

# OpenTheo

## **We Evolved. What About Faith? | David Lahti & Andy Norman**

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### **The Veritas Forum**

In this discussion, Philosopher Dr. Andy Norman of Carnegie Mellon, and Evolutionary Biologist Dr. David Lahti, discuss the evolution of humans and faith. They navigate the tension and harmony between science and faith. • If you like this, please like, share, subscribe to, and review this podcast!

### **Transcript**

Welcome to the Veritas Forum. This is the Veritas Forum Podcast. A place where ideas and beliefs converge.

What I'm really going to be watching is, which one has the resources in their worldview to be tolerant, respectful, and humble toward the people they disagree with? How do we know whether the lives that we're living are meaningful? If energy, light, gravity, and consciousness are a mystery, don't be surprised if you're going to get an element of this involved. Today we hear from Carnegie Mellon University philosopher Andy Norman, as well as Queen's College Professor of Evolutionary Biology, David Lahti. As they take to the stage at Carnegie Mellon University, in a discussion titled, We Evolved What About Faith? In which they discuss the tension and sometimes harmony between the science of evolution and our faith.

I want to thank the Veritas Forum for hosting this event. Dr. Lahti, everybody involved in the organization, it's a privilege to be here, and the fact that you do all the time to think about the question of faith, I think is marvelous, especially this hour. It's not everyone who can consider the reasons for and against being a person of faith that has the courage, not everybody has the courage to consider both the reasons for and the reasons against being a person of faith.

For those of you who consider yourself, it's people of faith. I commend you on being here and willing to hear my reasons. Those of you who are faithless, I commend you for listening closely and learning what we can from Dr. Lahti as well.

The question before us tonight is, what about faith? I take that question in several senses. One version would be, is faith a good thing? Is there a role for faith in our lives? Is there a place for faith in the academy? Is faith as a character trait a virtue or not? So, I think the only fair answer that anyone can give to this question is, it depends. It depends in particular on what we need by faith.

There are kinds of faith that are certainly benign, and there are kinds of faith that are, I think, malignant. So, right outside of this auditorium on the football field here, I used to run a character development summer camp for children. And every day of the week, we try to teach the kids a lesson using the game of ultimate frisbee, which is self-refereed.

And if you don't know ultimate, all of the calls are made on the honor system. So, every player is called upon to place the integrity of the game and fair play ahead of their private desire to win. And it's a wonder for the moralizing exercise, I think, to have to work in moral hustle step-by, and play the game.

But every Monday, we teach these children the importance of keeping a positive attitude. Now, keeping a positive attitude, I think, is an enormously important thing that all of us need at one or another time in our lives. And arguably, that's kind of what faith is all about, it's sort of keeping a positive attitude.

So, if that's what you mean by faith, I hardly endorse your right to be a person of faith. I myself have benefited from guidance that is very similar to the suggestion "Just have faith." When I was in high school, I wasn't a very happy camper, and apparently my face didn't display a lot of happiness either, and a friend came up to me and said, "Andy, how come you never smile?" I don't know, I just don't know, I just don't feel like having a good reason to smile. She says, "Just smile anyway." I thought about the hack.

It felt just monously first, because I felt like I was displaying an outward happiness that I didn't feel internally, but I just kind of tried it anyway. I kind of took it up faith that it might help. And the funniest thing happened, I smiled at people and they started smiling back.

I was in the world and I felt like a much friendlier place. And a lot of my social anxiety started to dissipate. So this advice, "Just smile anyway." It's not a regardless of some of the best advice I ever got, and I think it's similar, functionally similar in many ways to the advice "Just have faith." Both the positive attitude and smile anyway represent secular expressions of an attitude that you might call "faith." Both, I think, are beneficial for one's personal psychology and also have positive effects on social relationships, and therefore deserve our respect and admiration for those reasons.

