tacit assumption that religious leaders should not pronounce on scientific matters, and vice versa.

Ham’s performance raises the implicit question of what cultural work is being undertaken by American Christians who reject some of the key foundations of mainstream science in favor of a “young-earth” model of human and cosmic origins. In other words, what is at stake in these claims that it is not enough to simply declare oneself as a Christian but to take, in addition, a creationist stance?

Six months later I was sitting in a brightly lit chapel with Linda, a middle-aged Baptist who works with the organization. As we sat on opposite pews, she explained her motivations for moving to Kentucky and beginning to dedicate her life to AiG’s ministry—first as a volunteer, the only position they had open at the time, and later as a full-time employee. She had not always

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1 This name is a pseudonym to protect the identity of my interlocutors.
been a “born-again” Christian; while she grew up in a Catholic home and recalled with ease the lessons given by the nuns at her church, she was unfamiliar with evangelical Christianity, and even less familiar with AiG’s sleek brand of creationism. Looking back on these early childhood years in retrospect, she identified the seeds of her current passion. When she would ask the nuns how to reconcile the story of Noah’s Ark with the purported age of the dinosaurs, they would respond with the simple remonstration not to ask such questions, explaining away any inconsistency by attributing it to the “mystery” of God’s ways. As a young Catholic, Linda said she was unsatisfied with this response, but it was not until years later, after the death of her mother, that she began to look for “answers.” She kept repeating this word, insisting that it was a key element of her search, which took her to a Baptist church in upstate New York and eventually on a church trip to Kentucky’s Creation Museum. It was there, on her first visit to AiG’s headquarters, that she felt as though for the first time she had “answers” that could explain her faith—a certainty directed both to herself and to others. The importance of finally being satisfied with answers to religion’s and science’s big questions led her to move to Kentucky and form a new family with the church at which I had been attending services for the past several months.

Linda’s narrative of finding solace in AiG’s creationism and Ken Ham’s opening salvo with Bill Nye gesture toward answers to my research questions: How are religion and science integrated in a young-earth creationist worldview, and how does the discourse sponsored by organizations like AiG articulate with broader dimensions of evangelical Christians’ lives? While AiG and the Christians I met differentiate religion and science as categories of ways of knowing (or alternate epistemologies, as I suggest below), they nevertheless see them as interrelated and even inextricable from one another. I argue that the creationism promoted by
AiG and allied religious bodies should be seen as two interrelated phenomena: (1) a stance through which to *challenge* evolutionist ideas through a metapragmatically regimented adoption of an epistemic scheme and (2) a medium through which to *reinforce* a religious, temporal structure of cosmic history. The process of moving between parts of discourse that serve these varying functions—shifts in stance or frame—allows creationists to address multiple concerns within the same institutions and even the same discursive acts.
Chapter 1 – Setting the Stage

I

The following four sections briefly provide background information—of AiG’s history, my methodology, studies of conservative Christianity and creationism in the United States, and my theoretical framework—to contextualize the discussion in the next chapters. First, the Creation Museum (hereafter “the Museum”\(^2\)) opened in 2007 outside the small town of Petersburg, Kentucky, a suburb of Cincinnati. Even within the local community controversy swelled almost immediately over zoning changes, the fear of vast numbers of tourists flooding the narrow roads of this largely agricultural and residential area, and, as expressed in local newspapers, over the Museum’s proposed controversial stance on evolution (e.g., Thornton 2007). Despite these protests, and despite significant public challenges to its construction (even as early as the mid-1990s [Harden 1996]), the Museum opened as a public outreach campaign of its parent organization, AiG, which had been headquartered in the area since 1994 as an evangelistic ministry devoted to promoting young-earth creationism packaged as a return to a literal reading of the first book of the Old Testament, hence the organization’s name (Answers in Genesis 2007). Adopting Bishop Ussher’s (1658) chronology, which traces back biblical genealogies to find that the world and time itself were created in 4004 B.C., AiG unequivocally accepts a literal interpretation of all the stories (or rather, as they are careful to insist, histories) of the Bible and rejects any efforts to read the Bible metaphorically or as mythology.\(^3\) To defend this scientifically iconoclastic position, they counterintuitively resort to the language of science

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\(^2\) Capitalized to indicate I am referring to the proper noun of the Creation Museum; this is also how my interlocutors most commonly referred to it.

\(^3\) However, even AiG acknowledges that different genres of writing exist in the Bible, such that the Psalms are meant to be read poetically and not as literal history. Nevertheless, they emphasize for various reasons that the book of Genesis is meant to be read as natural and human history (see, e.g., Ken Ham and Bill Nye 2014).
itself to bolster their claims. This melding of religion and science, then, becomes the overall premise of the Museum and for the AiG ministry more generally.

II

This essay stems primarily from fieldwork I conducted from June to August 2014 in northern Kentucky. Over that period I conducted a total of six days of participant observation at the Museum itself. I toured the public facilities to approximate the average visitor’s experience, walking through the main exhibits more or less according to the path recommended by posted signs, guide-booklets, and Museum staff, and afterward strolled the grounds. During this time I took pictures and notes of what I saw, heard, and sensed in order to capture, from a guest’s standpoint, a phenomenological account of visiting the site. My interactions with other visitors were minimal; I simply recorded what was salient from my perspective and how I interpreted what was on display. At a later point, I returned to the Museum to double-check displays and media in the exhibits but more importantly to attend Creation College 4 (CC4), a four-day retreat held primarily in the Museum’s auditorium. This event, which featured dozens of scientists and public figures at AiG giving prepared lectures on different aspects of creation science and creation evangelism, focused on teaching an audience primarily composed of deeply committed members of fundamental churches across the United States how to defend creationism (i.e., traditional apologetics) and to spread the Gospel message with an emphasis on the importance of Genesis, as well as its confirmation through modern science.

As a kind of shorthand, I use the term “AiG” as a grammatical subject to refer to the carefully crafted official message presented at the Museum, on the official AiG website, and through endorsed speakers at CC4. I do not intend to imply a complete homogeneity within this

4 This research was conducted under human subjects protocol #14110, approved by the Brandeis University Institutional Review Board for research activities from June 20, 2014 until June 19, 2015.
discourse, as certain elements and speakers were in tension with one another. Instead, I use the singular subject to indicate the shared qualities of this discourse across different parts of the institution.

The second part of my fieldwork involved regular attendance at a fundamental, independent Baptist church, which I refer to here pseudonymously as Hope Baptist Church, in the vicinity of the Museum. Its leaders are theologically aligned with AiG, with several members holding close ties to the Museum’s operations; in fact, they openly promote the organization in sermons, pamphlets, and conversations. With a membership of about twenty regular congregants, this faith community is one of the smallest churches in the area yet a tight-knit group committed to fundamental Christianity. The pastor, whom I refer to as Brother Richter, welcomed me to join their Sunday services, Sunday school, and Wednesday Bible study group over the course of two months. I use the information I gathered there to discuss how messages and discursive forms elaborated at the Museum and CC4 parallel those found in fundamental churches in the area. I do not intend this congregation to be a representative of any larger collection of American churches. Given such close connections between AiG staff and the leadership of this small congregation of only a couple dozen members, the parallels between the Museum’s discourse and that commonly heard at the church are not surprising and may not be generalized to other fundamental churches further removed from the immediate vicinity of the Museum. Instead, I merely hope to gesture

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5 Throughout my work I favor the term “fundamental Christianity” over the phrasing more common in the academic literature—“fundamentalist” and “fundamentalism”—to accord with the preferred terms used by this church and, to a lesser degree, at the Museum. They employ it in the sense that they see themselves as returning to the “fundamentals” of the Christian faith, rejecting rituals and beliefs (like those adopted by Catholics and observant Jews) seen as external to the core Gospel message. The definitions of “fundamentalist” and “evangelical” are contested even among Christians, with different theological and dispositional criteria for their distinction posited, although generally they are acknowledged to share a belief in the authority of the whole Bible, not selections thereof (Harris 1998:4-7). See Harding (1991) for a discussion of how fundamentalism as a social category emerged as a cultural Other to modernism in the particularly apt context of the 1925 Scopes trial.
toward how AiG-constructed discourse can be embedded within more extensive Christian contexts.

In addition to my participant observation in both of these settings, the conclusions I reach here are a product of other research activities I conducted in the field. I draw from three interviews with individuals from different religious backgrounds: a Museum staff member and committed member of the church where I conducted research, a Pentecostal woman significantly less involved with the Museum and its brand of Christianity but nevertheless moved by the power of the Museum’s narrative, and a religiously-minded evolutionist who elaborated an outsider’s perspective on the Museum. Again, I do not present these interviews as statistically representative of any single “community”; I include excerpts from them to expand on or illustrate points I make.

III

The language and culture of AiG are only the most recent iteration of a much longer history of the twentieth-century creationist movement in the United States. Although elements of creationism appeared soon after evolution’s rising acceptance as an academic theory (Scott 2004), the modern-day movement to which AiG is heir is traced by outside scholars and the organization alike to Whitcomb and Morris’s (1961) seminal work *The Genesis Flood*. In it theologian John Whitcomb and engineer Henry Morris make a case for the integration of biblical and scientific evidence to illustrate the traces of Noah’s flood left on the geological landscape. Following its publication, creationist interest groups emerged in the United States under the banner of “creation science,” an attempt to incorporate scientific findings within a young-earth biblical framework. One of the first anthropologists to be attracted to this growing ideological movement was Christopher Toumey (1994), whose research followed a group of creationist
scientists in North Carolina during the 1980s. Creationism, he argues, provided a platform for conservative Christians to consolidate a host of social ills under a single explanatory system. That their explanation coopted the authority of science made it all the more attractive, especially to those evangelical Christians already within the scientific establishment.

