

**“Two Cheers for Charles”**  
**Texts: Psalm 8; Genesis 1:1-5, 26-31**  
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*In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth...Genesis 1:1*

It was only this year that I found out that Charles Darwin and Abraham Lincoln were born on the same day 200 years ago. Both were considered late bloomers, neither making his mark on the course of history until well past his young adulthood. When he was 54, Abraham Lincoln delivered the Gettysburg Address, speaking of “one nation under God” having “a new birth of freedom”. Darwin was 50 when he published *On the Origin of Species*, one of the most important books of all time, a book that argued for evolution and made the case for natural selection. Darwin had made his famous trip to the west coast of South America and to the Galapagos on a ship called the HMS Beagle 20 years earlier, but he waited 20 years to publish his findings because he was so aware that the reactions would be intense and probably unfavorable, both of which turned out to be the case.

Many consider Lincoln to be “the great Emancipator,” because of his steering America through the greatest turning point in our country's history and ending the scourge of slavery on American soil. Many in the world of science consider Darwin an emancipator. The world of 19<sup>th</sup> century England, which one can enter very easily by reading a novel or two by Jane Austen (1), operated according to a fixed set of assumptions. Reality was believed to be static and unchangeable, presided over by God’s priests who believed that just as God did not change, neither did society or nature. The conventional wisdom of the day was that every creature currently in existence had been present in its same form at the beginning, in the Garden of Eden. Darwin disagreed. (2) He was what one might call “an emancipator of the mind”. He provided a new way of thinking about the created order; his ideas about evolution and natural selection blew open a heretofore closed set of assumptions about nature and about humankind.

Darwin’s ideas upset just about everybody. You have likely heard about the legendary debate that took place in 1860 at Oxford University, a debate between Bishop Samuel Wilberforce and Thomas Henry Huxley. Huxley represented Darwin's position. He made Darwin's argument for him, because Darwin himself was too shy to speak in public. Wilberforce scornfully asked Huxley whether he was descended from an ape through his grandmother or his grandfather. It is not recorded what Huxley answered at the time, but Huxley did end up having the last word. When the bishop died after being thrown from a horse, Huxley wrote of the sad incident to a friend saying, “For once, reality and Wilberforce's brains came into contact. The result was fatal.” (3)

Opposition to Darwin's idea of evolution was not confined to England. Outrage broke out across the ocean, and resistance emerged here on American soil, culminating with the famous Scopes trial of 1925, which pitted William Jennings Bryan, one of the most popular speakers in the nation, against Clarence Darrow, who represented Mr. Scopes, a Tennessee public school teacher accused of violating a state law that prohibited teaching in schools any theory that denied divine creation, as the Bible presents it. William Jennings Bryan, a Presbyterian elder, represented the prosecution. Whether there was cause and effect or not, Bryan died just five days after the trial. The trial ended with Mr. Scopes being convicted and fined \$100. Two years later, the Tennessee Supreme Court upheld the antievolution law, but did say that Scopes should not have had to pay a hundred bucks.

The issue has been debated hotly ever since. Chris Henry and I are both graduates of Columbia Theological Seminary. I learned recently that after Darwin's *Origin of Species* was published, a professor at Columbia got into hot water. He was Dr. James Woodrow, Professor of "Natural Science in Connection with Revelation" and uncle of President Woodrow Wilson. He was dismissed from the Columbia faculty for allowing the findings of evolutionary science to influence his understanding of the Biblical story of creation, and the named chair, the named professorship, which Dr. Woodrow held was done away with, never to return. (4)

That was a long time ago, but even today, the idea that science and religion are compatible is fraught with feeling. It was only at the end of March of this year that the Texas Board of Education, after contentious debate, voted to allow the teaching of creationism, which dismisses evolution entirely. Just two or three years ago, a high school biology teacher in Georgia had to fight an uphill battle to have stickers that read "Evolution is a theory not a fact" removed from textbooks in Cobb County. The county's Board of Education had endorsed the placing of the stickers. The leader of the removal, by the way, was a fellow Presbyterian, a man named Wes McCoy. (5)

