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## Virginia Heffernan: A Creationist Against the Creationists

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Former *New York Times* writer Virginia Heffernan stirred up the primordial soup earlier this month by outing herself, in an article at Yahoo! News, as a creationist. It was an effective provocation. Writers at places like Gawker, Slate, and io9 lined up to make their denunciations, predictably, and the conservative press generally came to her defense. Also predictably, things got ugly.

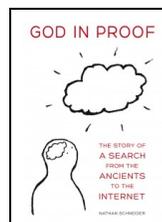
Heffernan is not exactly your typical head-in-the-sand creationist preacher. She articulates her position in a way that, I've found, is reflective of how a lot of people actually tend to see these things. She deftly manages not to dismiss, for instance, evolution or astrophysics altogether, but she doesn't find that they have as much relevance to her daily life as the Bible. To her, there is an opposition between the poetry of religion and the coldness of science, and given the choice she chooses the former.

"I never fell in love with science," she confesses -- and then concludes, quoting novelist Yann Martel: "A story with God is the better story."

But isn't a story with science and reason a better story, too? That, at least, is what huge swaths of the Christian tradition to which she belongs have concluded -- including the people who brought us creationism in the first place.

The distinctly modern phenomenon of strident, counter-scientific creationism is in large part the doing of a hydraulic engineer who taught at Virginia Tech named Henry Morris. Starting in the early 1960s, he began promulgating a method of "Creation Science" meant to show that the most pedantic reading of the Bible possible -- creation in six 24-hour days a few thousand years ago -- is actually solid science. Unfortunately, Morris's way of doing science required assaulting a lot of good science in the process, and his insistence on doing so very publicly won him and his followers a lot of attention.

Morris called his creationism "science" because he loved science, and he wanted to believe in it. This is about as far from Virginia Heffernan's brand of creationism as you can get. Other Christians, however, have proved much more successful in taking reason seriously in light of their faith.



Consider the 13th-century theologian Thomas Aquinas, for instance. A lot of us today -- at least among those who think of him at all -- tend to think of him as the fat man sitting atop a megalith of now-meaningless medieval jargon and law-like conclusions. Conservative-leaning Catholics sometimes mistake his dictates for an appendix to the Bible. But in his own time, while some of those same dictates were being condemned by that same church, he cut a very different figure.

The task that consumed Aquinas's life was that of making the dangerous natural philosophy of the ancient Greeks safe for medieval Christians. Borrowing heavily from the Muslims and Jews who had gone through much the same process over the previous few centuries, he sifted through the teachings of Aristotle and compared them to the best ideas Christians had already come up with.

The result was a synthesis that put Christianity and pagan philosophy each in its place. He insisted on a God who was fundamentally reasonable, and who could not be otherwise. He also put aside doctrines of Aristotle that seemed to be insufficiently credible. In the decades and centuries that followed, partly thanks to his efforts, Christian Europe was able to embrace the accomplishments of the ancients, giving rise to the Renaissance.

One of Heffernan's stranger moments is her dismissal of Darwinian evolution. She does so on the basis of its most reckless present-day progeny, the just-so stories of evolutionary psychology. She's comparatively uninterested in the vast, ever-evolving story of much more well-founded science that continues to make evolution an exciting work in progress. She pays no mind either to undertakings like process theology, a powerful approach to rethinking religious narratives with evolution in mind. Through it, many of Heffernan's fellow Christians have found fruitful ways to locate their lives within a story that includes both God and good science.

In Heffernan's apologia, nevertheless, there is a telling prognosis of where the public debate about religion and science lately has left a lot of us. We cannot live, that is, by theory alone. We can't live just by arguments -- even scientific ones. It may be because these debates tend to be dominated on both sides by men that they tend to be so ultimately one-dimensional, and brutally abstract, that they fail to satisfy the expectations we have for our everyday lives. That goes for Henry Morris's creationism as much as for Richard Dawkins's science.

Recent work by female philosophers of religion -- such as Eleanore Stump, in her recent book *Wandering in Darkness* -- are much more sensitive to the role of narrative in our lives and in how we experience truth. In the realm of narrative, something like the ongoing dialectic between religion and science makes a lot more sense than if you try to just slice and dice it analytically. It's a process. Again and again, the two come into conflict, internally and with each other, and they develop as a result.

Heffernan's revealing but ultimately reckless confession of creationism is another small step in this ongoing story. It's messy. Get used to it.

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