ON LINE OPINION - Australia's e-journal of social and political debate

**Evolution Weekend: different ways of knowing**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| By [Michael Zimmerman](http://www.onlineopinion.com.au/author.asp?id=6206) - posted Thursday, 6 February 2014 |  |

This weekend marks the ninth year that hundreds of religious leaders all over the world have agreed to celebrate [Evolution Weekend](http://www.evolutionweekend.org/). By doing so they are working to create an environment in which meaningful discussion about the nature of religion and science can occur.

Such opportunities are essential because some believe that the two are in conflict and that their religious belief must trump scientific understanding and empirical data. These people confidently assert that when their interpretation of scripture comes into conflict with scientific advances, science must be shunted aside. More often than not, the conflict that these people see arises in the context of evolution. Because evolution is so central to biology and because the scientific method is so central to human advances, it is not an exaggeration to say that allowing this narrow-minded perspective to flourish undermines many fields of study and perverts education. Additionally, allowing this religious perspective to represent religion broadly presents a caricature of religion that is very much at odds with reality.

Evolution Weekend and [The Clergy Letter Project](http://www.theclergyletterproject.org/) which sponsors it have amazingly widespread support around the world and across a broad array of religions. Christian leaders from a host of denominations have been joined by rabbis and imams, by Buddhist clergy and Unitarian Universalist ministers, to offer people are more thoughtful approach.

This year Evolution Weekend celebrants have selected the theme of "Different Ways of Knowing" to recognize that religion and science use different methodologies to ask and answer different kinds of questions. As [The Christian Clergy Letter](http://theclergyletterproject.org/Christian_Clergy/ChrClergyLtr.htm), signed by more than 12,900 Christian clergy members from every corner of the United States, notes, "Religious truth is of a different order from scientific truth. Its purpose is not to convey scientific information but to transform hearts."

This sort of robust understanding of the different purposes and epistemological underpinnings of religion and science allows many to move past arguing for the compatibility of religion and science and toward the position that the two can actually work collaboratively.

After announcing this year's Evolution Weekend theme, I received a note from Rabbi Devorah Marcus of Temple Emanu-El in San Diego that makes this point far more cogently that I ever could:

*I wanted to share what I taught at Torah Study this past Shabbat. As you may know, this past Shabbat was the Torah portion Bereishit - the very beginning of Genesis. The session began with a 20 minute discussion on why we need to read this as poetry, on why this is not science, and on why reading it as science is an insult to both God and intelligence. It was a great discussion well supported by Jewish obligations to read certain parts of Torah metaphorically. We then had a one-hour study on the first five sentences that explored the mystical interpretations of creation including ideas from medieval Jewish mystics who hypothesized interpretations of the story that are shockingly similar to the Big Bang theory. It was great fun as we had some physicists, scientists, and engineers in the room. When freed from the shackles of dry literalism it was amazing to see the minds soaring into the heavens of philosophy and science and Torah. It was truly an inspired and inspiring morning. The conversation between science and religion can lead us to amazing places as long as we're not afraid to have the conversations.*

Increasingly, religious leaders are recognizing and celebrating the way science has enhanced our understanding of the natural world. They celebrate its complexity, marvel at its beauty and stand in awe of its majesty. And none of this threatens their faith. Indeed, they accept that their faith requires them to embrace scientific advances with an open mind and an open heart.

The Christian Clergy Letter, after all, includes the following:

*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.*

If you want to learn more, take a look at the [Evolution Weekend web page](http://www.evolutionweekend.org/) and find a congregation near you that is celebrating the weekend. If you can't find one close enough, you can live-stream a wonderful event being held at the United Methodist Church Baltimore-Washington Conference Mission Center in Fulton, MD on Sunday, 9 February beginning at 6 pm Eastern time. The event is entitled "[Different Orders of Truth in Religion and Science](http://www.evolutionweekendmd.org/)" and includes an impressive panel of scientists and religious leaders. The event is being sponsored by The Clergy Letter Project and [WesleyNexus](http://wesnex.org/" \t "_hplink) in addition to several other organizations. Live-streaming is free but you need to register so go to the WesleyNexus [home page](http://wesnex.org/) for simple instructions.

For nine years, through Evolution Weekend events, clergy around the globe have been working with their parishioners to improve their understanding of the relationship between religion and science. They recognize that those who are promoting creationism in any of its guises, from 'creation science' to intelligent design, are privileging one religion over all others. Members of The Clergy Letter Project show us a way to move forward, to respect the deeply held religious of neighbors while honoring our own traditions and promoting the best knowledge science has to offer.

Join us!