
Reviewed by Dr. John E. Bauer

Reviewers of this book to date have given high praise to Alan Wolfe for his fair and impartial assessment of American religious practice in the United States. Making no claims of religious belief himself, Wolfe presents himself as an impartial observer of religion. In fact, as the director of the Boisi Center for Religion and American Public Life at Boston College, Wolfe has authored numerous books and articles which examine religion and morality in society. And although he is not, and never has been, a person of faith, he gives evidence of great admiration for those who profess a belief in God and who live their lives in a way which reflects that faith. This dispassionate objectivity may be admired, but seems instead to have led Wolfe to a set of conclusions that many conservative Christians would find appalling.

Using Jonathan Edwards as the benchmark of religious fervor and absolutism, Wolfe argues that religion in America has been affected dramatically by an evolving American culture - and has lost. That is not to say that Wolfe would in any way view this loss with regret. He is merely observing that while there are still significant differences between different religions, there is remarkably little difference among people. Equally important in his treatment of the subject is the tenuous relationship between religious doctrines and modern liberal democracy. America, although still one of the most religious nations on earth, has shaped religion to conform to its unique expression of democratic equality.

This book is organized around the major elements of religious life: worship, fellowship, doctrine, tradition, morality, sin, witness, and identity. The basis for the research which led to its writing is ethnographic, that is, it is qualitative and narrative. The data was gathered by trained ethnographers who interviewed people, observed worship and fellowship, and gathered stories. Because the research methodology was qualitative, it can only serve to illustrate changes that were evident to the observers and which emerged from analyses of the narratives they prepared. Those who seek to further test the conclusions of this book should consider using the research of George Barna or the Gallop Poll to test Wolfe’s findings through empirical, scientific means. At the same time, there is little doubt that Wolfe has correctly recognized some of the major shifts and trends in American religion.

With respect to worship, it would seem that a common theme across the entire landscape of religious practice is to “personalize or die.” By this the author suggests that American post-modern culture values intimacy and personal relationship in contrast to didactic, objective, or universal meaning. What this has meant to worship is a shift away from the notion of “liturgy as sacrifice” and more toward involvement in relevant personal growth and edification. Preaching must be clear and applicable. Music must be simple and entertaining. In fact, most megachurches employ market research to identify tastes and trends among members in order to attract and keep members. Although fewer and fewer Americans appreciate, let alone understand, the depth and meaning of
Mozart’s Requiem or the cantatas of J.S.Bach, the so-called seven-eleven songs (same seven words, sung eleven times over) of contemporary Christian music are simplistic, repetitive, and finally boring. But for many, such music supports the watered-down evangelism that non-threatening, inclusive churches promote.

Fellowship is the joining together of believers to worship, support, and provides a sense of belonging. Until recently, denominations provided boundaries of belief that kept the faithful safe from error. What has been observed in recent decades, however, is the disintegration of influence on the behaviors of believers. America is clearly in a post-denominational period, as judged by the high rate of membership crossover. It is commonplace for spouses to come from different religious backgrounds, and to change denominational allegiances when it suits their particular interests or needs. Wolfe concludes that “like other aspects of religious practice in America, the inward-looking quality once associated with strong versions of faith has been transformed by the individualism and hedonism of American culture. That is not necessarily a bad thing. Against a historical pattern characterized by narrow sects – each persuaded that it had a monopoly on the truth – and parochial congregations that cared little for those outside the group, there is something to be said in favor of religious switching and transient congregational loyalties. Encouraging fellowship by disparaging others while reinforcing the prejudices of the like-minded may no longer be the best way to go” (p.66).

Adherence to doctrine and tradition has suffered similar disintegration. Wolfe concludes that “nothing prevents Americans from deciding that their faith is so important to them that they are under an obligation to devote their lives to the study and application of their faith’s particular teachings. But in overwhelming numbers, they have chosen not to do so” (p.95). What appears to be common among members of just about every religious denomination is that church doctrine is fairly low on the scale of factors that contribute to church membership. Much higher on the list are values like obtaining a feeling of spirituality, warm and accepting fellowship, and uplifting and affirming worship. While it might be argued that such things are superfluous, self-serving, and inwardly focused, Wolfe would argue in turn that they do in fact reflect an American culture which is by its very nature the same.

Whether one is alarmed by Wolfe’s findings or is confirmed in one’s belief about religion in America, the fact is that religion has undergone significant change in the past several decades. And while it has had a tremendous impact on American culture, it has been significantly altered by the culture in turn. Wolfe finds a certain satisfaction in the fact that American religions are moving toward a common ground of secularized evangelicalism. After all, the result becomes a population which is calmer and more tolerant of religious differences. And as far as the fear that religion unduly influences public policy? Wolfe concludes: “There is, then, no reason to fear that the faithful are a threat to liberal democratic values. Americans love God and democracy and see no contradiction between the two, which is why they clothe their public life in the language of faith while they bring God down to earth and seek salvation through personal choice. American religion has been so transformed that we have reached the end of religion as we have known it. This does not mean religion no longer has meaning. It means we will have to know it in new ways” (p. 264).

