

# REVIEWS

## *The Creation: An Appeal to Save Life on Earth*

By Edward O. Wilson

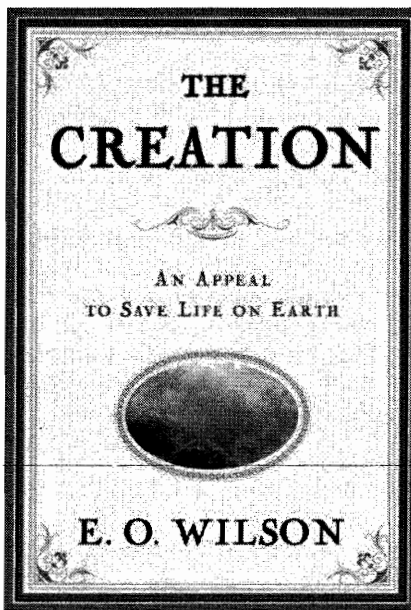
Reviewed by Karl E. Johnson

At first glance, E.O. Wilson's *The Creation: An Appeal to Save Life on Earth* is hard not to like. It is an attractive volume from Norton, featuring earth tones and outdoorsy feeling rough-cut pages. And who could quarrel with the project—an effort by a renowned Harvard atheist to reach out to a (fictional) Southern Baptist preacher through a set of letters asking him to collaborate in the cause to "save the Creation"?

At second glance, however, the book fails to live up to its packaging. Wilson's suggestion that Christian hope for the next world has resulted in an atrophied appreciation for this world is no longer as persuasive as when Lynn White, Jr. popularized a similar argument forty years ago.<sup>i</sup> True enough, when environmental consciousness was dawning in the years leading up to the first Earth Day, the church was largely asleep at the wheel. But then so was everybody else, except a few ecologists, environmental preservationists, and, it should be noted, a few theologians. The idea that Christian belief correlates with bad environmental behavior is a testable hypothesis, and sociological research has found it to be false.<sup>ii</sup> As Cambridge paleobiologist Simon Conway Morris put it in his review of Wilson's book that appeared in *Science*, the suggestion that "blame for environmental destruction should be laid at the door of reckless supernaturalists whose only concern is the next world" is a thesis that has "long since been exploded."<sup>iii</sup> It is time to stop pointing fingers and finally admit we are all sinners in our environmental behavior.

The main problem with Wilson's book, however, is his epistemology. He persists in speaking of science and religion in oppositional terms, suggesting that sci-

ence and religion constitute starkly different and conflicting ways of knowing. But this exaggerated conflict between science and religion also has been exploded. Although the "warfare" of science and religion has seven lives due to the popular writings of scientists such as Richard Dawkins and Wilson, no contemporary historian of science considers the warfare metaphor an accurate description or helpful heuristic of the past. Historians actually agree that the experimental approach to scientific inquiry that began during the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries was made possible by beliefs arising from the Christian milieu of the West—that the world is good, orderly, and knowable by human reason. This should not be surprising, as Christians from ancient times have believed in the "two books of God"—the book of nature and the book of Scripture. The Belgic Confession, to take just one example, states that God is known by two means—first, "by the creation, preservation, and government of the universe," and second "by his holy and divine Word." Contra Wilson, historic Christianity posits no conflict between reason and revelation.



More importantly still, the opposite of theism is not science but atheism. Wilson refers to his worldview as "scientific

humanism." But humanism is a philosophy, and there is nothing inherently more scientific about it than other philosophies, including Christianity. Simply put, Wilson's philosophical outlook is dated, as would be obvious to anybody who has followed discussions in the philosophy of science over the last half-century. Problems with his philosophy lead to problems with his sociology, as he assumes that scientists and religionists are two distinct sets of people, when in fact they are often the same people.

What of Wilson's main appeal: Can't we all just get along? For the record, the overwhelming majority of Christians are more than willing to join the cause—most already have—and even to work alongside those of other religions or worldviews. The problem is not the goal, but Wilson's coercive means of getting there.

According to Wilson the path to collaboration consists in setting aside differences of dogma, ideology, and metaphysics. Not so. The better basis for collaboration is for all parties involved to acknowledge that their concern for the environment is unavoidably grounded in their particular worldview or metaphysics. In contrast to Wilson's assertion that "the defense of living nature is a universal value [that] doesn't rise from any religious dogma," it is rather a value that, like all values, must arise in part from "religious dogma"—i.e., from one's worldview, whether religious or secular. Christians care about Creation because God created it and calls it good. Set aside the narrative and Christians have less, not more, reason to care for creation. Wilson's values function more similarly to this than he realizes. His own care for creation is grounded not in science but in his humanism. Science gives us data, not concern for the environment.

