

Today marks our sixth year to participate in Evolution Weekend. Scheduled in proximity to the birth date of Charles Darwin, 203 years ago today, Evolution Weekend was birthed through the efforts of Michael Zimmerman, a biologist who currently serves as Vice-President for Academic Affairs at Evergreen State College in Olympia, Washington. Zimmerman initiated The Clergy Letter Project in 2006, acting, he admits, out of sheer frustration over the language used by “a small but very vocal contingent of fundamentalist preachers” whose attack not only on the theory of evolution, but also on those who accept it, has been unrelenting. “These preachers,” Zimmerman observes,

were (and, unfortunately, still are) asserting that if you “believe in evolution,” you’re going to hell. They were (and, unfortunately, still are) loud in their condemnation of the many deeply religious people who have no problem reconciling their faith with the best science has to offer. They were (and, unfortunately, still are) asserting that Christian religious leaders, in particular, who [are] fully comfortable with evolutionary theory can’t be “true” Christians [Huffington Post, February 5, 2013].

The Clergy Letter Project started as an effort to secure the signatures of Christian clergy. It soon expanded to include clergy from the Buddhist, Jewish and Unitarian Universalist traditions. The clergy letters, now plural, offer signers an opportunity to state clearly that those who declare war on science are not speaking for all within their faith traditions. In the place of denunciation and name-calling, the signers point to core teachings within their tradition that not only permit but mandate open and meaningful dialogue. The Christian version of the letter affirms that, despite differences in the interpretation of scripture, “the timeless truths of the Bible and the discoveries of modern science may comfortably coexist.” Acknowledging that evolution “has stood up to rigorous scrutiny” and that “much of human knowledge and achievement rests” upon it, the letter calls on school boards “to preserve the integrity of the science curriculum by affirming the teaching of the theory of evolution as a core component of human knowledge.” To date, the letter has garnered signatures from almost 13,000 Christian clergy, 502 rabbis, 273 Unitarian Universalist clergy and 23 Buddhist clergy.

In an effort to continue speaking to unfolding events, the project initiated Evolution Sunday, which became Evolution Weekend as signers became more diverse. This year Grace Covenant joins 592 congregations in 13 countries seeking to end the standoff between religion and science. Ken Ham, head of Answers in Genesis, the organization responsible for the Kentucky theme park known as The Creation Museum, derides the weekend as a “Darwin praise service” [answersingenesis.org, February 8, 2007]. Be sure, however, that as we gather today, our focus is not Darwin but the wide freedom and responsibility with which we are endowed by the God of creation. Far from literalizing the Bible and putting a glass ceiling beyond which neither faith nor science may venture, we are here to celebrate the poetry of scripture and the sense of awe, beauty and mystery to which it gives voice. Directly contrary to putting a limit on how far we may go in learning about the world in which we live, such a reading of scripture alleviates our doubts and fears. Rather than sounding a retreat or demanding that we stay frozen in time and place, it beckons us into the future in the sure confidence that the God of faith is more than adequate to the discoveries that await us there.

**Science and faith are different, but complementary, forms of truth.** Theology, esteemed theoretical physicist-Anglican priest John Polkinghorne observes, is the “natural debating partner” for science. Science is concerned to study nature through experiments that can be repeated as often as needed. Seeking to establish *how* things happen, science is concerned with the process by which the world operates. Theology’s concern is seeking truth about the nature of God. It looks back to foundational events which are not repeatable but which nevertheless play a crucial role in how we understand God, humanity and the world in which we live. Rather than asking “how”, theology and faith ask “why”, with a focus on meaning and purpose. Both science and religion, Polkinghorne suggests, are seeking truth, but truth at different levels. By way of example, “the kettle,” he suggests, “is boiling both because burning gas heats the water and because someone wants to make a pot of tea.” Religious faith is concerned with the “who” and “why” of the person behind the tea. In a similar way, we may appropriately speak of music in terms of a neural response to the impact of air-waves on our eardrums; or we may speak in terms of the deep mystery and beauty of music that inspire the spirit. Both are true and useful. Neither needs to seek to obliterate the other. Neither needs to foment a conspiracy theory to discredit the other [The Science and Religion Debate—an Introduction, Faraday Paper No 1].

