

A Sermon – Psalm 19
Intelligent Design, Science and Faithful Practice
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Theme: *There is only one Truth: the Truth of God that comes to us in many forms. Scientific discovery is one form, revelation is another, but it is all one truth. To this one Truth, we can join the Psalmist in singing Alleluia.*

Recently, a scientist who is also a leader in his congregation offered a devotional to his local Church board, based upon a reading of Genesis 1. His comments were prompted by an essay in the Washington Post by Henry Brinton, a Presbyterian pastor and a writer for this journal, on the debate within his congregation between proponents of Intelligent Design and those who hold to the theory of Evolution. The scientist began by describing himself as a scientist and a Christian. He went on to explain the difference between a scientific theory which is the overarching generalization or synthesis of many tested and proved hypotheses and an hypothesis that is not provable by a set of repeated tests. Scientific theory is not the same as hypothesis. Then he stated his own conviction regarding creation. “God did it. The Genesis stories of creation while different in detail agree that God did it. This theme runs throughout the Bible. That God did it does not suggest how God created us and I find it somewhere between amusing/annoying/irritating/maddening that people might have the temerity to insist that God did it in a way that is pleasing to them. I feel that God has given us the intelligence to explore the world around us and to do our best to understand it.”

This approach, combining the pursuit of truth through scientific discovery with a humble acknowledgment of truths only known to God, allows for an embrace of science and faith. It allows for one to pursue the data that science reveals, including data about the origins of life, while praising God as the magnificent author of all that is. This, in fact, was the approach of many of the great scientists of history, including Galileo, Kepler and Einstein. The pursuit of truth is what animated them. If one believes that God is the author of all truth, then the pursuit of scientific truth is not to be feared but rather pursued with joy and delight in the discoveries that will render the manifold splendor of God’s truth. Truth is truth, therefore, scientific truth need not be held in opposition to revealed, or religious, truth. They are different aspects of the one Truth of God.

Generations of believers have embraced the prayer of Psalm 19 in just this way.

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. (Psalm 19:1 & 2)

The Psalmist gazes around the beauty of creation and utters praise to God, the sovereign author of all. This praise-offering comes from a truth born of faith. This is not an astronomical explanation, it is an act of praise welling up from the heart of human being. If it’s not a scientific explanation, is it true that the heavens are the work of God? Yes, it is true, but it is the truth of faith that animates praise. In the same way, another Psalm gives praise to God for the glory of the human person who has a unique place in all creation.

Yet, you have made them a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honor. (Psalm 8.5)

Ever since Charles Darwin set forth the theory of evolution in which the origins of life, including human life, spring from natural selection, which we now know is acting on random genetic variation, some religious believers have felt a radical threat to existence of God and particularly their faith in God as creator and author of truth. The latest version of this argument against the scientific theory of evolution comes from proponents of Intelligent Design. It is not a new argument but an old one repackaged and significantly more sophisticated than earlier versions of creationism. They do not believe that Darwin’s theory of evolution is adequate to describe the wonderfully complex diversity of creation. They believe such complexity, (the human eye being the most common example given), demands an unseen Designer; an acknowledgment that evolutionary biologists, and other scientists, are unwilling to make because the data does not prove the existence of an Intelligent Designer in a way that can be tested by the standard scientific methods.

On the other hand, many scientists, including Christians like the congregational leader offering the devotional, see the Intelligent Design movement, however sophisticated it might be packaged, as a distinct undermining of scientific research that has been tested numerous times and a severing of the once peaceful alliance

of science and faith, each grounded in the pursuit of truth. This severance would be most unfortunate, and certainly not one anticipated by the historic faith of Christians and Jews.

Lyanda Lynn Haupt, writing in the journal *Image*, says that even Darwin did not believe such a radical severance between faith and scientific discovery was necessary for those who trust the data of evolution. While unwilling to embrace any traditional Christian belief, with regard to theological assertions about God's presence in creation, Darwin happily described himself as agnostic. Haupt points out, "Darwin's intent has been distorted. His agnosticism was always centered on the limits of human knowledge, rather than an outright rejection of engagement with theological questions. Darwin wrote, "The mystery of the beginning of all things is insoluble by us; and I for one must be content to remain an Agnostic." According to Haupt, it was Thomas Henry Huxley, a friend and defender of Darwin, who in 1869 best described this middle position. "He was an a-gnostic, a non-knower, one who could not claim to know ultimate matters with rational certainty or through the empirical processes of modern science. Huxley distained [disdained?] the arrogance of popular theologians who claimed to explain the ways of God in the world, but he was likewise critical of atheists who doffed the significance of theological questioning altogether."

It is unlikely that the Psalmist surveying the heavens and praising God for the wonders thereof while giving thanks for the place of humanity within creation was thinking about the details of how such wonders occurred. He was simply offering praise and gratitude for his maker and living his life in accordance with the view that God is, indeed, the glorious author of all creation. The question of how might never occur to him, as it never occurs to millions of believers who joyfully give praise to God, without regard to the intricacies of chance, randomness and natural selection. For many, these matters are part of the fabric of life proven by science and pose no threat to their theology or to their practice of praise and gratitude.

Perhaps, this is where people of faith should let things rest. Matters of science, including the theories of the origins of life, are to be pursued by way of the standard forms of scientific research. Matters of science when in dispute, including theories about the origins of life, cannot to be solved by theology, nor can matters of theological dispute be solved by the scientific method. Theology has to do with the pursuit of God and doxological practice that flow from our understanding and experience of God. This is the path of the Psalmist and it has been the path of Christians and Jews for generations. Holy Scripture offers a window into the exploration of God and what it means for human beings to live in profound relationship with the Giver of all good gifts. Christians explore the New Testament assertion that God has been revealed in Jesus Christ, who is the One in whom all things hold together. (Colossians 2:17)

The most obvious instance in which theology particularly moral theology, calls the theory of natural selection into question is when it justifies the "survival of the fittest" in social policy decisions. This form of so-called natural selection is often nothing more than a way for the powerful to crush the poor, the weak and vulnerable who are the very ones that faithful Jews and Christians are called to defend.

Recently, an editorial in the *Christian Century* stated, "the knowledge of God cannot be gleaned simply looking at nature." Surely even Darwin would agree with this assertion. The knowledge of nature comes by looking at nature, and even then there are mysteries that remain beyond our understanding. Christians, believing that *all* creation coheres in Christ, in whom the fullness of God dwells, are free to explore all the wonders of the natural world using the tools of science for learning and more complete understanding. We can join the Psalmist who rejoices in the wonders of creation. Such wonders are not diminished by the work of science; they are illuminated. The question is whether people who believe in God can live with the truth of scientific data while offering praise and gratitude to God. To live otherwise is to set truth discerned from science against truth discerned from revelation, scripture and tradition. That is unnecessary for people of faith. There is only one Truth: the Truth of God that comes to us in many forms. Scientific discovery is one form, revelation is another, but it is all one truth. To this one Truth, we can join the Psalmist in singing Alleluia.

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