

“The God of Evolution”

Genesis 1.1–25 & 2.4b–7

The Rev. Hal Chorpensing, Plymouth Cong’l UCC, 12 February 2006

“When I reflect upon the range of the invisible and the silent God, with the vast and well-nigh incomprehensible stretch of time, and of his compassionate waiting and working through illimitable ages and periods, compared with which a million years as marked by the clock are but seconds; when I reflect that the silent stones and the buried strata contain the record of God’s working, and that the globe itself is a sublime history of God as an engineer and architect and as a master builder, I cannot but marvel at the indifference with which good men have regarded this stupendous revelation of the ages past, and especially at the assaults made by Christian men upon scientific men who are bringing to light the long-hidden record of God’s revelation in the material world.”¹

Those words about geology and human knowledge were written by the Rev. Henry Ward Beecher, minister of Plymouth Congregational Church in Brooklyn, NY...in 1885. Beecher came from an esteemed family of Connecticut Congregationalists that included his father, Lyman Beecher and his sister, Harriet Beecher Stowe.

It really leads me to wonder: why are we still debating the validity of evolution? If a Congregational minister could claim evolution as part of his faith 120 years ago, why is it considered even remotely controversial in this new millennium?

In the last two decades of the 19th century, the rise of modern historical-critical Biblical interpretation began in German universities and soon crossed the Atlantic. Using those methods, the two readings from Genesis you just heard are thought to be written by two different traditions: the first story by the Priestly source and the second by the Yahwist strand of the tradition. That idea is threatening to some Christians.

According to Nancy Ammerman, a sociologist of religion, “many leaders in American Protestantism were actively seeking ways to adapt traditional beliefs to the realities of ‘modern’ scholarship and sensibilities. They were met head-on, however, by people who saw the adaptations as heresy and declared that they would defend traditional beliefs from such adaptation...they produced a number of publications that furthered this defensive cause...over a five-year period (1910-1915) entitled “The Fundamentals.”² And it is from those tracts that fundamentalism derives its name.

Among the central tenets of Fundamentalism is biblical inerrancy: the idea that the Bible contains no error. The converse of that statement is that the Bible is always right...no matter the subject. This is the Greek New Testament, the Nestle-Aland 27th edition. The reason for so many editions is that archaeologists keep finding new papyrus fragments, some of which are earlier (and closer to the source) – and sometimes they are different! Nestle-Aland uses hundreds of different source papyri, so which papyrus would one take literally? Which of them is inerrant?

Not all conservative Protestants and not all evangelicals are fundamentalists. And there are softer and more strident forms of biblical literalism. Not all literalists are fundamentalists. Christian fundamentalism is a militant, defensive form of Christian interpretation that attempts to establish a new, exclusive orthodoxy based on a literal reading of the Bible. It is

¹ Henry Ward Beecher, “Two Revelations” speech, 1885.

² Nancy Ammerman, “North American Protestant Fundamentalism” in *Fundamentalisms Observed*, ed. Martin Marty and Scott Appleby. (Chicago: U. of Chicago Press, 1991), pp. 3–4.

a stance based in fear of new knowledge and understanding that challenges a rigid understanding of Christianity.

Nancy Ammerman observes that “As fundamentalism re-emerged in the United States in the late twentieth century after a period of apparent hibernation, no two words better captured its public image and agenda than ‘Moral Majority,’” which was founded by Jerry Falwell in 1979.

Clearly, there are different ways of apprehending knowledge and different ways of viewing the Bible. But in our culture the news media tend to cover the extremes, which is why fundamentalists seem to get all the press and air time. (Just think of how “dull” *The O’Reilly Factor* would be if two moderate guests were invited and Bill didn’t try to bait them into a rancorous disagreement. We might actually have to focus on the content, rather than the supposedly entertaining format.)

Some of you may have read my opinion column in Wednesday’s *Coloradoan*, which was written in response to a story about a Creationist speaking at CSU. The reporter interviewed a fundamentalist pastor and a geologist, essentially pitting science against religion. This is the kind of false dichotomy that gives Christianity a bad name. We are clumped together with Pat Robertson and his ilk, and seen as anti-intellectual.

We in the United Church have our faults, to be sure, but one of the hallmarks of our Congregational tradition is the centrality of intellectual integrity to our faith. Our particular faith tradition started at Cambridge University and continued with the introduction of universal, free public education in Boston in the 17th century and continues through founding colleges and universities like Yale, Harvard, Dartmouth, Oberlin, Grinnell, Tougaloo, Howard, Pomona, and even our own Colorado College.

