

THE EVOLVING FACE OF GOD AS CREATOR: EARLY  
NINETEENTH-CENTURY TRADITIONALIST AND  
ACCOMMODATIONIST THEODICAL RESPONSES  
IN BRITISH RELIGIOUS THOUGHT TO  
PALEONATURAL EVIL IN THE  
FOSSIL RECORD

Name of Researcher: Thane Hutcherson Ury  
Advisor: John T. Baldwin, Ph.D.  
Date Completed: April 2001

*The Topic*

From the early Reformation through the early 1800s, Gen 1-11 was consensually understood as providing a perspicacious, historical account of how God brought the world into being. Tenets of belief included six literal 24-hour days of creation and a catastrophic global Flood, and most often the conviction that Gen 1:31 implies that no evil of any type existed prior to the Fall. New geological interpretations in the early nineteenth century, however, pointed toward an earth history that seemed anything but *very good*, instead suggesting a harsh concatenation of deep-time prelapsarian pain, struggle, destruction of the weak, predation, diseases, plagues, catastrophic mass extinctions, and death in the subrational creation. Thus, a new theodical dimension arose which the church had not had to address prior to this time, i.e., paleonatural evil as posited by a deep-time interpretation of the fossiliferous portions of the geologic column. If those entities that are commonly labeled as natural evil are deciphered to have existed long before the arrival of humanity (and thus sharing no causal nexus with original sin), then believers would have to justify why they see the Creator as good in light of concomitants in his handiwork which seem *prima facie* so counterintuitive to how an omnibenevolent and omnipotent Creator might reasonably be expected to create.

*The Purpose*

Thus in the early nineteenth century, questions arose as to the compatibility of paleonatural evil with Gen 1-11 and an omnipotent, omnibenevolent Creator. To what extent would embracing an "evolver-God" impact the primary attributes of God such as omnibenevolence? Would traditional understandings of omnibenevolence need to be recalibrated to comport with a deep-time interpretation of the fossil record? Who were the first believers to recognize this as a potential theodicy issue, and how did they respond? The purpose of this study is to

assess the theodicies of some of the first thinkers to recognize and respond to the problem of paleonatural evil.

### *The Sources*

Given this context this dissertation seeks to discover, codify, analyze, and assess the theodical formulations of two groups of early nineteenth-century British groups, i.e., the traditionalists and accommodationists. Do they see natural evil as intrusive or nonintrusive to the original created order? If the Fall is historical, to what extent was the created order impacted? Contrasting accounts of divine creative method between the traditionalists and accommodationists provide conceptual perspectives by which to trace the evolving face of God, i.e., to detect a changing understanding of his beneficence from the period of the Reformation to the early nineteenth century. Further, an attempt is made to adjudicate whether the theodicy of the traditionalists or accommodationists is more compatible with the early Protestant understandings of God's beneficence as revealed through his method of creation; and to surmise how the early nineteenth-century dialectic between these groups can inform the same debate in the third millennium, which, in the wake of two additional centuries of geological discoveries, will continue to amplify the dialogue on paleonatural evil.

### *Conclusion*

Traditionalists and accommodationists, past and present, broach the problem of paleonatural evil quite differently. The present study highlights ten areas of contrast between these two groups of theists, perhaps the most important being how each deals with the question of what omnibenevolence and a *very good* created order mean if nature has been read in tooth and claw for deep time. When pondering the God of the *Lagerstätten*, is one likely to see a paternal, caring, loving Creator—the same omnibenevolent Creator revered by the early reformers? Considering the staggering levels of paleonatural evil yet to be revealed, it must be asked what concessions, if any, would be exacted of divine benevolence in order to preserve an all-loving God. Once the time-honored perspicuity of the Genesis account is allowed to be recalibrated by an extrabiblical philosophical yardstick, is evangelicalism setting a precedent for incremental accommodations to subsequent edicts of scientism? If evangelicals accept one inch of such a source as ultimate authority, what coherent rationale can be given for not going further?