

Support for Science by Members of the Clergy Is Evolving

Michael Zimmerman (mz@theclergyletterproject.org)

Rex A.E. Hunt

Despite what has become common knowledge, the Scopes trial was not a battle between religious and secular forces. At the time of the trial there were numerous well-known religious leaders who spoke out against the Butler Act and who actively supported the teaching of evolution. The Reverend Walter C. Whitaker, an Episcopal priest from Knoxville, TN, for example, was listed as a witness for the defense. Although he wasn't called to the stand, a statement of his in which he said "I am unable to see any contradiction between evolution and Christianity" was read into the record. (Scopes Trial Transcript 1925) Similarly, the Reverend Charles Francis Potter, a Unitarian minister, served as an advisor to Clarence Darrow during the trial. He regularly and forcefully articulated the position that religion and science were not enemies, often arguing that evolution did not negate spiritual meaning but actually enhanced it. (Potter 1950)

This tradition of clergy supporting the teaching of evolution has continued and grown over the past century. In the 1981 federal case, *McLean v. Arkansas Board of Education*, in which the state mandated that creationism had to be given equal time with evolution in public schools, 12 of the 23 plaintiffs were clergy members protesting that the law violated the Establishment Clause in the First Amendment of the US Constitution and that it was unconstitutionally vague. Similarly, in *Edwards v. Aguillard*, decided by the Supreme Court in 1987, among the 29 plaintiffs, 10 were members of the clergy.

With support for the teaching of evolution coming from religious leaders representing a wide array of religions for over a century, it is perhaps surprising that media attention and public perception remains fixated on a supposed conflict between religion and science. A closer look at an organization of members of the clergy who support evolution education with which we are involved should demonstrate just how misguided this belief is. It's important to note that this is just one organization of many promoting the compatibility of religion and science.

In 2005, in response to the first local school board in the U.S. to mandate that intelligent design be taught in biology classes throughout the district, thousands of clergy members from across the United States came together to protest. An open letter, now signed by over 15,700 Christian clergy members, concluded by saying, "We urge 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. We ask that science remain science and that religion remain religion, two very different, but complementary, forms of truth." (The Clergy Letter Project, a) Non-Christian clergy also wanted to get involved and thus similar open letters from Jewish

clergy, Unitarian Universalist clergy, Buddhist clergy, and Humanist clergy were drafted and, to date, have collectively accumulated over 1,600 signatures.

Even as those letters were presented to school boards and other elected officials, as well as being published by various media outlets, participating clergy felt they needed to do more to protect the science of evolution and to demonstrate that religion and science could be compatible. And they felt they needed to do so in a more personal manner. So, in 2006 the Project created Evolution Sunday – on 12 February, the anniversary of the birth of Charles Darwin – to carve out an opportunity for congregations to address the compatibility of religion and science as well as the importance of understanding the nature of evolution. Non-Christian clergy wanted to get involved in this activity as well, so, two years later, Evolution Sunday evolved into Evolution Weekend, and even more congregants participated in meaningful discussions.

Evolution Sunday and Evolution Weekend activities varied by congregation with each participating one deciding what made the most sense in their local context. Some read selections from *On the Origin of Species* during their service while others incorporated some of Darwin's personal history in sermons. Still others invited local science professors to lead post-service discussions on the relationship between religion and science. What tied all these events together was the desire to make science accessible while demonstrating its compatibility with each congregation's doctrinal beliefs.

As the culture wars deepened, as extreme fundamentalist voices professed to be speaking for religion generally, and as a disdain for science and antipathy for expertise seemed to become ever more prevalent, participating clergy decided that they needed to do more. They believed it was imperative to demonstrate that religion, in its best form rather than the narrow-minded perspective receiving widespread attention, requires us to care for one another and for the planet on which we live. And they felt the need to articulate that the process of scientific investigation and the information it yields, trumps opinion, and can provide insight into a host of critical issues, from dealing with pandemics to climate change, from understanding that racism makes no sense given our shared humanity to appreciating the complexities associated with sexual and gender identity.

Toward this end, several public actions were taken. The members of The Clergy Letter Project voted to rename Evolution Weekend opting to call it Religion and Science Weekend to recognize that the link between religion and science extends well beyond evolution.

