

Sermon Notes – January 8 2006
St. John's United Church of Christ, San Francisco
Rev. Kyle Lovett
Sermon Title: "*Bereshit* - In Which Beginning?
Readings: Genesis 1:1-5; Mark 1:4-11

Intelligent Design

I received many emails this week. Among them was a significant one from the ACLU:

ACLU Wins Historic Verdict in "Intelligent Design" Case

In a sweeping and historic ruling, Judge John E. Jones III said intelligent design is a particular religious belief, not a valid scientific theory, and teaching it in public school science classrooms violates the Constitution. This first-ever legal challenge to teaching intelligent design, brought on behalf of 11 parents from Dover, Pennsylvania, was led by the ACLU.

The decision in *Kitzmiller v. Dover* is a victory not only for the ACLU and the parents we represented, but for all who believe it is inappropriate, and unconstitutional, to advance a particular religious belief at the expense of our children's education.

The judge's decision strikes down a controversial Dover Area School Board policy adopted in October 2004 that required high school science teachers to present "intelligent design" as an alternative to evolution. Judge Jones ruled that the policy violated the plaintiffs' religious liberty and that the school board acted to promote their own religious views rather than advance science education.

"The breathtaking inanity of the Board's decision is evident when considered against the factual backdrop which has now been fully revealed through this trial," Judge Jones wrote in his opinion. "The students, parents, and teachers of the Dover Area School District deserved better than to be dragged into this legal maelstrom, with its resulting utter waste of monetary and personal resources."

The trial has sparked a national debate prompting school districts, elected

officials, academics and religious leaders to publicly oppose teaching "intelligent design" in the science classroom.

"Intelligent design" is an assertion that an intelligent, supernatural entity has intervened in the history of life. Witnesses in the trial demonstrated that such an assertion is inherently a religious argument that falls outside the realm of science. Judge Jones agreed in his opinion.

"We are very pleased Judge Jones agreed with the plaintiffs and that public school science instruction will not be muddled with religious beliefs masquerading as scientific theories," said ACLU of Pennsylvania Legal Director Witold Walczak, a lead attorney for the plaintiffs. ¹

Wasn't all this resolved with the famous Scopes Trial?

Scopes Trial

In the 1920's the ACLU sought a science teacher willing to challenge a Tennessee state law that prevented the teaching of evolution in public schools.

According to Steve Kemper (Smithsonian) -- town boosters in rural Dayton, TN figured such a dynamic trial would be good for the local economy -- so they went looking for a willing teacher.

They approached 24-year-old John Scopes whose classroom textbooks indeed contained the theory of evolution, which he understood and agreed with, though it is not clear he ever taught it in his classes.

Two the greatest national orators of the time were brought to town to argue the case. William Jennings Bryant, a politician and champion of creationism and Clarence Darrow, a labor union and racial injustice attorney volunteered for a showdown billed as "a duel to the death" to reveal, once and for all, who had the trump card when it came to explaining the origins of life -- religion or science.

Bryant, unable to match Darrow scholar for scholar, and theologian for theologian, decided to switch gears, supported by Judge John Raulston -- a conservative Methodist lay minister.

Instead of the great dual of ideas, Bryant's challenged the teaching of **any** human origins theories in public classrooms -- evolution or Creationism. He argued that any discussion of origins would include reflections upon God which is unconstitutional.

Darrow, prevented from calling his host of academic and religious witnesses, pulled his own surprising tactic. He called Bryant to the stand to defend literal readings of the Bible. Darrow succeeded in making Bryant look foolish, but he lost the case.

Each side had it's own foundational authority.

For Bryant and the Creationists -- the Bible was the supreme source of truth, regardless of the subject being considered. Because the scientific findings of Charles Darwin conflicted with biblical content, for them, those results could not be true.

For Darrow and the Evolutionists -- the scientific process was the supreme source of observable truth. For them, belief in the Bible was irrelevant to explanations of nature, which can be scientifically proven. ²

I've been musing, since Intelligent Design resurfaced in public debate, that we ought to write a book about Intelligent Design. After all, it could legitimately be argued that children ought to be exposed to the idea that there are varied beliefs about the origin of the world.

