

Evolution and Faith
Genesis 1:1-2:3 Psalm 19:1-6
Rev. Scott B. Martin – 2-11-07

Since the days of Copernicus and Galileo, who contradicted the church's biblical view that the earth was the center of the universe, it seems as if science and the Christian faith have been in one long drawn out battle for supremacy. At various times, right down to the present, some proponents on each side have proclaimed to have the sole, valid understanding of the Truth, with a capital "T". Surely this is arrogance of the first order, whether this arrogance arises from the scientific side or the religious side. Personally, I think Albert Einstein had it right, when he said, **"Science without religion is lame, religion without science is blind."**

In preparing this sermon I read two rather remarkable books, both of which I highly recommend. The first is Dr. Philip Kitcher's book *"Living With Darwin: Evolution, Design and the Future of Faith."* I found his last chapter particularly intriguing, where he deals with the impact of evolutionary science on religion. Kitcher is a self-avowed secular humanist, but he none-the-less finds great value in what he calls "spiritual/cosmopolitan" religion, as opposed to the traditional "providential/supernatural" forms of religion. He also empathizes with those of a more traditional religious view and what they would have to give up to adopt all that he believes goes with the scientific concept of evolution.

The second book is by Dr. Francis Collins, who is one of the world's most preeminent scientists in the field of genetics. He headed up the United States Human Genome Project. He is also, what I would describe as an "evangelical Christian." His book is entitled *"The Language of God: A Scientist Presents Evidence for Belief."* In his book he not only gives very convincing scientific evidence why Darwin's theory of evolution is valid, he also gives a very moving and personal testimony of how he came to be a Christian and what he believes as a Christian.

Obviously one can be a Christian and still believe in evolution. Francis Collins is not the only scientist to be a believing Christian. He cites two studies. Eighty years ago researchers asked biologists, physicists, and mathematicians whether they believed in a God who actively communicates with humankind, to whom they could pray and expect an answer. Now,

perhaps not surprisingly, given that this was 1916, 40% of them said yes. Researchers repeated this process in 1997 with modern day biologists, physicists, and mathematicians. They used the exact same wording in their questions. They were surprised to find that the percentage of those responding in the affirmative was essentially the SAME! Now granted these numbers would still be low compared to the general public, but what this study demonstrates is that the conflict between science and religion is not nearly as acute as one might think.

All right, so what is the big deal? Why do so many conservative and fundamentalist Christians get all bent out of shape over the teaching of evolution in the public schools? Why do so many of them insist that what is now called “Intelligent Design” be taught along side the teaching of evolution in our science classrooms?

Just google “Intelligent design” or evolution on your computer and you will get a good idea of how big a deal it is. If you recall, even the current president of the United States stated that he felt Intelligent Design should be taught alongside evolution.

Just a few years ago I was in Kansas when the Kansas State School Board voted to have schools teach “Intelligent Design” alongside evolution in the classrooms. I suspect you heard the uproar about this even way down here in south Texas! It made the international news. There was great concern that Kansas would cease to be competitive in the new global business climate. Kansas became something of a laughing stock all around the world. Well, it wasn't long before two of the school board members were voted out and the decision was reversed, but believe you me the issue is not settled. It rears its ugly head at almost every school board election. It is also one reason why private Christian Schools and home schooling are increasingly popular.

It does little good to consider those who are in favor of teaching Intelligent Design to be ignorant, self-deluded, religious, zealots. To do so will only cause both sides to circle the wagons and harden their positions. For those of us that have believed in evolution almost as long as we've been believing Christians, we need to ask once again, “What is the big deal for those brothers and sisters in Christ who clearly fear the teaching of evolution?”

Kitcher offers great insight on this. He sites the familiar Old Testament story of Jacob and Esau, where Esau is so hungry that he comes to Jacob and sells his God given birthright for “mess of pottage”, a bowl of lentils (Gen. 26:31-33). Very short term thinking on his part! Definitely not a very good bargain!

What price would you place on your soul, let alone that of your child? Kitcher recalls his own mother’s deep anxiety over his loss of faith. In his early teens he continued to sing in the church choir but no longer took communion and clearly did not believe in the church doctrines he had been brought up in. Kitcher says, **“For my mother, the education I had received, once seen as wonderful, beyond any dreams she could have had for me, now appeared as terrible, the source of a turn in my life that had deprived me of the single most precious possession any person can have. The worldly success my education promised me were completely irrelevant, utterly incapable of assuaging her sorrow.”** (p. 119-20) What does it profit a man to gain the whole world and lose his soul, is what his mother was thinking.

