

Evolution Sunday: Religious Leaders Speaking Out for Science
Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Visalia
May 28, 2017

Presented by Harold Wood

Reflecting writings by Michael Zimmerman and the Clergy Letter Project

The presentation tonight is inspired by, and makes extensive quotes from the writings of Michael Zimmerman, the founder and director of The Clergy Letter Project (www.theclergyletterproject.org). The Clergy Letter Project is an international organization of more than 14,000 religious leaders and scientists created to demonstrate that religion and science need not be in conflict. Through The Clergy Letter Project, Zimmerman created Evolution Weekend (www.evolutionweekend.org) and has nurtured its expansion around the world.

Zimmerman has been involved with the evolution/creation controversy for almost three decades. Holding a Ph.D. in Ecology, he is currently the Vice President for Academic Affairs at Evergreen State College in Olympia, Washington State. He is a Fellow of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, and the National Center for Science Education has honored him with their Friend of Darwin award.

[Italicized portions represent commentary from Harold Wood; regular typeface is from Dr. Zimmerman and the Clergy Letter Project.]

Michael Zimmerman writes:

In Dr. Seuss's environmental treatise, *The Lorax*, the question "Who speaks for the trees?" is asked. In the post-factual world in which we currently find ourselves, a similar and equally pressing question is, who speaks for science?

At this juncture within the Trump administration, virtually everyone by now must recognize that science is under relentless attack. Scientific advisory groups are being disbanded in many federal agencies, and many proposed budget cuts are directly targeted against science programs. And it's not just science that's under attack – it appears that any fact that conflicts with personal opinion can be dismissed out of hand. In this environment it seems perfectly acceptable to create your own "facts" to suit the narrative you have in mind.

When it comes to creationism especially, the opinions of science and education experts simply don't matter to many politicians. For example, the past chair of the Texas Board of Education, a young Earth creationist, Don McLeroy, infamously pronounced that "Somebody's got to stand up to experts."

So who, in the face of the relentless demeaning of science and fact coming out of Washington, will stand up and say, “This isn’t right?” Who will speak for science?

Yes, many scientists have been and will continue to do just that. But their critics are already saying that they’re simply yet another special interest group promoting their own goals. Why should we listen to the scientists about science, the argument goes, since they have a vested interest in the outcome of the debate?

Whether the issue is climate change, evolution, vaccination, or any other technical topic in which there is virtual unanimity of expert opinion, the experts are simply dismissed as being biased and mistaken. The fact that they are experts on a topic, in the minds of many, discredits them completely. I can’t tell you how many times I’ve been attacked for promoting the teaching of evolution by people arguing that since I have a Ph.D. in the subject, my views should be categorically discounted and replaced by those of people who have no such knowledge or, therefore, stake in the outcome.

Despite the lack of intellectual and scientific substance to the attacks on evolution, the constant refrain from creationists that evolution is responsible for virtually all of modern society’s ills has largely shaped the public’s perception of the issue. Large segments of the public, ignorant of both basic biology and common theology, reject evolution, believing that it is bad science and contrary to their religious beliefs. Even as scientists, building upon the principles of evolutionary theory, make the most astounding breakthroughs in the understanding of the human genome, leading to medical advances previously only dreamed possible, creationists work tirelessly to keep evolution from being taught in our public schools. Most politicians are scared to endorse this basic biological principle fearing a backlash in the name of religion.

Evolution Weekend is attempting to change all of that. The first “Evolution Weekend” was in 2006, with some 467 congregations participating. This year, 2017, marks the 12th annual Evolution Weekend. *Once again, hundreds of congregations are participating, with about 50 of these being Unitarian Universalist congregations throughout the United States and a few more in England and other countries.*

As Michael Zimmerman, the initiator of the project, writes, "Evolution Weekend is an opportunity for serious discussion and reflection on the relationship between religion and science. One important goal is to elevate the quality of the discussion on this critical topic — to move beyond sound bites. A second critical goal is to demonstrate that religious people from many faiths and locations understand that evolution is sound science and poses no problems for their faith. Finally, as with The Clergy Letter itself, Evolution Weekend makes it clear that those claiming that people must choose between religion and science are creating a false dichotomy."