But it shouldn't be done in Biology class or any of the other so-called "hard science" classes.

I believe that one key to the conflict between Intelligent Design and Evolution lies in a misunderstanding of scientific theory.

There was a review in a recent *Scientific American* magazine of Chris Mooney's new book, *The Republican War on Science*. I don't mean to be partisan here, but I think his work is worth mentioning.

Mooney details what he calls "science abuse" -- an intentional attack upon scientific principals and process. His work, and that of others, claims the Religious Right has been exploiting "a misconception about science common among nonscientists -- a belief that uncertainty in findings indicates fatally flawed research." (Rensberger)

Academics also point to the misuse of the meaning of "theory":
in the popular culture means an opinion,
but in science means an explanation.

Dr. Scott, executive director of the National Center for Science Education in Oakland, illustrates: "The theory of gravity is not an opinion or an observation, it explains why things fall." (Kemper)³

But what would it look like for a progressive Christian to advocate the teaching of Intelligent Design?

To begin with, instead of the topic being introduced in Biology class, it should be done in whatever passes as Sociology class these days – where kids learn about cultures and societies and human phenomena. There are many more theories of Intelligent Design – or shouldn't we call them what they really are – Creation Stories – than those in the Bible. That's what I want to compile – a children's book about Creation Stories – Intelligent Design stories from all over the world and from many different cultures.

Wouldn't that just fry the Creationists? Teach Intelligent Design more like a survey of world religions' creation myths. Here are some samples I was thinking of:

Whose Creation Story?

Shinto:

Of old, Heaven and Earth were not yet separated, and the In and Yo not yet divided. They formed a chaotic mass like an egg which was of obscurely defined limits and contained germs.

The purer and clearer part was thinly drawn out, and formed Heaven, while the heavier and grosser element settled down and became Earth.

The finer element easily became a united body, but the consolidation of the heavy and gross element was accomplished with difficulty.

Heaven was therefore formed first, and Earth was established subsequently.⁴

Apache:

In the beginning nothing existed--no earth, no sky, no sun, no moon, only darkness was everywhere.

Suddenly from the darkness emerged a thin disc, one side yellow and the other side white, appearing suspended in midair. Within the disc sat a small bearded man, Creator, the One Who Lives Above. As if waking from a long nap, he rubbed his eyes and face with both hands.

When he looked into the endless darkness, light appeared above. He looked down and it became a sea of light. To the east, he created yellow streaks of dawn. To the west, tints of many colours appeared everywhere. There were also clouds of different colours.

Creator wiped his sweating face and rubbed his hands together, thrusting them downward. Behold! A shining cloud upon which sat a little girl.

"Stand up and tell me where are you going," said Creator. But she did not reply. He rubbed his eyes again and offered his right hand to the Girl-Without-Parents.

"Where did you come from?" she asked, grasping his hand.

"From the east where it is now light," he replied, stepping upon her cloud.

"Where is the earth?" she asked.

"Where is the sky?" he asked, and sang, "I am thinking, thinking, thinking what I shall create next." He sang four times, which was the magic number.

Creator brushed his face with his hands, rubbed them together, then flung them wide open! Before them stood Sun-God. Again Creator rubbed his sweaty brow and from his hands dropped Small- Boy.

All four gods sat in deep thought upon the small cloud.

"What shall we make next?" asked Creator. "This cloud is much too small for us to live upon."

Then he created Tarantula, Big Dipper, Wind, Lightning-Maker, and some western clouds in which to house Lightning-Rumbler, which he just finished.

Creator sang, "Let us make earth. I am thinking of the earth, earth, earth; I am thinking of the earth," he sang four times.

All four gods shook hands. In doing so, their sweat mixed together and Creator rubbed his palms, from which fell a small round, brown ball, not much larger than a bean.

