

## **BOOK REVIEW**

**Greg Cootsona**

### ***Mere Science and Christian Faith: Bridging the Divide with Emerging Adults***

Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2018

This is a well-written introduction to the relationship between science and Christianity. It seeks to engage “emerging adults,” a category taken from psychologist Jeffrey Arnett somewhat narrower than “millennials,” the term I am more familiar with. Essentially these are 18-30 year-olds and are “emerging” because they reach five milestones marking adulthood – leaving home, finishing school, becoming financially independent, getting married and having children – later than previous generations. It is a demographic looking for personal meaning and identity, frequently changing direction and open to many different futures, and with attendant anxieties; and it is a generation much less likely to be church-going than earlier generations. However, whilst recognising the narrative of conflict in the surrounding culture, emerging adults are, on the whole, more tolerant and open to alternative readings.

Cootsona tackles various issues which may present challenges, or in some cases apologetic opportunities, to Christian faith, though inevitably somewhat cursorily given the introductory nature of his text. The line he takes on these issues is generally moderate and reasonable, and he accommodates modern scientific understandings with a high view of Scripture. Thus, regarding neuroscience’s perceived challenge to the existence of an immaterial soul, Cootsona adopts the position, prevalent in the science-religion discourse, that we do not need to worry because the idea of an immaterial soul is Platonic not biblical anyway. However, this is not an unproblematic position. Yes, we are psychosomatic unities, as he says, but that word seems to convey the idea of both a psyche and a soma, not necessarily a psyche which is just an emergent feature of the complexity of the arrangement of matter in the soma and which will cease to exist when the soma dies. The main problem I see with this view is that, although of course we believe in the “resurrection of the body,” i.e. that we are embodied in the resurrection life as we are in this life, there seems to be a need for some part of us to continue in

existence when we die. On the other hand, Cootsona is surely right to see consonance between the cognitive science of religion's finding (notably in the work of Justin Barrett) that children are "born believers" with Calvin's notion of the *sensus divinitatis*.

Cootsona is cautious, where I would be somewhat bolder, in making arguments from the beginning of the universe at the Big Bang and, most especially, from cosmic fine-tuning. His philosophical argument, that we are in the only universe we know about, and the probability of its existence is one, is unconvincing. Yes, the *posterior* probability is one but the whole point of the fine-tuning argument is that the *prior* probability is, at least *prima facie*, very low. On the other hand, Cootsona is right to criticize Intelligent Design, the argument that biological structures such as the bacterial flagellum are too complex to arise through the natural process of evolution, as both scientifically and theologically flawed.

Cootsona does a good job in evaluating three options for the relationship of evolutionary science to theology: (i) Young Earth Creationism (YEC) according to which the science is plain wrong and a literalist reading of the early chapters of Genesis obligatory; (ii) a metaphorical reading of Adam as the paradigmatic human who turns away from God and is therefore in need of salvation; and (iii) the 'mediating' position which accepts evolution but still insists on a literal Adam as federal head of all co-existing humanity, presumably widespread throughout the globe during Adam's time. Cootsona has little time for the first but gives some space to each of the others, opting, rightly in my opinion, for (ii). He cites C. S. Lewis in support of a literary reading, important because of course Lewis was a literary scholar alert to differing kinds of literary genre. One problem he points to with option (iii) is the seeming inconsistency that, although Adam and Eve are treated as literal historical figures, it is still the case that much of the story is taken as non-literal, e.g. the man created directly from the dust of the ground.

For the emerging adults he is aiming at, Cootsona sees engagement of faith with technology to be more important than any of the other topics addressed. They are, after all, the generation that has been influenced by technology from the cradle. Here Cootsona sees both positives and negatives. Technology can be useful for evangelism and for helping the world's poor, but the project of strong artificial

intelligence raises the prospect of technology that is out of control with robots mimicking and transcending human capacities, including, as with Victor Frankenstein's monster, the propensity to commit evil, in a curious analogy with original sin. And at a more mundane level youth's obsession with screens is inimical to real-world relationships.

Other topics covered include climate change and, particularly bravely, sexuality. On the former, of course science doesn't provide an absolute consensus, as apparently demanded by some, but surely that of the body which matters most, namely the inter-governmental panel on climate change, with its huge number of international scientists qualified in the appropriate disciplines, is what needs to be heeded. The claim made by Lynn White that God's command to humans to have dominion over the earth has led to Christian theology being entirely negative for the health of the planet is well corrected and critiqued. And on sexuality, Cootsona's basic point that science can inform but not dictate our ethics is surely right. However, it is important to get what science does and doesn't say correct. For example, claims that there is a "gay gene" have not stood up to examination (see Eleanor Whiteway and Denis R. Alexander, "Understanding the causes of same-sex attraction," *Science and Christian Belief* 27:17-40). Also, one needs to maintain a clear distinction between inter-sex conditions, where sexual characteristics are ambivalent, from gender dysphoria. In the latter, the sexual characteristics are well-defined and all point one way, but the person's psychological perception is of being in the wrong body, a male trapped in a female body or vice versa – indeed, one could say, a disunited psyche and soma.

Cootsona closes with some useful guidance and resources. His book is an excellent starting point for the topics he considers. It will be especially valuable for church leaders and others concerned with how to engage emerging adults with a positive story about science and faith, and hence removing a possible barrier to their being open to the good news of salvation in Jesus Christ.

I noted a couple of minor factual errors in my reading: Georges Lemaître, father of the Big Bang theory, was a Roman Catholic priest but he wasn't a Jesuit (75); and it was in 1915 not 1916 when Einstein presented his general theory of relativity to the Prussian Academy of Sciences and thence to the world (75). Also, I

was surprised to read that Imre Lakatos maintained that Christianity was a scientific research programme with “hard core” teachings, such as the divinity of Christ, which are not easily jettisoned (95), and, presumably, auxiliary hypotheses which are less secure (Cootsona gives his own example of the latter, namely the historicity of Adam and Eve). My surprise was averted on learning that this error slipped in as a result of the publishers’ rewording at the editorial stage. Still, it is worth noting that Philip Hefner and Nancey Murphy in the science-religion field have presented Christianity as a Lakatosian scientific research programme somewhat like this, even if Lakatos himself did not. None of these quibbles detract from the excellence of Cootsona’s book.

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