Although ethnographic studies of creationist discourse like Toumey’s are relatively less common, I also draw on the work of anthropologists who have contributed to creationist studies indirectly through their consideration of broader styles of evangelical language. Susan Harding’s (2000) well-read monograph details the role played by religious language and narrative in bolstering a religious frame of reference for believers among a fundamental/evangelical community in Virginia. Despite not focusing explicitly on creationism, she titles one chapter “The Creation Museum,” referring to a small, now closed creation science museum at Jerry Falwell’s Liberty Baptist College. Besides giving an overview of the role of creationism as a key, if contested, component of 1980s American evangelicalism, Harding indicates that the museum she observed does not fundamentally replicate scientific discourse but, in tension with Toumey’s argument, inverts it and challenges the authority and seriousness of all science, whether Christian or secular, as a fallible human institution (2000:221-6). Similar methods of destabilizing scientific authority occur at AiG’s Museum, too, but within a different discursive framework from what Harding finds, as elaborated below. Like Harding’s, James Bielo’s (2009) ethnographic account of Bible study groups reveals the inseparability of religion and language for evangelical Christians. He takes a practice theory approach to seeing various genres of speech acts within everyday Bible study sessions as performative of important religious functions, such as “witnessing.” Although he does not consider creationism explicitly, this focus

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6 Through moments of Goffmanesque slips of frame (see below).
7 Bielo’s (2014) ongoing project, though, does investigate creationism and AiG’s design team specifically.
on the performative quality of religious language is a theme that presents itself boldly within creationist rhetoric. I build on the findings of these authors who have foregrounded the role of discourse in creating fundamental Christian communities.

Although these nascent studies in the anthropology of American Christianity are valuable, they do not consider the most recent iterations of creationism, as exemplified by AiG. Ella Butler (2010), however, has written insightfully about AiG’s brand of creationism specifically. Writing just after the Museum’s opening, she examines the epistemologies elaborated there as a parallel to social constructivist critiques of science. The way they frame creationism, she argues, coincides well with Latour’s (2004) position that science operates under certain assumptions that are social in origin. The Museum’s rhetoric also resonates with Kuhn’s (1996 [1962]) notion of different scientific “paradigms.” As she puts the comparison forcefully, [Kuhn’s] concept of dominant paradigms in scientific practice precisely mirrors the Creation Museum’s point. The paradigm of an old Earth is equated with the paradigm of Biblical Creation. For the museum, starting points form a significant point of critique – if all knowledge is socially constructed in this way, then creationists and evolutionists are simply scientific practitioners beginning from different paradigms. [Butler 2010:246]

However, she quickly points out that AiG departs from this line of thinking and does not, ultimately, argue for a kind of scientific relativism because God’s Word—as both “fact” and “interpretation”—is superior to secular starting points, which lack this interpretive clarity. She also draws attention to AiG’s denial of recursivity to its critique of science; in other words, paradigms are much more static than Kuhn would allow for, and the accumulation of evidence to

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8 Later, in chapter three, I come to this same conclusion from a different angle.
then *shift* paradigms does not appear within creationist discourse (2010:246-9). I follow her concern with examining the epistemological scheme set out in the Museum, especially in the material I elaborate in chapter three. I then extend her argument to consider how the Museum’s engagement with science plays a role in the religious narrative enacted for visitors. I also place AiG’s discourse within the broader context of the surrounding fundamental community by drawing on data from Hope Baptist to understand how the organization’s epistemological model is being adopted in more unambiguously religious settings.

**IV**

A helpful tool in understanding the mixture of religious and scientific language at the Museum is the writing of Erving Goffman. One mechanism by which AiG manages their confluence of different styles of discourse is what some linguistic anthropologists have called a change in “footing” or “stance” (Goffman 1981:128; Jaffe 2012:4). These terms, which I use interchangeably, refer to a contextual relationship between speaker and listener that must be inferred from the particular social environment in which discourse is embedded. That is, certain markers indicate to an audience the relationship between the speaker and hearer, whether one of parent/child, authority/subject, pastor/parishioner, etc. At the Museum, these shifts in stance structure how visitors are meant to interpret the information presented. The Museum’s discourse is, therefore, more complex than simply a variety of styles; the subtle shifts in stance that occur within even a single display add further layers of nuanced relationships between the Museum and its visitors. Unpacking and making sense of these layers in turn contributes to the multiple discursive functions served at this site.

Moreover, as Goffman (1974) indicates with his concept of “frame” or “framework,” social constructions determine what people understand as reality, but these are not necessarily
fixed. In drawing on Alfred Schutz and William James, Goffman (1974:2-3) suggests that one frame through which reality is perceived may dominate at one point only to be superseded by another at a later time. In other words, the way reality is approached varies according to selective emphasis of a certain framework, which may shift within a single discursive event. An important, though not the only, way in which this shift may occur is through a “key,” which he defines as “the set of conventions by which a given activity, one already meaningful in terms of some primary framework, is transformed into something patterned on this activity but seen by the participants to be something quite else” (1974:43-4). To employ the conventions of one frame to transform the meaning of a discursive act into an alternate frame occurs frequently within the Museum, as a scientific frame becomes keyed as being imbued with more significant religious meaning. To examine these shifts in stance and frame, I turn to a quick tour of the Museum itself, with an emphasis on the discursive genres employed as visitors experience AiG’s rhetoric firsthand.
Chapter 2 – A Walk through the Museum on Unsettled Footing

I

In travelling along the Cincinnati beltway by car, few signs point toward the Museum;\(^9\) it seems to spring suddenly, out-of-place, autochthonously on an otherwise unremarkable stretch of the landscape. Once inside the Museum’s gates, however, visitors enter a new world, one which feels wholly unlike the rest of suburban Kentucky, marked by the spread-out bustle of strip malls and traffic juxtaposed with rolling green hills and wide-open spaces. Even before entering the Museum, we as visitors feel, to modify Dorothy’s famous words, “we’re not in Kentucky anymore.” While first walking from my car to the grand and imposing Museum entrance, I noticed license plates from a stunning variety of different states, mostly not from the local tri-state area (Kentucky, Ohio, and Indiana, which make up most license plates seen outside the Museum). These vehicles are inscribed with markers of Christian identity, from bumper stickers

\^9\ In fact, only a handful of signs read “Creation Museum,” presumably government-sponsored “attractions” signs with the label “Screaming Raptor Zip Lines” for the recreational activities available on the Museum grounds. These signs make no mention of its affiliation with the Museum, and no signs mention religion or Christianity explicitly.
to labels of church groups on large travelling vans. To an even greater extent than everyday life in the South already is, this is Christian social space. Once inside all the mundane features of the surrounding area fade away, to be replaced by a sleek, professional aesthetic: fossils on prominent display, tall glass windows welcoming visitors to the lobby, and décor presented as archaeological and paleontological artifacts (Figure 1). These design elements, with the help of a multi-million-dollar operating budget, index the style of a natural history museum and play a role in the creation of a stance of scientific authority.

On passing by the life-size dinosaur statues and entering the lobby, visitors pass through a welcoming display called Dragon Legends (see Figures 1 and 2), which, through a series of small glass-box exhibits, suggests that dragon myths from the around the world—illustrated through facsimiles of old and worn texts and colorful paper dragon decorations surrounding visitors—may be evidence of eyewitness accounts of dinosaurs walking the earth (and interpreted in culturally specific ways). This explanation of dragon myths creatively draws on cultural products as support for a key implication of a young-earth creationist position: that since God created all species kinds at the same time as humans, there must have been a period in which people and dinosaurs co-existed. These creatures, or at least some of their

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10 Bernadette Barton (2012) has made similar observations in her work.
11 The role of dinosaur imagery in the Museum is too significant to treat comprehensively here; briefly, it has become the primary face of the Museum because, as one CC4 participant told me, it is a way of self-consciously
representatives, were even selected to come onto Noah’s Ark and were saved from extinction for a while longer, existing until only a few centuries ago. This contemporaneity with humans is used to explain the cross-cultural appearance of dragon myths.

From this welcoming exhibit the Museum curves around the circular lobby toward the Main Hall, which has as its centerpiece a mastodon skeleton, again strengthening the connection between the Museum and natural history museums (Figure 3). The rest of the Main Hall allows guests to partake in common museum experiences, such as having a quick meal (at Noah’s Café), buying souvenirs and apologetics resources (at the Dragon Hall Bookstore), or watching a lecture, musical performance, or science demonstration in a mid-sized auditorium (Legacy Hall).

![Figure 3: Main Hall with reproduction mastodon skeleton. Photo source: creationmuseum.org/whats-here/exhibits/ Copyright Answers in Genesis 2014.](http://creationmuseum.org/whats-here/exhibits/)

The first step toward which visitors are directed in their journey through the Museum is into the special-effects theatre, where they are shown a film called “Men in White,” which follows two angels as they shepherd a young girl confused by the seeming contradictions between her faith and the science she is being taught in school. After taking her on a whimsical journey to see the faulty foundations of the science she is learning in school, the angels conclude by suggesting that, with true science on her side, she no longer has reason to be ashamed by her repurposing icons traditionally associated with evolution for religious ends. To use Goffman’s term, dinosaurs become “rekeyed” as a religious symbol, while maintaining their association with science museums.
belief. Immediately outside the theatre doors is the approach to the beginning of the main exhibits, called the Walk through History, before which guests have their tickets scanned.

II

At this point most of the remaining exhibits are arranged in a linear way, and visitors must generally walk through in a pre-set order from the first ones to the last (see Figure 4). The first thing they encounter along this path is called the Dig Site: Visitors walk through a darkened canyon (or for small children, they can crawl through a maze) and emerge at a recreated paleontological field site, with life-sized figures of scientists examining recreated fossils in the
dirt. A video of a creationist paleontologist plays overhead, explaining that both he and his evolutionist colleague (represented visually by two figurines) “have the same evidence,” but they come to different conclusions based on their different “starting points.” The excavating paraphernalia and scientific language employed to describe the scene—even the small display signs identifying these objects—position the display as a representation of the scientific community to the general public, much as any natural history museum would (albeit with a greater emphasis on the concept of “worldviews”). In displays on the periphery of this room are physical artifacts next to signs that direct viewers to consider for themselves how old they might be (Figure 5). Not only do these artifacts contribute to the scientific footing that the Museum wishes to put forward here; they also invite viewers to engage in a questioning, critical-thinking relationship with the Museum displays, similar to the engagement that is encouraged at science museums. This “frame” of critical evaluation helps bolster the impression that visitors are to participate in a scientific mode of testing various hypotheses about the physical record.

