

**SCIENCE AND RELIGION REVISITED**  
**A Sermon by Dean Scotty McLennan**  
**University Public Worship**  
**Stanford Memorial Church**  
**February 13, 2011**

In the gospel lesson<sup>i</sup> I've just read, Jesus resists the temptations of the devil to challenge the laws of nature. Turn stones into bread, he's baited. Throw yourself off the pinnacle of the temple, he's dared, and see what happens. The devil quotes scripture at Jesus: "God will command his angels concerning you" and "On their hands they will bear you up."<sup>ii</sup> Jesus wisely resists. But there are many in America today who, in the name of religion, would reject what we know scientifically about the laws of nature to rely on biblical passages alone.

Five years ago *Stanford Medicine* magazine published an article based on a sermon I'd given on science and religion here in the Stanford Memorial Church. The article was titled "O God: Darwin on the Cross."<sup>iii</sup> It was part of an entire issue was devoted to the topic of evolution, concerned particularly about an anti-science attitude at work in the United States based on religion and the impact this attitude has had "on our daily lives as it influences decisions affecting public policy."<sup>iv</sup> In that issue of *Stanford Medicine*, my words were in luminous company among articles by the likes of Stanford professor of neurobiology, Bill Newsome,<sup>v</sup> and former President Jimmy Carter.<sup>vi</sup>

Professor Newsome described himself as a serious Christian as well as a serious scientist, claiming that there's no conflict for him between science and religion. They are quite different domains, he explained, asking different questions. Of course one must be "relentlessly critical," he insisted, pursuing "rigorous standards of proof" before "accepting any scientific 'result' into the canon" of what one believes to be true about the natural world. On the other hand, religion tends to ask quite different questions like, "Is it better to live or to die?"<sup>vii</sup>

President Carter affirmed himself as a committed Christian as well as a nuclear engineer who had studied advanced physics. He asserted, "I find no incompatibility between the existence of a supreme creator and discoveries that human beings have made through our own intelligence, that God's given us." Carter also saw different questions being asked for the most part by science and religion: "I don't have to have faith to know that a ball is round. I don't need faith to know that the desk I'm sitting behind is firm and hard...But I have faith that Jesus Christ lived as the Son of God and that he's the epitome of proper human behavior." Where scripture makes direct scientific claims, though, of course it can be wrong. For example, Carter explained his perspective on creationism, based on a literal reading of the biblical book of Genesis, in this way: "Some people cannot accept that any word in the Scripture could possibly be mistaken. Some, including some in my own church whom I teach every Sunday, have a very devout belief that the world was created by God in 4004 B.C. in maybe six calendar days. I never had any problems accepting the fact that the Earth is billions of years old and that it revolves around the sun rather than the other way around."<sup>viii</sup>

Today, there's a need to revisit the science-religion question from this pulpit, I feel, as I have several times before. That's partly because a new Gallup poll has found 40% of Americans still believe in creationism; specifically, they are convinced, based on their reading of the biblical book of Genesis, that humans were created by God, as they are now, within the last 10,000 years, rather than having evolved over a much longer time from more basic organisms.<sup>ix</sup> It's also because the National Academy of Sciences last year issued a report lamenting the poor state of science education in America. It found that K-12 math and science education in the United States ranks forty-eighth internationally, which has a huge effect on our nation's economy.<sup>x</sup> It's also because research published last year from the National Survey of High School Biology

Teachers found that thirteen percent of them explicitly endorse creationism, and an additional five percent support creationism in answering students' questions; seventeen percent of teachers do not cover human evolution at all in their biology classes while sixty percent spend only 1-5 hours on it, with many explaining that they keep evolution instruction brief to avoid confrontation with students and parents who believe in creationism.<sup>xi</sup> This has reached up to the professional educational level, where only eight out of the 126 U.S. medical schools with detailed online database information have any courses mentioning evolution.<sup>xii</sup> This is an utter travesty in American education, affecting not only our economy but also our ability to train those who can ultimately do the basic genetic research needed to cure many life-threatening diseases.

For the sixth time this year, many hundreds of religious congregations on six continents are participating in Evolution Weekend, an event sponsored by The Clergy Letter Project started by Butler University Professor of Biology Michael Zimmerman. More than 14,000 clergy, including Joanne and me, have signed a letter affirming that religion and science can comfortably co-exist and defending evolution from attack from by biblical literalists. We also want to provide support to politicians who are frightened to endorse this basic biological principle because of religious opposition. Yesterday was Charles Darwin's birthday, and we are trying to emphasize how critically important evolution is to our modern understanding of the world and our work in it as religious people.<sup>xiii</sup>