Wolfe should give every confessional Lutheran Christian cause for evaluation – not just over the way in which our culture has influenced American Lutheranism – but over what the
future holds for a church that places a very high value on doctrine, restricts itself in its practice of fellowship, puts a premium on membership, and honors the historic traditions and meanings of the denomination. And, if what Wolfe describes is true in the macroculture, then what of the microculture found in each Lutheran congregation? How well do members understand, let alone remain committed to, the doctrines of the church? Why do people choose to belong (or not belong) to a congregation? Why do they leave? What are the strengths of my congregation that foster member retention? On the other hand, what are my congregation’s weaknesses that contribute to member attrition? How are changes in the cultural values affecting how my members view our congregation and the doctrines of our church? And finally, if all the elements that comprise the traditional values of historic Lutheran practice (not doctrine) don’t resonate or aren’t appreciated by most people in the broader milieu we call American culture, are we content to live with continuing decline until what is considered conservative Confessional Lutheranism is little more that a denominational relic of history?


Reviewed by John E. Bauer

In 1990 when George Barna wrote The Frog in the Kettle, he began and ended his book with a fictional story of Jill to show how much change would occur in her life if what his research predicted would actually occur. In this book, Barna again picks up the life of Jill and again predicts what life will be like in another ten years, this time in 2010. Using again the illustration of a frog in a kettle of water – unaware that it is slowly being cooked as the temperature is slowly raised – Barna poses the question for Christians to consider, “Have we reached the boiling point?” If we haven’t, his book will certainly leave the reader with the impression that we are only a degree or two away from that point.

This book serves as something of a companion to The Transformation of American Religion because Barna provides data gathered from extensive scientific polling and demographic research. Where Wolfe relied on ethnography, Barna and associates utilize data bases from opinion polls, population studies, and measures of leading economic and social indicators.

The basic premise of the book rests in the belief that being able to reasonably recognize societal trends and predict future directions is essential for the church to adapt its methods for communicating the Gospel. “If the role of the Church is to influence all dimensions of culture rather than to be shaped by the culture, then we must be alert and assertive in representing God to the best of our ability in the world. That means serving Him with excellence, but we cannot achieve excellence without appropriate preparation. Part of that preparation is the body of experience that God enables us to have, since those experiences not only test us and improve us but also sensitize us to opportunities and challenges that will emerge in the days to come” (p.22).

One might correctly wonder if it is, indeed, the Church’s role to change the culture of society, arguing instead that it is really the mission of the Church to change hearts with the Gospel of Jesus Christ. For the sake of this review, however, let’s assume that the former cannot occur without the latter. Then it would behoove church leaders to understand cultural trends in order to better
address the effects of those trends on the lives of our members – not to mention on the lives of those whose souls we seek to save.

Barna and Marks touch on numerous elements of society: education, the economy, technology and biotechnology, entertainment, and politics. And while these are important to the overall discussion of what the future might hold, Barna’s analyses of the discernable trends in morality, lifestyle, religious belief, and the nature of the local church are of most value.

Suffice it to say that the trends noted in the 1990’s in these areas have continued in the same direction. Moral relativism contributes to spiritual anarchy, sexual promiscuity and pornography are valid life style options, lying and vulgarity are acceptable. When all belief systems are of equal value, it becomes increasingly difficult for Christians to advance an absolutistic message. To say that Jesus is the ONLY way to salvation is not politically correct. Is it any wonder that evangelical efforts meet with resistance among our own members?

Still, this book provides encouragement for Christians who seek to address this unfulfilled, hypertolerant, stressed out generation. Understanding people and how they live in this culture is a first step to knowing how to “touch the Word to their hearts.” Such an understanding of cultural trends isn’t a method for church growth, it’s a means to touch lives. This book is recommended for those who really desire insight into the world in which our members live.


Reviewed by Paul R. Boehlke

Most of us probably took notice of the new Intelligent Design (ID) argument when Michael Behe published Darwin’s Black Box in 1996. Here was a biochemist at a major university who attacked Darwinism on the basis of the complexity of various biochemical reactions. Sensing something different was happening, a group of WLC science professors and students traveled to St. Norbert College to hear Behe in January of 1998. Behe pointed out that a gradual step-by-step accumulation of mutations could not account for the existence of the chemistry within cells and tissues that had many different interacting parts -- all of which needed to be present at once in order for function to occur. He aptly labeled all the needed components in such cascading chemical reactions as blood clotting with a catching phrase, “irreducible complexity.” The chemistry could not be reduced to the gradualism that Darwinism required. If a cell would begin to make parts for a future mechanism, it would reduce its fitness and would be selected against. On the other hand, competing cells that did not make such parts would be favored by the environment because they did not spend their resources on parts that would have to sit on a shelf for millennia. Behe’s claim that Darwinism could not explain such complex biochemical mechanisms did raise eyebrows.