![Figure 5: Replica “trilobite tracks” with accompanying signage encouraging guests to speculate on “When were the prints made?”](image)

The theme of questioning evolutionary “starting points” continues in the next room, which in a bright, almost sanitized environment presents two perspectives on the natural world with no mention of any ambiguity between them: what are called “God’s Word” versus “Man’s
Word.” These two “worldviews” are presented as axiomatic starting points that determine how the same physical evidence in the present will be interpreted as evidence of past occurrences. For example, Figure 6 shows two possible explanations for a raptor skeleton found by paleontologists. Starting with the “assumption” that the animal died 125 million years ago, someone following Man’s Word would conclude that it had been buried by sedimentation over the intervening millions of years until the present day. On the other hand, someone following God’s Word—in this case assuming an earth only 6,000 years old—would conclude that it had been buried during the cataclysmic Flood of Noah’s days. Other displays in this room, including one analyzing the famous “Lucy” Australopithecus afarensis skeleton, take a similar approach to analyzing different philosophical starting points, which, according to the exhibits, are distinct from the empirical processes of scientific discovery, so that creation science becomes a legitimate avenue of inquiry alongside evolutionary science.

Figure 6: Man’s Word vs. God’s Word in the Starting Points gallery.
The next two rooms—Biblical Authority and Biblical Relevance—evince the first drastic shift in stance; the sterile scientific markers of the previous exhibits are replaced with keys of a different genre entirely: the history of biblical figures who have been the carriers of God’s Word into the world. Figures of the prophets from King David through Jesus’s Apostles appear as conduits of divine authority, in a dimmer, more comforting, more explicitly biblical room than the previous one’s bright lights and scientific focus. Even the soothing instrumental music helps put guests at ease as they explore biblical figures that have brought God’s Word to the people. However, toward the end of these two rooms a more sinister atmosphere begins to intermingle with the previous comfortable setting: A black-and-white cartoon painting of the Scopes trial faces visitors while an ominously scored video plays. This clip explains that attacks on the Bible’s authority—the comforting authority that visitors have just seen in the previous exhibit area—started with Darwin’s publication of *On the Origin of Species*, a foundation on which were built the “humiliation” of the Bible “in open court” wrought by the Scopes trial in 1925, and followed by the rise of Nazi Germany, presented as likewise grounded in evolutionary thinking.

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12 A woman I interviewed—who is not involved in an AiG-centered church yet for whom Christianity holds a strong place in her life—insisted that this was the most memorable room of the Museum for her, since it brought to life the Bible stories on which she had been raised. Although she expressed a different narrative from the one I describe below, she is still able to enact her unique religious understandings through various parts of the Museum.
In the next room, formally named Culture in Crisis but known in some Museum materials as Graffiti Alley, visitors encounter the sounds of sirens, car alarms, and other disruptions of an urban landscape (Figure 7). The walls are plastered with torn magazine covers referencing major conservative rallying cries like abortion, gay marriage, and atheism. Around a corner a large sign announces the fear of relativism expressed in this part of the exhibit: “Today Man Decides Truth,” with the word “Truth” struck out and replaced in spray paint by “Whatever” (Figure 8), further dramatizing the fear that without God’s authority presented in the previous rooms, chaos ensues as civilization accedes to the decay of moral relativism. At another turn through this hall is a recreated residential home and a church, with “windows” (continuously running television screens) allowing viewers to gaze at the secret lives of members of a prototypical family to behold the moral decline going on even in Christian homes. Teenaged characters discuss the temptations of additional conservative fears: pornography, marijuana, and abortion. Again, ties between the moral deficiencies of this fictional family and the teaching of evolution are stressed when, on the other side of the room, the family’s preacher suggests that the creation narrative is not a necessary component of good Christianity. This dangerous abandonment of the book of Genesis, the displays indicate, is at the root of the destruction wrought on the church, the family, and, through the dystopic sensory environment enacted in Graffiti Alley, society as a whole. As
Figure 9 shows, one of the central visual components of this hall is a giant wrecking ball with the label “Millions of Years” collapsing the wall of the family’s church, with the overt suggestion that the evolutionary idea of millions of years of history (*contra* only 6,000 as per God’s Word) is the leading cause behind a decline in church attendance and decadent societal morality. The moral valence of this key structural element of the Museum plays an important role in the overall structural narrative enacted at the Museum, as discussed in chapter four.

IV

Following this bleak vision of the contemporary world, the Museum invites guests to “travel back in time” to discover the roots of this corruption, passing through the Time Tunnel to a film depicting the beginning of the universe in the Six Day Theatre according to the six-day creation narrative found in the first chapter of Genesis. With no scientific language or evidence here, the movie is situated firmly within a frame of religious narrative. However, just outside the theatre guests enter a bright, white, minimalist, and stoically-columned hall known as the Wonders of Creation, in which scientific marvels are superimposed onto each of the days of creation enumerated in the film. Once again a scientific register predominates in the audio displays, in which each aspect of creation—from atomic bonds and cells all the way to
galaxies—is described; this stance marks it as a return to the natural history model of knowledge transmission found in earlier exhibits. Nevertheless, the ethereal architecture—and the overall six-day creation narrative in which it is embedded—force both a religious and scientific footing to appear simultaneously. Further ahead, visitors are guided into a recreated Garden of Eden (Figure 10), a lush tropical jungle complete with the sounds of a waterfall, myriad statues of animals from all over the world living together in Eden, and several depictions of Adam, first of him counting the animals and then having Eve created from his rib, according to the second chapter of Genesis (Figure 11).
At the end of the walkway through the Garden visitors again enter a much darker, twisting hall, formally called the Cave of Sorrows, which illustrates the biblical Fall of humanity (or, as the Museum refers to it, the “Fall of Man”\(^\text{13}\)). In separate scenes along this nearly

\(^{13}\) Again, in their terms, the two fundamental forces in the universe are Man, used as a stand-in for all of humanity, and God; at this point in the narrative the former tries hubristically to usurp the authority of the latter.
pitch-black, descending hallway (this exhibit serves as a ramp taking visitors from the upper to the lower floor of the Museum), Satan, in the form of a snake (Figure 12)—through the Bible verses and the interpretation thereof printed on signs above it—tries to tempt Adam and Eve to doubt whether God will actually punish them for eating from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. The following scene presents Adam and Eve both choosing to eat the forbidden fruit.14 In a jarring discontinuity in the temporal narrative, the next part of the hallway jumps back to the present-day suffering that directly results from the choice of Adam and Eve to sin against God (see Figures 13 and 14). The walls are lit with a bleakly gray light, and sharp angles combine with images of war and genocide and the sounds of screaming to suggest a world perhaps even more frightening than that portrayed earlier in Graffiti Alley. The final scene in this exhibit

14 Mieke Bal (1986:319) suggests that traditional interpretations of Eve as the primary cause of the Fall suffer from the “retrospective fallacy” in that they view the first few chapters of Genesis according to what is later learned in the narrative about Adam and Eve and according to prevailing gender ideas. That the Museum shies away from adopting the dominant trope that Eve alone caused the Fall would be a possibly illuminating line of thought to follow. Perhaps the Museum is moving toward a reinterpretation of the gender implications of the Garden of Eden story that differs from more traditionally misogynistic views wholly blaming women for mankind’s corruption, a refashioning of previous readings of the creation narrative.
returns to Adam and Eve after they have sinned and shows their response to God’s judgment against them: They have sacrificed a pair of calves on an altar and have skinned them to make
clothes for themselves (Figure 15). The display insists that these actions are part of God’s “curse” on Adam and Eve as well as their descendants (i.e., all of humanity) in retribution for disobeying the Lord. Specifically the blood of these animals is necessary to appease God’s wrath with humanity. Indeed, the bloody carcasses of the animals have been reproduced in vivid color as the first humans look on in horror and incredulity. Turning the corner, visitors emerge into the light once again, but this time they have entered a new post-Fall world. Gone are the lush green

Figure 17: Cain murders Abel at the end of the Cave of Sorrows.
tones and flowing waters of the Garden, replaced by an arid, desert-like environment (for a sample of the color scheme used in this room and the kind of language used to describe it, see Figure 16). Interpretive signs point out violent and painful elements in the world—animal poisons, stingers, crop failures, and death—all of which are attributed to the sins of the first human beings. This passage through the “cosmic pain” of post-Edenic existence climaxes with a depiction of the first murder: Cain standing distraught over a dead Abel (Figure 17). Thus, violence in human communities and danger in the natural world flow equally from the single disobedient act toward God in the first few chapters of Genesis.

Following the Fall, the Museum places the next passages of the Genesis narrative (now on the lower level) into a framework of scientific plausibility. First is a piece of Noah’s Ark, which when I visited was directed mostly toward advertising the ongoing construction of the Ark Encounter, an off-shoot of the Museum planned as a theme park about forty miles south, in Williamstown, Kentucky. The rooms dedicated to the biblical Flood allow guests to interact with an animatronic version of Noah and some of the animals on the Ark, as well as to see scientific displays that present the plausibility of putting all animal “kinds” on the Ark at once. In the next display, Flood Geology, further scientific evidence is adduced to indicate the geological plausibility of a cataclysmic flood present simultaneously in all parts of the world. Once again the language of these exhibits includes markers of scientific authority and hypothesis-testing, as in earlier science-focused displays, but here the emphasis has shifted away

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15 See Bielo (2014) for more details.
16 Like “Museum,” “Fall,” and the “Garden,” I capitalize “Flood” to reflect my informants’ written usage and to indicate a proper noun.
17 Elsewhere I have presented the epistemological strategy of, at certain junctures, only expressing the scientific plausibility of the biblical account rather than proof; absolutely true knowledge, they emphasize especially at CC4, comes only from the Bible (Bafford 2014a). See chapter three for a further examination of this epistemological model.
from seeing the world from creationist “starting points”\textsuperscript{18} or even exploring the “wonders” of the scientific world but instead toward allowing for the possibility of how biblical events could have taken place within a logical, scientific framework.

