

Quote for the Order of Service: “*I assert that the cosmic religious experience is the strongest and the noblest driving force behind scientific research.*” Albert Einstein

Monkey in the Middle: How Intelligent Faith Links Science and Religion – Susan Elias

Today is the 197th birthday of Charles Darwin...Charles Darwin who sailed to the Galapagos on the H.M.S *Beagle* in 1831, Charles Darwin who meant to become a minister, but who became a scientist and gave us the Theory of Evolution¹. This is Evolution Sunday², and 400-plus congregations around the country, from Presbyterians to Methodists, from Congregationalists to Unitarian Universalists, are gathering just like us, right now, to celebrate the compatibility of religion and science. Not the pseudo-science of intelligent design, but real science. Make no mistake—Evolution Sunday is a response of the liberal religious left to the conservative politico-religious right.

Intelligent design, or ID, attributes the appearance and development of the universe to a super-intelligent being, that is, God. Actually, roots of ID go all the way back to Aristotle. But ID has evolved into an attack on the separation of church and state, science education in public schools, science, and scientists themselves. You know, I've been demonized for being a woman, and demonized for being partnered with a woman, but I never expected to be demonized for being a scientist. Wow. It is 2006, right?

¹ *On the Origin of Species by Natural Selection*, 1858.

² The Clergy Letter Project, Michael Zimmerman, Dean of College of Letters and Sciences, University of Wisconsin Oshkosh, http://www.uwosh.edu/colleges/cols/rel_evolution_sun.htm and <http://www.darwinday.org/>

When Reverend Erik offered Evolution Sunday to the Worship Weavers' guild, I jumped at the chance, because I am a wildlife biologist *and* a Unitarian Universalist. I love science *and* I love religion. Science is an approach to understanding, which is very much how we approach our understanding of God or Mystery in our church. In my freshman chemistry class, I was profoundly delighted to learn that the exact location of an electron can never be pinned down--but it is there. I was fascinated to learn that the electrical rhythms in the heartbeat are unpredictable but contained within bounds--and when the rhythms go out-of-bounds, that is fibrillation. This is an example of ordered chaos—out of which comes *models* of how things work.

Scientists think in terms of models. We know the universe is too complicated for us to grasp fully, but we construct operating models to describe phenomena. It goes like this: you form null hypotheses and alternate hypotheses, and come up with ways to test the hypotheses. The tests lead to accepting or rejecting the null hypothesis. Sometimes scientists are disappointed or surprised, but this often leads to new hypotheses and new tests. Albert Einstein rejected the support his own work lent to quantum mechanics--and it was a later generation of scientists that found quantum mechanics was well substantiated by gathering new evidence. The key here is that scientists think in terms of probability, or likelihood. Nothing is ever proven. We say that we are 95% sure we've come to the correct model, but there is a 5% chance that we are wrong. I find alternative hypotheses, uncertainty, ordered chaos, the possibility that we're wrong, beautiful.

So is the Theory of Evolution seamless? No. Are there gaps? Sure. But, as a whole, it is *highly* likely to be the way it works. Think of the ability of the bird-flu virus to mutate so that it may leap from bird to pig to human. And, in only *five* generations of Atlantic salmon, over-fishing and re-stocking with hatchery fish leads to a smaller genetic pool of smaller, weaker, less adaptable fish. Insects develop resistance to pesticides in *one* generation. This I call thrilling, sobering, in-your-face evolution.

Likewise, I found my college Religion 101 class thrilling. There are so many models out there--the Holy Trinity, Unitarianism, the Chakra system of Hinduism, reincarnation of Buddhism, animism, pantheism, atheism. These models, or paths, lead to better living, to coping, to giving, and to living with the mystery--not conquering it. The UU model is to search for truth with reason as our guide, and I love it. Marc Zvi Brettler of Brandeis University, author of *How to Read the Bible*, tells us that Bible stories, such as Genesis, are an anthology of myths...not myth as pulp fiction, but as metaphor, as a charter for how we can live meaningfully. He writes that it is a fundamental misunderstanding to view metaphor as science. Thus religion becomes for me not a rigid defense of the literal word, but a joyous, challenging search for truth.

And so you see, this makes me a very happy monkey in the middle of religion and science.