Furthermore, Behe maintained that the existence of irreducible complexity inside the cells clearly revealed the guiding hand of an Intelligent Designer. The complexity indicated that a supernatural being must have directly entered into the development of biological organisms.¹
As one might guess, Behe did not come to his position in a vacuum. In Doubting Darwin Thomas Woodward traces the history and rhetoric of the ID movement by connecting the major players in this second wave of creationism. Even though the book is based on a doctoral thesis (where one would expect detachment), Woodward is openly sympathetic toward ID and paints their story in hyperbole. At times his overdrawn metaphors (like storming the beach in the movie “Saving Private Ryan”) become distracting. Woodward’s style reveals that he clearly believes that he is documenting an epic change in scientific worldview. His rhetoric is that of an exciting observer describing a major historical event arousing scientists from “dogmatic slumber.”

The earlier scientific creationism movement of Morris, Whitcomb, and Gish in the 1960s is dismissed as merely “a nagging annoyance” or an “oddity” for evolutionists. This quick appraisal begs for more explanation and support. Even if one questions the approach of the earlier creationists, this judgment is hardly borne out by the extensive literature that has been produced against them.²

One cannot deny that the story of ID is an interesting one. Woodward marks the birth of the modern ID movement with Michael Denton’s 1985 book, Evolution: A Theory in Crisis. Denton especially puzzled over the major evolutionary changes in the Darwinian model and displayed twenty-one cases in which it was difficult to imagine intermediate structures. For example, he noted that the bird lung had a unique structure completely different from other animals including the supposed reptile relatives. To him the problems of evolution were “too severe and too intractable to offer any hope of resolution” within the standard Darwinian framework. Woodward shows that Denton’s book influenced both lawyer Phillip E. Johnson and biochemist, Michael Behe. Johnston was noted for pointing out the existence of a philosophical bias in biology which allowed only natural explanations.³ Behe, as we have seen, brought in irreducible complexity. Finally, the mathematician/philosopher William Demski emerges as the most outstanding member of a more extended group of young, gifted, credentialed supporters who Woodward cannot help but call “the four horsemen.” Demski is known for his development of a methodical filter for the detection of ID in nature.

Philosophically, the foundations of ID allow theistic-evolution (which includes a broad spectrum of belief) joined with a desire for intellectual respectability that avoids any literal interpretation of Scripture. Accordingly, ID people carefully avoid references to a young-earth, a real Adam and Eve, or a world-wide Flood. ID allows that God may have used evolution and long periods of time but that is not their focus. The question for ID is not whether the claims of Darwinism conflict with the Bible, but whether they conflict with biological evidence. ID is claiming that biological systems show signs of being guided by Intelligence and that science should go wherever the evidence leads.

Woodward correctly indicates that the ID movement has taken great pains to point out its separateness from the scientific creationists. ID does not want to be quickly dismissed by evolutionists as just another form of Biblical fundamentalism. The avoidance of Biblical references reduces possible disagreement within their own ranks. ID proponents wish to be judged as merely working with the facts in nature. Along this line ID scientists maintain that they do not choose to identify the agent of biological complexity. When others try to point out that there seems a thinly hidden theological agenda, Johnson, Behe, and Demski have independently answered (with a smile, I’m sure) that the agent of design could be anything.
even space aliens. The strategy seems to be that the opponent needs to first agree to the existence of design before they deal with where this leads.

Woodward maintains that ID’s exclusive focus on the evidence will move Darwinian theory into a state of crisis: a crisis in the sense that Thomas Kuhn discusses in his landmark book, The Structure of Scientific Revolutions. Accordingly, Woodward then anticipates that a major paradigm shift in science will have to occur. This shift in worldview would be greater than the Copernican Revolution. Furthermore, Woodward claims that it will demand a new openness toward theism. However, such a shift would be more than what Kuhn describes as ‘picking up the stick at the opposite end and looking at the data differently.” It involves the nature of modern science itself. It would call for setting aside the imbedded modern scientific assumptions that all natural events have natural causes and that the only reality is materialism. Darwinism is a product of those assumptions. ID may be missing the point that even if Darwinism is finally viewed as failing, that this would not require the basic assumptions to be replaced. Darwinism is more likely to be modified or to be exchanged with another evolutionary theory while preserving the same assumptions of naturalism and materialism.

