

Natural selection is happening all the time

In their recent commentaries, Bill Wheaton, Elmer Savilla and Dennis VanLiere share two things in common: All deny evolution in favor of biblical creation, and none is a scientist.

Surveys show that just a few percent of scientists believe in fundamentalist creationism, and the great majority do not believe in God.

Among elite scientists there are no fundamentalists, and few are believers. The higher one's level of education is, the more likely one will be skeptical of the supernatural.

Nor should one be fooled into thinking that there is a new scientific interest in "intelligent design." That's an illusion promoted by well-funded religious organizations, working in concert with a few Christian researchers whose work has already been refuted and rejected by the scientific community.

Why has the biblical creation myth failed so miserably among scientists? Because when it comes to figuring out how things really work, the power of science always trumps the speculation of religious opinion.

Imagine if a devout Christian testified under oath that a defendant was guilty because, after long prayer, it was his sincere belief that God told him so.

The testimony would be stricken as unsubstantiated. The science of forensics regularly uses fingerprint and DNA analysis to determine beyond doubt who

really did and did not commit criminal acts that were witnessed by no one, even when they occurred many years ago.

Wheaton's, Savilla's and VanLiere's claim that science cannot tell us what happened outside of direct observation is, therefore, very wrong.

Astronomical and biological science tell us that far-distant Neptune is too hostile to life to have supported intelligent beings as long as it has existed.

The writers of the Bible did not even know about Neptune, because it is not visible without scientific instruments.

I've worked with oil company geologists. They're a practical lot of working scientists hired to find oil and natural gas by hard-nosed business people who have shareholders breathing down their necks.

I've never met one who is not appalled that many nonscientists believe the Earth is just a few thousand years old, rather than the 4.5 billion years proven by radiometric dating.

After all, using radioactive isotopes to date rocks was developed and refined by nuclear physicists, the same brilliant minds who developed hydrogen bombs for the defense of our country!

Or consider what happened when a conservative Christian school board voted to drop evolutionary science from the Kansas public school testing requirements a couple of summers ago.

A consortium of science and industry

In my opinion

Gregory S. Paul

joined with the Republican governor to get modern science reinstated. The high-tech industry was especially aggressive because computer software development is becoming increasingly dependent upon evolutionary algorithms based directly upon Darwinian selective forces.

Motorola, for one, is advertising its revolutionary Digital DNA.

Wheaton, Savilla and VanLiere engage in a gross misrepresentation. They say that the intellectual choice is either between intelligent design or random chance.

This simplification is shocking in the face of overwhelming scientific research to the contrary that everyone should be familiar with by now.

When viruses (such as HIV), microbes (TB, malaria, etc.) and insects develop resistance to once-lethal agents, they are evolving in the non-random manner first coherently described by Charles Darwin.

He explained the key directing factor in bioevolution: natural selection. (The creationists' essays carefully avoided mentioning this vital process.)

If a bacteria develops a genetic defect that allows it to better survive an antibiotic than its normal relations, then the offspring of the mutated bacteria will thrive, while the old form dies off.

That is selection, and it's as effective as it is straightforward. The combination of mutation followed by selection happens all the time, and is well-demonstrated by countless meticulously researched examples.

There is no limit to this system. Mutations favored by natural selection can keep adding up until a population is so genetically altered that it becomes a new species, unable to reproduce with the original species.

As additional changes continue to accumulate over time, organisms can be radically altered as natural selection modifies them for life in new environments.

An excellent set of fossils records how, over time, land mammals related to hippos became increasingly adapted for aquatic life, until they became whales. There are many other such examples that creationists choose to ignore.

Francis Collins (a practicing Catholic) and Craig Venter headed the federal and private human genome projects, the

most advanced science programs of our age. Both firmly reject creationism in favor of evolutionary science. That should tell you something.

Nowhere in the world is a major bio-science project headed by an anti-evolution creationist. That also should tell you something.

After all, it is the community of talented scientists, not armchair theists, that has created the high-tech world we live in.

Opinionated talk is as cheap as it is ineffectual. It is skilled research that has the real power to get things done.

So nonscientists can listen to people who adhere to an ancient creation myth so devoutly that they end up misinforming people about the facts of modern science.

Or they can have confidence in the vast body of research accumulated by multitudes of scientists that shows that the universe and our planet are immensely old, and that life has been evolving, and continues to evolve, under the influence of natural selection.

Gregory S. Paul, who grew up in Northern Virginia, is the author of "Dinosaurs of the Air," which is scheduled to be released by the Johns Hopkins University Press, and is currently involved in a research project on the interrelationship between religion and society in developed democracies.