These clergy members are opposed to religion being taught in science classrooms instead of evolution. They are opposed to climate change denial being promoted despite overwhelming

evidence that humans are dramatically influencing global climate patterns. And they are opposed to dramatic cuts in spending on science.

While it might seem surprising that thousands of clergy members would support scientific investigation, in reality, Zimmerman believes, there's nothing surprising about this position at all. The clergy members who comprise The Clergy Letter Project are interested in more fully understanding the workings of the natural world even as they work to discern the intricacies of the spiritual realm. They fully recognize that scientific investigation deals exclusively with the former.

It is wrong to dismiss all people of faith and all religious leaders as being anti-science, when in fact it is only a vocal minority. In fact, according to recent polls by the Pew Research Center, even though 60% of Americans say religion and science conflict, "Highly religious Americans are less likely than others to see conflict between faith and science." The survey found that those who subscribe to the idea that science and religion exist in tense, perpetual opposition are largely those without a religion themselves.

The Catholic Church historically had a reputation for being anti-science – most famously when Galileo faced the inquisition and was forced to retract his "heretical" theory that the Earth revolved around the Sun. But in 1996, John Paul II suggested evolution was "more than a hypothesis" and was an "effectively proven fact." Today, Pope Francis has stated that the theories of evolution and the Big Bang are real and God is not "a magician with a magic wand." Speaking at the Pontifical Academy of Sciences, the Pope made comments which experts said put an end to the "pseudo theories" of creationism and intelligent design. Similarly, Pope John Paul II, Pope Benedict XVI, and Pope Francis have all accepted the reality of human-caused climate change and recognized it as a moral issue.

Other prominent religious leaders from other faiths have embraced science. The Dalai Llama even wrote a book about it, The Universe in a Single Atom, in which he argued that even "If science proves some belief of Buddhism wrong, then Buddhism will have to change." He noted of course, that science can be used for good or ill, and we must approach scientific inquiry with compassion and empathy. But he also insists that "a spirituality that ignores science can quickly become a rigid fundamentalism." He has become convinced that a dialogue between religion and science will advance the wisdom of both disciplines and greatly benefit humankind.

*Indeed, several important modern theologians actually embrace science as the foundation for new religious understandings. Catholic theologian Thomas Berry wrote in 1988, "Both education and religion need to ground themselves within the story of the universe as we now understand this story through empirical knowledge. Within this functional cosmology we can overcome our alienation and begin the renewal of life on a sustainable basis. This story is a numinous, revelatory story that could evoke the vision and energy required to bring not only ourselves but the entire planet into a new order of magnificence." —Thomas Berry, *Dream of the Earth*, 1988.*

In 2008, the Rev. John H. Thomas, General Minister and President of the United Church of Christ, gave a similar view in a pastoral letter:

“The transformations of today’s scientific vision enrich our faith... We are insatiably curious, and our profound curiosity fuels equally the venture of science and the quest of faith. As a result, our universe has expanded and so has our understanding of God. Our faith has nothing to do with clinging to ancient misconceptions. Our faith is not in the worldviews of ancient theologians or the cosmologies of biblical texts, as majestic as these might have been. Gone is the old view of a small, static universe, with fixed species dwelling on a fixed earth. Gone is the old view of a small, static God. God speaks in many ways and through many voices. Today, one of God’s most provocative voices is science. We listen and respond, grateful that our theology is enriched by new ideas.” ...

“Evolution helps us see ourselves anew, as creatures who share a common origin with other species. Today we know that human bodies and brains share the same genetic and biochemical processes with other creatures, not just mammals but insects, plants, and bacteria.”
(http://d3n8a8pro7vhmx.cloudfront.net/unitedchurchofchrist/legacy_url/1489/pastoral-letter.pdf?1418424941 January, 2008)

Under the auspices of [The Clergy Letter Project](#), more than 14,400 clergy from all across the United States have signed letters making it clear that science must be supported and that doing so poses no threat to religion. There are actually four different versions of the Clergy Letters, one for Christian Clergy, and separate ones for Jewish, Buddhist and Unitarian-Universalists. As of this writing, signatories include 460 UU Clergy, 523 Jewish Rabbis, 26 Buddhist clergy, and 13,481 Christian clergy. A wide range of Christian denominations are represented, including Presbyterian, Lutheran, Disciples of Christ, Congregational (United Church of Christ), Episcopal, Roman Catholic, Methodist, Baptist, Religious Science, and many non-denominational Christian churches.

