

Big History, the Big Bang, and the Big Book: The History of Science Meets the Tradition of Christianity

Course Context

In the 1980s, historian David Christian embarked on a delightfully daring journey: to narrate the entire history of the world from its origins to the present. Ignoring the sacred cow of academic specialization, in which academics are only encouraged to speak about their immediate areas of intellectual concentration, Christian coined the term “Big History” to refer to the history of the cosmos in all of its fourteen-billion years of glory. Even though he was an Australian historian of Russia, with little formal training in science, Christian began teaching history in a way that no one had quite done before. As David Christian was attempting to understand the evolution of history across fourteen billion years, many conservative Christians were actively vilifying the consensus of scientists when it came to the age of the universe, the age of earth, and the origins of human life. Kenneth Ham, an Australian like David Christian who is also around the same age, is at the forefront of creationist apologetics. Ham founded the Creation Museum and he is president of a highly influential organization that teaches young-earth creationism and rejects the methodologies and assumptions of mainstream science. Who is right, David Christian or Ken Ham? And what difference does it make anyway?

Course Description

In *Big History, the Big Bang, and the Big Book*, we will explore the intersection between the history of mainstream science and the beliefs of evangelical Christianity. As we look at each of the major branches of science, we will do so with an eye toward understanding how it impacts the thought and practice of Protestant evangelicalism.

Course Format

In many ways, this course is a test-case on the history of Christianity and science. Every major theme is based on real-life examples of how Christians responded to important historical events.

Course Goals

There are three goals for this course: (1) to understand the assumptions and claims of science, particularly revolving around its major disciplines; (2) to understand the assumptions and beliefs of evangelical Christianity, particularly as it relates to the Bible; and (3) to put evangelical thoughts and practices in conversation with the aims and designs of modern science, with the purpose of bridging the gap between science and religion.

Required Books

The following three books are required reading for this course:

- Bill Bryson, *A Short History of Nearly Everything*. Broadway, 2004.
- David Lindberg and Ronald Numbers, *When Christianity and Science Meet*. University of Chicago Press, 2008.
- Alister McGrath, *Science and Religion: A New Introduction*. 2nd edition. Wiley-Blackwell, 2009.

Recommended Books

The following books are recommended reading for this course:

- J. B. Stump and Alan Padgett, ed. *The Blackwell Companion to Science and Christianity*. Wiley-Blackwell, 2012.
- Ronald Numbers, *Galileo Goes to Jail and Other Myths about Science and Religion*. Harvard University Press, 2010.
- Gary Ferngren, ed. *Science and Religion: A Historical Introduction*. Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002.
- Francis Collins, *The Language of God: A Scientist Presents Evidence for Belief*. Free Press, 2007.

Recommended Internet Sites

The following internet sites are recommended browsing for this course:

- [The Dialogue on Science, Ethics, and Religion \(DoSER\)](#) at the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS)
- [Big Questions Online](#) (many science related questions)
- [Science and the Big Questions](#)
- Slate's [Big Ideas Series](#)
- University of Oxford [Ian Ramsey Centre](#) (a number of projects and a large archive of videos)
- [Faraday Institute](#) (a number of projects and a huge archive of video, audio and print resources)
- [BioLogos Foundation](#)

Course Assignments

There are four assignments for this course:

1. A five-page response to each of the three books required, which gives an overview of the book (2 pages), isolates specific areas of interest (1 page), and explains how this book challenges, equips, disrupts, or enhances your personal faith (2 pages).
2. Class participation, which is exhibited through thoughtful interaction with the professor and fellow students, respectful engagement with guest speakers, and participating in class discussions and small group discussions.
3. A 5-7 page paper exploring a topic of interest related to science and faith. More directions will be given in class.
4. A 5-7 page proposal for a way that your local church, or ministry context, can begin to talk about the relation between science and Christian faith. Students will identify a strategy plan to discuss with leadership relating to these areas. More directions will be given in class.

Course Schedule

The following is the tentative schedule for this course:

Week 1	-	Introduction. Overview of the history of Christianity and science.
Week 2	-	Astronomy: the origins of the universe and the reading of the Bible. Test Case: Galileo.
Week 3	-	Geology: the age of earth and the flood of Noah. Test Case: Kirkdale Cave.
Week 4	-	Guest speaker: astrophysicist.
Week 5	-	Biology: evolution by natural selection and biblical creationism. Test

- Week 6 - Case: Charles Darwin.
- Week 7 - Paleontology: the study of human fossils. Test case: Neander Valley.
Genetics: the study of genes and the uniqueness of human beings. Test Case: Mitochondrial Eve.
- Week 8 - Guest speaker: anthropologist.
- Week 9 - Archaeology: what it does and doesn't confirm about the Bible. Test Case: Jericho.
- Week 10 - Conclusion. Where to go from here. How to integrate science into one's ministry contexts.