

**The Rev. Dr. Janet Adair Hansen
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When we consider the heavens, there is something about the transcendent power of God that is revealed to us. Christian author Madeleine L'Engle, author of *A Wrinkle in Time*, called astrophysicists our "contemporary mystics." Studying our 14 billion year old universe doesn't detract from faith, but encourages its expansion and growth. Even Carl Sagan began the opening of his *Cosmos* documentary with a statement evoking spirituality: *“Our contemplations of the cosmos stir us. There is a tingling in the spine, a catch in the voice, a faint sensation as if a distant memory of falling from a great height. We know we are approaching the grandest of mysteries.”*

The supposed conflict between science and religion has been promoted since Charles Darwin came up with the theory of evolution, and didn't go away after the Scopes Monkey Trial of 1925. A clergy friend, Steve Johnson, writes that when he was in 6th grade: *“We were given pamphlets that described the evils of evolution.”* By 6th grade Steve had convinced himself he would become a scientist, and read every book on the subject in the library. Even back then, Steve realized that, *“Evolution isn't evil any more than gravity is evil. It is simply part of the natural world.”* But at his parent's church, which he describes as a conservative Baptist church, people with different opinions weren't welcome. *“We were labeled sinners and told we were bound for hell.”* Steve studied geology in college, and became a naturalist, and it was only then that Steve says *‘I realized all Christians weren't like that. Through my interaction with [friends] I came to realize that there were Christians who thought you could be a Christian and a scientist at the same time, you could believe in God and still accept the theory of gravity.’*

Michael Zimmerman, biology professor and founder of the Clergy Letter Project, writes that evolution is the single issue that most often brings religion into conflict with science. Christians who hold to belief in biblical inerrancy, and contend that the world is only 6,000 years old, think evolution is a frontal attack on faith. But evolution is inextricably linked to biology - famous biologist Theodosius Dobzhansky said in 1973 that *“Nothing in biology makes sense except in the light of evolution”*. So scientists are not willing to concede that religious belief negates scientific understanding about biology, evolution, geologic history or astrophysics - our universe is about 14 billions years old, our planet about 4 billion.

In an essay published last fall through Lutheran Alliance for Faith, Science and Technology¹, Zimmerman wrote that the supposed conflict between them *“does damage to both religion and science.”* Zimmerman observes that those who understand science are *“put off by the anti-intellectual position of religious leaders demanding that evolutionary theory be rejected.”* And even though those that are against Evolution are *“only a subset of all religious denominations”*, all Christian religion is *“tarred by this brush and is broadly perceived as intellectually intolerant and anti-modern.”* Zimmerman warns that *“Together these factors lead to fewer people embracing religion and understanding its potential power.”*

In the fall of 2004, Biology Professor Zimmerman worked with clergy throughout Wisconsin to prepare a letter supporting evolution after a School Board in Grantsburg WI passed an anti-evolution policy. They were successful in their efforts, and public pressure caused the School Board to withdraw their anti-evolution policy. But clergy around the country encouraged Zimmerman to make it a nation-wide effort, and so the “Clergy Letter Project” was begun.

“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 ‘one theory among others’ is to deliberately embrace scientific ignorance and transmit such ignorance to our children. We believe that among God’s good gifts are human minds capable of critical thought and that the failure to fully employ this gift is a rejection of the will of our Creator.”

15 years later there are over 15,000 signatories, plus thousands more on versions for Unitarians, Buddhist, Jews, Muslims. The Clergy Letter Project has also encouraged the celebration of Evolution Weekend in religious bodies in February close to Darwin’s birthday. I signed back in 2006 and my church in Cortland first observed Evolution Sunday in Feb. 2007.

This past year in 2020, anti-science rhetoric and beliefs around the country hampered our efforts to deal with the Coronavirus Pandemic. Right as we needed all the scientific help we could get to help slow down the spread of the Covid-19 coronavirus, right as we needed the CDC to provide clear

¹ Michael Zimmerman essay 10/11/20 Clergy embracing science – and making the world a safer, greener and better-informed place <https://luthscitech.org/clergy-embracing-science-and-making-the-world-a-safer-greener-and-better-informed-place/>

guidance, right as we needed everyone to heed science and follow public health guidelines, science fell under attack. The coronavirus was claimed to be a "hoax" by right-wing politicians and by right-wing Christianity. Wearing a mask for safety was scoffed by conservative religious leaders and by the President and his political allies. The White House interfered in CDC efforts to mount a coordinated response to the Pandemic, even to the extent that CDC communications were re-written and edited by politicians rather than scientific experts. But science is not based on religious beliefs or on political persuasion, and science will not be denied.

As Zimmerman wrote in his essay in Oct. 2020, the supposed conflict between science and religion harms science as well as religion.