Perhaps, some observations about the origins of the earth and its creatures are appropriate from the pulpit this Sunday after Earth Day. In the interest of full disclosure, I will tell you that I am among more than 11,000 clergy from around United States of America who participate in a project called "The Clergy Letter Project." This Project consists of those ordained pastors, priests and rabbis who believe that science and religion can be friends, that the idea of evolution is not antithetical to the Judeo-Christian tradition. I know much more about the religious realm than I do about the science realm, but I am afraid neither of science nor of the scientific method. I agree with Albert Einstein, who said, "Science without religion is lame; religion without science is blind." I have never been able to get my mind completely around Charles Darwin's work, but I do not see his observations as an affront to Biblical understanding, but rather as a

complementary endeavor. Science answers the questions of How; religion answers the questions of Why. I'm not afraid of knowledge, even complex knowledge. If you want to have the pants scared off you, just read Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*. You remember that futuristic novel. Pay attention to the speech by the Fire Chief Captain Beatty, who explains why the decision was made to burn all the books. The reason was not national security or political power. It was complexity. The Fire Chief says, "Books make ideas too difficult. The reader winds up lost in a welter of nouns, pronouns and adjectives. The people demanded that the books be burned because they did not wish to think any longer." (6)

In the midst of the complexities of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, please God, let the faith community avoid its centuries-old tendency of "glorifying the irrational." The great purposes of God are not well-served by a fundamentalist interpretation of Scripture that assumes, for example, that the creation story in Genesis is a descriptive account of actual events that took place in a six-day period. The first chapter of Genesis is valuable - it is in fact, authoritative for the church, because it tells the truth, the truth that God created the world and created it good. God created everything in the world and made everything good originally. We humans were created to be stewards of all the good things that God created. The writers of Genesis were not setting out to write a primeval history book, a factual account of events. They were confessing their faith. They were in exile. They were in a terrible situation; it seemed as if anyone but the God of creation was in control of events. Their hymn, if you will, their prayer was the first chapter of Genesis, reminding them that God alone was God. From God everything came, and to God everything will return.

The world needs to know to whom the world belongs. Danish theologian Søren Kierkegaard once wrote, "There is no lack of information or knowledge in our land. Something else is lacking." We need in our land both scientific analysis and moral guidance. We need both experiment and inspiration. Science is responsible for one, and the faith community is responsible for the other."

Our society is advanced technologically and scientifically. Dazzling new discoveries unfold every day. We have the technology and the agricultural acumen to be able to feed every human being that lives today on earth. What is lacking? A moral vision - the will to do it. Our technology and scientific advancements have led us to develop the most sophisticated weapons. We can aim those weapons tens of thousands of miles away with pinpoint precision. What we haven't done yet is to figure out how to keep people from becoming enemies and using weapons against one another. Something else is lacking. We need to be reminded of the simple difference between good and evil - that is what faith is for. Science is to reveal to us the depth of the possibilities of God's created order; faith teaches us how to live in it and the necessity of being stewards of it.

We have made a lot of progress in the last million or so years, but we face an ecological crisis the likes of which the world has never known. What is the vision, the moral vision that will save the universe? Faith can help. Moral leadership is needed.

Avery Dulles, a thoughtful Roman Catholic theologian, writes about how science and technology need to be leavened with, guided by the insights of the faith tradition: "Whatever we can do, whatever we have the capacity to do, we not necessarily ought to do. Technology does not recognize restraint; it has no inherent morality – morality comes from religion." (7)

Science and faith ought to be in conversation with each other. In the church, we ought to be looking at the most pressing moral issues of the day through the values of the Judeo-Christian tradition. What about stem cell research, and cloning, and matters like this? I believe that the more we know about the will of God, the more we have to offer the world. And the more we know about how the universe works, the more we will know about how God works.

