

# EOS 204 Reading and Writing Assignment

## The Book

Sawyer, R. J. 2000. *Calculating God*. Tom Doherty Associates Book, New York, 335p.

This book is available through various online book dealers and local stores. If you prefer to get an audioversion of the book be sure to purchase the UNABRIDGED version. I have also placed a copy on reserve in the Perkins Library on West Campus.

## The Background

The United States is unique<sup>1</sup> in the Western World (with notable [exceptions](#) in the United Kingdom) for having a long and complicated history regarding the public's perception of the [theory of evolution](#). Public polls, done over the last 40 years, have largely remained unchanged: around 50% of Americans do not accept human evolution specifically and around 30% do not accept biological evolution in general. The reasons are nearly exclusively religious, but vary greatly theologically and in scope (see [here](#), this article was written by a Young Earth Creationist from Liberty University). Several major court cases have been fought over whether "biblical creationism", "scientific creationism", "intelligent design", and biological evolution itself can and ought to be taught in the public classroom (see [here](#) for recent summary).

Robert J. Sawyer, known to some of you as the author of the 2009-2010 television series [Flashforward](#), published the science fiction novel "Calculating God" in 2000. The timing coincided with the height of the national debate over the scientific merit of "intelligent design theory", which ultimately ended in the "[Dover Trial](#)" in 2005. Robert J. Sawyer's novel was immediately controversial and was heavily criticized by some skeptics as being anti-science and overtly pro-intelligent design, but see Sawyer's response [here](#) and [here](#). In a 1996 interview Sawyer self-identified as an agnostic (see [here](#)), skeptical of the idea of a "personal" god.

*Calculating God* heavily involves arguments from the paleontological record and the history of our planet and universe. It also draws heavily on contemporary cultural and religious issues, creating what the best of science fiction has always done (in my humble but correct opinion): a deep reflection and analysis of our present-day society - its fears, disagreements, woes, hopes, and dreams - rather than a simple vision of the future.

## The Assignment

Read the book and reflect on its themes and characters. Educate yourself about the "creation-evolution" debate and its issues (the above links provide a great start for your research). Educate yourself about biological evolution (class should help with this...). How can you relate/not relate to this story and its characters? What are your own views on biological evolution<sup>2</sup> and its implications (or lack thereof) for religious belief? Do you find the story's arguments convincing? Put yourself into the story, which side would you find yourself on? Are there such "sides", if not, why not, and if so what are they? Compared to the rest of the world, why do you think has the debate over evolution been so especially dramatic in the US? What do you think scientists and educators can learn from this issue – does reading *Calculating God* help or hinder this discussion? Do you think it is appropriate to have an assignment such as this in a university science course? Why or why not?

## Grading

Your grade on this project will be based on the level and depth of understanding of evolution and the creation-evolution debate as reflected in your writing, how well you are able to articulate your personal opinions on this subject, and whether you have followed formatting directions (see below). Your grade

WILL NOT be based on which personal opinion you express, or presence, absence, or nature of your religious beliefs. My personal views on the theory of evolution, faith, spirituality, religion, and the creation-evolution debate are [no secret](#) and can be easily ascertained by anyone with the ability to google my online C.V. and the published literature. Of course, you could also just ask me. Indeed, I would welcome and encourage you to discuss these issues with me and (more importantly) one another outside of our regular class time. Needless to say, your grade on this project will not in any shape or form be based on how much you agree or disagree with me.

### Format

6-8 pages (plus cover page and references/bibliography). No maximum or minimum requirement of number of references but a) do not reference course slides or course notes, b) cite everything that is not generally known and err on the cautious side if in doubt, and c) your use (not number) of references is a direct reflection of your depths of understanding of the facts of the issues. Double-spaced; one-inch margins all around; page numbers centered at bottom; Times New Roman 12 font required; use “justify” text alignment throughout (see HERE what that means); do NOT put extra spaces between paragraphs or sections; include section headings in the text, NOT as separate lines. Example:

DO NOT DO THIS:           **My Personal View**

My personal views on this subject are complicated and nuanced. It would...

DO THIS:                   **My Personal View.** – My personal views on this subject are complicated and nuanced. It would....

**Cite all references in your text using a format of your choice – just keep it consisted. Unless it was said in some extraordinarily profound fashion, do NOT quote the text. Seriously.**

<sup>1</sup>beginning in the early 1990s, modern anti-evolutionism was widely exported into Europe by conservative evangelical Christian missionaries from the United States. The current anti-evolutionist movement in Europe, South Korea, Turkey, and elsewhere is as culturally ‘American’ as are Coca-Cola, McDonalds, Levi’s Jeans, and Hollywood movies.

<sup>2</sup>BTW, as you will hopefully learn from your research, the “origin of life” is a completely separate issue from biological evolution. Whether we will ever explain how life originated has absolutely no bearing on how biological evolution explains the diversity of living things that have and do exist on our planet. The theory of evolution starts with the premise that life exists. It could very well be that the origin of life might one day be explained through an evolutionary model, but “origins of life” and “evolutionary change of life” are two different things. So don’t get hung up in your discussion on the mystery of the origin of life.