Conway Morris, who refers to Wilson's thesis as "a thinly disguised programme to hijack religious energy and divert it

## REVIEWS

into the secular arena," makes the same observation. Although well-intentioned, "Wilson's programme is ultimately underpinned by an incoherent metaphysics. Equally important, its scientific agenda carries the real risk of imposing tyranny." Conway Morris concludes that the failure of Wilson's project lies in "the recurrent inability of materialists to understand that the decision to protect the biosphere can only derive from an ethical imperative that is itself independent of the natural world."<sup>iv</sup>

Differences in worldview need not divide, but can actually be the very basis for collaboration. Indeed, mutual respect means acknowledging, not ignoring, each others' worldviews. What does this look like? Take Bono's support for the ONE Campaign "to make poverty history" as an example. In his address to the National Prayer Breakfast last year, Bono challenged Jews, Christians, and Muslims to come together to fight poverty—as Jews, Christians, and Muslims. Instead of asking everyone to shed their religious identities, he appealed to their various faith traditions, quoting from the Hebrew Scriptures, the New Testament, and the Koran.

I'm not sure how we got to a place where rock stars demonstrate more nuance than Harvard professors, but it is probably telling that Wilson's preacher is fictional. Apparently Wilson doesn't have any actual preacher friends who could have reviewed his manuscript and advised him on its several caricatures. Indeed, Wilson's gesture of goodwill toward Christians is not likely to be taken all that seriously amidst the backdrop of his other writings. As physicist Karl Giberson memorably put it, Wilson's attempt to extend the right hand of fellowship is like "Al Qaeda opening a doughnut shop and inviting George Bush."<sup>v</sup>

I hope Giberson is wrong, and that Wilson is sincere in his appeal for collaboration. If so—if Wilson is willing to break bread and not just push doughnuts—then at some point he will cease preach-

ing long enough to listen. And when he does, he might be surprised at what he hears. He might hear, for example, that Christianity is a faith tradition that emphasizes hope and renewal, including the promise of a new heaven and a new earth. Historic Christianity teaches that Creation itself will be restored. Human persons, created in the image of God, are called to be agents of shalom in the world, and that includes being stewards of the natural environment. Not only the doctrine of Creation, but the doctrines of the Incarnation, the bodily resurrection, Common Grace, and even the Second Coming, all yield a dignity and significance to the material world. Far from being irrelevant dogmas, such doctrines are resources that motivate millions with respect to the very environmental virtues Wilson cares about. Simply put, they are first principles worth preserving.

The implications of Christian theology for environmental practice are not quickly grasped by anyone, much less by a longtime atheist. Perhaps what is needed for more substantive dialogue and encounter across worldviews is for Wilson and other secularists to join the National Religious Partnership for the Environment as secularists. Secularism, after all, is not a procedural ethic that somehow transcends particular visions of human flourishing. It is one among many worldviews.

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POSTSCRIPT: An earlier version of this review appeared in *Translations Magazine*. Since that time, in a promising indication that Wilson is sincere in his desire for collaboration, he recently participated in a meeting cosponsored by the Center for Health and the Global Environment at Harvard Medical School and the National Association of Evangelicals "to search for common ground in the protection of the creation." Wilson also signed "An Urgent Call to Action: Scientists and Evangelicals Unite to Protect Creation," which states that the signatories "happily discovered far more concordance than any of us had expected, quickly moving beyond dialogue to a shared sense of moral purpose."

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<sup>i</sup> White, L. (2006). The historical roots of our ecological crisis. *Science*, 155, 1203-1207.

<sup>ii</sup> For a definitive review of this research, see Hitzhusen, G. E. (2007). Judeo-Christian theology and the environment: Moving beyond skepticism to new sources for environmental education in the United States. *Environmental Education Research*, 13(1).

<sup>iii</sup> Conway Morris, S. (2006). The road to hell? *Science*, 443, 273.

<sup>iv</sup> Ibid., 273.

<sup>v</sup> As quoted in Radin, C. A. (2006, 29 October). God's Green Earth. *Boston Globe*.

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*The Creation* is available from W.W. Norton © 2006; hardcover; 160 pages; \$21.95.

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### *Evening Thoughts: Reflecting on Earth as Sacred Community*

By Thomas Berry

Reviewed by Charles Yaple

The title and subtitle of Berry's latest book suggest the human race might be at a tipping point. Are we, as the title might infer, an endangered species living in our final days? Is there a hopeful alternative contained in Berry's subtitle if we embrace the "earth as a sacred community?" Readers will find both in the book.

Using an eclectic collection of essays, Berry outlines forces that have created our present ecological dilemma - rise of nation states, the petrochemical age, unchecked consumerism, and global warming. To counteract these forces, the author prescribes a new jurisprudence necessary for our survival. His "Ten Principles for Jurisprudence Revision" are well conceived and contribute significantly to the realm of environmental ethics. However, the central