Smaller displays on the periphery are likewise scientifically oriented, some focused on explaining the science

\textsuperscript{18} Likely because, with creationist starting points already established, they fall ironically from explicit focus into taken-for-granted assumptions.
behind natural selection, while others take specific scientific objects—like a dinosaur skeleton newly acquired by the Museum (Figure 18)—and explain how they intersect with biblical narratives like the Flood. For example, the allosaurus artifact named Ebenezer takes part in the construction of the Genesis narrative presented in the Museum in that he is said to have drowned in the rising waters of the Flood and been subsequently entombed (see Figure 19 for the corresponding signage). This material artifact and others like it, then, become “emplotted”\(^{19}\) onto the narrative carefully constructed throughout the Museum, a theme to which I return later. The final main room of the Museum—Confusion, also referred to simply as Babel—illustrates a kind of folk anthropology: It provides an explanation for why human communities around the world

\[\text{Figure 20: Diagram illustrating the emergence of human linguistic and physical diversity in the Babel exhibit.}\]

\(^{19}\) I borrow this term from Cheryl Mattingly (1994:812) (who in turn adopted it from Ricoeur) to describe the social action by which personal events become plotted onto a broader narrative.
look, talk, and act differently. Modelled after opulent near-eastern kingdoms and temples (complete with faux torches and golden statues), the space hosts a short film describing the Tower of Babel and its consequences. Once God imposed multiple languages, mutual communication was no longer possible, and groups split up and spread out from Babel to become differentiated in their physical features according to adaptation to their environments (see Figure 20 for the illustration the Museum provides to explain this migration).

V

With the Babel story and its significance for understanding contemporary human diversity, the Museum’s narration of Genesis ends. However, there is one last room in which the Gospel message—the story of Christ’s life, death, and resurrection, referred to as Christ, Cross, and Consummation, respectively—serves as the finale of the formal exhibits. A movie, suggestively titled “The Last Adam,” tells the story of prophecies of the coming of a messiah, followed by a brief reenactment of Jesus’s life and the drama of his persecution and resurrection. It is only the blood of Christ, the narrator suggests, that can fully atone for the sins committed by Adam (hence why he is called the “Last Adam”: the one to end the suffering begun by the first adam, or man). With this message presented, the Museum leads visitors back upstairs and into the gift shop to purchase any apologetics materials they may need to share what they learned at the Museum with others in their communities.

The preceding overview of the frequent shifts in stance and frame within the Museum highlights the unsettled quality of its presentation. Rather than communicate to visitors in a single modality, the displays alternate their footing with respect to their audience and at times offer coinciding messages in different genres, marked simultaneously by keys of different kinds of discursive acts. Even within a seemingly single genre of museum display, different rhetorical
techniques are used—explicating “starting points,” criticizing evolutionary science, or offering the plausibility of biblical events. However, to grasp the functions of these multiple stances within creationist discourse, it is first necessary to elaborate AiG’s epistemological framework and the overarching religious narrative enacted at the Museum, to which I turn my attention in chapters three and four, respectively.
Chapter 3 – Epistemological Schemes and Metapragmatic Regimentation

I

The epistemological scheme the Museum explicitly sets out may be approached as a typology of ways of knowing. Goffman (1974:27) refers to this kind of scheme as “a group’s framework of frameworks—its belief system, its ‘cosmology’—even though this is a domain that close students of contemporary life have usually been happy to give over to others.” In this chapter I happily take up Goffman’s call to analyze such an emic system of the organization and regimentation of different ways of knowing in order to more fully understand the intricacies of creationist discourse as a whole. AiG posits two separate “epistemologies”—that is, explicitly formulated ways of knowing: one for understanding the present physical world through “observational science” and another for knowing about the past through a separate “historical science.” Each of these “rationalities” consists of a logical system for acquiring knowledge associated with a different temporal position.

Before continuing to explore these ways of thinking, I provide some theoretical material to more clearly grapple with the concept of “multiple rationalities.” In his Lewis Henry Morgan lectures, Stanley Tambiah (1990:105, 107) carves out discursive space for a form of rationality departing from the conventions of Western logic: what he labels broadly as a “performative” way of interacting with the world versus “causality,” in which some philosophers locate the entire scope of human rationality. Although he acknowledges that this argument itself must have some universal ground on which to stand (1990:131) (i.e., it is impossible to argue for a completely relativist position, since different cultural phenomena must overlap on some common assumptions if they are to be intelligible to one another at all), the thrust of his argument aligns with the position taken by philosopher Peter Winch (1970 [1964]), who cautions against the risk
of “category errors” when using one cultural position, or rationality, to look at the categories of another but still allows for the possibility of understanding alternate rationalities. I am not suggesting that the two temporal rationalities posited by AiG map onto the two modes of being in the world described by Tambiah; I simply build on Tambiah’s and Winch’s task of delineating alternate rationalities.

Returning to the two modes of thought understood by AiG, their distinguishing criterion lies in whether the object of knowledge is in the present or the past, with little potential to use the techniques or logics of one to access information about the other. The first of these two rationalities is referred to as “observational science,” referring to an empirical, scientific way of knowing the directly observable physical world in the present. In public lectures, publications, and Museum displays, AiG cites as examples of this way of knowing most engineering, physics, chemistry, and biology that deals with the functioning of living systems in the present. This kind of scientific reasoning, because it relies on immediate observation in the present, which is taken to be relatively infallible, is a perfectly valid approach to acquiring truth about the physical world. In contrast, another way of knowing, termed alternately “historical science” or “origins science” by different AiG speakers, deals exclusively with past events and is qualitatively different from observational science. More specifically, it allows for an interpretation of physical objects in the present as signs or indicators of what happened in the past, but this information alone is not sufficient to reach knowledge of the past; scientists require the aid of assumptions about the past, which are a priori criteria in relation to viewing physical evidence. That is, they already exist apart from any input from the empirical data of the visible everyday world.

20 Of course, this assumption itself is vulnerable to challenge by STS critiques of the observable world as not inherently “obvious,” but in championing the basic premises and authority of science, AiG does not allow for this kind of “recursivity” (cf. Butler 2010).
which scientists only later rely to draw their final conclusions. AiG presents these starting points as the prior assumptions that ultimately influence what is “seen” by all scientists. Without these basic theoretical assumptions, a barrier between the past and the present prevents any true knowledge of history. Only with the help of philosophical starting points can an attempt be made to construct knowledge of the past, both near and distant.

A key component of these epistemologically separate “staring points” is that they rely, at least in part, on the concept of the witness. During CC4 one technique Ken Ham taught his audience to use when questioned with claims of biological evolution was to ask in response, “Were you there?” Although a relatively less sophisticated rhetorical move, it is meant to sow doubt in accounts of the past removed from immediate sensory experience. Nevertheless, with no immediate ability to perceive the past, AiG argues, people can still rely on witnesses who were there as a way to confirm what happened, depending on their credibility. As an analogy given in a speech at the Museum, Dr. Terry Mortenson compared what he called “origins science” to the work his son does as a detective, who relies on witness testimony to reconstruct crime events in the recent past. When he approaches a crime scene, Mortenson explained, he looks for individuals who may have seen or heard what happened. In a parallel to “origins science,” he insisted that evolutionists do not have a witness who observed the origins of humanity, but creationists do: the “eyewitness account” provided by God and the prophets in the Bible. With the Word of God serving as witness to human origins, creationists can reach authoritative knowledge of the past, whereas secularists who do not acknowledge such an authority as credible witness testimony cannot. Thus, AiG speakers make connections between historical science of the distant past (i.e., human origins) and the more proximal past, both of which operate under

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21 For resonance with the religious concept of the same name, see Harding 2000 and Bielo 2009:113ff.
similar epistemological conditions. The requirement for “witness testimony” becomes a distinguishing criterion between God’s Word and Man’s Word, with the former portrayed as resting on similar principles of authoritative knowledge to what historical disciplines employ, while the latter grasps at straws and is left to insert its own (erroneous, they claim) axiomatic assumptions.

This emphasis on the Word of God as eyewitness testimony to natural history extends, unsurprisingly, into church contexts as well. In a sermon, Brother Richter addressed the possibility of evolution having been used as God’s mechanism for creating human beings:

But if you’re asking the question could God use evolution, you’re asking the wrong question. The question is not what God could have done; the question is what did God say he did.

As with AiG’s discourse, Brother Richter’s emphasis is on God’s verbal account of what he did: that he said the human species was created a certain way. As testimony to his own powers of creation, God’s Word as expressed in the first few chapters of Genesis is taken as authoritative and, thus, as the proper lens through which the human past ought to be interpreted.

II

Within the overall epistemological regime laid out by the Museum, further distinctions can be made among different approaches to historical science, some of which stand on sturdier ground than others. Having established that all interpretations of the past rely on philosophical axioms, AiG details two of these (see Figure 21 for an illustration of this taxonomy). The first—the aforementioned set of religio-philosophical assumptions collapsed under the term God’s

22 The use of witness testimony—the authority yoked to a sense of “being there”—arguably parallels the authority among anthropologists of being in the field and “seeing” things for themselves, as opposed to relying on alternate ways of knowing.

23 For these direct transcriptions of church sermons, I use the following conventions: Bold text indicates a word or phrase that the speaker marked by greater stress and volume; numbers in parentheses indicate pauses in seconds.
Word—begins with the account of the entire Bible and especially the book of Genesis as a literal account of historical fact.\textsuperscript{24} The philosophy against which this is opposed, Man’s Word, is described as hubristically presuming there is no God and that humans can impose their dominance over God’s Word as unproblematically set forth in the Bible. Despite their maximally opposed character,\textsuperscript{25} both of these foundations, as axioms, by definition cannot be challenged because they stand apart from any tests of falsifiability. The Museum discursively positions evolutionists as basing their science on axioms that are just as belief-based as creationists’. A curious consequence of this discursive move is that evolution—and specifically the philosophy that supposedly undergirds it, atheism—becomes reinterpreted as a religion (Bafford 2014b).\textsuperscript{26}

As a result, AiG moves the debate from one over science to an even playing field in which Christian philosophical assumptions compete against secular philosophical assumptions, not with

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{24} Cf. note 3.
\item \textsuperscript{25} Indeed, as Lévi-Strauss (1955:431, 440) has shown, maximal distinguishing, as the foundation for binary opposition, lies at the heart of human mental activity, and by extension, cultural forms.
\item \textsuperscript{26} I found this most concretely in my work when I asked interviewees at the end of each recorded conversation whether they thought atheism was a religion. Those aligned or somehow affiliated with the Museum unanimously answered that it was, while those outside fundamental religious circles provided much more diverse responses.
\end{itemize}
the overpowering force of “science” itself, in the global marketplace of ideas.\textsuperscript{27} In effect, then, while the standard procedures of science can attain access to the dynamics of physical systems (the human body, elliptical orbits, or organic chemistry), in order to reach the past scientists must resort to philosophy/religion.