Creator kicked it, and it expanded. Girl-Without-Parents kicked the ball, and it enlarged more. Sun-God and Small-Boy took turns giving it hard kicks, and each time the ball expanded. Creator told Wind to go inside the ball and to blow it up.

Tarantula spun a black cord and, attaching it to the ball, crawled away fast to the east, pulling on the cord with all his strength. Tarantula repeated with a blue cord to the south, a yellow cord to the west, and a white cord to the north. With mighty pulls in each direction, the brown ball stretched to immeasurable size--it became the earth! No hills, mountains, or rivers were visible; only smooth, treeless, brown plains appeared.

Creator scratched his chest and rubbed his fingers together and there appeared Hummingbird.

"Fly north, south, east, and west and tell us what you see," said Creator.

"All is well," reported Hummingbird upon his return. "The earth is most beautiful, with water on the west side."

But the earth kept rolling and dancing up and down. So Creator made four giant posts--black, blue, yellow, and white to support the earth. Wind carried the four posts, placing them beneath the four cardinal points of the earth. The earth sat still.

Creator sang, "World is now made and now sits still," which he repeated four times. ⁵

West African: ⁶

I. Mande Creation Myth

The creation myth of Mande-speaking people of southern Mali is an example of what is called a "cosmic egg myth." As reflected in their culture, the creation myth has elements of an imperfect creation as a result of incest. Here, we present one of many versions of the creation myth as told to us by Professor Bastain in our AFS/ANT267 class.

In the beginning, there was only Mangala. Mangala is a singular, powerful being who is perceived to be a round, energetic presence. Within Mangala existed four divisions, which were symbolic of, among many things, the four days of the week (time), the four elements (matter), and the four directions (space). Mangala also contained two sets of dual gendered twins. Mangala was tired of keeping all of this matter inside, so the god removed it and compiled it into a seed. The seed was his creation of the world. The seed however did not hold together well and blew up. Mangala was disappointed with this and destroyed the world he created.

Mangala did not lose hope; the creator began again, this time with two sets of twin seeds. Mangala planted the seeds in an egg shaped womb where they gestated. Mangala continued to put more sets of twin seeds in the womb until he had 8 sets of seeds. In the womb, the gestating seeds transformed themselves into fish. The fish is considered a symbol of fertility in the Mande world. This time, Mangala's creation was successful. This is important, because it illustrates the idea of dual gendered twinship, an idea that permeates Mande culture.

II. Yoruba Creation Myth

The Yoruba creator is called Olurun or Olodumare and is often assisted by the lesser god, Obatala. In the beginning, there was only water and chaos. The supreme being sent Obatala or Orishanla down from the sky to create some land out of the chaos. He descended on a long chain (umbilical cord) and brought with him a rooster, some iron, and a palm kernel. First, he put the metal on the earth and the rooster on top of that. The rooster scratched the metal and spread it out to create land. Then he planted the palm seed and from it grew the earth's vegetation. Olurun named earth "Ife" and the first city "Ile-Ife." Orshilana created humans out of the earth and got Olurun to blow life into them. ⁷

Babylonian:

When there was no heaven,
no earth, no height, no depth, no name,
when Apsu was alone,
the sweet water, the first begetter; and Tiamat
the bitter water, and that
return to the womb, her Mummu,
when there were no gods-

When sweet and bitter mingled together, no reed was plaited, no rushes
muddied the water, the gods were nameless, natureless, futureless,

then from Apsu and Tiamat in the waters gods were created, in the waters
silt precipitated,

Lahmu and Lahumu,
were named; they were not yet old
not yet grown tall
when Anshar and Kishar overtook them both,
the lines of sky and earth
stretched where horizons meet to separate
cloud from silt.

Days on days, years
on year passed till Anu, the empty heaven,
heir and supplanter,
first-born of his father, in his own nature
begot Nudimmud-Ea,
intellect, wisdom, wider than heaven's horizon,
the strongest of all the kindred. ⁸

More: <http://www.magictails.com/creationlinks.html>

We could learn a lot about what motivates people, what makes them tick, why we have misunderstandings – if we learned about the creation myths and what they say about a culture.

