



Our Front Porch

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<https://peacefulscience.org/articles/front-porch/>



This has been a big month for Peaceful Science. This month, [our bustling forum hit about 80,000 views per month](#), and is becoming our lively front porch with all sorts of interesting things. A book deal on the Genealogical Adam is now officially signed with Intervarsity Press Academic, and my first draft is nearly done. Recently, our work with [Science for Seminaries](#) and Concordia Seminary was in the spotlight at [WIRED](#) and [RealClearLife](#), leading to an entertaining exchange with [Jerry Coyne](#). This comes on the heels of about [15 articles of quality engagement from the Discovery Institute](#) as well. [Conversations with Reasons to Believe](#) have begun to assess the scientific details of their human origins model.

Next week, I will be giving eight talks in eight days, including at [FaithAscent in St Louis](#) and at Hong Kong University on “[Of Apes and Artificial Minds: The Paradox of Human Exceptionalism](#),” On top of it all, I turned 40 last week, graduated my second PhD student, and am expecting my second child in December. A big month, and more to come.

A friend of mine, Dr. Walter A. Rogero II, is a pastor and theologian, who played several roles in the Science for Seminaries program at the DoSER program of AAAS. To discern who we are and what we are becoming, I asked Dr. Rogero to interview the many denizens of the forum, and report back. Dr. Rogero asked: [What value does Peaceful Science bring?](#) This is what he learned...

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Have you heard the one about the atheist, the creationist, and the computational biologist? Sounds like the start of a joke, doesn't it? But what if it wasn't the start of a joke, but the start of a conversation?

For the past six months, physician and scientist, [S. Joshua Swamidass](#), has moderated a growing community of unlike-minded individuals; an [open forum](#) more guided by the rules found in Robert Fulghum's [All I Needed to Know, I Learned in Kindergarten](#) than those in [Robert's Rules of Order](#). The forum is one part of a larger and evolving vision that Swamidass calls *Peaceful Science*. Through *Peaceful Science* he hopes to establish common ground between disparate communities, and judging from the ongoing growth of the forum, it seems that this hope is shared by others.

The forum is an ad-hoc collection of experts of all sorts gathering to wrestle with the grand questions at the confluence of science and theology. It is a kind of modern [Areopagus](#) providing an idea-space at once refreshing (in today's marketplace of ideological polarization) and invigorating (for those wishing genuine academic engagement). While the depth of conversation adds interest for the casual and curious, the forum has been particularly valuable for developing ideas through critical dialog. *Peaceful Science* has given more than one specialist just the right partners with whom to explore or refine their theory. The multi-faceted conversations provide glimpses into other professions, other ways of approaching questions; and most particularly: windows for outsiders into the somewhat opaque world of the practicing scientist.

The forum offered by *Peaceful Science* draws young-earth creationists, materialistic atheists, intelligent design proponents, agnostics, mainline theologians, conservative seminarians, and a growing list of others. Some are committed Christians, others able scientists; many are both. Some participants are new to the discussion, [finding their voices](#) in the larger conversation. But many have long experience in engaging the grand questions. This experience and their strong credentials generate a surprising depth of engagement among a kaleidoscopic panorama of topics. Really smart, highly qualified, people talk about a lot of things on the forum.

Participants engage in fruitful interdisciplinary sparring matches while maintaining a genuine civility. This is intentionally cultivated. Foundational to the diversity of the forum is Swamidass' deliberate inclusion of dissenting voices. He seeks them out, draws them out, and sometimes even calls them out. Somehow, this results more often than not in discussion rather than conflict. As [he explains this experiment](#),

In the end, that is our crazy bet. We hope we can talk to Wittgenstein's lion, and some how find some common ground. I'm hopeful, but it remains to be seen how far this experiment might go.

Swamidass excels in developing high-level engagement among forum constituency, and in drawing strategic thinkers into the burgeoning conversation, and when they do join in, they often find surprising value in the forum itself. One atheist [struggled to explain](#) why he found himself here, finally offering:

I don't know why I am part of the community. Perhaps I have gone "native" in some sense. I haven't changed my views, but I do care that the community is successful in achieving its goals.