The result of this intellectual move is that, at least within the epistemological regime elaborated by AiG, religion and science remain incommensurable ways of knowing, despite the fact that they appear alongside one another at the Museum. This configuration evokes a similar division laid out by Akhil Gupta’s (1998) investigation of Indian agricultural practices, with some modification. Gupta attempts to outline “hybridized understandings of agriculture” that combine elements from indigenous “humoral agronomy” with practices more recently imported as part of what he calls “green revolution bioscience” (1998:159). Although he suggests that these bodies of knowledge and agricultural techniques are unique hybrids, he also maintains that farmers commonly switch from one “system” to another, each of which consists of “contradictory logics and incommensurable discourses” (1998:5-6). Even within his notion of hybridity, then, Gupta still separates conceptually different sources of knowledge as being fundamentally distinct, despite their intimate proximity within farmers’ agricultural and linguistic practice. Similarly, any attempt to reproduce the local categories salient at the Museum must separate science and religion as fundamentally distinct ways of knowing, despite their coinciding within AiG’s rhetoric. In other words, even if the scientific method can be used as a means to confirm religious knowledge, it remains qualitatively separate. While scientific and religious epistemologies may not be distinct in a cross-culturally universal manner, I only

\textsuperscript{27} This argument follows Toumey’s (1994) point that discourse of “science” becomes too strong to deny wholesale, so Christians must find ways to fashion their own practices as equally if not more scientific than those of the mainstream scientific community. See section three below.
describe here the discursive practice by which the creationists at the Museum *claim* them to be separate.  

### III

The Museum’s exhibits foreground a trend within AiG’s discourse, as well as among the pastor and congregants at Hope Baptist, to concede to the hegemony of science and the need to adopt language that takes science as a serious way of knowing. Toumey (1994), too, since the 1980s has recognized creationism as a response on the part of fundamental communities to address the demand to be seen as “scientific” in twentieth- and twenty-first-century America. Likewise, the Museum’s exhibits repeatedly acknowledge the legitimacy of “science”; indeed, even the existence of a Creation Museum bespeaks a deep “buying in” to the premise that science must be addressed, even when making ostensibly religious claims. While at many points the discourse of “science” appears as a simplistic, monolithic authority, much as it is used in popular Western media in general (cf. Tambiah 1990), in a few places AiG’s use of science becomes more specific. As implied earlier, they approve of the scientific method as an abstract process of hypothesis-testing, empirical verification, and peer review.  

At the same time, however, AiG inserts important caveats into what is considered good or bad science that help justify their rejection of the conclusions of mainstream scholarly conclusions.  

One of the key sites at which this negotiated engagement takes place is the Natural Selection room, located as an off-shoot to the Flood Geology area of the Museum. Curiously for an anti-evolution establishment, the exhibit does not challenge the phenomenon of natural

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28 Indeed, as Tambiah (1990) and Saler (1987) note, the category of “religion” as fundamentally separated off from the rest of social life is a Western construction and, therefore, may not always be useful when interpreting social systems in cultures where such a distinction is not relevant. Nevertheless, since my interlocutors are descendants of this Western tradition, it is not surprising that they have reproduced a taxonomic scheme similar to their (and anthropologists’!) predecessors.

29 Provided that those peers agree with their fundamental, non-empirically verifiable starting points.
selection itself: In a series of scientifically-keyed information signs (including illustrations of experiments with newly designed antibiotics), the principle of natural selection in modern-day microbial populations is explained and defended. Taking into account evidence for natural selection among populations like Darwin’s Galápagos finches, this display openly accepts some of the evidence often used to counteract creationism and, in the process, answers criticisms that they deny science. On the contrary, they insist that they witness the same observable phenomena as mainstream scientists, including those of natural selection in the contemporary world; only when processes of natural selection are extrapolated into the past does an epistemological problem arise, such that evolution of human beings from other species is an untenable deduction.

Returning to an earlier theme, in the exhibit’s conclusion the process of natural selection becomes rekeyed as a religious phenomenon. As one of the signs reads, “Natural selection is supported biblically and scientifically. It can be viewed as a God-ordained process that allows organisms to survive in a post-Fall world.” With this rhetoric AiG is able to destabilize criticisms that they do not accept the science of natural selection—a basic principle of the biological sciences—while simultaneously rekeying “natural selection” as a Christian phenomenon that plays its own role within the larger religious narrative enacted at the Museum (to be examined in chapter four).

When AiG engages with scientific evidence that appears not to support its account of origins, it does not challenge it on account of its scientific quality but rather on account of it not being scientific enough. The most prominent example of this rhetorical technique is how creationists accommodate radiocarbon dates, which seem to suggest a world much older than 6,000 years. In a “technical” session at CC4, Dr. Andrew Snelling made a case against the scientific muster of carbon-dating techniques. Not only do these techniques have too much
variability in their margins of error and too much inconsistency among individual tests, he offered, but the scientists who conduct these measures make *assumptions* about initial carbon levels (as well as the uniformity of natural processes), assumptions that creationists do not share. In this discussion, Snelling combines two separate rhetorical strategies to contest scientific evidence supporting evolution: an argument against radiocarbon dating on the basis of poor scientific technique and an argument against the axiomatic “starting points” of the technique, which accords with the Museum’s overall epistemological scheme. In this way, he and AiG deploy the language of science itself to argue against evidence that contradicts a young-earth model of the universe.

In both their acknowledgement of natural selection and their engagement with radiocarbon dating techniques, creationists at AiG do not so much rely on ignoring certain pieces of evidence over others. Instead, their discursive approach is more focused on setting out the evidence and arguments leveled against them by mainstream scientists but then to reinterpret them according to an alternate epistemological framework. The question posed by evolutionists of what evidence is there to support a theory of origins therefore becomes transformed into one of how to make meaning out of given evidence. As Butler (2010) has argued, this move ironically coincides, as mentioned earlier, with recent work by science-and-technology-studies writers to replace the model of scientific evidence that “speaks for itself,” so to speak, with one that concedes that all scientific interpretations are motivated by culturally constructed assumptions.

**IV**

This attempt to move the locus of the debate from a contestation over facts and evidence within an accepted scientific paradigm (what my interlocutors would call “observational science”
while others would call simply unqualified “science”) to a challenge over philosophical
“worldviews” at a distinct epistemological level constitutes a discursive move that serves certain
political purposes.\(^{30}\) While other elements of their scientific appeal still draw on more traditional
techniques to refute evolutionary thinking (e.g., dissecting and challenging specific studies or
lines of evidence), this novel approach at the epistemological level acts as a way to destabilize
the underlying framework of the debate in a way favorable to their arguments. By extracting the
debate from an evidentiary level to one concerning the very grounds for the debate itself,
creationists engage their publics in a discursive style more amenable to their aims. In more
technical terms, the Museum’s rhetoric and AiG’s speakers engage in discourse that could be
termed “metapragmatic” in that, to follow Michael Silverstein (1993), they provide a
commentary on the effects of their discourse on target audiences. Furthermore, drawing on
Silverstein, Richard Parmentier (1994:128) explains that within institutional settings certain
metapragmatic discourses may “regulate the range of acceptable interpretants of specific
segments of social semiosis” in a process known as “regimentation.” Unlike Parmentier’s
(1994:134-5) examination of the institutional regimentation at Colonial Williamsburg, however,
the constraints on interpretation at the Museum are hardly indirect or implicit.

A noticeably explicit example of this metapragmatic function took place at CC4, when
Ken Ham explained to his audience the dangers of adopting one discursive style over another—
and, consequently, the justification for AiG’s rhetoric over that of other Christian apologists. In
what he labeled more traditional apologetics debates, secularists could attain the upper hand by
convincing Christians to set aside their Bible, in this case parsed as their main source of
knowledge or “weapon” against their opponents, and instead battle only on grounds of

\(^{30}\) I use the term “political” here to refer to modes of contestation for control of popular discourse, knowledge, and
social institutions.
“scientific” evidence. While in this scenario the Christians willingly put away their starting points (i.e., they agree to debate solely on accepted scientific evidence for creation, leaving biblical evidence aside), Ham pointed out that, in reality, the secularists do not excise their own set of assumptions. Thus, the odds are stacked against Christians, who cannot draw on their axiomatic assumptions (God’s Word), while their opponents can draw on theirs inconspicuously. Explicating this maneuver for his audience, Ham contends that the debate must be \textit{framed} in the proper terms so that, as suggested above, Christians and secularists may contend with one another on equal ground. Besides offering an explanation for why creationist apologetics has failed in the past, Ham indicates the power of metapragmatic regimentation invoked in his speech. It is, in fact, his \textit{explication} of what occurs in creation/evolution debates and the effects they have on the outcomes thereof that is intended itself to have an effect on the audience: to make them more successful in their evangelizing. By regimenting the terms of the debate itself, he intends to enact fundamental social changes.

At other points throughout the Museum and even in conversations with the pastor and congregants at Hope Baptist, a topic of perennial concern was how best to communicate with those outside the community (non-Christians and evolutionist Christians) in order to bring about a specific change in their actions: viz., to bring them to the point of repentance and salvation. Again, this more or less explicit concern with language itself and the pragmatic effects it has on the world suggests the importance of metapragmatic speech among this group of creationists. Through the act of drawing attention to the impact that argumentative styles—including epistemological regimes—have on their audience and simultaneously positing a new configuration of ways of knowing, these Christians explicitly invoke the pragmatic function of their language and through this very act take steps toward forcing skeptics to reevaluate their
philosophy of science and, with any luck (or rather, with God’s grace), effect a change in their beliefs.
Chapter 4 – Mythic Narrative: Emplotment on the Arc of Cosmic History

I

While the creationists’ contestation of secular science is well-elaborated, it is by no means the only, or even the primary, function of the Museum. Just as crucial is the development and reinforcement of an overarching mythic narrative constructed through the Museum’s displays, not necessarily in relation to outsiders but for Christian communities themselves. The Museum lends itself especially well to a narrative analysis because, as suggested earlier, it is organized linearly and, with a few notable exceptions, chronologically, with visitors following the narrative as they proceed through the Museum from beginning to end in a set pattern.\textsuperscript{31} This narrative analysis can be explained more easily through a structural division of the Museum into what AiG calls the “Seven C’s of History.”\textsuperscript{32} Diagrams portraying these seven C’s are available

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{seven_c's_of_history.png}
\caption{The Seven C’s of History. Diagram courtesy of Creation College 4. Copyright Answers in Genesis 2014.}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{31} Indeed, literally \textit{inscribed} in the material layout of the main exhibits.