In fact, two Protestant denominations have endorsed the Clergy Letter Project at the national level - the United Methodist Church world-wide and the Presbyterian Church (USA).

Of course, perhaps one of the largest percentage of signatories from any one single denomination come from the Unitarian Universalist clergy. Our own The Rev. Kathleen Scott has signed it as clergy for the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Visalia. As of May 17, 2017, there are now 460 signatures for the Unitarian Universalist version of the clergy letter, the text of which is in your Order of Service.

A key point common to all versions of the letter is the strong message urging “school board members to preserve the integrity of the science curriculum by affirming the teaching of the theory of evolution as a core component of human knowledge.” All the letters ask that science remain science and that religion remain religion, as two different, but complementary, forms of truth.

Most recently, the Clergy Letter Project endorsed last month's April 22, 2017 [March for Science](#). The March was led by dozens of professional scientific organizations, but joined by several religious organizations, including the Unitarian Universalist Association, the American Humanist Association, and the Ethical Culture Society.

[*The Mission of the march is expressed thusly:*

The March for Science champions robustly funded and publicly communicated science as a pillar of human freedom and prosperity. We unite as a diverse, nonpartisan group to call for science that upholds the common good and for political leaders and policy makers to enact evidence based policies in the public interest.

After voting overwhelmingly to have the Clergy Letter Project endorse and participate in the March for Science, a number of members of the Clergy Letter Project participated in person. Reverend Beth Galbreath, a United Methodist minister from Woodbridge, IL, attended the Chicago March for Science, carrying a sign that read, "People of Faith for Science" and advertising the website for theclegyletterproject.org. Members of her congregation had signs reading "I love God and Science!"

Another United Methodist Minister, Reverend Judy Young, from Derwood, MD, marched in Washington D.C. wearing a t-shirt reading "Celebrating Faith and Science."

Reverend Joan Henjum, a Disciples of Christ minister from Seattle, carried a sign in that city reading "Another Pro-science Pastor" while members of her congregation carried signs with slogans like "Science is God speaking" and "Thank God for Evolution!"

Shortly after the March, Rev. Joan Henjum, together with several United Church of Christ ministers published a paper that summarized their view that integrates science and spirituality. The last paragraph justified their participation in the March for Science:

Science provides a language for listening to nature. It reveals worlds of astonishing interconnectivity and complexity. Exploration of creation through scientific inquiry is an exploration of God. Science is a powerful voice of God. We appreciate how science gives voice to the natural world, how it helps us make sense of the world's workings. And we want to listen, ever more closely, to what God is saying through the environment and all its creatures. So! People of faith marched in the Science March. We were expressing our appreciation for the scientific method and its findings, and building partnership for serving and preserving life on the planet.

I would like to end this evening with a focus on what science and evolution means to Unitarian Universalists in particular. In Unitarian Universalism, the compatibility of the science of evolution and of an enlightened religion has long been part of our approach to religion. To give one prominent example, in 1900, the Rev. Dr. Marion D. Shutter, minister of the Universalist Church of the Redeemer in Minneapolis, Minn. presented 12 lectures titled Applied Evolution in which he placed Darwin's theories within the context of Universalist theology. Each of these lectures were attended by 1,000 to 1,200 people and were considered seminal in providing

Universalists of the time with an understanding of these new theories and how they would strengthened their faith and beliefs.

He began his lectures with a case for how science aided religion by stating that “the long battle between Science and Religion was, to a certain extent, upon both sides a mistake.

“...not only is there no real conflict,” he stated, “when we come to understand the subject, ... religion, or religious thought, so far from suffering disaster at the hands of science, has been the actual gainer. ... It has lost nothing but some unscientific notions that were long, but erroneously, supposed to belong to religion. It is better without them. It stands upon solid footing. It can make stronger appeal to the human intellect.”