But notice that there's absolutely nothing religious about either of those attitudes. And whatever a religious faith does for you, I have a strong suspicion that secular surrogates for that religious faith can basically have the same beneficial effects on your mood,

beneficial effects on your social relationships, your friendships, and so on. So I have yet to be persuaded that religious faith has benefits that a secular attitude adjustment can't provide.

There's another kind of faith that is exemplified in the following story. Almost exactly five years ago at the event, very like this one, the creation museum in Kentucky, in the name of the town, in Kentucky. Bill Nye, the science guy, and Amanda and Karen Ham debated whether or not the Biblical account of origins is scientifically respectable, or has any scientific merit.

This particular event, again, held in a laboratory in very like this one, but it was live-screening to millions of people also. They have a lively exchange, Bill Nye said there's tried to show that there's absolutely no way that the Genesis account of origins could possibly be true, given what we know about the way the world works, and can him adamantly argue the opposite. And then a really interesting thing happened.

The question and answer period, the moderator asked both men to explain what would change their minds. So Bill Nye spoke first, he said, "The still is answered to the work." He said, "Eddedance. Heddedance would change my mind." And for example, here's the kind of evidence that would disprove evolution.

And he went on to give very concrete examples of the kind of things you might find in the fossil record, if you wanted to falsify a Darwinian account of origins. And then it was Ken Hamster, and Ken Hammer said, "I'm a thing. I'm a Christian.

Nothing is going to persuade me that the word of God is not true." Now, if Bill Nye's attitude, I think, was representative of the attitude of science, and Ken Ham's attitude was, I think, a very distinct example of the attitude of faith. And this attitude basically says, "These are my beliefs. They're part of my identity.

I refuse to change them, no matter what the evidence shows." So there's a kind of a defiant refusal to bend to the demands of reason and evidence that I think is at the heart of much religious faith. Now, it may not be at the heart of all religious faith, but it's very hard to deny that the religions of the world don't ask their adherents to say things that would never pass muster in a suitably scientific or even a suitably in any form where an accountable talk was considered important. In fact, the whole purpose of the concept of faith seems to be to provide an exemption for beliefs that you can't defend otherwise, that would never withstand scrutiny in the free and open exchange of ideas, but because it's an article of faith, I get to hang on to it anyway.

If you actually study, look hard at the way people use the word "faith." If you think hard about the way the word "faith" functions in your own thinking, I think you'll start to find that more often than not, the concept of faith functions to excuse unaccountable cognition. And I'm worried about this for a number of reasons. One of them is that we

live in a world right now where a world where the political system of our country is praying in part because our politicians, all the way up to the highest office of the land, don't care about the norms of accountable talk.

Our commander-in-chief right now, the president of our country, flouts rationality norms at every turn, and not only does this prevent facts from having the weight they deserve in public policy disputes, but it also turns people against one another. So I think the scientific attitude, by comparison, can anchor our thinking in the facts, number one. But the structure of scientific inquiry in this course is also such as to compel people to give up views that are not defensible and not evidence-based.

And it's only by being willing to part with the ideas that divide us that we can come together in dialogue and really create a well-functioning social whole. I like to study dialogue and how it works. I think the norm at the very heart of dialogue, all dialogue that works, is if you have the better reason, I will yield.

But if I have the better reason, you would read to you. And when somebody like Kim walks into a discussion and proudly declares that nothing will change his mind, he's essentially saying to heck with that norm. The same way Donald Trump says to heck with that norm, day in and day out.

And you can see the corrosive effect it's having on American democracy and civil society right now. But of course, as people are fond of saying, Donald Trump is a symptom, not the root cause of what's wrong in our culture today. And I think that's right.

Various factions in American society have been defying the norms of accountable discourse for decades to gain for a political gain. And we're seeing things frayed as a result. But the problem is that when you defy a norm, when you, it starts to revoke.

And that norm ceases to bind us together into a civic whole that can actually talk together in productive ways. And my worry about the whole concept of faith is that it starts to ball rolling on that very slippery slope. You teach people that it's okay to say, to heck with the evidence when it comes to my religious beliefs, then they're more likely to do the same thing when it comes to scientific debates, moral debates or political debates.

