

## Dr. Connie Bertka, Ph.D., Unitarian Universalist (I came from where)

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Connie Bertka: 00:22 Approaching the science of human origins from religious perspectives. You'll have an opportunity to discuss with several of our BSIC members who will represent for us not only different religious perspectives, but different contexts in which this topic might come up. Before I invite each of them to share their thoughts, I wanted to have an opportunity to share my own thoughts on this subject. So I'm speaking now for myself, not for the entire panel. What I'm particularly interested in, where I'd like to begin our conversation is why I think it's so important for the scientific community to be open to proactively engaging religious communities in this conversation. And based on my experience in this area for over 10 years now, I'd also like to suggest a few ideas for how we can encourage this to be a positive and productive experience. So it probably will come as no surprise that many of my scientific colleagues share my interests in communicating not only the discoveries of science, but actually the fun of doing science with not only students, but also the public at large. (01:56) And if we can believe data on US public attitudes towards science, which I think we can, for the most part, my colleagues and I will find an audience, probably not unlike this audience, that recognizes the value of science and its significance for societal wellbeing. However, each member of this audience is also bringing with them their own individual worldviews, that is, your own ideas about what the world is really like and what constitutes important and valuable information about the world. Now, what we learn about the world through science, if we choose to reflect on it, may enhance our individual worldviews, but sometimes it may challenge those worldviews. So the first thing I would encourage my scientific colleagues to be mindful of is both of those possibilities. Now science as a practice is about the testing of explanations of the natural world against nature itself. So by definition, we can't speak about the supernatural, a domain that most of us are comfortable assigning to religion. Scientists are advised to remember that,

particularly if they're considering trying to use science to argue for or against the existence of God, science has no authority to make that claim. (03:32) And from my own experience, I'm happy to report that most scientists recognize this and they share my disappointment with and concern over the relative few who recklessly cross that boundary. That said, as much as I want my colleagues to recognize and help communicate the appropriate nature and role of science, I also believe that we have a responsibility to recognize that when we speak about nature, we are speaking for many people, we're also speaking about creation. Put another way, despite their differences in process and domains, both science and religion do also make claims about the same world. Now, depending on your individual worldview, these are claims about nature, about creation, or about both. Now, my intention in doing science may not be to either challenge or enhance your individual worldview, but what if that impact is unavoidable? What then is the responsible course of action for the scientific community? (04:49) A fine place to start is education about the nature and role of science so that any claims that science, by definition, is always in conflict with religious belief can be corrected and that, certainly, where the scientific community, for the most part, places its efforts. And maybe we can argue that at minimum, this is what we must do, but is it all we can do? After all, ultimately, isn't it the responsibility of religious individuals and groups to decide how to incorporate what science is learning about the world if they choose to into their worldview? Well, as an individual who places a high value on what science is learning about the world, and as one whose own religious tradition, Unitarian Universalism, encourages that scientific knowledge is reflected on, I personally find myself unable to settle for a minimal effort on the part of the scientific community. (05:57) I want to ask, if we are doing all we can to help create environments where individuals are allowed, even invited, to participate in the ongoing process of integrating scientific knowledge with their own worldviews if they choose to do that? But how exactly can the scientific community contribute to such an environment? Human origins is an especially appropriate topic, I believe, to explore in this context, where did we

come from? What does it mean to be human? Those are inherently interesting questions and ones for which I think we recognize that a variety of disciplines, including science and religion, address. The scientific community has a responsibility to do its utmost to convey what it has learned from its study of the natural world that's pertinent to reflecting on those questions. At the same time, we must be ever mindful of the fact that science alone is not going to provide a full answer. Some people have a word for this, they call it humility. A visible expression of this approach, I believe, is to create environments for learning where individuals are welcomed and respected, regardless of their worldview and opportunities are created for increasing dialogue and understanding. (07:32) Now, in creating this environment, scientists would do well, I believe, to begin by avoiding stereotypes of religion and religious believers and have some understanding of the diversity of religious beliefs and the sometimes subtle and not so subtle differences between scholars, clergy, and laity. If worldviews are going to be impacted in a meaningful and lasting way, if an individual chooses to move beyond mutual understanding towards an ongoing process of integration, then engagement of religious leaders and scholars in this work is vital. They too must agree that science and religion share, at least in part, the same world. This is hard work for all of us. Not only are most of us not trained in interdisciplinary work, that said, I've had the good fortune to meet many professionals, scientists, theologians, and clergy who would like to participate in this effort. Our reality though, is that we all have other pressing concerns. Scientists need to keep active research programs going and clergy have numerous pastoral and societal concerns to address. (08:54) I have to wonder, though, how many more of my colleagues in both science and religion might be interested in being involved if we didn't insist, as often as we do, that the answer to challenging questions is to be found in simply separating our domains of concern. That may well be the most pragmatic answer in the short-term, but I'm left wondering what lasting difference a deeper engagement might make in the long-term, especially to addressing challenging controversies that arise at the intersection of science and society, and often, human evolution is one of

those. Now, I don't expect to know the answer to those questions any time soon, but there are encouraging activities taking place. And as way of introduction, I would remind you that here we are at the invitation of the Smithsonian Institution Human Origins Program, participating in a conversation to address approaching the science of human origins from religious perspectives. (10:09) So we've invited some members of the Human Origins Program's Broader Social Impacts Committee to draw on their varied experiences to help us explore this topic. They'll be sharing with us insights from experiences rooted in a range of worldviews Catholic, Protestant, and humanist, and a variety of contexts, parochial education, the public school setting, seminary education, and congregational life. Let me finish my remarks by once again thanking the Smithsonian Human Origins Program and the institutional and private supporters of that program, not only for their wonderful exhibit, but also their commitment to inviting all of us to be part of this ongoing conversation about human origins. And with that, I'm going to begin by asking each of the panelists to provide 10 minutes or so of their thoughts on this topic. And at the end of that time, we'll then have a question and answer period with all of you.

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