"First, the denigration of evolution, something so central to science, leads to a refutation of expertise and the belief that science itself is based on opinion rather than data. Second, the animus towards evolutionary theory has dramatically altered the way science is taught. The problem goes far beyond the discipline of biology and shapes the understanding students have of the scientific method itself. When faith, opinion and facts are considered to be equal it becomes impossible to differentiate scientific ideas from non-scientific ideas and society quickly loses much that the Enlightenment has brought us."

Zimmerman is right. That's how we've ended up with someone on Twitter or Instagram with no accreditation, and maybe not even a HS diploma, bashing a scientist with years of research, published results and backed by peer reviews. That's how we've ended up with "anti-maskers" claiming their personal rights to freedom are infringed by public health mandates. That's how we've ended up with churches insisting on having in-person religious services even when contraindicated by community spread and government public health restrictions.

A friend I've stayed in touch with since we both lived in Portales NM over 20 years ago, posted on Facebook this past week that she had contracted Covid. Christine doesn't know how she was infected, as she says she rarely left her house since Halloween and has taken every precaution. She now lives in a rural area south of Lake George, NY and runs in her own landscaping business. It's not like she has traveled or lives in an area where there are lots of visitors. Christine has been careful about wearing masks and washing hands and limiting her interactions with others... but for the last week she has been really ill, and is complaining that she can't even smell Vicks Vapo Rub. But someone must have been an unknowing spreader, and their carelessness, or resistance to mask-wearing, resulted in Christine contracting Covid.

As has been observed, Covid doesn't care if you are Republican, Independent or Democrat, Covid doesn't care if you are wealthy or poor, Covid doesn't care if you live in the city or in the country.... Covid is an unthinking virus that takes advantage of any opportunity to invade a host and rapidly replicate itself. And the more it is allowed to spread, the longer it stays in human hosts, the more variations it comes up with to counteract antibodies. Which is why we need to be concerned not just about vaccinating every American, but about global vaccinations. Because the coronavirus doesn't restrict itself to boundaries or borders, and America First isolationism will make things worse, not better.

My clergy friend Steve, who studied geology and became a naturalist before going to seminary and becoming ordained in the UCC decades ago, ended up resigning his position as pastor of an Ohio Congregational Church last summer after the consistory re-wrote his Call Agreement following the George Floyd protests, trying to add in a requirement that the Pastor observe "the separation between church and state." Steve said that was just the latest in a series of tensions. He wrote me,

I had received an anonymous letter that declared that I would "die in my sins" because I had described evolution as a fact of life, similar to gravity, from the pulpit. When I brought this to the attention of the Consistory one member told me point blank that she agreed with the letter, though she didn't approve of anonymous letters in general.... Steve said that also, (L)ate in 2019 when I preached about the Christian response to climate change [someone] said he didn't want to debate my theology but that climate change was a hoax, or more precisely, that it was completely natural in origin and human beings had nothing to do with it. That did it for Steve. And now, after decades of service in ministry, he doesn't even want to have anything to do with the Church.

Sociologically speaking, in the United States, demographic studies reveal a positive correlation between those who are science deniers, and those who hold fundamentalist religious beliefs. But you don't have to see Christian faith and scientific understanding as opposed to one another. The kind of Christian faith that is threatened by science is like a 3rd grade Sunday School understanding of God as some patriarchal sky king, and the Bible as a book that was dictated verbatim in King James English by the Holy Spirit. This kind of religious faith is narrow and rigid in its conceptions, and unwilling to grow or make any progress.

Does a scientific understanding of the world erase its emotional impact or spiritual power? Of course not. The worlds of theology and religion always interact with the cultural and scientific worldviews of that day. Catholic theologian Elizabeth Johnson says such interaction *"is essential to make*

religious faith both credible and relevant within a particular generation's view of the world and how it works" (Johnson 2007:286). But when theology reflects upon the scientific understanding of the world, we shouldn't be talking about ancient, or medieval or even Newtonian scientific concepts. Astrophysicists view the cosmos as a dynamic, emergent, self-organizing universe of dazzling dimensions. Or, as Francis Collins is quoted, "God is an awesome mathematician & physicist."

Collins, a physician and geneticist, who was the Director Human Genome Project, published a book in 2006 called *The Language of God* in which he argues for theistic evolution. "Faith is reason plus revelation, and the revelation part requires one to think with the spirit as well as with the mind. You have to hear the music, not just read the notes on the page."

