

The Politics of Creation

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Readings

Rev. Helen Lutten Cohen, First Unitarian Universalist Parish, Lexington Massachusetts

I continue to believe passionately that science and religion are compatible. Individually we may be more comfortable with one approach or another, but we can still recognize that any one approach is limited and needs others. We can rejoice in what they can accomplish together.

One meaning of Unitarianism is the belief that all that exists is ultimately one, whatever form it takes: matter and energy, body and soul, mind and heart, all living and non-living things, deduction and intuition, emotion and intellect, love and reason, science and religion....

Universalism entails a belief that everything belongs. Science has uncovered enough about genetics to show us that we belong together within the human family, among primates, among all living things, among the stars. We are at once so small and so securely held by and connected with a vastness beyond our comprehension. I felt as a child, and I feel now, the attachment between me and each thing I encounter. In some sense, I love the whole world. God is in the details. When we live in the world with this understanding, there are few simple answers, and fewer absolutes. We must be ready to open our minds and hearts to change, however convinced we are. We must also be ready to act, according to our best understandings and with humility.

Dr. Bob Cornwall, Pastor of First Christian Church of Lompoc. October 16, 2005

The scientific and religious communities come into conflict when they speak of things about which they are not equipped to speak. Scientists are no longer functioning as scientists when they make claims about the ultimate nature of reality. Religious adherents err when they turn their sacred texts, written for theological purposes, into a template for scientific inquiry. Genesis does not offer scientific theory, but it does offer a wonderful statement about the meaning and purpose of creation, which is something scientific theory is not equipped to handle. On these matters, science is silent, and rightly so. Unfortunately this silence has been interpreted in some religious quarters as antagonism toward religion.

It is healthy to debate the merits of science and faith. The questions of intelligence and design and their relationship to science are worth pursuing, but not in our science classrooms. Continuing the battle in its present form diminishes both science and faith. Is it any surprise that in this fractious climate America is falling behind the rest of the

developed world in science? Is it any wonder that many people swear off faith in God, because it would seem that to embrace God is to deny science?

There is a middle path that can lead to fruitful dialogue. Let us choose our path wisely.

Sermon

Did you know that there are actually two creation stories in the Book of Genesis? In the first, God takes six days to create the world, bringing forth first the separation of water from sky, then the separation of land from water. He then creates vegetation, separates light from darkness and fills the water with fish and the sky with birds. On the last day he creates mammals, including human beings. Most importantly, God gives all of this to the humans, telling them to take care of it. And then creation is done.

According to the second story, all that is, is dust. God causes a mist to rise from the earth and waters the dry nothingness. He takes up the dust and forms a man, called Adam. Then he creates a garden filled with trees and rivers for Adam to live in. Seeing that Adam should not be alone, he creates the animals, and calls on Adam to name them. When Adam falls asleep, God takes from him a rib and forms the first woman, Eve.

There has been much speculation about why there are two creation stories in the book of Genesis. One theory suggests that much of what became the Hebrew Bible originated in an older Oral tradition. When this Oral tradition began to be written down, multiple variations appeared, not unusual for oral traditions. Rather than choosing just a

few or combining them, all the stories were included in what eventually became the Hebrew Bible. In the case of the Creation Story of Genesis, there were two. It did not concern those working on the final text that some of the details conflicted or that there was more than one story about the same event. As in so many cultures based in oral tradition, truth itself is often seen as more flexible. Better to hold onto the inconsistencies than to run the risk of omitting part of the larger truth you are trying to capture. If those inconsistencies forced generations of scholars to struggle with scripture for the truth, so much the better. It's the struggle for truth that augments the richness of religious faith and practice.

I have often wondered why traditional Christians are so threatened by evolution, evolution being the scientific theory that all forms of existence change over time in response to their environment. Are evolution and the Genesis story of creation not simply two stories approaching the same aspects of life, but from different angles? Perhaps I am not alone in my lack of understanding. I never really understood why the 1925 Skopes Monkey Trial, which focused on whether evolution should be taught in the classroom, became a national event. Why has the religious right been filling school boards with trustees bent on bringing creationism into our science classrooms - creationism being the belief that the universe and all life was created in a mature and fully functioning form. And why, when the Supreme Court ruled that Creationism was not scientifically based and did not belong in science curriculums, did creationists redevelop their theory, call it "intelligent design" and try again?