He came, originally, on a reconnaissance mission to determine if Swamidass was a legitimate scientist. Finding out the science here was above reproach, he was drawn in by a set of values and priorities he found important and rare. He stayed. Real ideas were engaged here, for the common good.

Having developed this idea-space, this play-box for thought, Swamidass himself often interjects grand suppositions of his own for critical evaluation. Most visible among these is his current exploration of the scientific and theological bases for a literal Adam and Eve.

Now, some may view the Genealogical Adam and Eve as frivolous or baseless, while others may think the suggestion of a literal Adam and Eve itself is paramount to the *Peaceful Science* endeavor. But by advancing a Genealogical Adam and Eve, Swamidass ultimately neither endorses nor rejects the concept; instead he offers this position as a helpful thought experiment.

Casual observers will doubtlessly judge Swamidass' Genealogical Adam and Eve in terms of how well it matches their own views. A more nuanced appraisal; however, suggests that Swamidass is using this hypothesis to explore the boundaries between the scientifically probable, the scientifically possible, and the scientifically allowable.

For issues of scientific consensus (like common descent in evolution), he confidently expresses that consensus as probable.

For issues of scientific debate (like the possibility that all human beings alive today are genealogically related to an original pair), he boldly provides a hypothesis and model of that hypothesis, expecting critical debate to support or falsify whether it is possible.

For issues lacking a ground for scientific comment (like the supernatural creation of a pair of humans related to but distinct from all others, who leave no discernable genetic record), he radically asserts that non-scientific disciplines—theology particularly—have the right of free inquiry.

Again, Swamidass' approach is easily misunderstood. Instead of seeking to establish a fact, with the Genealogical Adam he is offering an illustration, a parable, or a thought-experiment to the world for peer-review. His doing so expresses the heart of an effort he calls *Peaceful Science*. In the Genealogical Adam, he models an approach to the grand questions. He does not offer a solution to an ultimately indissoluble question, but instead seeks the establishment of common ground on which disparate communities might explore

grand and even controversial questions. This is a common ground that seriously regards scientific attainment, consensus, and methodology; but permits speculation on matters beyond the reach of contemporary science's methodological naturalism.

Now, if Swamidass' vision for such common ground is illustrated by the way he has offered the Genealogical Adam and Eve as a public thought-experiment, then this vision finds concrete expression in the forum itself, with its parallel commitments to good science and to the respect of others and their views. Swamidass calls this a Secular-Confessional society.

[A] dual secular-confessional square model is what *Peaceful Science* is built around. More and more I see Christians, Agnostics, and atheists engaging each other with kindness, respect, and honesty. Continue this way, and I expect we will continue to grow, not just in numbers but also in influence. This serves the common good, even when we define the common good in different ways.

The forum achieves common ground among participants through a shared commitment to good science and to a respect based in critical discussion, not unconsidered agreement; discussion through which hypotheses may be explored, refined or even overturned. But while discussion is vigorous; divergent, even dissenting views are held in great respect and sought out, unlike many places that address similar questions.

Forum participants cite the community's respect for opposing views, its openness to exploration and even change, and its willingness for outside voices to make meaningful contributions as distinctive. The forum is not regulated by organizational belief statements or moderated by a monolithic police, though it does have prominent disclaimer. Instead of disseminating a point of view, it seeks to provide rich dialog from diverse voices as an approach to wrestling with the grand questions. In this methodology it appears to be unique, and is attracting more and more thought-leaders to share, to wrestle, to grow, and to drink from waters of discourse both refreshment and revitalization.

All voices are welcome at the Peaceful Science forum, where kindness is the watchword (remember how the woman left Westboro?) and every viewpoint can expect a healthy and rigorous engagement. One may not agree with all that comes out of the Peaceful Science forum's discussions (and even those so involved generally do not), but should its nature spread into other circles, this author believes that the world would be a better place. Here's hoping that every foray *Peaceful Science* makes at finding common ground finds similar success to that enjoyed by forum participants.

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