

*Evolution and Creation in Conversation*¹

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We have a problem. On one hand, the idea that life on Earth has evolved from simple beginnings is one of the best-established concepts of modern science. It began long before Darwin. For decades, British geologists had known that the Earth was unimaginably ancient, and that the oldest fossils represented simpler organisms than younger ones. Darwin simply pointed out that nature tended to favor organisms that are better adapted to their environment; and that over the immensity of geologic time, natural selection could explain the increasing complexity and diversity seen in the fossil record. Fifty years later, in the early 20th century, the discovery of genes showed how traits were passed from one generation to the next, greatly strengthening the case for evolution. And of course genetics has led to both the agricultural revolution that now feeds Earth's 6.7 billion people, and to medical discoveries that allow so many of us to live richer lives.

As one modern biologist put it, "nothing in biology makes sense except in the light of evolution."

On the other hand, one of the central insights of the Judeo-Christian tradition is that God created the cosmos and all that is. "The earth is the Lord's and the fullness therein." [Ps. 24] Our sense of the moral worth of life and the moral shape of a good life depend deeply on values grounded in that tradition. I suspect that many religious people (probably all of us here) would agree that nothing in their experience of the world makes sense except in light of divine creation.

And so we have a problem. The value system that makes life worthwhile and the knowledge base that makes modern life possible seem to be at odds with one another.

Some of us cope with this dilemma by compartmentalizing our lives into a world of work or school, shaped by the ideas of science, and a world of church and home, shaped by the Bible, but we're unable to connect the two, and so live a schizophrenic existence. ... Others of us think that we must choose sides. Some take the side of science and evolutionary theory and reject the wisdom of religious tradition. Others take the side of what they see as religious thought or

¹ This sermon was a conversation between Dr. Fisher, an emeritus professor of geology at Johns Hopkins (who delivered the text in normal type), and Rev. van Utt, a pastor in the Presbyterian Church U.S.A. (who delivered the text in italics).

faithful biblical interpretation and reject many of the ideas of science. And as we choose sides, our society is split by a deep cultural divide.

The church's ambiguous response to this divide has undermined its ability to speak with authority on critical moral issues like genetic engineering, reproductive technologies, and sustainability, all of which rely on the science of evolution. Churchgoers get little help grappling with these issues; and because of its failure to take evolution seriously, the voice of the church is marginalized in public discourse; and society is deprived of the moral wisdom that our churches could and should offer.

So the church can't ignore this issue. We have to find a way of connecting the value system implied by creation with the knowledge of science. In his book *Texts Under Negotiation*, Walter Brueggemann states the issue clearly: in the contemporary world, neither science nor religious thought will automatically be accepted by everyone. All truth claims are under negotiation, and our understanding of reality has become an ongoing, creative, constructive task, one in which the church must participate. To do so, Brueggemann invites us simply to trust the stories of our tradition, and allow them to engage the understandings of science in ways that are imaginative, constructive, and creative.

If we look closely at the Bible we find lots of precedents for doing exactly that. Psalm 19 is a great example. It opens with these wonderful lines:

The heavens are telling the glory of God;
and the firmament proclaims his handiwork.
Day to day pours forth speech,
and night to night declares knowledge.
There is no speech, nor are there words;
their voice is not heard;
yet their harmony goes out through all the earth,
and their words to the end of the world.

These verses speak beautifully about how God's creative word still goes out through all the Earth, sustaining the world.

Verses 5 and 6 then give an example of the orderliness of the cosmos by describing how God has set the sun in the heavens, how it obediently runs its daily course, and how nothing is hidden from the Sun's nurturing warmth.

Then we come to these verses on the law:

*The law of the LORD is perfect,
reviving the soul;*

*the decrees of the LORD are sure,
making wise the simple;
the precepts of the LORD are right,
rejoicing the heart;
the commandment of the LORD is clear,
enlightening the eyes;
the fear of the LORD is pure,
enduring forever;
the ordinances of the LORD are true
and righteous altogether.*

We usually understand those lines as a reference to the legal code of Moses, and of course they are. But coming right after that extended description of how nature's orderliness reveals God's glory, these lines seem to suggest that the law of the Lord includes not only the legal codes that define how humans are to live in society, but also the natural laws that define how we are to live in and with creation.