\textsuperscript{32} Pronounced homonymically, perhaps with an intertextual smirk, as the “seven seas.”
throughout the Museum as an overlay to people’s movement through the exhibits, although the clearest visual representation of the pattern was presented during CC4, when the audience was taught how to explain the seven C’s to their own church communities (Figure 22). The entire span of cosmic history—past, present, and future—is divided into seven periods: creation, corruption, catastrophe, confusion, Christ, cross, and consummation.

After the initial exhibits primarily laying out the epistemological foundation described above, the remainder of the Museum shifts its focus to narrate these seven C’s. The first period refers to God’s creation of a perfect world and is represented in the Museum by the movie of the six days of creation, the Wonders of Creation, and the perfect natural and social environment of the Garden of Eden. With the sins of Adam and Eve, though, this ideal world is corrupted, and death, pain, and suffering enter the world for the first time. Dissatisfied with human morality during the time of Noah, God released more death and destruction on the earth, this time in the form of the global “catastrophe” of the Flood, which is represented in the Museum by several models of the Ark and scientific plausibility of the Ark. The next stage, briefly elaborated, is the “confusion” among people groups after the Tower of Babel. The last three stages—usually combined together by AiG employees, as though they were one unit—consist of “Christ, cross, and consummation” and are confined in the Museum, at least explicitly, to the final film, “The Last Adam.” Christ refers to the coming of a redeemer, while cross stands for his death at Calvary, and consummation suggests a return to a perfect world once Christ returns at a future time. Signs throughout the Museum that mirror the icons in Figure 22 let visitors know where they are in the narrative as they walk through the second half of the Museum.

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33 And also, as seen in Figure 4, on the map in the gray headings over major parts of the exhibits.
34 Marked visually on the Seven C’s chart by the “corruption” logo, which features a skull figure with its orbital sockets formed out of Adam and Eve’s heads.
The diagram designed by AiG in Figure 2 can be analyzed symbolically to identify some sources of its appeal in constructing a cohesive mythic narrative. First, the pattern is straightforward and fairly easy for visitors to grasp, with its alliteration and visual connection to the biblical events enacted in the displays. Each of the stages occupies a similar category as all the others; even the entire timeline is laid out to form a giant letter “C,” thus reinforcing the redundant (even fractal) symbolism. Second, as suggested by the blue arrows in the diagram, there is a parallel structure between the first three stages and the final three stages. (“Confusion” is the only stage without a clearly defined pair.) Starting on the left, just as Noah was a messianic figure whose virtue saved the future of humankind, so is Jesus compared to Noah in his capacity to save souls (the former saving souls on the Ark, the second through his body). Next, whereas “corruption” involved the start of death, Christ’s death on the cross marks the end of death for those who trust in him (and, as becomes relevant below, the end of blood sacrifice). Finally, the perfection of the world before the Fall will be matched by a return to perfection after the second coming of Christ. This last parallel is most clearly demarked from the rest: “creation” and “consummation” exist on the white side of the image, while all the other stages occupy the black side: that is, existing in a sinful, non-utopian world. With trust in Christ, then, the world can, at least in the future, come full circle from utopia to dystopia and back to utopia, a theme expressed as a palimpsest, one version repeated over another, throughout the Museum.

II

Taking a cue from Edmund Leach (1967) and Claude Lévi-Strauss (1955), this mythic narrative can be broken into binary oppositions to illuminate how it operates at a cognitive level.

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35 This latter point was explained to me during CC4 by a children’s ministry instructor, who used the connection between Noah’s boat (something children can easily visualize) and Jesus’s salvation (something that is less easily grasped) to teach the important of trusting in Christ.
36 Even the pattern of beginning the exhibits with a film and concluding with one suggests coming full circle.
for participants. I have simplified Figure 22 yet kept its overall spatial layout in Table 1. I collapse all of the “dark” stages into categories associated with death, while the only two

categories of perfection—“creation” and “consummation”—exist as the oppositional phases, what I gloss as “life.” Meanwhile, the distinction between the first three stages and the last three stages in the seven C’s is temporal in that the first three occurred early in the Genesis narrative, while the last three are related in the New Testament during the life and second coming of Jesus.

More significantly, though, the first three stages involve God as the primary agent against whom Man is juxtaposed; in the last three stages, Christ becomes the supernatural force by which humanity is saved. The progression of the narrative according to Table 1, therefore, starts with the Garden of Eden and moves counterclockwise, first passing from life to death (a verdant to a desolate world), then finding Christ, finally passing back from death to life through the vehicle of Christ’s salvation. Moving deeper, I want to look further at what happens at the juncture between the areas associated with life and those associated with death. If the most exciting anthropology exists at these liminal boundaries, as identities are being disrupted and reformed (Turner 1967), then the central turning point of the Museum’s mythic narrative occurs at the

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>God as Agent</th>
<th>Death</th>
<th>Life</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sin (Corruption)</td>
<td>Garden of Eden (Creation)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christ as Agent</td>
<td>Christ’s Death (Cross)</td>
<td>Christ’s Resurrection/Return (Consummation)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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*Table 1: Structural reading of the Seven C’s of History.*

37 The fact that Christ, as part of the Trinity, theologically shares a substance with God would suggest that this may actually be a form of self-sacrifice. I cannot delve into this intriguing argument here but instead focus on the more immediate level at which God and Christ are considered separate characters throughout the Museum.
point where death is first introduced into a world that was previously only filled with life: namely, the scene of the first blood sacrifice, as depicted in Figure 15.

The importance of this scene is indicated, first of all, by its central location in the Museum. It occurs approximately halfway along the linear path of the Museum’s main exhibits, after the perfection of God’s Eden and before the corrupted world that serves as the backdrop for the remainder of the post-Fall Museum. In this sense, then, it serves as the horrific turning point in the Museum’s story about a world with everlasting life falling into one in which all beings must die. The Museum’s designers did not shy away from depicting the first instances of animal slayings; death literally takes center stage, as no attempt is made to obscure the bloody, skinned dead calves. The impression on museum-goers is that this is the tragic consequence of having sinned; a perfect world without any killing was exchanged for one of violence, pain, and destruction. If this sacrificial scene serves as a turning point along the horizontal axis of the Museum’s progression from one stage of history to another, it also occupies a mediating position along the Museum’s vertical axis, as well. Recall that this scene in the Cave of Sorrows occurs on the ramp leading from the upper level (on which God’s wonderful creation is exhibited) to the lower level (on which God’s catastrophes and Man’s corrupted world take place). Likewise, in his analysis of a Nepalese Buddhist temple, Robert Paul (1976) identifies a model of the psyche split between higher reasoning and lower corporeality mapped onto the upper and lower levels of the building itself. By analyzing spatial arrangements that could easily be overlooked, Paul argues, we can uncover less obvious dimensions along which a cohesive symbolic universe can be expressed in the physical world. At the Museum, as visitors proceed from the glories of God to the evil state of the contemporary world, they must literally make a descent into depravity and death. In its location on the ramp, the sacrificial scene mediates between these two worlds,
serving as the end of the world of perfection and, like a rite de passage, the beginning of a new world, though in this case a decidedly darker one.

To begin to unpack the multiple layers of symbolism and many implications of this sacrificial scene at the Museum, it is helpful to begin by recapping its “native exegesis,” or how the participants explain it, just as Turner (1967:20, 26) recommends. Signs interpreting the first sacrifice describe it as the only way to please God now that Man had abused his right to live in the Garden of Eden. More immediately, after having been cast from the Garden, Adam and Eve became ashamed of their nakedness and needed to cover their bodies, so God directed them to make the first blood sacrifice, which is enacted in the display. People, or at least the Israelites, had to continue to offer sacrifices to the Lord as repayment for the sin committed in the Garden of Eden; however, due to the gravity of the sin, these measures were never fully successful at expiation. Figure 23 depicts a second, smaller-scale blood sacrifice led by Noah after the recession of the Flood waters. These rituals continued until the time of Christ, who, we learn in the “Last Adam” film, himself served as the final, perfect blood sacrifice that did have the power to completely reverse the sin committed by Adam. Only by sacrificing a divinity, not merely an animal substitute, could the original sin of the human race be absolved. Christ’s sacrifice—in

Figure 23: Miniature display of Noah's blood sacrifice following the Flood.

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38 Though, as he also says, this ought not to be a limit imposed on our analyses but rather a point of departure (Turner 1967:26). I consider additional etic interpretations below.
essence a better substitute for animal sacrifice—is the reason given by the Museum for why modern-day Christians no longer have to conduct the sacrifices prescribed in the Old Testament: Christ died for our sins, so he has superseded these older, pre-Savior edicts. This framework for understanding the role of Christ as a sacrificial substitute appears throughout Christianity, yet in this setting it takes center stage as the structural focus of the narrative conveyed to visitors.

While the first blood sacrifice and Christ’s sacrifice are recognized as fundamentally similar within the Museum’s rhetoric, a third violent act depicted in the Museum—Cain’s murder of Abel in Figure 17—might also be viewed as sacrificial according to this framework, even if it departs radically from Christians’ explanations. Just as Leach (1967:8-9) draws attention to Cain and Abel as a structural retelling of the creation story,39 striking parallels exist between the image of Adam and Eve’s first blood sacrifice (Figure 15) and life-sized figures of Cain standing over his slain brother (Figure 17). The victim lies in front of the killers, who raise their hands up in horror and disgust at what they have done. Within the narrative, murder exists because we live in a fallen world due to Adam and Eve’s original sin; the violent loss of human life, just as much as the violent loss of animal life, is just one of the painful *prices* (or, biblically, “wages”) to be paid for sin. In this way, Abel, who occupies the same category of hapless victim as the slaughtered calves, becomes just as much a sacrificed object as they do, yet equally unable to bring about the redemption of humankind.