This speaks to the interpretive frame that Congregationalists have used historically: the lens through which many of us in the UCC see. Marcus Borg recounts a wonderful story about an American Indian sage who prefaced a tale with this caveat: “I don’t know if the story actually happened, but I know it is true.” We seek to understand scripture as the *rich stories of our faith*, written by distinctive peoples in particular times and places, rather than the *words of God* dictated to an ancient transcriptionist. Please don’t misunderstand me: I love the Bible dearly and find it an indispensable guide to life and faith. *But it is not, nor was it ever intended to be, a science textbook.*

I love the creation stories of Genesis. They are magnificent stories that let us know some critically important things: that we –both male and female – are created in the divine image; that God is the source of life and love; that we are responsible for taking care of each other and the planet God has entrusted to us.

The question remains: are Christians willing to look at and use sources of knowledge other than a literal reading of the Bible as a way to inform and influence not just their thinking, but their faith. Let me put that question to you, and ask you to ponder it this week: Are you willing to allow your faith to be influenced not just by the biblical record, but also by physics and biology, by history and archaeology, by art and by music?



“I am inclined to look at everything as resulting from designed laws, with the details, whether good or bad, left to the working out of what we may call chance. . . . *I cannot think that the world as we see it is the result of chance*; yet I cannot look at each separate thing as the result of Design.”³ Those are the words of Charles Darwin, who “himself

³ quoted in Ian G. Barbour, *When Science Meets Religion*. (SF: HarperSanFrancisco, 2000), p. 10

believed that God had designed the evolutionary process but not the detailed structures of particular organisms.”⁴

Science and theology examine the universe from different points of view that sometimes intersect (just as a psychologist may think of depression as treatable through cognitive therapy and a psychiatrist may conclude that the same patient’s condition is biochemical and needs to be treated pharmacologically).

So, how might we look at the world around us and take different perspectives and ways of knowing into account?

One of the finest writers working at the intersection of theology and science is a UCC layperson, Ian Barbour, emeritus professor of physics and religion at Carleton College (another institution founded by you-know-who). In his book *When Science Meets Religion*, Barbour identifies four different ways the two disciplines meet:

1. in conflict with each
2. independent of each other
3. in dialogue with each other
4. with integration

I’m going to extract a few of Barbour’s words on each and let you weigh where you stand:

Conflict: Biblical literalists believe that the theory of evolution conflicts with religious faith. Atheistic scientists claim that scientific evidence for evolution is incompatible with any form of theism. The two groups agree in asserting that a person cannot believe in both God and evolution....

Independence: An alternative view holds that science and religion are strangers who can coexist as long as they keep a safe distance from each other. According to this view, there should be no conflict because science and religion refer to differing domains of life or aspects of reality....

Dialogue: One form of dialogue is a comparison of the methods of the two fields...Alternately, dialogue may arise when sciences raises at its boundaries limit – questions that it cannot itself answer (for example, Why is the universe orderly and intelligible?). A third form of dialogue occurs when concepts from science are used as analogies for talking about God’s relationship to the world....

Integration: A more systematic and extensive kind of partnership between science and religion occurs among those who seek a closer integration of the two disciplines. The long tradition of natural theology has sought in nature a proof (or at least suggestive evidence) of the existence of God. Recently, astronomers have argued that the physical constants in the early universe appear to be fine-tuned as if by design.”⁵

Personally, I would argue that as persons of faith, we need to open our hearts and minds to all ways of knowing. God gave each of us a brain to use, so it would be unfaithful to deny that gift.



So, why does any of this matter? You are no doubt aware that Christian fundamentalists have been active in various local communities in trying to pack the school boards with persons who would countenance teaching Creationism (AKA intelligent design) in a science class. You need only look east to Kansas if you want an example of this happening on the state level. And nationally the steps taken by the current administration to lower the wall of separation between church (a particular kind of church) and state are

⁴ *ibid.*, pp. 9–10

⁵ *ibid.*, pp. 2–3

alarming. (Let's not forget that the wall was created to ensure freedom of religion and not to protect the state.)

Harry Emerson Fosdick preached a sermon in 1922 called "Shall the Fundamentalists Win?" The words still ring true: "As I plead thus for an intellectually hospitable, tolerant, liberty-loving church, I am of course thinking about this new generation."⁶ There is also something happening that you might not be aware of: that young people who might otherwise find a path to God through Christ are being turned off by religion that tells them what they must believe, that other ways of knowing are not to be trusted, and that anyone who doesn't believe what they do is damned. I know that I was one of those young people...the kind that didn't come back to church until I was in my 30s. (And there are numerous members of the "church alumni association" who still haven't made it back because of the damage done by intellectually dishonest churches and clergy.)

Churches like ours need to shout from the rooftops that we are out here! It is time for us to say "enough" to those who would equate Christianity with ignorance. We have a distinctive and inclusive message that needs to be heard.

May it be so. Amen.

⁶ Harry Emerson Fosdick, "Shall the Fundamentalists Win?" in *American Sermons* (NY: The Library of America, 1999), pp. 784-785.