And after a few more lines praising the legal code (and, we take it, natural law), the psalm concludes with that wonderful, well-known prayer:

*Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart
be acceptable to you,
O LORD, my rock and my redeemer.*

I often find myself praying those lines prior to giving a talk on evolution and creation, as a way of reminding myself that I'm not speaking on my own behalf, but on God's. But in the psalm, "words" seems to mean more than just words. In the opening verses of the psalm (as in Genesis), God's words have cosmic creative power, and these closing lines seem to say that the words of our mouths – even the meditations of our hearts! – have creative force as well.

And so these lines remind us that human creativity also happens in the context of both moral law and natural law, and that our attempts to be creative – our interweaving of natural law and moral law – must always be made in the context of prayer.

This intimate connection between natural law and moral law in the Bible shows how the Biblical communities – and actually, all ancient peoples – saw cosmos, culture, and creation as parts of a seamless whole, not as topics for separate academic departments. In the modern world, where knowledge tends to be compartmentalized, it's easy to mistake the Genesis accounts of creation for pre-scientific papers on cosmic origins, intended to describe the mechanics of creation. But, seen in Biblical context, it's clear that's not the intent of the stories.

Their agenda was theological, not scientific. They wanted to establish the moral context in which we live.

So the point of Genesis 1 is simply that God is the Creator of the cosmos, of all that is, the entire moral and physical framework in which we live our lives, and that God found that framework good.

The story tells us almost nothing about how God created. At first, God simply *spoke*. God spoke light, Earth, seas, and heavens into being, saying “Let there be ...” – and there was!

Further on, God began to involve creatures in creating. On the fourth day, God said “Let the Earth put forth vegetation...” and the Earth did. But again, no details are given on how Earth brought forth that vegetation, even though any Israelite farmer could have given a pretty detailed description of exactly how seedlings sprout from fertile soil.

On the fifth day, God said “Let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures...” and the seas did. And on the sixth day, God said “Let the Earth bring forth living creatures of every kind,” and again the Earth did. And at each step, God blesses the creatures, and invites them to be fruitful, and multiply – to be creative.

And in the end, of course, God creates humans, and invites us also to be fruitful, to multiply, and so to create. That theme of human creativity – represented by the cultivation of the land, the generation of offspring, and the creation of culture – is one of the most consistent themes of the Bible, the heart of God’s covenant with Abraham and Sarah, and with their descendents.

So, as it is in Psalm 19, the point of the creation stories is first to convey the deep coherence between God’s cosmic creativity, nature’s biological creativity, and human creativity. And that biblical image of cultivating – not just cultivating the soil, but also cultivating ideas, music, art, even just and moral political systems – offers a perfect metaphor for how we too are invited to create.

Read in this way, the story of Genesis 1 connects easily with a modern understanding of evolution. Genesis tells us very little about how things came into being. The scientific story of the cosmos fills in many of those details. Put differently, Genesis tells us that God created the cosmos, and that the cosmos was good; the understandings of science tell us a lot about how God chose to create.

Paul’s letter to the Corinthians reminds us forcefully that “the world did not know God through the wisdom of the world” – by which he means the wisdom of nature, rational thought.

That is still true. Science – the study of natural law, or of evolution – does not provide an adequate knowledge of God or the mystery of God’s creative love. Too often scientists go beyond the knowledge of science, arguing that mechanistic explanations can explain everything – the origin of life, the birth of a child, or the mystery of human love. But the world is more than mechanism. To paraphrase Paul, Christ crucified is a stumbling block to the world, but to those who are called, Christ is the power of God and the wisdom of God. God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom.

But life today takes more than belief in God’s wisdom and the saving power of Christ, or belief in creeds and doctrines. Belief alone is insufficient. As people of faith, we must do more than believe – we must be engaged in the world. The gospel accounts of Jesus’ life invite us to imitate his way of living, by healing the sick, feeding the hungry, and bringing good news to the poor.

Today, healing the sick requires modern medical science. Feeding the hungry takes modern agricultural science. Bringing good news to the poor requires modern economic theory.

In other words, we cannot save the world without the knowledge of the world. To be the church responsibly in today’s world requires that we weave together our faith in Christ and the knowledge of the world, moral law and natural law.

Belief is foolishness if it doesn’t accommodate the natural wisdom of science.

And science is foolishness if it doesn’t incorporate the moral wisdom of faith.

We need each other.

We must be in conversation.

Neither the secular community, nor – I’m sad to say – the church have been good at doing this. The bible doesn’t tell us how to do this, how to grapple with the highly technical moral problems of contemporary society. We must simply do our best (as Paul said) to work out our salvation in fear and trembling, praying together.

In Unison:

Let the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts
be acceptable to you,
O LORD, our rock and our redeemer.