I want to give you some evidence that supports my claim that faith has this kind of effect on people in their psychology. Do you know what demographic group supported Donald Trump in greater numbers than any other demographic group study? White evangelical Christians. 81% of American white evangelical Christians voted for Donald Trump.

One of the best predictors voting against Donald Trump was being a secular American, a non-believing American. Is it possible that religious faith pays the way for a license to a demagogue? If you practice the idea of being obedient to God, they end day out, are you more likely to be with white? I would be out of doubt. Seems to me, yes.

Just a couple of weeks ago, a study came out from the Public Religion Research Institute. The category of Americans that supports Donald Trump's family separation policy is our southern border, more strongly than any other demographic group, evangelical Christians. These are appearance of religion that purports to be a not-well, and yet, it's one of the strongest indicators of support for one of the most inhumane policies.

We've seen our government enact in a long, long time. Right now, evangelical Christians oppose impeachment. 99% to 1%.

Is it possible, just maybe possible, that religious faith can derange and disorder someone's morals in such a way that they actually, while attending to be good inadvertently, cause harm? I don't think we should dismiss the possibility, and I think each and every one of us has a obligation to consider that question seriously. In fact, this very same study that I just mentioned asked respondents in the survey to say, "Yes or no, nothing Trump could do would it make me vote against him?" And they looked at many, many different demographic groups. The demographic group that was more likely to say, "Yes, there's nothing Trump could do that would ever make me vote against him." White, evangelical Christians.

Notice the similarity between Trump no matter what, and the Bible no matter what, has expressed by Ken Ham. I think those attitudes are related, and one of those attitudes, despite the best potential, can pave the way for the other. Thank you for that, Dr. Norman, and thanks to Baron Toss.

I'm not going to get into the politics, so don't get worried. I'm going to start with this "We of All-Tarp." I used to teach a non-maintenance course called "Bean." By all changing social issues at the University of Massachusetts. And my favorite day is when I would start with a round single cell organism on one side of it, and then a human on the other, actually a college student, preferably somebody from that very class.

And I would ask for a show of hands, how many of you believe that given enough time through a series of gradual changes, that single cell could eventually lead to this person with 30 trillion cells, and about a hundred billion of them being in making up the brain the most complex objects on the planet that produces advanced cognition, consciousness, self-awareness, the ability to express our thoughts and language. How many of you believe that that happened through a natural process? And among those hundreds of students about as many as are in this were maybe more, someone put their hands up and someone keep them down. Others clearly weren't sure, and a lot of them probably had ever been put on the spot about that question.

And some who left their hands down would frown and shake their heads. Then I'd reveal that the microbe was actually a human cycle. And now suddenly everybody in the room would accept that in just a few years, through a gradual biological process, that single cell with parts that are not very much different from any primitive eukaryote, could

become something that fakes and feels and creates civilizations, the most amazing organism in the world.

It happens all the time. Matter of fact, just since I've stood up here talking to you, this process has begun a new 750 times on the planet. So why is one biological process doing something over a few years totally fine with all of us? But we are concerned in talking about today a different biological process doing the same thing over three billion years, and nobody thinks development or ontogeny poses a problem for faith or belief in God.

We would never have a discussion of that, or you would show up for one. So why are we here talking about whether evolution poses a problem for faith in God? And it's certainly not because the Bible and science agree about the process of development. We should get that straightening.

Can Hebrews thought that we started out as tiny versions of ourselves in case, essentially, in seeds by the males implanted in the field of the female womb, whose job was simply to be fertile, like nutritious soil. The Bible assumes that its audience has this understanding or this view of development. And the language of the Bible is just as poetic and non-scientific as about the formation of our bodies as it is about the formation of our universe.

But the description nevertheless is meaningful and it's beautiful. So for instance, listen to this from Psalm 139. "For you formed my inward parts, united me together in my mother's womb.

I praise you for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works, my soul promotes it very well. My frame is not hidden from you when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth.