Appreciating the importance of confronting climate change and noting that climate deniers were becoming increasingly vocal, a team of clergy members and scientists drafted a statement entitled "The Climate Crisis Letter" calling for immediate action to help avert the devastation climate change is creating. The letter notes that "Scientific understandings and religious

teachings alike teach us that we are connected as one human family and, further, we are connected to all life. Thus, our own survival is inextricably connected to the responsible stewardship of the Earth and all its creatures.” The letter concludes by stating, “Our religious communities should lead in asking a simple question: How can we be good ancestors? A powerful question. A spiritual practice. A call to action.” (The Clergy Letter Project, b)

Building on this effort, the membership of The Clergy Letter Project voted for “Religion, Science and the Common Good” to be the theme for Religion and Science Weekend 2024. The Project explained the import of the theme as follows: “We are living in an age of conflict and extremism. Cooperation and collaboration in pursuit of the common good is increasingly coopted by personal interest, greed, and power politics. Many routinely challenge scientific evidence while asserting the supremacy of opinion and personal rights; hence, they boldly proclaim climate change and global warming to be a hoax while vaccination is a government plot. How can religion and science collaboratively rediscover and promote a vision of the common good?” (The Clergy Letter Project, c) Needless to say, this theme led to some wonderful conversations in congregations around the world.

One clergy member beautifully and succinctly explained his vision of the connection between religion and science as follows: “Life is not made merely of equations and graphs and data. It is about relationship and connection and listening... and stories involving our senses about those relationships and connections. If we are not listening – not the only thing we need to be doing, but it is a necessary activity – we will not have any stories to tell in the future. Recognizing that fact allows us all to begin reframing how we think about science and its place in the quest for not just knowledge, but also for meaning.”

Most recently, members of The Clergy Letter Project voted overwhelmingly (with over 99 percent voting in favor) to release a statement articulating the importance of the values being promoted by the organization. The statement focused on four specific values: the value of human dignity; the value of truth; the value of science; and the value of religion.

The statement asked political leaders and the public “to consider how any actions that censor good science, render some individuals invisible, and spread messages of hate in place of love, work to destroy our communities, harm the most vulnerable among us, forsake our most precious shared values, and force a significant portion of the population to live in fear.” The statement concluded by asserting “We believe that if we were to make full use of the combined power of religion and science, we could create a fairer, greener, healthier, more humane, and more truthful world.” (Zimmerman, 2025) The statement was shared widely and generated fruitful discussions in congregations.

It might seem ironic that such full-throated support for science is coming from religious corners. Indeed, it wasn't new during the Scopes trial; sixty-six years earlier, religious leaders, luminaries like Charles Kingsley, Henry Ward Beecher and Frederick Temple, were some of evolution's most outspoken advocates when *On the Origin of Species* was published in 1859. Now, as science itself is more generally under attack, it should not be surprising that clergy are stepping up to defend science and educate the public. If more scientists were to join their ranks, not to promote religion but to translate scientific equations, mathematical descriptions, and technical data of all sorts, "into a 'big story,' a new mythic level narrative about human beings and our place in Earth's 4-billion-year history of life and the planet co-evolving," (Frank, 2018) expressed in ordinary language that ties human life and the universe together, even more progress could be made.

References Cited

The Clergy Letter Project, a, Christian Clergy Letter, https://www.theclergyletterproject.org/Christian_Clergy/ChrClergyLtr.htm, accessed on 21 August 2025.

The Clergy Letter Project, b, The Climate Crisis Letter, https://www.theclergyletterproject.org/Climate_Letter/ClimateLtr.html, accessed on 21 August 2025.

The Clergy Letter Project, c, Religion and Science Weekend 2024, <https://theclergyletterproject.org/rasweekend2024.html>, accessed on 21 August 2025.

Frank, Adam (2018). Climate Change and the Power of Story, *Orbiter Magazine*, 26 June 2018. (<https://orbitermag.com/climate-change-and-the-power-of-story/>, accessed 21 August 2025)

Potter, Charles Francis (1950). *Creative Personalities: The Next Step in Evolution*. Funk and Wagnalls, NY.

Transcript of the Scopes Trial (1925), page 223 <https://profjoecain.net/scopes-monkey-trial-1925-complete-trial-transcripts/>, accessed on 21 August 2025.

Zimmerman, Michael (2025). Clergy United in Diversity: The Power and Importance of Respecting Human Dignity. Medium (https://medium.com/@michaelzimmerman_40329/clergy-united-in-diversity-the-power-and-importance-of-respecting-human-dignity-f8dd530af28a), accessed on 21 August 2025.

Author Biography

Michael Zimmerman is the founder and executive director of The Clergy Letter Project. Having earned a Ph.D. from Washington University he taught biology and served as an academic administrator at numerous universities over his career.

Rex A E Hunt, MSc(Hons), an author, religious naturalist, and social ecologist, is a retired minister in the Uniting Church in Australia. A member of The Clergy Letter Project and Board member of the Religious Naturalist Association, he is a leader in the 'progressive religion' movements in Australia and New Zealand. His latest book is *Dancing with Dandelions: Awe, Wonder, and a 'Wild' Mystical Naturalism*. Coventry Press (2025).