

Darwin and the biology of faith



Highland Views

Chris Highland
Columnist

A textbook used by some private religious schools across the country tells young minds that “evolution is untrue Scripturally, but it does not even make good science.”

I guess when you capitalize Scripture and keep science lowercase, that should be a clue to the educational intent.

Did you know that Abraham Lincoln and Charles Darwin were born on the same day — Feb. 12, 1809? That’s trivia, but it’s not trivial that Darwin left an interesting legacy beyond his explanation for the origin and development of life on earth.

After hearing Jim Costa read from his book, “Darwin’s Backyard,” in a local bookstore, I asked Jim, who teaches biology at Western Carolina University, to discuss his views on science, religion and Darwin.

He sees the enthusiasm of students every day in class and in the field. “The imagination can be seized by different experiences.” He finds enjoyment in observing the “wow moment” when a student sees something, even a tiny insect, “in a wholly new light.”

There can be endless “wow moments” in our own near environment — in our own backyard, as Jim puts it.

What about Charles Darwin (1809-1882) and faith? It is debatable what Darwin ultimately believed, but as Jim explains, “in any case it is clear that he rejected the idea of a personal god that plays an active role in [our world] ... He may have retained something of a deistic sense, but certainly rejected conventional religion.”

I suppose this is one reason we don’t see Darwin honored in stained-glass too much (except Christ College. Cam-

bridge and Fountain Street Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan).

Jim makes one particular statement that captures my attention: “There is an irony in the fact that after his epic worldwide voyage on HMS Beagle [1831-1836], Darwin basically never left home again.” Remarkable. Charles was only 22 when he boarded the Beagle. He could have studied medicine or theology, but instead he chose to explore, to investigate, to make a career out of “wow moments” and new light.

Back home in England, Darwin brought the insights of his voyage directly to his domestic world and “derived universal truths from his backyard experiments” (the focus of Costa’s book). In fact, “He was a lifelong ‘experimentiser,’ to use his term, and [often enlisted] the assistance of his kids, his wife Emma, friends and other relatives.”

He tested whether seeds can survive in salt water and delved into the lives of plants, bees and even earthworms. He had a delightfully insatiable curiosity.

Darwin’s curiosity has “evolved” with the wise skepticism of contemporary science. It seems to me the consistent discomfort between scientists and religionists can be traced to how curious and open to discovery a person can be.

Since science and religion both seem embedded in the human species, I wondered if Jim sees any way for these divergent worldviews to coexist.

“Given the tremendous spectrum of religious belief I daresay most people of faith do find compatibility, common ground [between faith and science].” He recognizes there are many scientists who are people of faith, yet there is a “fundamental incompatibility” with scriptural literalism, which “cannot be reconciled with any scientific understanding of the natural world.”

As he describes it. the scientific

method “is the only reliable method we have so far for figuring out truths of the natural world.” He agrees there are “mysteries” to explore but the study of science offers the most cogent explanations.

What do we say to those who view science as a threat to their spirituality? Jim responds:

“These anti-science voices still constitute a vocal minority, and I would urge the silent majority to counter these voices.” He decries the “willful ignorance” of some who selectively reject the advancements of science (medicine, technology, etc.).

Science isn’t foolproof or final, but its self-critical nature is the best tool we have for understanding this amazing world.

“Darwin’s working method teaches us how to look at the natural world with new eyes,” Jim says. “In my book I hope I succeed in inspiring readers to reflect on that, how to think like a scientist, and even to try their hand at repeating Darwin’s experiments.”

This sounds like a timely invitation for a healthy, hands-on practice of searching, whether a person lives by biology, belief or both.

Jim is also the executive director of the Highlands Biological Station in Highlands. The station encourages research and education for all ages through its nature center, botanical gardens and outreach programs. A good reminder that balanced education is available not only in Darwin’s backyard or on worldwide voyages, but in our own backyard, with Nature itself as the primary teacher.

Chris Highland served as a Protestant minister and interfaith chaplain for nearly 30 years. He is a teacher, writer, free-thinker and humanist celebrant. Chris and his wife, Carol, a Presbyterian minister, live in Asheville. Learn more at chighland.com