

AMALGAMATED STARDUST

Over the past two or three weeks schools kids all across the country have been streaming back to class. Some of them have dreaded opening day all summer, but others couldn't wait to get back to their studies. And most every one of them has a favorite subject. What was yours? Math, history, art—maybe lunch?

No doubt for some, their favorite subject is science. And in Florida, due to recently passed legislation in that state, it's being taught in a new way this year. For after decades of controversy, science teachers in the Sunshine State are now mandated to include evolution in the curriculum. That may surprise you. You may have assumed that was a given. But the struggle over how to teach the origins of the universe and the emergence of human beings wasn't resolved with the Scopes Trial in the early 20th century. The struggle between creationism and evolution continues to this very day.

Creationists, of course, argue that God created the world, and that we should understand the Genesis account as, "historically and scientifically true." They believe, and I quote their credo, that "all basic types of living things, including man, were made by direct creative acts of God during the creation week described in Genesis." (CRS "Statement of Belief" www.creationresearch.org) Genesis, creationists suggest, provides the scientific explanation of the origins of the universe, from the creation of the stars and planets to the creation of human beings. Therefore, they argue, it should be taught as such in our schools.

On the other hand, those who are proponents of biological evolution build on Darwin's understanding that the great diversity of life on earth has come about because of a process of natural selection. They argue as one university website notes "that all life on earth shares a common ancestor . . ." ("Evolution 101," www.berkeley.edu) The theory of evolution is widely accepted by biologists and others and is based on research utilizing the tools of modern science. And many scientists take our common descent back even further, positing ideas like the "Big Bang Theory" which points to a dramatic explosion at the beginning of time, from which all physical matter originates.

There are, of course, two separate but related questions here. The first asks how are we to explain the origins of the universe. The second: what is appropriately taught in our public schools in light of the fact that ours is a nation that separates church and state?

In terms of the first question, it often comes down to an either/or proposition. Either you believe and teach that God created the world, or you believe in evolution. But this either or approach, I would suggest, misses the point. There *are* two ways—at least—of describing our

origins. But they are not both scientific. Evolution and the Big Bang Theory *are* based on science, but understanding God as Creator is rooted in religious belief. Science uses the language of facts and figures, but religion uses the language of metaphor and faith. If we truly separate church and state, then the first should be taught in school, the other at home and in the church. But for people of faith these need not be thought of as dueling ideas! They are, rather, different ways of understanding and explaining reality: the way of science and the way of faith. They can be, and I would argue are, *both* true.

In fact, I would take it a step further and argue that ultimately modern scientific theory and the ancient Hebrew poetry of the Bible point to the same underlying truth that ultimately all that is comes from a common source.

Contemporary mathematician and scientist Brian Swimme writes: "Our ancestry stretches back through the life-forms and into the stars, back to the beginnings of the primeval fire." (*The Hand of God*, 156) While in the Genesis account of origins, God creates the sun, the stars and the earth, and out of the earth, all life itself! "Let the earth bring forth living creatures of every kind," declares the Holy One. (Genesis 1:24a) And later, in the second story of creation found in Genesis, God is said to form the first human from "the dust of the ground." (Genesis 2:7)

I love how writer John McQuiston sums it all up in a journal entry he wrote while vacationing in Maine: "As I sit on this porch," he writes ". . . I have been brought to this morning by a process that began billions of years ago; I am an amalgamation of stardust that has miraculously been made aware; I am cradled in the hands of God; I am part of the living, conscious expression of the Infinite." (*Finding Time for the Timeless*, 101-102)

Scientific study bolsters the case for evolutionary theory, for the Big Bang Theory, for the idea that we are descended from a common origin. And the principles of good scientific research can be brought to bear on such explanations. Indeed, the day may come when we have a fairly complete understanding of how the universe came to be what it is today. The day may come when we can fully explain the development of humankind. We may, through science, come to know the how of it all.

But science cannot explain the why. Why is there life? Why are we here? That falls to religion, that falls to faith. But it's not either/or. We can believe in both science and religion, we can affirm both reason and faith, because they are different ways of exploring the truth.

The comic strip *Zits* chronicles the life of a typical teenaged boy named Jeremy. In a recent one panel strip, Jeremy is stretched out on the porch roof looking up at the star-filled sky. His mother pokes her head out the window and says, "Shouldn't you be working on your history

paper?” Jeremy replies, “[Yeah, but] first, I’m putting it in perspective.” (Boston *Globe*, 8-27-08)

“When I look at your heavens,” says the Psalmist, “the moon and the stars that you have established, what are human beings that you are mindful of them, that you care for them?” (8:3-4) When I put it all in perspective, I can’t help but wonder—why are we even here? Why does God care? But, says the Psalmist, God clearly does. You and I are made just a “little lower than God” and “crowned with glory and honor.” (8:5) Sisters and brothers, how desperately we need to put things in perspective! For there are forces at work that would try to convince us that human beings are of little worth. But God says otherwise.

No one captures that more eloquently than poet James Weldon Johnson in his wonderful poem called “The Creation.” In the powerful style of a black preacher, Johnson’s poem is full of metaphor which gives new life and expression to the creation story. God flings stars against the night time sky. God delicately plants the little red flowers. And finally, in a grand climatic moment God scoops up clay from the river bed, and then, on the bank of the river, kneels down and sets to work. The same God who lit the sun, who flung the stars, who rounded the earth,

This Great God,
Like a mammy bending over her baby,
Kneeled down in the dust,
Toiling over a lump of clay
Till [God] shaped it in His own image,
Then into it [God] blew the breath of life,
And [it] became a living soul. (*God’s Trombones*)

Sisters and brothers: you have been created just a little lower than God. You have been crowned with glory! You have within you the very breath of life. There may be times when you are down, when you feel lower than dirt, but remember you are amalgamated stardust made aware! You are a living soul. And as our children are taught the how-tos of science in school, might they also learn from us the whys of faith! Might they and we, always remember we are loved and honored by the Creator of all that is.

Amen

John H. Danner