I remember attending a class a few years ago entitled "God and the New Physics." It was taught by a Georgia Tech professor named David Finkelstein. The subject matter had to do with the origin of "black holes". I wish I could tell you where they came from but I can't. Dr. Finkelstein could. At the end of the class, someone raised his hand and said, "Professor, I don't know what you're talking about. Is it theology or philosophy or science?"

And Dr. Finkelstein answered, "Yes!"

The inherent interrelatedness of all things is one of the core beliefs of our tradition. *God was in Christ reconciling all things to himself.* (8) A part of that reconciliation certainly ought to be the reconciliation of intellectual endeavor and moral thought. In church we say that before the "Big Bang" there was Christ. In church we say that if and when the world as we know it comes to an end because of "the big crunch", or because the sun has turned into a giant red ball, even if that happens there will still be God who started it all in the first place.

Darwin didn't know everything. That's why he warrants only two cheers from me. He was wrong about some things, but he was right to use the brain that God had given him to try to understand how the world works. He was right to experience awe and wonder before the majesty and mystery of creation. After that first trip to South America, he said that no one could stand in the solitude of a primeval rainforest and not know that there was more to reality than any human could ever imagine. He told a friend that when he wrote *Origin of Species* his faith in God was "as strong as that of a bishop". When he died, he was buried at Westminster Abbey. The great tragedy of Darwin's life was the death of his precious daughter Annie who died as a girl. It can be fairly said that Darwin became less religious and more melancholy in his mood and in his writing, but he never lost his

amazement over the wonders of nature and its continuing unfolding.

He was no less impressed with creation than were the writers of Genesis. The writers of Genesis were not very good scientists. They believed that the world was flat, and that it was surrounded by a dome called heaven, which they believed to be a boundary, an impermeable boundary that held back a great reservoir of water. Beyond heaven was the water, and every time it rained, it was because a window of heaven had opened and some of that water came through, as in the story of Noah and the Flood.

The Bible is not a science book. It is a book that expresses the faith of people who lived 600 years before the birth of Christ, and who took great comfort in the belief that the world and all its inhabitants belong to God. Genesis makes a bold theological affirmation that is echoed later by the psalmist, *O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is thy name in all the earth. When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have made, who are we that you are mindful of us? And yet, you have made us a little lower than divine beings, and given us dominion that is – responsibility - over the works of your hands.*

We have a God-given responsibility to use every tool at our disposal, especially our brains, to investigate creation and to use all the human ingenuity we can muster to care for it. I believe this, because the Bible tells me so.

I love Reinhold Niebuhr's definition of religion: "Religion is a reaction to life's mysteries and a reverence before the infinitudes of the universe."

Let me finish with a bit of verse by Giacomo Leopardi. In the poem, a shepherd poses questions to the moon, which, from the shepherd's perspective, appears to dominate both the night sky and the earth itself.

And when I gaze upon you,  
Who mutely stands above the desert plains  
Which heaven with its far circle but confines,  
Or often, when I see you  
Following step by step my flock and me,  
Or watch the stars that shine there in the sky.  
Musing, I say within me:  
Wherefore those many lights,  
That boundless atmosphere,  
And infinite calm sky? And what the meaning  
Of this vast solitude? And what am I? (9)

Friends in Christ, what are we? Oxygen, hydrogen, carbon, calcium, phosphorus. That's what we are. We are residents of a planet in the cosmos, a cosmos vast beyond all imagining. We are also the work of God's hand, and in life and in

death we belong to God. So it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end. Amen.

- (1) James Moore on "Speaking of Faith, NPR, 9/20/07.
- (2) Ibid.
- (3) *The New York Times*, 2/10/09.
- (4) William M. Brown, "The Wonder of It All," *Vantage*, Spring, 2009.
- (5) Ibid.
- (6) *The New York Times*, as quoted by Stephen L. Carter, 2/25/09.
- (7) "Democracy May Lose Out," *The Atlanta Journal Constitution*, 10/24/92.
- (8) II Corinthians 5:19.
- (9) As quoted by Huston Smith in *Why Religion Matters*, Harper Collins, 2001, p.276-277.