While nature declares the glory of God, modern science usually does not. One may wish that this were not true, but it is a descriptive judgment of modern science. If examples of ID actually do begin to function as provocative anomalies in science, it is more likely that evolutionists will suggest co-option as an explanation rather than ID. Co-option suggests that the parts of a complex biological mechanism may have had other uses before being applied to the present chemistry. And if we say, show us these uses, we are likely to get either some interesting just-so stories. We may also receive a rather reasonable scolding to be patient. We will be reminded that science is never complete, and some things will always await discovery in the future. Hence, this reviewer would predict that science will not change its course as dramatically as Woodward and the ID people wish. It can hold on to evolutionary natural causes even if it has to modify Darwinism. There are already scientists that question gradualism in evolution for other reasons.

In particular I enjoyed Woodward’s report of a presentation on ID given by Michael Ruse at the annual meeting of the AAAS in 1993. Woodward indicates that the ID followers hailed the Ruse presentation as a major breakthrough. Ruse, an evolutionist and a philosopher, noted that scientists in honesty need to recognize that there are “certain metaphysical assumptions built into doing science....” Here Ruse is admitting that naturalism is assumed, that is, modern scientists assume that all events in nature have natural causes.

The ID people, of course, saw this analysis as ruling out any possible detection of ID. Woodward states in italics, “The distinction between methodological and metaphysical naturalism is functionally meaningless and misleading, since to exclude intelligent causes from consideration in science is really the same as excluding them from reality.” This point is fascinating, and certainly discussions about the assumptions in science and the history that has produced them are a way to have true discussions about evolution/creation and truth claims.

Overall the book is enjoyable and informative. It is surprising that Woodward makes no direct mention of the history of the formation and function of the Discovery Institute which includes most of the ID proponents. There is very light coverage of the counter-rhetoric of
Kenneth Miller. If Miller is truly a “champion of Darwinism and a dogged opponent of Design” as Woodward says, his specific arguments could have more space.\(^9\)

Where does all this leave the reader? We dare not quickly endorse all arguments just because they are against evolution. We cannot prove that God created through science. Science is a step away from nature and involves human interpretation. Design in nature should send a person into study of Scripture, but we need to remind ourselves of how delicate this move is. One can quickly turn to other things (Rom. 1: 19-23). Trusting in human arguments raises the question of whether faith is present at all. One is reminded of young David who tried on Saul’s armor (the reasonable thing to do) and rightly concluded that this did not feel right. David then declares to the Philistine that he comes against him in the name of the Lord Almighty (I Sam. 17:38-47).

A strong message coming out of the ID camp, clearly shown in Woodward’s book, is that the scientific establishment assumes evolution to be true on the basis of metaphysical commitments to naturalism and materialism. This is a valid general apologetic when dealing with skeptics. It shows that evolution is not proven.

On the other hand, we need to be aware that all the sophisticated arguments including Behe’s specific design in biochemical systems are still human and are subject to everything in our fallen nature. Human arguments can always be countered. Furthermore, we need to stay aware of the historical observation that science changes. Kuhn says that even the facts of science change.\(^10\) Today, what we think is a good scientific defense may fade away as time passes. Christians need to stay wary of efforts that focus only on supporting faith with reason. Kurt Marquart said it nicely, “What apologetics can only show to be probable at best, or not impossible at worst, theology proclaims as divinely revealed truth and certainty, to be received in humble faith.”\(^11\)

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1. The classic design argument was made by the Rev. William Paley in 1803. He said that if you found a watch on the ground, you would conclude from its complexity and purpose that it had been designed. Therefore, one should also conclude that the complexity found in humans also requires a designer. Behe’s argument is the same but his focus is on the complexity of the chemistry in cells (the black box) and in tissues.
2. Scientific creationism apparently has been more than an “oddity, a nagging annoyance, and … never any substantive threat.” On the contrary, many have felt compelled to defend evolution. Many court cases involving science education in the public schools resulted. The American Biology Teacher has waged a constant war of words against scientific creationism. The Creationists by Ronald Numbers, A Busing Science by Philip Kitcher are both direct results of the creationist movement of the 60s. The National Center for Science Education (NCSE) was established specifically to defend the teaching of evolution and to keep creationism out of public schools. Experts did have to show others how to answer creationist arguments.
Stephen Jay Gould and Niles Eldredge have proposed that evolutionary change may move quickly and then settle down for periods. This idea would solve the fact that the fossil record has gaps. Gould and Eldredge’s punctuated equilibrium theory is saying the form living during rapid change have less chance of being fossilized because of their relatively brief existence. Hence there is an appearance of gaps in the evolutionary record. Conservative Darwinists take issue with the punctuated equilibrium theory.

On a WORT-FM Madison radio show discussing evolution / creation was hosted by Mark Young on Nov. 6, 2000, Elliot Sober, a much respected professor of philosophy at The University of Wisconsin, agreed with me that the naturalism assumption was true of science and evolution.

