The Creation Stories We Live By

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1 Bio-diversity and Common Cause

In the convictional communities that usually comprise discussions between scientists and theologians you can find those who stake out their positions as either naturalizing religion or theologizing nature.\(^1\) It is quite rare when an eminent evolutionary biologist breaks from his in-group to address religious foes with respect and concern. Yet, this is exactly what Edward O. Wilson has done in his work *The Creation: An Appeal to Save Life on Earth*.\(^2\) For this reason, it is important for those situated believers who are usually opposed by Wilson to listen carefully to his appeal.

Wilson's working assumption is that many religious communities, and especially conservative Christians he left more than fifty years earlier, tend to disregard environmental causes as liberal extremism for which they claim no affinity.\(^3\) Wilson's appeal is more a plea to set aside these cognitive maps that divide the communities and to refocus the discussion through a reframing of faith and science toward an ethic of self-restraint toward the natural world.

Wilson states his appeal as a letter to an imaginary Southern Baptist minister. Wilson, himself a former Southern Baptist child reared in Alabama and today a secular humanist, proposes to the pastor that they lay aside principled disagreements about evolution and intelligent design.\(^4\) Wilson concludes they do not need to answer or agree upon every mystery of the universe to confront problems that are, by any account, serious and urgent. He understands that some will see in the nature as a divine creation, and that there is a Lord of Life who makes nothing in vain. For others living Nature, every plant or animal, is a masterpiece of biology, of random selection. Does this difference in worldview separate Wilson and the pastor in all things? “It does not. . . . Let us see, then, if

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3 Ibid., 7.
4 Ibid., 167.
we can, and you are willing, to meet on the near side of metaphysics in order to deal with the real world we share.”

Looking around the real world, the rest of life is vanishing. Half of all species could be gone forever by the century’s end, leaving only the genetic codes that wildlife biologists have stored away. “Five percent of the Earth’s land surface is burned every year” to make way for cattle and crops, helping to fill the atmosphere with greenhouse gases “sufficient to destabilize the climates of the entire planet.” Throw in the effects of industrial pollution, merciless hunting and commercial fishing practices, invasive species showing up everywhere, and the unyielding demands of human development, and “Now a sixth (extinction) spasm has begun, this one the result of human activity.”

Human life itself has become the giant meteorite of our time doing grave injury to the biosphere upon which we and all life depend. As other creatures are brushed aside or driven off, humanity could soon enter what “poets and scientists alike may choose to call the Eremozoic Era—the Age of Loneliness.”

Wilson reminds us of the unnumbered “opportunity costs” to science, medicine, and agriculture with every departed species. He proposes a sensible objective—“to raise people everywhere to a decent standard of living while preserving as much of the rest of life as possible”—and to this end would expand marine sanctuaries and protect biological “hot spots” like the Amazon and Congolese forests. In general he advises an attitude of care and humility toward the natural world, which should have a familiar ring to the pastor, and a prudent stance of “existential conservatism.”

Buried within Wilson’s portrayal of Christianity is his latent humanist critique. Because he thinks that only an immanentist (this-worldly) perspective can truly include all that is material, natural, and bodily, he sees much of the Christian tradition’s ascetic, disciplinary paths as denigrations of “this-worldly” life. Charles Taylor provides an excellent framework by which we can identify the dilemma that Wilson addresses. For Taylor, there are two crucial criticisms of Christianity brought by the exclusive humanist:

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5 Ibid., 4.
6 Ibid., 16.
7 Ibid.
8 Ibid., 53.
9 Ibid., 74.
10 Ibid., 91.
11 Ibid., 94–98.
12 Ibid., 167.
13 Ibid., 6.