Bishop John Shelby Spong, a liberal Episcopalian priest and theologian, deftly explains why evolution is such a hard pill for traditional Christians to swallow. Listen to what he writes:

Darwin shattered biblical literalism and its seven-day creation story.... The whole interpretative myth by which Christianity presented its faith system began to crumble. That myth asserted that in the beginning was a good creation ... which ... bore witness to God's perfection. Then there came.... the eating of the fruit from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. This act plunged the world into a state of sin ... from which there was no way of escape ... [Then] God entered human life in the person of Jesus, who bore the punishment of the fall ... and paid the price for it in the crucifixion and overcame it in the Resurrection. Finally, ... believers in every age could appropriate for themselves the salvation offered on the cross of Calvary. The only problem is that this myth is based on an understanding of human origins that is simply wrong.

Darwin forced us to acknowledge that there never was a finished and perfect creation. Creation, he asserted is an ongoing and unfinished process. Human life is evolving from lower forms of life so it was, therefore, not created perfect. If perfection was not our original definition, then we could not fall into sin, not even metaphorically. This means that there never was something called "the fall." Human beings cannot, therefore, be rescued from a fall that never happened, nor can they be restored to a status that they have never possessed. All life is in flux. That was the Darwinian insight ...

Darwin's theory of evolution seriously threatens any literalist understanding of the creation stories and the theological meaning given to them. This is why evolution is so threatening to traditional Christians. Notice I echo Spong in saying traditional Christians. There are many Christians who are not threatened in the least by evolution, Christians who do not have a literalist interpretation of the Bible, and who see their faith as a living evolving faith, much as we Unitarian Universalists see our faith.

However, for those literalist Christians, there's just no way around it! And their response? Discredit evolutionism and promote creationism, which just so happens to dovetail perfectly with the theology that arises from a literalist interpretation of the Bible. Many creationists will deny that they start with the Bible for the core of their theory. Many will claim that their theory is grounded scientifically, but you would be hard pressed to find a creation scientist who is not also a literalist Christian.

Now, it would be easy to spend my time with you this morning talking about why evolution is right and why creationism is wrong, and why religion doesn't belong in science, but somehow I think I would be preaching to the choir, and that would be a waste of your time and mine. What I want to do is explore the theological consequences of this issue. We pretty much know what's at stake for traditional Christianity – the demise of the big answers they have for the big questions about the meaning of life. But what's at stake for us?

What's at stake for us is that we are witnessing a dangerous thinning of the line between religion and state. What's at stake is that a theologically-motivated political force is dressing theology in scientific clothing and trying to force it into our children's schools. What's at stake is that bringing creationism and/or intelligent design into our schools drags our children back into the damaging doctrine of original sin that many of us left behind.

Ironically, it's a self-described creation scientist who sums up the stakes pretty well. According to Darren Gordon, "The question of origins has a

direct bearing on our behavior, our destiny, our concept of God, and our philosophy of life.”¹

So what are the consequences of creationism for our behaviour, our destiny, our philosophy of life? If you can point to a specific point of origin as the point of perfection, there is no room for innovation. Innovation becomes the enemy, it becomes dangerous, because anything new takes us further away from our perfect origins and deeper into a state of imperfection. You find perfection and ultimate truth by looking back to your origins and seeking to rebuild that state of perfection in your life. This is a kind of “originalism”, not unlike the judicial philosophy practiced by conservative Supreme Court judges like Scalia and Thomas who hold that the Constitution is to be interpreted according to the original intention of its writers. Likewise, creationists will argue that life itself is to be structured according to the original intention of its creator, God, and God’s intentions for creation are held within the Genesis account. If it’s not in Genesis, it wasn’t meant to be. This has strong consequences for moral issues like gender equality, marriage equality, racial equality, the definition of family, environmental protectionism, and more.

What are the theological consequences of evolution for our behavior, our destiny, our concept of God, and our philosophy of life? Although the theory of evolution itself contains no pronouncements about morality, it’s not too difficult to see the moral implications that can be derived from it. Evolution has no point of origin. The only law is the law of change. If change is a constant, then innovation and newness are nothing to be feared,

¹ <http://www.clubs.psu.edu/up/origins/faqsci.htm>

but rather to be embraced. Change builds on change. But if you can't go back to an origin to legitimize whatever life philosophy you're trying to legitimize, then what do you use? Well, evolution doesn't give us that answer either, because that's not what science is supposed to do. This is in the realm of theology, and so let me answer this question from the Unitarian Universalist context.

In a religion that, like the theory of evolution, sees change as natural and desirable, we use experience. Religious liberals place a great deal of importance on experience. It allows us to be flexible in the way we approach life.