Your eyes saw my unformed substance. In your book we're written every one of them, the days that were formed for me. When as yet there was none of them.

No Jew or Christian makes a big deal about knitting and weaving and the depths of the earth in contrast that with modern developmental biology. And for good reason. The point here is clearly not to give a technical account, but to praise God for what he has done and to acknowledge the timelessness and depth of God's love for.

Each of us individually. The timelessness and depth. And to know Jew or Christian insists that since the Bible in many places credits God directly for embryonic and fetal development.

Even though it does this, no Jew or Christian insists that we have to accept this as a miraculous intervention such that no science could ever touch it. Nobody says that. But Christians since Darwin have sometimes gone a little bonkers when it comes to evolution

doing both of these things.

So insisting that the little statements about creation ought to be read as technical descriptions for one thing. And then insisting that since the Bible credits God with creation that we have to reject any science of that as a matter of faith. Now even though I asked earlier rhetorically why some of us do this, I'm not actually going to answer that question now even though I do think there are a number of main motivations and none of them are scientific in nature.

Right now I'd rather not dwell on mistakes. And I like the fact that we're going to take evolution as a given today. And that's great but I've already given you my take on the question of the title of tonight.

Which is given that we evolved. What about faith? What about faith in God? Which is just no problem. I mean it's the same answer as if you were asking what about faith in God given the fact that we have blood circulating in our bodies or that we evolve.

I mean we develop from the psyche. So I'm essentially saying that the process of organismal development which nobody takes to be a problem for faith in God has the same philosophical status, the same theological and metaphysical implications as the equally historical but longer term between generation process of evolution. Development is fine for faith in God.

Evolution is fine for faith in God. But of course I just want to stop there. So right now what I'd like to do is entertain a few positive ideas about what an understanding of evolution can mean for a faith in God.

I'm not going to argue for faith. I'm going to assume right now that you are a believer. And I know this is not true but I'm just rhetorically this is what I'm going to do.

And that you also embrace evolution in what should that mean or what can mean for your faith. And I hope that this is important to non-believers here but hey we're privy to or subject to atheistic accounts of what I've used for me for faith all the time. Some of the most famous writers, science writers on the planet right now.

So now it's your turn to be patient if you don't mind. So I'll specifically be talking about the Judeo-Christian God although Muslims will doubt was find some points of resonance. Okay so three statements actually in particular about what about God now that a believer embraces evolution.

It happened to me three agents. I promise I didn't plan it like a sermonist but it turned out to be history, humility and holism. You probably don't believe that I didn't plan it but that's why.

So first evolution will highlight the role for you of history, of time in relation to God. So

there's really nothing new here to something that we might have forgotten or we might not have recognized as fully as we should. God is the creator of a 4D world.

A world of space and time and I think it's really appropriate. It's great that a Jewish physicist in the last century was the one to show this to us. Using science when it was Jewish followers of God thousands of years ago who were the first to present the idea to us that time is part of the created order.

But it's Darwin for me and not Einstein who shows us most precisely what it means to always have the time dimension in mind when we say nature or creation. Evolution is inherent in life. So when a kid is saying he's got the whole world in his hands we have to think of this as not today's time slice of the world.

That's what I thought about when I was a kid. It is the entire world including from his beginning to his end. In a case we miss this dynamic thinking about creation.

Evolution will force it upon us. And I'm glad that all Genesis 1 days of creation are happening all the time. So when we wonder what it means for God's relationship with us if we're descended from apes for instance.

Take this dynamic thinking. Remember Jeremiah 1 5? Before I formed you in the womb I knew before you were born and consecrated you. So we're developmental descendants of dumb zygotes.

But God knew us there anyway then. And we're evolutionary descendants not only in apes but all the way back to dumb prokaryotes. But God knew us then anyway.

God is in chapel by time so time presents no theological problem. In fact to remove time from our understanding of creation removes a dimension from our understanding and actually causes a bunch of problems not only theological but also scientific. Alright so that's about history.

