Religious perspectives on science and human origins – Dr. Jim Miller, Ph.D., Presbyterian

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Jim Miller: 00:00

Hi, I'm Jim Miller and I'm a Christian. I'm a bit hesitant to say that, not because I'm hesitant to be a Christian, but simply because by saying that I'm representing a community that ranges from Quakers on one end or in one case to Roman Catholics on the other, or from Southern Baptist on the one end and Coptic Christians on the other, which if any of you understand is quite a range to be responsible for. So what I'd like to do is to, rather than trying in any way to give a common denominator description of what the Christian perspective on the science of human evolution is. Is rather to show you something of the range of perspectives that you do find within the Christian community on this subject matter.

There's already what has been referred to as a conflict perspective, or it's a perspective that for some Christians that the very findings of science are in some way, threatening to their religious understanding of themselves and the world around them. And there's irony here because often these same people will seek scientific support for their particular religious perspective. So it's an ironic concern about human evolution, when as a matter of facts the authority of science in the culture is sought to support their own religious perspectives. However, perhaps more common than the conflict mode of a relationship is one that sees science and religion as fundamentally separate ways of looking at the world, and not in any sense of conflict because they are so different from one another. And in this particular perspective it may well be the Christian will accept an evolutionary understanding of the material existence of the world. See the universe as 13.7 billion years old, and the earth is 5.8 billion and life on earth is 3.8 billion years, and except an evolutionary account of life on earth and of human origins in the material sense. But yet we may reserve a different interpretation about what constitutes authentic humanity and will, as a matter of fact, approach that question from a religious perspective. Perhaps the
most general innocent secular description of point of view comes from the late Stephen Jay Gould in his coinage of the term NOMA, the acronym NOMA for non-overlapping magisteria. It's a position that he articulated actually in response to a position that was expressed by the late John Paul, the second, Pope John Paul, the second in which in a letter that he wrote to the Vatican Academy of Sciences, he noted that evolution generally had come to be seen as something more than a hypothesis, by virtue of evidence coming from very many different sources of inquiry. (03:43) But he then went on to say that, that acknowledgement should not be taken to suggest that what constitutes authentic humanity does not require as a matter of fact, an act of divine creation. So here you have an expression within the religious community of the divided magisteria that that goal was referring to. There's then a third, at least a third group, and it's easy to talk about for a second and third group, but there's at least a third group that ranges from those who have simply a nagging intuition, that there should be some relationship between what we discover about natural history and in particular, the history of human origins and how we understand ourselves religiously, particularly within the Christian community that drawing from the Hebrew scriptures accepts the notion that humankind is made in the image of God. To those who think that at the very least we should be engaged in some ongoing conversation about these matters, even if we're not entirely clear where that conversation is going, to those who actually actively seek some sort of integrated way of bringing these ideas together in a single conceptual manner. (05:10) So there you have within the Christian community, not a single point of view, but at least three. And one could even probably break down those three into more subdivisions as well, just as the Christian community is a religious species of great variety.