And that brings me to the illustration on the front of your Order of Service today. On either side of the giddy monkey, you may recognize bumper sticker symbols. On the right is the Christian fish symbol, on the left the Darwin fish with feet. This particular bumper sticker war began with the Christian fish. It is thought that in the early days of Christianity, when the faith was

considered dangerous, believers often drew the outline of a fish to quietly proclaim their faith. The fish symbol is a public statement of Christian faith for some, but for others was seen as a statement of support for the Biblical story of creation. Parody on the Jesus fish soon appeared as the “Darwin fish,” with the little feet headed toward land. Tom Lessl, University of Georgia professor of communication, surveyed Darwin fish symbol-owners. He asked: Why did you put this emblem on your car? What audience did you hope to reach? What does the Darwin fish mean to you? Here are some responses:

“Mainly I did it to annoy the Christian right wing, since they are so fond of putting the fish-Christ symbols on their cars. I also use it to display the symbol of my group, which believes natural processes explain the world around us.”

Another said: “I believe that the Darwin fish sums up my religious beliefs. I believe in a higher being, God, if you will, but I do not believe that the acknowledgment of such a god excludes scientific and anthropological evidence for either the Big Bang theory or evolution.”

And another: “I am not trying to attack any other religious groups. I believe that everyone is entitled to their own beliefs, and I don’t want to impose mine on anyone; however, I can see how some people might feel hurt by the obvious play on the traditional fish logo. I can’t speak for everyone, but I don’t see it as anything but light-hearted.”

And this one “It is my way of saying, ‘Creationists are [expletive] idiots. Get a [expletive] education. Humans are no better than chickens, redwoods, fireflies, earthworms, goldfish, algae or infectious salmonella, just because we walk upright and have opposable thumbs.’”

And my personal favorite: “I have actually been approached by people who are confused by the Darwin fish on the back of my car and the Christian College of Georgia parking sticker on the front. They wonder how I could have both.”

Well, you know what I think—there is no need for religion-bashing or science-bashing. Intelligent Faith links science and religion with ease. Let’s remember that Biblical creationists and UUs alike are searching for meaning, understanding, truth, and comfort. For many spiritual people, the possibility of a Godless universe is too harsh, cold, and chaotic. Trying to be compassionate, I remind myself that for some religious fundamentalists, evolution is a threat to their faith. I heard a lady on the radio say “we ain’t evolved from no apes, and if they try to teach my kids otherwise, I’m gonna home school.” In that I hear a person who is threatened, and don’t we all feel threatened at times? But I also hear voters being manipulated by fear into close-mindedness, the dumbing-down of our kids, dangerous disrespect for intelligence in non-human life, and an assault on religious and scientific freedom.

As the recent Kitzmiller vs. Dover Area School District case in Pennsylvania makes clear, the 1925 Scopes “Monkey” trial on evolution has not ended. Intelligent design as *theology* is okay, but it’s not science. The problem arises when unscientific political and religious institutions try

to usurp science. Hitler dominated and derailed science. Listen well to people like Baptist Jimmy Carter who calls for us to preserve the separation of church and state. Listen to the ruling of Judge John E. Jones III in *Kitzmiller*: "Teaching intelligent design in public school biology classes violates the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment to the Constitution of the United States...because intelligent design is not science and cannot uncouple itself from its creationist, and thus religious, antecedents." But don't think ID is going away. If we endorse the establishment clause, then we'd better stay on our toes. As abolitionist Wendell Phillips said, "Eternal vigilance is the price of liberty."

But let's get back to how Intelligent Faith harmoniously links science and religion. Think of it this way. Carl Sagan, our icon of cosmology, said when his child was really sick, he prayed to God. Darwin himself studied evolution with the absolute belief that he was studying God's work. Ecologist E. O. Wilson said that people have a biological need for religion and philosophy. When you sit with ravens in winter, your awe can only expand. Look at the rainbow colors of the mosquito wing, or watch water freeze into feathery crystals. Watch as your newborn's eyes learn to track. Watch barnacles open as the moon pulls the tidewaters away. We scientists—and each and every one of us is born a scientist—are agape. Intelligent Faith is ours at birth. Intelligent Faith tells us there is room for God in science, and science in God, together, in our *souls*. No problem.