III

Thus, sacrifice—first the blood of animals, then the blood of people, and finally the blood of Christ—serves as a dominant symbol throughout the Museum in that it recurs in a number of

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39 Girard (1977:61, 63) also reads the Cain and Abel drama as indicating the need to differentiate similar things (in this case the two brothers) by sacrificing one of them, hence the trope of “enemy brothers” widespread in mythology. While not discounting this theory, I focus here on another level of the Cain and Abel story that is more clearly enacted at the Museum.
different contexts and condenses a number of significant meanings into a single act (Turner 1967:30-1).40 There may be another way in which sacrifice takes shape at the Museum. I argue that visitors partake in the narrative by becoming both sacrificial victims of others and people who conduct self-sacrifice. On the first point, the Museum conditions visitors to see all the evil in the world—from death to racism to everyday annoyances—as a direct consequence of the sins committed in the Garden of Eden. They are taught to see themselves, in this sense, as victims of sinful past behavior. Just as the sacrificed animals and Abel are the victims of humankind’s collective41 decision to sin, the pains and “groans” of everyday life become evidence of violence done to all people as a consequence of primordial human history. Only, they would say, through trust in Jesus Christ—in his perfect and ultimately successful sacrifice—can a person escape this suffering, to no longer be a victim of the cycle of blood sacrifice initiated first by Adam and Eve.

René Girard has argued that sacrifice is a way in which internal societal violence gets channeled into appropriate outlets by, taking a cue from Freud, being transferred from one object to a replacement thereof. In other words, violence becomes sensible within a structure of ritual sacrifice that determines who is an acceptable victim and who is not (1977:4, 8, 116-7). My argument here is not that the sacrificial scenes at the Museum are substitutes for any kind of natural violence among Christians; instead, I suggest, more modestly, that visitors learn to “read” the violence in their world as a form of sacrifice, which in turn is a form of violence committed against the rest of the world in extension of God’s violence42 against Adam and Eve. At the discursive level at least, all of humanity becomes the sacrificial victims at the hands of an angry

40 The depiction of the consequences of sin is also recursive in that it must be presented twice: first in Graffiti Alley and second in the Cave of Sorrows, each of which carries a different focus. This repetition of the narrative (not unlike the repetition of the creation narrative in multiple places throughout Genesis [see Leach 1967]) arguably works to reinforce the overall cultural mythology.
41 In a future work I hope to extend the argument about Adam and Eve’s individual choices as historical actors to collective responsibility and how it relates to notions of distributed agency.
42 To them, justified.
God; the consequence, for believers, is that violence becomes legible as part of God’s will. This constitutes a creative response to old questions of theodicy: How better to explain the existence of evil than to plot it within an ultimately hopeful religious narrative? Overall, then, through the process of passing through the Museum and by connecting biblical ideas and scenes with everyday life, the Museum invites visitors into seeing themselves as active participants in the cosmic mythology being narrated to them. Returning to Mattingly’s language of “emplotment,” visiting Christians emplot their sufferings and pains onto a larger cosmic narrative, at the end of which lies the possibility of redemption through Christ and a return to perfection.

In yet another way the whole Museum experience itself may be read as a sacrifice visitors voluntarily make of themselves to strengthen their faith and to implant themselves more deeply in the mythic narratives reproduced in their churches. Travel and admission to the Museum requires an expense of time, effort, and money. Even getting to the Museum itself involves travel along twisting, narrow roads that make it seem to be a distant land, wholly separate from its environs. If, as I suspect based on my observation of visitors, most already come to the Museum well-aware of the religious insights and stories conveyed therein, a question arises as to what purpose it serves to continue circulating such information over and over. In other words, what does the Museum “do” for those who already know the story? A partial answer may be that the things visitors must give up to come to the Museum become a price paid in order to “fellowship” with other Christians, show devotion to God’s glorious creation, and be at the center of such a widely-recognized beacon of American fundamental Christianity. Without any American

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43 The narrative I describe here has strong parallels to that I found at Hope Baptist. Several sermons illustrate many of the themes of utopia-dystopia-utopia described above and are suggestive of the preexisting narratives that become reinforced by fundamental Christians through Museum visits.
“shrines”\textsuperscript{44} to which devotees can travel to become more personally and corporeally connected to their religion, Protestant Christians may turn to institutions like the Creation Museum to fill this void. Furthermore, as already indicated, by engaging in a process of inserting visitors into the cosmological narratives central to their faith, the Museum can reinforce a particular vision of the world. As Girard writes, “there is no real difference between rites of passage and rites intended to maintain the status quo…. Wherever there is a potential for dangerous change, the remedy lies in ritual; and the rites invariably entail a repetition of the original solution, a rebirth of differences” \textit{(1977:284)}. Visiting the Museum shores up the conservative commitments most guests have before coming, and their chance to become enveloped in the mythic narrative (to see the Bible come to life, as one woman told me) strengthens the power of that narrative for them in their religious practices outside the Museum.

Linda, the woman I interviewed and whom I mentioned in the introduction, explained the importance of her first visit. As she traveled to Kentucky with her church group from upstate New York shortly after the Museum opened, she was immediately struck not just by the grandeur of the technologically sophisticated exhibits but by the fact that, for the first time, everything about her religious upbringing made sense. Ever since she was raised as a young girl in a Catholic school she had sought answers for how to reconcile scientific findings (like dinosaurs) with religious teachings. While she switched to a Protestant church during her adulthood, she did not feel fully comfortable with her faith until she visited the Museum. Arguably this sensation of having the pieces fit together—of being able to see a cohesive narrative in the chaos of the world—is at least partly a result of the “sacrifice” she had to make, a kind of pilgrimage to an unmistakably religious place beyond the confines of her church in New York. In other words,

\textsuperscript{44} In a sense similar to how the Alamo serves as an American “shrine” at which Texans can feel personally connected to their history \textit{(Brear 1995)}. 
this first Museum visit—and her subsequent work at AiG—helped to consolidate the frame of fundamental Christianity (i.e., what the organization collapses as God’s Word). While Linda’s case may be on one extreme of a continuum of reactions to the Museum (she was so moved by the Museum experience that she uprooted to Kentucky to dedicate her life within the institution), it suggests the power that ritually enacted narratives hold for fundamental Christians who journey to this beacon on the American religious landscape.
Chapter 5 – Synthesis

I

In the preceding two sections I have presented what appear to be two separate arguments. First, I suggest that the Museum and the creationists who adopt its discursive framework and guidelines move the creation/evolution debate to a different epistemological level in order to counter their critics, both real and imagined, in the scientific and public sphere. Second, I draw attention to a mythic structure on which the Museum and Christian communities base their cosmology; their rhetoric both reflects and reinforces a perspective of living in a “fallen” world, a midpoint along a teleological, biblical trajectory. While these functions of the Museum may not be *prima facie* mutually exclusive, they seem to describe distinct phenomena. Indeed, in the weeks following my first few visits to the Museum and continuing several months later, I was puzzled at not being able to feel as though I could identify its “locus,” or the primary function it serves. Even its intended audience eluded me, and this uncertainty is shared by many of the Kentuckians I met not affiliated with the Museum.  

However, as a holistic cultural system, the fundamental Christianity deployed at the Museum integrates these two functions in a particular ordered way. The connection between the terrain of the Museum’s knowledge claims and the emplotment and enactment of its soteriological narrative becomes clearer when understanding the role the latter plays in the former. That is, it is crucial to understand how the dominant fundamental Christian narrative is articulated within the epistemological framework the Museum lays out. If God’s Word encompasses all the axiomatic, non-falsifiable “starting points” creationists take for granted, it

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45 This was a popular point of conversation among those outside the Museum, with some suggesting its primary audience was the proverbial choir to which it was literally preaching, while others that it served as a site at which primarily non-Christians could come to gawk at some of the more exotic elements of creationist ideas.
necessarily includes the events and structure of the Bible; this much is made explicit through an
equation of God’s Word with the literal words of the Bible. Less forthright, and more important
for my argument, is that God’s Word also includes the deeper regimentation of the biblical
narrative as realized through the “C-shaped” structure of perfection-corruption-salvation.
Although more implicit, this cross-denominationally recurrent Christian theme acts as the lens
through which visitors are encouraged to interpret what they see in the world around them. As
suggested earlier, their everyday experiences as well as their observations of the material record
become emplotted onto a grand cosmic history that is still being enacted but whose ending is
already written down. This act of interpreting through a creationist lens illustrates the operation
of the philosophical/religious epistemological level posited by AiG. In this sense, then, God’s
Word is being constructed/strengthened at the same time that Christians are taught a “theory-of-
knowledge” framework within which to situate it (cf. Figure 21).

Moreover, the issue of audience helps explain the need for these multiple layers of
meaning in the first place. The curious arrangement of the Museum and its seemingly alternating
themes and approaches make sense when recognizing that AiG is attending to multiple audiences
simultaneously. While they may direct their resources toward reinforcing a religious narrative
among the faithful, they also attempt equally forcefully to engage with a secular, or at least non-
evangelical Christian, contingent that does not yet subscribe to the teleological, apocalyptic story
that mirrors what their core audience hears in its churches each week. In recognizing the need to
engage with the realm of “science” in order to be taken seriously in the public sphere,
creationists oblige by framing their inquiry as science-affirming. At the same time, they
preemptively address challenges to this position by contesting the conditions of the debate:
couching them at a broader philosophical/epistemological level less impervious to direct attack
than a more evidentiary level. Furthermore, having internalized the Western obsession with and
hegemony of “science” as a discursive force, fundamental Christians address not only outsiders
but also their own needs to be fully modern, backed up by the power of science. For AiG’s
speakers and their Christian interlocutors, switching to a scientific frame within an overarching
religious context becomes part of everyday life and reinforces their own position as
sophisticated, knowledgeable subjects. To simplify, then, different aspects of the Museum’s
rhetoric are intended to attend to different concerns: the first to the spiritual expectations of
believers and the second to the broader secular context with which they find themselves forced to
engage in an effort to gain legitimacy and feel legitimized. These functions are not separate but,
as seen in the way God’s Word becomes embedded within a larger epistemological framework,
work in concert with one another.