There are significant threats to this perspective, though, both from the religious right and the secular left, which I want to discuss today. Starting with religious conservatives, a prime example is Albert Mohler, the president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, who proclaims, "You cannot coherently affirm the Christian truth claim and the dominant model of evolutionary theory at the same time." He asserts, "Theologically, the historical Adam as the

common ancestor of the human race is the most important issue. But the question is, how in the world do you end up with an historical Adam if you have an old earth?" This perspective has real impact on people teaching in Southern Baptist seminaries. For example, William Dembski, one of the main proponents of so-called intelligent design theory, with a Ph.D. in mathematics and a Masters of Divinity degree, was recently called into the president's office at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary and asked to explain his statements in a recent book that the earth is 4.5 billion years old, the universe is 14 billion years old, and the flooding at the time of Noah was regional rather than worldwide. Dembski had also written, "I do not regard Genesis as a scientific text. I have no vested theological interest in the age of the earth or the universe... Nature, as far as I'm concerned, has an integrity that enables it to be understood without recourse to revelatory texts." However, the seminary president was later quoted in a newspaper account as follows: "Had I had any inkling that Dr. Dembski was actually denying the absolute trustworthiness of the Bible, then that would have, of course, ended his relationship with the school." So, faced with losing his job, Dembski recanted his scientific views, saying: "As a biblical inerrantist, I believe that what the Bible teaches is true and bow to the text, including its teaching about the Flood and its universality."<sup>xiv</sup>

On the other hand, some of the new public atheists, like Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, and Dan Dennett, make their own claims that religion and science are incompatible. Dawkins in his book *The God Delusion* stated that the pope was a hypocrite for writing a letter endorsing Darwinism, and that he could not be genuine about science. Dawkins added that he would personally prefer an honest fundamentalist to the pope.<sup>xv</sup> Stanford graduate Sam Harris in his book *The End of Faith* describes religious faith as "what credulity becomes when it finally achieves escape velocity from the constraints of terrestrial discourse – constraints like

reasonableness, internal coherence, civility, and candor...Ignorance is the true coinage of this realm.”<sup>xvi</sup> Daniel Dennett in his book *Breaking the Spell* traces what he calls a theological retreat over the last century and a half due to Darwin's theory of evolution: "We began with a somewhat childish vision of an anthropomorphic, Handicrafter God" and ultimately moved to "a timeless Platonic possibility of order." For Dennett, though, "Darwin's more generative vision provides the structure in which we can see the intelligence of Mother Nature (or is it merely apparent intelligence?) as ... non-miraculous and non-mysterious.”<sup>xvii</sup> The problem for Dennett, though, is that if God isn't an agent who can answer prayers, receive sacrifices, and mete out punishment, then this really isn't religion we're talking about at all. It's atheism, which clerics are unwilling to admit when they describe God in a non-anthropomorphic way -- as eternal and immutable Being.<sup>xviii</sup>

So, how are religion and science compatible from my own clerical point of view?

In that article in the *Stanford Medicine* magazine, I wrote the following: "I have to say that personally I'm filled with awe at the natural order of the universe. The fact that there are natural laws at all, which are discoverable through the scientific method, and which are consistent and trustworthy and hold, fills me with feelings of amazement and gratitude and confidence. Those are religious or spiritual sentiments for me."

I would add that it's an article of faith for me, and a source of wonder, that the universe is not awry or askew or absurd. Nihilism is not the final answer. It could have been that gravity works on some days and not on others, that gene codes tell us nothing, and that 1 plus 1 is not always 2. But instead there's an observable and discoverable order in the universe. And science is not the enemy, but the companion and enabler, of my faith in that order. I can generate hypotheses, test them against empirical evidence, and if see if they hold across the board. If they

don't, I throw out the hypothesis and start again, knowing that I haven't fully discovered or understood the natural laws involved. All of this assumes that there really is something consistent and trustworthy – an ordered creation -- out there to discover in the first place. That's an article of faith; that's a religious sentiment from my perspective. We also couldn't do science without it.

Back to quoting my *Stanford Medicine* article now: "What's not religious, or what belittles the creation and its order, for me, is the claim that every so often a Supreme Being breaks in and violates the natural order of the universe for this reason or that: say, suspending gravity or reversing it so that someone who's jumped out a skyscraper window flies back in, or reversing time so that an accident that's already occurred never happened. What's awe-inspiring to me is the regularity and trustworthiness of the natural order, not periodic claims that it's been interrupted and altered for my benefit or yours, for this compelling reason or that." I don't believe in a supernatural God who disrupts nature whenever or however he or she chooses, but instead I believe in a God that is ordered creation itself, the basic energy of the universe, the life force.