Collins was unaware that late 20th c. theologians were already looking at both evolution and the creation and expansion of the universe as stories about God. The cosmology in the biblical Genesis stories is augmented by the cosmology of the Universe Story. Just as physicists and molecular biologists had to abandon the scientific categories and concepts they formerly held about the nature of the Newtonian universe as outdated when they got to quantum mechanics, so Christians need to abandon outdated western theological categories and concepts in order to find a true spirituality of the cosmos. When science pushed out to the limits of inner space (atomic and subatomic) and of outer space (astrophysics), the old Newtonian-Cartesian worldview was turned on end and quantum theory was born. The intrinsic structure of atomic physics and the spiritual dimension are paradoxical and intertwined.² The new scientific understanding is that there are no solid material objects, only wavelike patterns of probability, and these are not always predictable. What is real are not "things" but "relationships," not matter but energy and its multiple modes of expression. All creation is a verb and not a noun; "matter" on earth and in outer space is just the rhythm and movement of a continual cosmic dance of energy.

And so, theologians like Teilhard de Chardin, Matthew Fox, Thomas Berry, Sally McFague have celebrated the Omega point of Origin, the Cosmic Christ, the expanding universe as primary revelation of God's mystery, not just our planet but the whole cosmos as the Body of God, all of them describing an immanent presence that permeates all that is and all that ever has been. Everything has not just a material manifestation, but a numinous energy, and when we deprive a being of its "sacred quality" we disrupt the larger

¹ ²Fritzfjof Capra, The Tao of Physics cited by Elizabeth Dodson Gray, Green Paradise Lost (Wellesley: Roundtable Press, 1979), 62.

order of the universe.³ The whole universe since its beginning is sacramental: no part is found outside of God, and all parts are infused with God's Spirit. This is not pantheism, meaning all things are gods, but panentheism, meaning God is in all things, and there is no where God cannot be found.

This kind of progressive, limitless, expansive understanding of God and of Christianity dissolves the artificial war between science and faith. What was once perceived as a division between science and spirituality comes together, like a wrinkle in time. In the vision of these mystic theologians of the Universe Story, mitochondria (tiny little organisms in our cells), humanity and the largest galaxies spinning in the widening universe, are all part of one another. What happens to a single mitochondria is as significant a cosmic event as any galactic change. The universe relies on intimacy and relationship. As Matthew Fox writes in his book, *A Spirituality Named Compassion*:

[T]he universe is conceived as a harmonious process that is fundamentally interconnected. It is made up of webs or patterns that include galaxies and stars, planets and oceans, trees and birds, crystals, molecules and atoms, and we cannot separate any of these patterns from the rest without destroying them. Both organic and so-called inorganic matter are part of these patterns and only exist through this mutual inter relatedness. (143)

And so, studying the heavens, which tell the glory of God, getting to see not just the constellations and Milky Way with the naked eye, but being privileged through photographs to glimpse far away stars and galaxies emerging, spiraling out in intricate dance, this takes us to a place of awe, a place where divisions and lines of demarcation on earth or in our minds, drop away. Whether we start from science, as did Francis Collins, not splitting hairs but splitting DNA, or we start from faith, as theologians and mystics do, we arrive at the same place of profound reverence, of astonishment at the complexity and harmony of all creation, of awe at the patterns and synchronicity at all levels of the universe.

A few years ago, Alan Lightman wrote a book, "Searching for Stars on an Island in Maine," containing 20 essays on everything from stars to atoms, truth to transcendence, death to origins, weaving together the spiritual quest for meaning with scientific knowledge. Lightman is an astrophysicist

² ³Thomas Berry, *Dream of the Earth*, 134.

and a humanist, a professor of the practice of humanities at M.I.T. Lightman’s spiritual journey begins at Lute Island, Maine. To Lightman’s surprise, he has a mystic experience in a small motorboat on his way to his summer retreat. On a clear moonless night, sensing something special about the moment, he turned off the boat’s running lights and engine, and lay down on his back to take in the ocean of stars above. Lightman recounts:

“The boat disappeared. My body disappeared. And I found myself falling into infinity. A feeling came over me I’d not experienced before...I felt an overwhelming connection to the stars, as if I were part of them. And the vast expanse of time — extending from the far distant past long before I was born and then into the far distant future long after I will die — seemed compressed to a dot. I felt connected not only to the stars but to all of nature, and to the entire cosmos. I felt a merging with something far larger than myself, a grand and eternal unity, a hint of something absolute.”

When Lightman returned to an awareness of his body and his boat, he reported that he had no idea how long he’d been lying there.

Privileged to live here on Mount Desert Island, with the Maine woods and water a part of our souls, how can we not embrace both the scientific world, this unique ecosystem we live in, and also embrace the spiritual world, the transcendent sense that lifts us up out of ordinary concerns and brings healing to our troubled souls? We need both science and faith, as individual persons, as community, as a country, and as a planet.