Take the example of gender equality. It doesn't exist in the Bible, and thus many traditional Christians, deep down, do not support gender equality. We have a different way, a way based on experience. When a critical mass of women began to speak from their experience, Unitarian Universalists sought to respond to that experience. To be fair, there was initial resistance. After all we are creatures of this culture as well, but over time, the truth of women's experience gained power and definitive changes were made in how we did this religion. Same thing for homosexuality. The Bible denounces it, and so literalist Christians denounce it as well. In Unitarian Universalism, when a critical mass of gay folks began to speak from their experience, we took them at their word, and things began to change in our religion. Our religion is still struggling with the consequences of the experience of race. This predominantly white religion struggles with how to respond to the experience of racism, but we are committed to the process, even if we often fail to make the changes that we need to. For our failures, we are in a

religion that believes in change, embraces change, rather than fearing it. We believe it is the moral thing to do. In this way, the theory of evolution reinforces our philosophy and theology of life.

But there are some ways that evolution challenges Unitarian Universalism as deeply as it challenges traditional Christianity. The comfortable relationship between Unitarian Universalism and evolution stretches when we look at the nature of change. Unitarian Universalism holds an optimistic view of change. Change is a good thing. It makes our lives better and richer, and we have the potential of being better moral beings when we work with change rather than fighting against it. There is a strong emphasis in our religion on improvement – improvement of society as a whole, improvement and betterment of our own individual selves, improvement in the relations we have with others.

Evolution withholds any promise of future improvement. One of the central features of evolution is natural selection. The organism with the genetic code best suited to its environment will survive, and the others will die. There is no sentimentality in natural selection. There are no favourites. There is no sense of fairness or justice. The ones that fail aren't evil, and the ones that survive aren't good. Evolution makes no such moral claims.² We cannot use the theory of evolution to make moral claims about fairness, or equality, or justice, about moral accountability or about personal

² This concept was articulated by Rev. John E. Gibbons in his sermon, "Why Evolution Still Matters," delivered at the First Parish in Bedford Massachusetts, February 6, 2005.

responsibility. These issues take us into the realm where science has no authority.

And that's why it's dangerous to use force science into theories that are about justifying a particular morality. Recall the words of our reading: "Scientists are no longer functioning as scientists when they make claims about the ultimate nature of reality. Religious adherents err when they turn their sacred texts, written for theological purposes, into a template for scientific inquiry."

There is no implicit morality embedded within Darwin's theory of evolution. In fact, history shows us that evolution has been used as a force of oppression, just as it has been a tool for liberation. When Darwin's theory first emerged in the late 1800s, many interpreted natural selection according to white upper middle class values. Darwin's natural selection became aligned with survival of the fit and was used to justify the superiority of the white race and the economic power of the middle class. There was a moral power given to strength and survival, and anyone who couldn't make it, wasn't meant to make it. This mutation of evolution has been called Social Darwinism. Strange how the transformation of natural selection into survival of the fittest dovetails so well with contemporary neo-conservative ideologies that understand poverty as deviance.

Science just isn't meant to be used as the handmaiden of morality. If we try to twist evolution into a theological system supporting a certain set of morals, we're manipulating science as badly as our opponents. Religion

and science are two different tools, and the dividing line between the two is not always clear, but it's best to be aware that there is a dividing line.

This may actually be hard for some Unitarian Universalists because there are among us those who have turned to science and nature for the grounding of our theologies, and so perhaps this is something that is at stake for us in the struggle that has erupted between evolutionists and creationists. Perhaps we are just as hungry for the need to have all the pieces fit. Meaning that we want our theologies and our sciences to fit. We want them to reinforce each other. We want all the pieces to come together into a seamless whole. One thing that we hold in common with those who promote creationism and intelligent design is that we live in a society that wants everything to fit, and struggles mightily, using all the resources at our disposal to make that happen.

But what if it's not possible? What if our human attempts to consolidate the totality of meaning hinders our ability to hold the world around us in awe and reverence?

If you or I had been in the place of those ancient Hebrew scribes, what would we have done with the multiple versions of the Creation Story that were circulating in Oral Tradition?

We have something to learn from their humility. I'm not talking about that self-effacing humility that damaged so many of us in our religions of origin. I'm talking about a deeper more genuine humility. The humility that comes with the realization that we know so little, and that there is so much in the

world and beyond it that we can never understand. In the face of the vastness of creation, the vastness of our great unknowing, can we resist the temptation of pride, resist the temptation of holding those bits of knowledge that we do have as weapons towards those with whom we differ. Can we, in humility, challenge what we see happening in our classrooms with integrity and honour, with love rather than anger, and with compassion rather than arrogance.

This is what's at stake for us.