For many religious people the basic tenets of evolution threaten their most cherished beliefs. Evolution seems to threaten the core of their faith; their understanding that there is a God, a supernatural being, who created this world and everything in it, who has a plan and a purpose for creation and for us. In its place evolution seems to offer random chance and survival of the fittest. It doesn’t seem to be a very good bargain. It seems to leave us with a greatly diminished worldview. No wonder so many people say, “No thanks, I’ll keep my faith, you can have your science.” This is especially true if someone who hold similar faith views and who seem to know what they are talking about, points out inconsistencies in the theory of evolution. This offers a lifeline that allows them to keep their cherished views.

As Kitcher points out, religious conservatives are not the only ones to experience a sense of loss in the conflict between science/rationality and faith. William James, the author of the classic *Varieties of Religious Experience*, wrote **“For naturalism, fed on recent cosmological speculations, mankind is in a position similar to that of a set of people living on a frozen lake, surrounded by cliffs over which there is no escape, yet knowing that little by little the ice is melting, and the inevitable day drawing near when the last film of it will disappear, and to be drowned ignominiously will be the human creature’s portion. The**

merrier the skating, the warmer and more sparkling the sun by day, and the ruddier the bonfires at night, the more poignant the sadness with which one must take in the meaning of the total situation.” Wow! Does every new scientific discovery or new rational insight wear away the under girding of faith?

I hope not. It does raise questions. It can cause us to drop old cherished beliefs, but in the long run I don't know about you, but I don't want a faith built on untruths or even blind faith. I come back to Einstein's comment that "Science without religion is lame and religion without science is blind."

I was probably a strange teenager. I loved going to the library. I can remember poring over *Science* magazine and believe the other magazine was called *Scientific American*, or something to that effect. Biology was one of my favorite subjects in school. I went around digging up milkweed plants to plant in the back yard so I could raise Monarch butterflies and watch them proceed through their lifecycle. One time I dug a big hole in the yard, lined it with plastic and filled it with water. Then I rescued hundreds of tadpoles from a mud puddle that was about to dry up. It was fascinating watching them move through the various stages to become ever more toad like. My mother didn't seem to mind too much that for a while our back yard looked like something out of one of the plagues of Egypt!

There is something wondrous about this creation. There is something more to this world than a mere sum of its parts can explain. Science can help us explore and describe the parts but it can not help us very much in exploring the "something more." Religion can help us explore the "something more" but it is not very useful in helping us describe and explore the parts. Perhaps this is what Einstein had in mind in declaring that "Science without religion is lame and religion without science is blind."

Evolution is a well tested statement of how the plethora of life on this planet came to be and will continue to come to be. It is an invaluable scientific principal. So called intelligent design can not be put on the same plane. It makes a good philosophical position but not a very good scientific position.

Science can not answer all of humanities questions. It is not the only path to truth for the human race. Science can not answer such questions as:

What is the meaning of life? Is there a God? Is there an afterlife? How can sin be dealt with in my life? What is the purpose for humankind? Etc.

Christian philosopher John Polkinghorne argues this point quite cogently by pointing us to music. He writes: **“The poverty of an objectivist account is made only too clear when we consider the mystery of music. From a scientific point of view, it is nothing but vibrations in the air, impinging on the eardrums and stimulating neural currents in the brain.**

How does it come about that this banal sequence of temporal activity has the power to speak to our hearts of an eternal beauty? The whole range of subjective experience, from perceiving a patch of pink, to being enthralled by a performance of the Mass in B Minor, and on to the mystics encounter with the ineffable reality of the One, all these truly human experiences are at the center of our encounter with reality, and they are not to be dismissed as epiphenomenal froth on the surface of a universe whose true nature is impersonal and lifeless.”

Philosophers, professors and preachers love to use big words. I had to look up ep-i-phe-nom-en-al. It means a secondary phenomenon occurring with or accompanying another, but HAVING NO POWER IN ITSELF TO PRODUCE EFFECTS. Polkinhorn is claiming that this “something more”, this “non-objective” reality is at least as real and powerful as that which we commonly believe to be real, the material and physical world around us. Religion, faith, the holy, God are realities that have powers of their own, that are not dependant on those things that science can probe and test.

Let us end where we began, “Science without religion is lame, and religion without science is blind.” Amen.