The creation story in Genesis is a confession of faith about the nature of the universe. To the extent that it speaks at all to the “how” of creation, it speaks in terms of the limited understanding of twenty-six centuries ago. Rather than a scientific worldview that explains the natural process, it is poetry giving voice to the mystery, the awe and purpose of the universe. Through the contortions of what Old Testament scholar Terence Fretheim dismisses as “exegetical antics,” we can seek to turn creation’s hymn of faith into science; but in doing so, we do violence both to science and to faith. We do not feel compelled today to limit the practice of medicine to the “medicine” of the Bible. For the most part, we do not hold onto exorcism as the preferred treatment of epilepsy and mental illness; and we do not restrict our treatment of leprosy, polio, cancer or HIV/AIDS to ointments and herbs utilized two thousand or more years ago. We know ourselves to be free to use our minds and every tool at our disposal to get at both the cause and the treatment of illness.

And so it is with the efforts of science to understand the natural process by which our world came into being and continues to operate. We need not cling to a “god of the gaps,” a god who is little more than a convenient tool for which we reach when our natural explanations of the universe come to an end. Such a god, you see, is ever in retreat, ever fading into the background as we come to understand more and more of the world around us, needing god less to fill in the gaps of our understanding. Far from a rival to science, far from being diminished by what we know, the expanding horizons of human knowledge open to us a God far greater than any we have ever known.

Seeking to give answer to the many people today “hungering for an authentic spirituality that is intellectually honest and at home in a scientific era,” the United Church of Christ released the Pastoral Letter, “A New Voice Rising,” in 2008. The letter celebrates the contributions science can make to our ever widening, ever deepening understanding of a God who is not static but a living God, who goes before us, speaking, calling, and creating still:

Through the scientific advances of our time, we are seeing nature with new eyes, and what we see fills us with wonder and praise. Stunning images of deep space are like new windows on creation. Microscopic details of living cells show us the unexpected intricacies of our biology. Mathematical equations unravel the secrets of the first seconds following the birth of the universe. Through these gifts of science, we look across ever-expanding vistas of cosmic beauty, almost to the beginning of time itself. What we see evokes wonder and humility, and we hear within ourselves a new voice arising and singing an anthem of praise that reverberates through the whole creation [“New Voice Rising,” United Church of Christ, p. 1].

**The hymn of creation calls us to responsibility for God’s good world.** The hymn of creation does not leave us cowering in the corner, fearful of what the future may hold. Neither does it embrace the mindless philosophy of whatever will be will be. Characteristic of poetry, Genesis 1 unfolds in a stately rhythm. It is repetitious, returning again and again to the God who speaks, who sees, who separates, who calls. Four times God pronounces the work of creation good, emphasizing its excellence, its rightness, its wholeness. The hymn builds, Karen Armstrong observes, to a crescendo. It devotes more space to each successive day until everything finally converges on the sixth day when God pronounces the entirety of creation very good [*In the Beginning*, 9].

Just as monarchs of the day constructed statues and other physical representations of themselves to remind their subjects who was in power, Genesis affirms human beings in the “image” and “likeness” of God. Human beings are given “dominion,” which, interpreted in light of the dominion granted Israel’s king, is not license to do as one pleases, to pillage and destroy, but rather to bear covenant responsibility toward those in one’s care. Dominion granted to human beings, then, is the responsibility of being “living reminders of the Creator.”

With the hymn of creation apparently in mind, Psalm 8 reiterates the point. Human beings are granted responsibility within God’s world, subject to the overarching sovereignty of God. Far from a quivering mass of insecurity, human beings are, on the one hand, co-laborers with God. Far from pompous, self-sufficient gods in our own right, we, on the other hand, know best who we are when we view ourselves in light of the God who has made us. “We believe,” the Clergy Letter affirms,

that among God’s good gifts are human minds capable of critical thought and that the failure to fully employ this gift is a rejection of the will of our Creator. To argue that God’s loving plan of salvation for humanity precludes the full employment of the God-given faculty of reason is to attempt to limit God.

True, we are not gods; but we are God's and as such we bear responsibility. We bear the responsibility of using every tool at our disposal to understand and tend to the world in which we live.

Barbara Brown Taylor's *The Luminous Web*, a small volume on science and religion, concludes with a parable. Recalling a Fourth of July fireworks display some years previously, she describes the people gathered to watch the show as dark silhouettes set against bright bursts of light. Each time a new explosion lit the sky, a small child carried on her father's shoulders a few feet away, lifted her tiny hand into the air, reaching for the sky.

Faith that is healthy and strong frees our children and frees us to reach for the sky. It does not put in place a glass ceiling beyond which we dare not go. It seeks to close down neither explorations into the mysteries of the universe nor into the mysteries of God. A faith that is healthy and strong does not cower in fear in a corner or hold onto a god trapped somewhere in the past. A faith that is healthy and strong is a faith that frees both us and our children to reach for the stars. Thanks be to God!