

How can the concept of the unique first human and the concept of continuous human evolution be reconciled And closing remarks (I came from where)

This video was recorded at the Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History on March 28, 2011

Connie Bertka: 00:20 Jim, I'll give you the last question.

Jim Miller: 00:23 I'm sorry that our friend and colleague, Wentzel Van Huyssteen has left because he had to catch the train, but I still want to ask this question to the whole group, but I need to start with a small amendment of what he said in his introduction of himself. He said that Princeton Seminary had established the first chair in science and theology in America. That certainly is true within recent times. But in 1861, the Columbia Seminary in Columbia, South Carolina established a chair in natural science in connection with Revelation. And it was first held by James Woodrow, who was the uncle of Woodrow Wilson, who was a geologist and a chemist. This was, of course, right before the late unpleasantness between the states and that disrupted the establishment of the chair for a short time. (01:15) But he taught in that position for about 20 years and finally fell a foul of his religious community, namely Presbyterians, by virtue of the fact that he was finally asked after 20 years to express himself with regard to what he was teaching about evolution. And when he did this to the alumni society of the seminary, there were those in the churches who took considerable exception because he had begun his position by thinking that Darwin was probably mistaken and 20 years later had come to the conclusion that Darwin was probably correct. The issue though didn't really... Which resulted in four different general assemblies from 1884 to 1924, ruling against his holding the chair, primarily over the issue of Adam. I hate to mention simply one of the two primary genitors of our humankind. But I think it is the issue of human origins that is far more of an issue within at least the Judaeo-Christian and Islamic communities than is the evolution of newts or tadpoles or dogs or whatever. (02:41) And in that regard, what I would like to ask the panel to reflect on is, it seems

that evolutionary theory suggests that what you have are parents and children all the way back to the time that sexual reproduction evolved. So that it's not easy to draw any particular kind of line that says, here you have the first human being, the first modern human. How is it that religious thinking on this matter, which seems as a matter of fact to want to insist upon, as did those Presbyterians back in the late 19th, early 20th century, that Adam is created uniquely, or there is a uniquely created first human? How can that notion be related to what seems to be a continuous, even if a descent with modification of organic union of parents and children all the way back?

Audience member: 03:47

not sure I understand

Wesley McCoy: 03:51

I think I understand the question. And this is a very similar question that was asked of me by a member of our State legislature. When I spoke to him on the telephone about why we need to continue teaching evolution, he was very concerned that how could it be possible that one day there was a human and then somehow that non-human being gave birth to a human. That was the breaking point for him. He could not accept evolution based on that idea. And one of the most powerful answers that I give my students, and that did not work for this legislator, was the idea that when we speak of evolution, we're dealing with large groups, with populations. (04:39) We're not exactly dealing with one individual giving birth to a new species that is unlike the mother and father. That there is a continuum. But some people used to call it a chain of being from the ancient times up until the present with the strongest evidence of that being our DNA that we contain in our cells right now being so similar to the DNA of our recent ancestors and our ancestors farther in the past and species that develop from relatives of ours from the distant past. (05:20) So some people find that very uncomfortable. I find it a thrilling way to explore the past history of the earth to find that we are in fact related to all the living things that currently exist.

Audience member: 05:36

May I please just comment on that, because I think that my question, which is going to be very similar to what his was, is that given the fact that you have this continuous

evolution here, there are a zillion of animals that are not human. And at this point in time, obviously there are humans. There's a whole mess of in-between stuff. Where from the religious point of view, do you put, draw the line to say, Oh, these beings have souls, and these don't? That's I think the gist of the question I was interested in.

Wesley McCoy: 06:11

Sure. It's a question that you can ask about people who are walking around today. All the living people who are on the earth today, you can wonder if they in fact have souls. And that's, I think a legitimate question to ask in religion. It may not be answerable with science, but if you go back into the past, is there a single moment where God instilled a soul into one individual and then not into his brother or his cousin or into his uncle? And I certainly don't claim to know the answer to that. But I trust the way I explained it to my minister was, I trust in the love of God enough to believe that God holds us in the palm of his hand in so many ways that we can't know and we can't understand. That's part of the mystery to me about our past. And I'm not sure we'll ever come up with a single answer that explains that for everyone.

Connie Bertka: 07:09

Nancy, you look like you want to

Nancy howell: 07:11

I know this one also makes me want to write another book. In answer, we put them together. There's several dimensions to the question. At one of which is, always takes me back to the first two chapters of Genesis. In Genesis one, we get a big head, in a sense, or we start to, because we're told we're in the image of God. Yet notice how the text is written about humans being made in the context of everything else. Chapter two is the one where God says, [inaudible 00:07:46] stop having such a big head about who you were created to be. Because some interpreters understand that a human sin in chapter two of Genesis was pride. So it seems to me, we have this interesting little sort of dichotomous way of thinking about humanity and the text. (08:07) And who is this Adam in this story? Not a single individual. I'm not sure even the ancient thinkers were necessarily thinking of a single individual, but perhaps writing into the poetry in story and song of the time, or thinking much more broadly about

humanity and its creation and the beauty of being known and recognized by God. I suppose, just one other thought for reflection that I'd throw into this matter is if this is the moment of God's creation, we sort of are pushing to find out where are we named as humans, persons, right? Well, and so we pushed this way. Was it Adam? Was it later? But I want to push us backward to the other direction because our ancient colleagues wondering about God and ourselves actually thought of all creatures as having, in different time periods, as having spirit. So we have become a culture, more restrictive about thinking about spirit or souls than our ancient counterparts. So I suppose I'm not giving any answer, but saying that we have far more questions to ask in relationship to ourselves and animals and souls.

Connie Bertka: 09:34 And that is a very good thought to end on, and I want to give Rick an opportunity for some final words.

Rick Potts: 09:41 Well actually, just to segue from the last discussion in question to the end, and thanks to all of you. Within the context of the exhibition and the various things that we have put out on our website, and the companion volume to the exhibition, and the discussions that we continue to have is public for us, such as this. That people have asked me, what do you think it means to be human? And I say, well, we're posing it as a question. It's not a hall called the Smithsonian will tell you what it means to be human. But I think that if there is a single consistent answer that goes through the hall is that, we would like people to consider, is that certainly part of being human has been a process of becoming human. That's what we were referring to the process of evolution. (10:36) And that it didn't happen all at once. And what we find is that when people come into the hall from a variety of different religious and philosophical orientations, that their answer of how they take that message, they get that, but how they embrace that or how they incorporate that into their thinking is very personal. And it's personal in ways of where they can talk about it with perhaps family members who are with them or members of a group that they happen to be part of, but it does bear a testimony to the diverse ways in which one can take the science and incorporate it into

one's thinking that is informed by so many different areas. Let me then thank you for your involvement and your very thoughtful, and sometimes in many cases, in fact, in all these cases, penetrating questions.

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