

THE GREAT DEBATE: EVOLUTION, INTELLIGENT DESIGN, AND CREATIONISM

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, 2 the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. 3 Then God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light. 4 And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. 5 God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.
(Genesis 1:1-5, NRSV)

One day, a visitor at the Bronx Zoo noticed that a monkey was reading the *Bible* and Darwin's *Origin of Species*. In surprise, the visitor asked the monkey, "Why are you reading those two books?" "Well," the monkey replied, "I'm trying to figure out if I'm my brother's keeper or my keeper's brother."

Unfortunately, today's legal battles between Evolutionists, Creationists, and Intelligent Design proponents is no laughing matter because it could change what our children learn in school about science.

The central question is this, can science and faith be reconciled in such a way that both retain their integrity? This is not a new question. From Copernicus to Galileo to Darwin, science has been perceived as a threat to churches from Italy to America, churches who far too often responded harshly. Is there an inherent, unresolvable conflict between religion and science? Renowned American scientist, Stephen Jay Gould, contended that there is no intrinsic

conflict between science and religion. Science and religion are two different ways of approaching reality (Stephen Jay Gould, *Rocks of Ages; Science and Religion in the Fullness of Life*, p. 5ff.). Science seeks to answer the question “how” (how is life created) whereas religion seeks to answer the question “why ” (why are we here, what is our purpose in life).

Gould once put it this way, “Science gets the age of rocks, and religion the rock of ages; science studies how the heavens go, religion how to go to heaven” (Ibid. p. 6). Scientist Anthony Carpi writes, “A common misinterpretation of science is that science defines ‘truth.’ Science does not define truth; rather, it defines a way of knowing” utilizing the scientific method of observing, hypothesizing, predicting, and experimenting (www.Visionlearning.com/library/module_viewer.php?mid=45).

UCC minister, Rev. Jennifer Amy Dressler, reminds us that “Science does not provide everything necessary for ‘the good life,’ much less deal with questions that are beyond that of the quantifiable, measureable universe... Science can give us the secrets of the atom, but it cannot guide us in what to do with nuclear potential. Science in and of itself cannot address questions of value, moral questions, ethical issues. It provides information but it truly cannot tell us how to use the information. Science can clone cells, and may learn to clone successfully large numbers of animals or even humans, but it cannot tell us if we should do this...Scientific knowing and other ways of knowing – intuition, imagination, and faith – have been too easily cast into opposing camps. What a shame; what a loss. Because science and faith are intended by God to be complementary ways of knowing, not opposing ways” (www.uwosh.edu/colleges/cols/Clergy%20Sermons%20PDF/amy-dressler_rural_indiana.pdf).

Mainline Protestants like us usually have no qualms with science or the Theory of Evolution. On the contrary,

theologically conservative Christians, be they Protestant or Roman Catholic, may lock horns with science on a regular basis. The most conservative Christians espouse Creationism, called Creation Science by some proponents. The biblical literalists who inhabit this camp believe the Bible's creation accounts are literally true and historically accurate. *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* says, "Creationism...entails a number of beliefs, including a short time since the beginning of everything ('Young Earth Creationists' think that Archbishop Ussher's sixteenth-century calculation of about 6000 years is a good estimate); six days of creation (...with some insisting on a literal twenty-four hours...); [and the] miraculous creation of all life including *Homo sapiens*" (<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/creationism/>).

Christian minister, The Rev. Dr. Robert D. Cornwall, reminds us that in reading the Genesis creation accounts "...the writers and the recipients weren't asking scientific questions. What Genesis does is challenge another creation story, the Babylonian one. In that story God isn't the creator, the creation is God. In fact, in this story, the sun, the moon, the earth, and the sea are different gods, and these gods aren't necessarily good. While the Babylonian story instills fear, Genesis calls for praise and adoration" (http://www.uwosh.edu/colleges/cols/Clergy%20Sermons%20PDF/cornwall_ca.pdf).

Not only do Creationists challenge Darwin's Theory of Evolution, but so do the proponents of Intelligent Design. About a year ago H. Allen Orr wrote an excellent piece in *The New Yorker* on Intelligent Design (often called ID for short). He explains that ID has "...been championed by a tireless group of writers, most of them associated with the Center for Science and Culture at the Discovery Institute, a Seattle-based think tank that sponsors projects in science, religion, and national defense, among other areas. The center's fellows and advisers—including the emeritus law

professor Phillip E. Johnson, the philosopher Stephen C. Meyer, and the biologist Jonathan Wells—have published an astonishing number of articles and books that decry the ostensibly sad state of Darwinism and extol the virtues of the design alternative. But Johnson, Meyer, and Wells, while highly visible, are mainly strategists and popularizers. The scientific leaders of the design movement are two scholars, one [Michael Behe is] a biochemist [at Lehigh University] and the other a mathematician [William Dembski who recently left Baylor University to teach at a Southern Baptist seminary]. To assess intelligent design is to assess their arguments” (<http://www.newyorker.com/printables/fact/050530fa> fact). Both scientists are affiliated with the Discovery Institute.

ID theorizes that the universe and life as we know it is too complex to have happened by natural selection and evolution alone. ID proponents differ from Creationists in that they acknowledge at least some change in certain species and they believe that the Earth is more than 5,000-10,000 years old. However, like Creationists, they have sought to have their views taught in American public school science classes.