Theologically, I resonate most to the poet William Wordsworth's concept of God as a "Sense sublime of something far more deeply interfused, whose dwelling is the light of setting suns, and the round ocean, and the living air, and the blue sky, and in the mind of man: a motion and a spirit that impels all thinking things, all objects of all thought, and rolls through all things."<sup>xix</sup>

So the new atheists set up a straw man God for me. And they even go further to claim that my notion of God, along with many Hindus' and Taoists' and Buddhists' and Reform Jews' and Sufi Muslims' and Quakers' and even Episcopalians' cannot be called "God" at all. Richard

Dawkins and the Religious Right in fact join forces to try to deny me God, because I affirm Einstein's God "who reveals himself in the orderly harmony of what exists," instead of what Dawkins calls "the interventionist, miracle-wreaking, thought-reading, sin-punishing, prayer-answering God of the Bible, of priests, mullahs and rabbis, and of ordinary language." My Bible also speaks of a God in whom "we live and move and have our being,"<sup>xx</sup> a kingdom of God which is within us and among us,<sup>xxi</sup> a God who is "the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end."<sup>xxii</sup>

Jimmy Carter explains in his *Stanford Medicine* article that there's an atheist perspective which denies that anything is imposed upon us by a superior entity, and there's a fundamentalist Christian view, most prevalent now among his denomination of origin, the Southern Baptists, which takes Scripture literally. Those two extremes get played out in understandings of science and religion that are indeed incompatible. But he personally sees science and religion as completely compatible, and is passionate about keeping that connection strong: "I have written poems about it, and I have written theses about it. I've made speeches about it. I teach in my Sunday school lessons about it."

May light and truth suffuse our minds and spread throughout our hearts. May we trust that the spirit's fires burn brightest where the truth is sought. May we pray that "more light" will guide our ways. May we awake in wonder and delight while knowledge and wisdom grow.<sup>xxiii</sup>  
Amen.

**BENEDICTION:**

For all who see God, may God go with you,

For all who embrace life, may life return your affection.

For all who seek a right path, may a way be found...

And the courage to take it, step by step.

Robert Mabry Doss



## NOTES

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- <sup>i</sup> Matthew 4: 1-10.
- <sup>ii</sup> Matthew 4:6, citing Psalm 91:11-12.
- <sup>iii</sup> Scotty McLennan, "O God: Darwin on the Cross," *Stanford Medicine* (Summer, 2006), pp 32-34.
- <sup>iv</sup> Philip A. Pizzo, "Letter from the Dean," *Stanford Medicine* (Summer, 2006), p. 2.
- <sup>v</sup> William Newsome, "Of Two Minds: A Neuroscientist Balances Science and Faith," *Stanford Medicine* (Summer, 2006), pp. 24-25.
- <sup>vi</sup> Jimmy Carter, "America Veering Toward Theocracy," *Stanford Medicine* (Summer, 2006), pp. 18-19.
- <sup>vii</sup> Newsome, "Of Two Minds," p. 25.
- <sup>viii</sup> Carter, "America Veering Toward Theocracy," p. 19.
- <sup>ix</sup> "40 Percent Of Americans Still Believe In Creationism," *Huffington Post* (December 20, 2010), [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2010/12/20/40-of-americans-still-bel\\_n\\_799078.html?view=print](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2010/12/20/40-of-americans-still-bel_n_799078.html?view=print)
- <sup>x</sup> As cited in Michael Zimmerman, "USA Today: Decrying Scientific Ignorance While Endorsing Creationism," *Huffington Post* (September 27, 2010),
- <sup>xi</sup> Michael Berkman and Eric Plutzer, *Evolution, Creationism and the Battle to Control America's Classrooms*, as cited in Michael Zimmerman, "Evolution Vs. Creationism: Study Reveals Public School Science Lagging," *Huffington Post* (January 31, 2011).
- <sup>xii</sup> Mark Shwartz, "Darwin Lives," *Stanford Medicine* (Summer, 2006), p. 17.
- <sup>xiii</sup> Michael Zimmerman, "Appreciating Religion and Science on Evolution Weekend," *Huffington Post* (February 7, 2011).
- <sup>xiv</sup> Michael Zimmerman, "In the Creationist Universe, Religious Dogma Trumps Scientific Inquiry," *Huffington Post* (November 10, 2010).
- <sup>xv</sup> Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 2006), p. 67.
- <sup>xvi</sup> Sam Harris, *The End of Faith* (New York, W.W. Norton, 2004), p. 65.
- <sup>xvii</sup> Daniel Dennett, *Breaking the Spell* (New York: Viking, 2006), pp. 243-244.
- <sup>xviii</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 9-10.
- <sup>xix</sup> William Wordsworth, "Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey (1798)," *The College Survey of English Literature* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1942), Vol. 2, p. 53.
- <sup>xx</sup> Acts 17:28.
- <sup>xxi</sup> Luke 17:21.
- <sup>xxii</sup> Revelation 22:13.
- <sup>xxiii</sup> Thomas Troeger, "Let Light and Truth Suffuse the Mind" (hymn).