Thus evolutionary theory, after showing the path that human life traversed through the centuries, gave religion a new way to understand the creation of humankind. Shutter wrote,

“And we hold that it is better and nobler, -- better to have risen from cave and jungle than to have fallen from Eden; better to have developed from the animal than to have degenerated from the angel...”

Dr. Shutter argued strongly that people of faith can and must accept “teachings of Modern Science,” and in writing a book based on his lectures, he wanted to “show that one might accept the facts, without trimming or evasion, and yet preserve the spirit of reverence and the essence of religion; indeed, find as a result of accepting the facts to the utmost, a profounder reverence and a deeper religious life.”

These ideas can still be found today in our UU 4th Principle: “A free and responsible search for truth and meaning” and the fifth of our Six Sources: “teachings which counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science,”

Both the Unitarian Universalist 7th Principle and modern ecological science teach us that the interconnected web of all existence is not just among human beings, but among all life forms, past and present, and among the rocks and oceans and rivers and climate. In fact it is among all the stars and solar systems and galaxies of the Universe.

*The “process theology” school of theology, adopted by many UU clergy and theologians, shares a common attitude with modern science. It does not merely embrace what is **current or popular** in scientific understanding, because, as we all know, current scientific understanding has a way of growing and changing over time. If science is anything, it is not a static collection of facts or theories, but rather an “attitude” of skeptical inquiry that seeks to always tease out new understandings of the world. Scientists verify their understanding not by tradition or faith, but through continual testing and experimentation. For example, the accepted science of a hundred years ago about geological formation of the Earth has been superseded by modern plate tectonics. As science progresses, so will our understanding about such processes change and*

grow. At the same time, some basic concepts based on scientific discovery will never change - for example, we will never return to a geological view that the Earth is only 10,000 years old.

Bernard Loomer, a longtime Dean of the University of Chicago Divinity School and a leading proponent of process theology, was expressing an essentially scientific attitude when speaking about theology he said: "Final answers are not to be trusted. We are born in mystery, we live in mystery, and we die in mystery."

This is not dissimilar from the views of astronomer Carl Sagan, who wrote: "Every aspect of Nature reveals a deep mystery and touches our sense of wonder and awe." And eminent biologist Edward O. Wilson, likewise finds in the scientific understanding of the world the grounding for a strong sense of the spiritual, writing: "For us the history of life and of the universe as told by science becomes more than a sequence of strange and arresting events. It becomes our personal and shared story, our creation story, our sacred story."

It may seem surprising to some that this appreciation of a sense of wonder from both a theologian and from scientists could converge in this way. Yet, Loomer and Sagan both delighted in the wonder and mystery of existence as continually revealed by the scientific enterprise.

Bernard Loomer wrote:

"The world in all the dimensions of its being is the basis for all our wonder, awe, and inquiry."

As signatories of the Clergy Letter Project, and through numerous sermons, books, and poetry, many UU clergy today follow in the footsteps of Shutter and Loomer by speaking on behalf of science, seeing it as an important element of our faith.

To give one example, Rev. Roger Bertschausen, minister for the Fox Valley Unitarian Universalist Fellowship Appleton, Wisconsin writes:

"Like Darwin, I am not interested in trying to understand the natural world by using supernatural explanations. Religion is a distinct but overlapping sphere with science. To me science explores how the world works. Religion explores what it all means. I don't think you can explore what it all means if you don't begin with how the world actually is and how it actually works. That's the starting point of religion for me."

As Unitarian Universalist minister Helen Lutton Cohen states in the UUA's brochure, "Science and Religion: A Unitarian Universalist Perspective," "I continue to believe passionately that science and religion are compatible. Individually we may be more comfortable with one approach or another, but we can still recognize that any one approach is limited and needs others. We can rejoice in what they accomplish together. Science and religion together reveal to

us a world of wonder. They make us grateful to be part of it, even in the face of the fear, pain, loss, and evil that are also part of it.”

Similarly, UU evolutionary evangelist Connie Barlow says,, “If children can learn... they descend from the stars, and that their ancestors once swam in the sea, perhaps they'll see there's no fundamental contradiction between having a religious understanding of the world — one that stands in awe of creation and finds meaning and value in existence—and embracing the profound offerings of science.”

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