II

Outside the Museum walls, among Christians theologically aligned with AiG these
functions become enacted in a similar way within the somewhat more private religious settings
of independent congregations. The most prominent example of this use of creationist rhetoric
came in a sermon delivered by Brother Richter early in my fieldwork. Titled “Marvelous Are
Thy Works,” this fifty-three minute homily praised the wonder of God’s creation while directly
criticizing Darwinian models of evolution and the myriad dangers they pose for society. The
overt structure of his presentation illustrates the dual functions of creationist discourse described
above:

I want you to think. As you go through life, as you go through your daily routine,
I want you to try to get in the habit of just thinking, and as you begin to think, I
want you to begin to marvel as the Psalmist said, in verse fourteen, “marvelous
are thy works.” (1.5) My outline was very simple: I’ve got first of all the marvels of creation (2.0) and the marvels (1.0) of salvation.

Besides his emphasis on rational, self-reflective capacities (marked by the stress placed on words like “thinking” and “think”), Richter’s outline of his speech act maps roughly onto the connection between a defense of creationist knowledge (“marvels of creation”) and the narrative of salvation through Christ (“marvels of salvation”). The remainder of his sermon follows this pattern, although he spends considerably more time expanding on the first section.

After decrying evolutionary ideas as a primary root of evil in the world, he turns his attention to a praise of God’s marvelous creation. Over a series of topics, he expounds on the vastness or the complexity of different natural phenomena. In the first example, taking a cue from King David’s marvels at the night sky (Psalms 8:3), Richter cites a scientifically verifiable understanding of the size of the universe as a sign of God’s grandiosity. In his characteristic, performatively marked cadence—slow, careful, rhythmic alternation between a deep booming voice and quiet yet powerful exhortations—he links his experiences of wonder as a child to the scientific and religious knowledge he has today:

And when I was in school, all they knew was the Milky Way. The universe that our—the solar system that we are in, that is all that they knew about was the Milky Way, and I can remember the teacher trying to explain how big the Milky Way was. And it was staggering. Well nowadays, we know that the Milky Way is just one little bitty, teeny, teeny portion of the whole universe. The Milky Way that our teacher explained that if you got on a rocket, how many years it would take to go to, you know, this and there and, wow, I was fascinated. And now we know that the Milky Way is nothing; in fact, if you really want to get a good vision of this—again, I’m not paid by AiG anymore; I don’t work them anymore; I don’t get a commission from them anymore—but go to the planetarium and depending on which video they’re showing that day, the one I saw it showed the Milky Way, and then it showed thousands and thousands and thousands of universe [sic] even bigger than the Milky Way. And as David
considered the **vastness** of the universe, **how big is the universe**! Truly we would say, marvelous are thy works.

He continually emphasizes the “staggering” “vastness of the universe,” a discursive move that does not dwell on the smallness of our world in the grander cosmic scheme but indexes God’s power of creation. More importantly, with new advancements in scientific understandings of astronomy, namely expanding our conception of the universe beyond the Milky Way, he is able to appreciate anew the religious awe that so struck David. He shifts his stance from discussing ostensibly secular fascination of the size of our galaxy to a spiritual praise of these same works as exemplars of God’s marvelous powers of creation. By this shift of stance and the consequent rekeying of the cosmos as a religious, not simply scientific, object, he parallels similar discursive styles in the Museum that reimagine the scientifically studied world within a broader Christian framework. Also like at the Museum, scientific inquiry is presented not as a substitution for religious zeal but a complement to it.

Following a presentation of several other “marvels of creation,” Richter moves to the second, shorter division of his sermon and, in so doing, illustrates the connection between creationists’ epistemological scheme and the soteriological narrative enacted within fundamental Christian institutions. Returning to more conventionally Christian themes, he lays out the “marvels of salvation,” a verbal parallel to the “marvels of creation” described in scientific and religious terms earlier:

You **cannot** be perfect. You can **never** enter heaven with your sin. So since you can’t be perfect yourself, Jesus Christ—God himself—left heaven, came down to earth, and became man. As man he lived about thirty-three years. In that thirty-three years he never one time sinned. He was **tempted** at all points like as we are, yet he remained without sin. But then he did something even more. God in the flesh looked at you and I and said **they cannot go to heaven** because they have this big sin debt that must be paid. So Jesus Christ took that sin debt that belonged to me and belonged to you. He took the **penalty** of my sin; he took the **curse** of
my sin; he took the **condemnation** of my sin. And he took it **off** of me and put up **upon** himself and then he **went** to the cross, and he **died** on the cross and completely, totally paid for every one of my sins. And there I stand with every one of my sins, forgiven….

[In a passage of 95 seconds, Richter repeats the pattern of the above construction with the “righteousness” that Jesus shared with the people.]

As I thought about the marvel of salvation, I thought how marvelous, that God would **leave** heaven, come to earth, and take upon himself the form of a man, with all of my sin, and die for someone like me. I’m not even sure that I would do that for most of us or for any of us. (2.0) [more slowly] I love you (1.0), dearly (1.5), but if you said the only way one of you could be kept alive is if I give up my life, I tell you, I’m gonna have a **real** struggle with that. And yet Jesus Christ gave up his life so that you can be saved, by repenting of your sins and trusting **him**.

He begins the passage by reiterating the theme of human fallibility and the imperfections that exist in the world. With the phrase “the curse of my sin” he invokes AiG’s tendency to emplot everyday immorality onto the narrative of humanity’s “curse” in the Garden of Eden as part of the grand cosmic structure of fundamental Christianity. The answer to this dilemma, or in structural terms the mechanism by which to return the world to the pre-Fall righteousness, is, as anticipated, the repentance of sins and trust in Jesus Christ.

These themes are by no means unique within the broader fundamental Christian community. Neither is it surprising, considering the pastor’s and the church’s close ties to AiG, that the earlier part of his sermon follows the Museum’s epistemological and narrative framework. What is noteworthy, however, is the integration of these concepts in a single speech act, identifiable at the sermon’s broad structural level. Through the use of the parallel verbal forms “marvels of creation” and “marvels of salvation,” Richter fashions these separate discourses as dyadic parts of the same religious theme. Just as the congregants are exhorted to
marvel at the intricacies of the physical world through the lens of an omnipotent, glorious creator, they are guided to see Christ’s salvation as a similarly holy bestowment.

By positioning these elements in a shared context, he implies they are inextricably linked. Given the conclusion presented earlier that the religious, soteriological narrative of the Museum constitutes God’s Word, I suggest that the connection Richter presents here is that his community’s understanding of the “marvels of salvation” act as a lens through which the “marvels of creation” are understood (indeed, what makes them marvelous in the first place). While a scientific understanding of the world may, according to creationists, be separated analytically from people’s religious “starting points” as conveyed through the narrative of God’s Word, they are fundamentally part of the same story, which cannot be told without both. Since the world that fundamental Christians inhabit includes church settings and cross-denominational organizations like AiG, any thorough analysis of their engagement with these forces ought to include mention of how discursive patterns appear across these different settings.

III

What, then, can anthropologists make of statements from AiG leaders who shift effortlessly from religious to scientifical-philosophical stances in the construction of creationist discourse? I return to the debate between Ken Ham and Bill Nye with which I opened this essay. What appeared so curious or even unsettling about the former’s evocation of both epistemological arguments and religious narratives takes on clearer focus in light of the multiple functions served by creationist discourse: Addressees include not only members of their own fundamental community but also a science-dominated, secular world hostile to its knowledge.

46 In support of this point, Brother Richter cautions the congregants to remember that, despite the wonders of creation he mentions, these pale in comparison to God’s original, pre-Flood and pre-Fall, creation. Only with the return to perfection through Christ’s salvation will creation once again be as marvelous as it once was.
claims. The delicate negotiation of these competing audiences demands multiple discursive techniques, including the formation of a metapragmatically regimented epistemological argument, the emplottment of a religious narrative onto interlocutors’ lives, and a flexibility to shift the Museum’s stance within a single visit, even within a single exhibit. While some exhibits and talking points address the need to convince others in the secular world of the scientific viability of the creationist worldview—a form of saving face at the collective discursive level, although equally applicable to everyday interactions between AiG-educated apologists and their critics—other points within the Museum’s narrative address the need to reinforce Christian visitors’ own notions of living in a biblically ordered teleological world, one that is likewise confirmed by the authority of science.

Regardless of the degree of disagreement with the knowledge claims expressed by creationists, any outside observer who recognizes the cultural ingenuity behind these discursive forms ought to appreciate the creativity and elegance of the intricate pas de deux in which creationists engage their secular interlocutors while also monitoring themselves as individuals with psychological and social needs for order-making. They construct their own creationist selves at the same time and through the means of debating the secularist “other.”

On a final note, I conclude by returning to my conversation with Linda. At the end of our interview in the quiet chapel, I explained that I would be presenting this research in front of groups of “secularists,” and I asked whether there was anything she would like me to convey to them. She responded simply that she wished they would listen. Frustrated by the vitriol aimed at creationism—and conservative Christianity more generally—she hoped only that people outside these religious communities would offer more tolerance and be more open-minded of alternative ideas without dismissing them immediately. Setting aside heated argument and listening to one
another with compassion was her primary message. All she wanted was for them to listen to her point of view without resorting to ridicule. As anthropologists, our duty is not only to see the world from the “native’s point of view” but, increasingly, to consider the individuals we work with as unique, caring, and deserving of our respect and empathy. A recognition of a common humanity, in spite of the flaws and imperfections we all share, is one of the strengths of the anthropological method. My hope, echoing Linda’s, is to bring this kind of cross-cultural understanding to a group that has been marginalized on the modern American ideological landscape. While this is not a new call—just as I was beginning my life Harding (1991) was already cautioning against fundamental Christians continuing to occupy the position of modernity’s marginalized and “repugnant cultural Other”—it is nevertheless one that remains to be fully realized. My project has been one of listening—of “witnessing”—and I believe that I am a better person for having made the journey.
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