In Genesis, for example, there's already water and chaos and void and darkness. In the Apache story, there's only darkness – no water, no chaos, no nothing.

Some say that matter is inherently evil and corrupt.

Some say that matter is good.

Some say that humans are inherently evil and corrupt.

Some say that humans are born of the gods.

Some say that humans are bastard children of the gods.

In the face of quantum physics, some want to say that the answer to what was at point zero minus one millisecond of the big bang? God! ⁹

Faith and Science

Over ten years ago, in 1992, UCC theologians refined an earlier statement addressing the teaching of evolution and creationism.

In "Creationism, the Church, and the Public School"

The UCC:

- supported 1987 Supreme Court decision banning teaching "creation-science" in public classrooms
- challenged the abuse of science by creationists.

Advocated:

- creative freedom in biblical interpretation
- the role of the church in teaching religious ideas
- continued support for academic freedom in public schools.

Recommended:

- local UCC congregations study and discuss these matters

- work to maintain the teaching of evolution in public schools
- elect school board members who are pro-evolution

Called pastors to:

- teach belief in the Creator God
- challenge literal readings of scripture,
- engage in creative dialogue across disciplines.

In the spirit of that call, I joined thousands of American Christian clergy, affirming the appropriate co-existence of religious and scientific truths, by signing an "Open Letter Concerning Religion and Science," written by Dean Michael Zimmerman, College of Letters & Science, Univ. of Wisconsin at Oshkosh:

(excerpt) "We the undersigned, Christian clergy from many different traditions, believe that the timeless truths of the Bible and the discoveries of modern science may comfortably coexist.

We believe that the theory of evolution is a foundational scientific truth, one that has stood up to rigorous scrutiny and upon which much of human knowledge and achievement rests.

To reject this truth or to treat it as a theory among others is to deliberately embrace scientific ignorance and transmit such ignorance to our children." ¹⁰

The ties that bind us are found in the affirmation of *bereshit* – we're made in the image of the Author of Life, the Holy One, the divine. That's our faith affirmation. It is *not* incompatible with evolutionary theory. Both of those messages are what we, as Progressive Christians, proclaim.

¹ From an ACLU email update. The full opinion and additional information on *Kitzmiller v. Dover* is available online at: www.aclu.org/evolution

² From *Teaching Evolution: By What Authority?* Text: Matt. 21:23-32 - a sermon delivered 10/16/05 at the United Church of Hayward, UCC in Hayward, CA by The Rev. Kathryn M. Schreiber.

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⁴ Translated by W.G. Aston, *Nihongi* (London: Kegan, Paul, Trench, Trübner, 1896), 1-2; Edited by Richard Hooker; found at <http://www.wsu.edu:8080/~dee/ANCJAPAN/CREAT1.HTM>

⁵ Compiled by: Glenn Welker; Last Updated: August 12, 2004; found at <http://www.indians.org/welker/creation.htm>

⁶ The creation myths of Africans are as varied as the many cultures which inhabit the continent. Cosmogony mythologies play an important role in West African societies; they set up the framework of the social, political, and even economic structure of society. From *West African Cosmogony: Origin Myths of Mande, Yoruba, and Cameroon*; found at <http://server1.fandm.edu/departments/Anthropology/Bastian/ANT269/cosmo.html>

⁷ *West African Cosmogony: Origin Myths of Mande, Yoruba, and Cameroon*; found at <http://server1.fandm.edu/departments/Anthropology/Bastian/ANT269/cosmo.html>

⁸ <http://ccat.sas.upenn.edu/~hummm/Resources/Ane/enumaA.html>

⁹ From Midrash

¹⁰ From *Teaching Evolution: By What Authority?* Text: Matt. 21:23-32 - a sermon delivered 10/16/05 at the United Church of Hayward, UCC in Hayward, CA by The Rev. Kathryn M. Schreiber.