Second one in appreciation of evolution does in particular an evolutionary anthropology understanding of ourselves. Gives us a reason to be humble. And it's yet another instance of God of the Bible always fostering our humility and warning us against putting on errors.

We didn't pop out of God's ear in full armor like Athena. We didn't come floating to shore on a seashell held heavily by trumpets. We were molded from ordinary dirt.

And that's why you take the Bible figuratively or literally. In this evolution the Bible tells us exactly the same thing. We have a humble history.

We are more than apes. We are apes but we're more than apes. We're crazy smart.

We bear the Amago Bay but we're given this as a gift we didn't make ourselves. And we



do come from apes and we should forget our roots. But that's uncomfortable isn't it? I mean I've got a little bit uncomfortable even saying that even though I accept this like I accepted the earth goes around the sun.

But it is awkward sometimes to say that we're apes. It's tempting not to think about our roots because well frankly because we are self important stiff neck little people. Just like the original little group of desert folk that God chose to represent in the ancient world.

Those are his and so. In fact the story of God's stewardship of his people throughout the Bible has repeated the story of God choosing to make himself known from very modest material. From choosing Moses to speak to him who couldn't speak well.

I think he would have done better than that. Whittling down Gideon's army and telling him if you want to keep all of them choosing fishermen and tax collectors as the disciples and on and on. Less we should boast.

Less we should boast. And yet we still like to boast. So evolution maybe knocks us down and peck.

Makes it harder to boast about our elevated nature and that's a good thing. And the God of the Bible makes a plain that he has no difficulty dealing with people with modest opinions of themselves. And the most conceited ones that are the problem.

So that's humility. History, humility and now holism. Evolution provides an invitation or an opportunity for holism in our world duty.

When we look outside we don't have to choose anymore between science and God, between Ken Hammon and Bill Nye. We are a miracle evolutionary creation. Now if you're still in the process of incorporating evolution into your world, do I know how you feel in it? Maybe you hold those two aspects in your mind somewhat awkwardly like to strangers stuck in an elevator or something.

But when you fully embrace the evolutionary story you get a robust nexus between the empirical and theological lead. Two books so to speak of God's works and God's words. Be us.

Love us. Theistic evolutionist, if you want to call it that, can no longer see for instance a tree as merely an individual even created by God. Rather, forever after that tree will be the tip of a gigantic iceberg of answers to stretching back as far as time itself, like itself.

And representative of not only its own species but its relatives among other trees, other plants, and ultimately through innumerable reproductive connections all of life itself, including us. If you're a theist and you don't have that expansive view of life of creation you can't imagine what it will do to your appreciation of God's creativity and prose so I recommend it. So there it is, a little bit anyway about what I think that the realization

that we evolved should do to a, in this case, a straight ahead, good old fashioned faith.

Now of course I'm not saying that any of this provides an argument for the existence of God per se. Each of us has to make that decision for ourselves. I've been assuming, like I said, just for the sake of the points so that you can see we evolved now if you're a believer, what about faith? But it's important that we address this matter honestly, and that's one of the reasons I put it in that way, because this kind of honesty isn't always done.

We don't want to be fooled by faith arguments for the existence of God and on cold water, such as the old creationist claim that we don't have any natural explanation for complex eyes and flagellal. In the same way we don't want to be fooled by faith arguments that God has been rendered obsolete by something about modern science, that you can cite these successes of modern evolutionary biology or the power of natural selection has replacements for God. So if we set those truder sorts of arguments aside, of course people will still go one way or the other, because the heart and the mind are moved by many things.

But all I'll say to you close is that if a creator does he says, "Then evolution is how he creates." And if you do believe in God, understanding that he creates revolution can only enrich your faith experience in your life. Never think about trees and apes and zygos the same way again. Thank you.

[Applause] If you like this and you want to hear more, like, share, review, and subscribe to this podcast. And from all of us here at the Veritas Forum, thank you.

(gentle music)

(buzzing)