As I see it, one of the problems with Intelligent Design is that it seeks to fill in the gaps of evolution with God. As scientific discoveries shrink these gaps, the God of the gaps shrinks too. Second, the notion of a designer takes Intelligent Design out of the realm of science and shows it to be in the realm of philosophy and theology. While its proponents claim that it is science, ID does not in fact follow the scientific method. No scientific experiment exists to prove the existence of a designer, nor can it be disproved. After all, these are matters of faith not science.

As Michigan State Professor Robert Pennock puts it, “The problem is, science requires a specific model that can be tested. What exactly did the designer do, and when did he

[or she] do it? [ID adherent's] nebulous hypothesis of design, even if restricted to natural processes, provides precious little that is testable, and once supernatural processes are wedged in, it loses any chance of testability...One may, of course, retain religious faith in a designer who transcends natural processes, but there is no way to dust for his [or her] fingerprints” (<http://www.actionbioscience.org/evolution/nhmag.html>).

ID proponents are fond of criticizing Darwin, saying that evolution violates the second law of thermodynamics. Mainstream scientists counter that ID theorists misapply this law and thus undermine their argument (*Ibid.*). Another argument that ID theorists make is biochemical. Michael J. Behe, scientist at Lehigh “...argues that complex biochemical systems could not possibly have been produced by evolution because they possess a quality he calls irreducible complexity” (*Ibid.*). Kenneth Miller, scientist at Brown University responds, “If Behe wishes to suggest that the intricacies of nature, life, and the universe reveal a world of meaning and purpose consistent with a divine intelligence, his point is philosophical, not scientific...However, to support that view, one should not find it necessary to pretend that we know less than we really do about the evolution of living systems. In the final analysis, the biochemical hypothesis of intelligent design fails not because the scientific community is closed to it but rather for the most basic of reasons—because it is overwhelmingly contradicted by the scientific evidence” (*Ibid.*). Other examples exist that remind us again and again that Intelligent Design is not science, but philosophy or theology.

Since in my estimation Creationism and Intelligent Design are scientifically and theologically flawed, what might we as Christians believe with intellectual integrity? I have found great insight in the writings of The Rev. Dr. John Polkinghorne, former president of Queen's College at Cambridge University, a scientist who became an Anglican

priest at midlife. He is now a canon theologian of Liverpool Cathedral. He won the Templeton Prize for research in religion and science in 2002. His books include *Quarks, Chaos and Christianity*. (He has a helpful website called www.Polkinghorne.org.)

There's a great public radio interview with Polkinghorne on a program called "Speaking of Faith." The interviewer, Krista Tippett said, "John Polkinghorne's perspective largely transcends the parameters and arguments that drive the debate between evolution and creationism in this country. 'Both science and religion are needed,' he has written, 'to interpret and understand the rich, varied and surprising way the world actually is.' He does not understand creation as God's one-time production of a ready-made world. Instead, he believes that creation is a continuous, ongoing process. 'God created something more clever than a ready-made world,' he writes, 'a world able to make itself.' And he reminds us that the biblical creation stories were not written as scientific textbooks. Rather, he says, they are theological writing with the main purpose of communicating that the world exists by the will of God"

(<http://speakingoffaith.publicradio.org/programs/quarks/transcript.shtml>).

Polkinghorne remembers an English clergyman in Darwin's time named Charles Kingsley who said that "'God could no doubt have snapped the divine fingers and brought into being a ready-made world, that God had done something cleverer than that: God had made a world in which creatures could make themselves.' And so that's the picture that God brings into being a universe, it has great potentialities, great possible fruitfulness, but creatures are allowed to explore and bring that fruitfulness to birth. And that seems to me a very beautiful and fitting form of creation, a better world, so to speak, than a world which was ready-made. But it has a necessary cost. It has a shadow side....It is beautiful and it's fruitful, but it's also ugly and terrifying, and dreadful things

happen in the world. It's the shadow side of a world allowed to make itself...If there are going to be tectonic plates...sometimes they will slip. And when they slip, that will create an earthquake or, if it's under the sea, will create a tsunami" (Ibid).

Regarding the interaction of science and religion, Polkinghorne sees no conflict arguing that science offers us insight into the nature of the world and religion offers insight into the nature of God. While he believes that one can't deduce information about one from the other, he does believe that "...they fit together in a way that makes sense. They don't seem to be at odds with each other...[which he finds] encouraging" (Ibid.).

Finally, in reading the Bible, Polkinghorne reminds us that we need to decide if what we are reading is poetry or prose. He says "...that's, in a sense, the sadness of the 'creationist'...position, that these people who are really wanting to be respectful to scripture are, I think, ironically, being disrespectful because they're not using it in the right way" (Ibid.).

It seems clear to me that the opening chapters of Genesis are to be interpreted as poetry. These beautiful words are a statement of faith in a God who chooses to create and be in relationship with all creation. Regardless of where we stand in the Creationist, Intelligent Design, Evolution debate, what matters most is that we have faith that God had something to do with creation as Genesis puts it, "In the beginning..." AMEN.

Written by Rev. Jimmy Only

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The Congregational Church of Manhasset, New York (UCC)

PASTORAL PRAYER

Eternal God, billions and billions of years ago your word of creation began a universe in which life could create itself, could move and change and progress in ways we still do not fully comprehend and so we give you thanks and praise. For the sun and moon, for the blanket of stars each night, for water pure and clear, for fruitful soil and the food we harvest from it, for meadows and forests, mountains and flowers, and for the gift of animals great and small who have their place in our world. Most especially we thank you for the gift of humanity and pray that you would help us dwell together in peace and tranquility, wisely and gratefully using the gifts you have given us, preserving them for our posterity.

Through Jesus Christ we pray. AMEN.