

“I came from where? Approaching the science of human origins from religious perspectives” – introduction by Dr. Rick Potts

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Rick Potts: 00:20 I'm Rick Potts. I direct the Human Origins Program, and I'm also the curator of our relatively new exhibition on human evolution. In fact, a week and a half ago, our exhibition on human origins titled What Does It Mean To Be Human turned one year old. And mysteriously, balloons and party hats appeared on the statues of the early humans in the hall. And in fact, during one two-hour stint that I had in the exhibition hall in our Scientist Is In Program, a couple of groups of school kids came up to me and sang happy birthday. I had to explain to them that I'm not one year old, but the hall is one year old, but it was a very good time. It was all very, felt very celebratory. (01:13) And it's been quite a year for the exhibition. The website, all aspects of the human origins initiative. The best counts and estimates that we can do, that the Smithsonian can do, indicates that roughly 4.6 million visitors have come to see the exhibition over the first year, and that's very gratifying. Our hot topics events, which take place in the small theater. I don't know if we can possibly have the lights down a little bit, so the slides can be seen a little bit better. (01:53) In any case, the hot topics events which are usually the last Friday of every month, as well as our Scientist Is In Programs have encouraged tens of thousands of visitors to meet and talk with researchers, research scientists, and also our experienced volunteers, our docents, within the exhibition hall. So I'm very, very grateful to all who have participated in those public programs and opportunities, and of course, to the many visitors who have taken the time to visit, to give us feedback, and as you have today, to come to public presentations like this. (02:40) Every other month throughout the year, in fact, in the hot topics, but the hot topic events that are every other month, the group that offers today's event helps host a program in the exhibition hall on a topic devoted to the variety of religious and philosophical perspectives and reflections on the science of human evolution. In developing the hall, we wish to create a place where museum visitors can see and examine the scientific findings, while at the same time, we recognize that people bring to this subject a whole slew of different ideas and understandings about what it means to be human. (03:32)

Research discoveries about the deep human past have contributed to, and I think in many ways have transformed, our understandings of who we are as a species and perceptions about and relevant to our own humanness. And so the study of

human evolution definitely intersects with these same subjects and how they are informed by other human endeavors, literature, the arts, philosophy, and of course, religion. (04:10)

As curator of the Human Origins Hall, several years ago, I felt it relevant and personally very interesting for us, that is the Smithsonian and this museum, to invite an external advisory group. What we have called the Broader Social Impacts Committee of Human Origins, or for human origins to actively lead a conversation both here at the Smithsonian, but also more widely, about the broader societal understandings and responses stimulated by the scientific investigation of human origins. (04:49) In addition to the public programs that I've just mentioned that, let me also briefly point to some of the resources on the web. So let me just go briefly to the web here and to the homepage of our website. There it says, "What does it mean to be human?" and it's rotating an initial image there. Even from the home page, you see some of our ideas that people have said about what it means to be human, what's hot in human origins, our public events, but also human evolution, religious perspectives. And clicking on that, you see some of the resources that have been developed by the Broader Social Impacts Committee, representatives of whom are on the... of which is on the panel today. (05:52) And we begin, for example, with a little bit of an introduction that I wrote, and the mission statement of this group, of this committee, a statement from the co-chairs Connie Birk and Jim Miller, and then a listing of the members of the committee. And on those, on the website, you can even go to their personal statements and their reflection about human evolution. I just called up Connie's here. I hope that's okay, Connie, to put your personal statement up there? But everyone else has put theirs on there as well. (06:35)

And we have as part of the resources on the web, what's known as the primer. And let's see if that calls up. Here we go. A primer on science, religion, evolution, and creationism. And we are in fact, as a result of the last two days of meetings of the committee, the committee has decided to develop, and they are developing at this point, other resources for this particular part of our website.

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