



A Pentecostal at The Smithsonian

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<https://peacefulscience.org/articles/pentecostal-smithsonian/>



Credit: The Smithsonian Institution

“What concerns do you have about our ‘Exploring Human Origins: What Does it Mean to be Human’ exhibit?”

This surprisingly direct question was posed to me, a slightly nervous and cautious ordained *Assemblies of God* (A/G) minister and biology faculty member at my denomination’s national university. It was 2016, and a small group of us were on a private tour. The question came from Rick Potts, pre-eminent paleoanthropologist and curator and creator of this particular Smithsonian Museum traveling exhibit.¹

I floundered in cognitive disequilibrium. Rick was relaxed, easy-going, and inquisitive. Where was the heated rhetoric and arrogance I anticipated?

The Pentecostal Scientist

As an adolescent, I embraced a conflict view of faith and science...and science won. An agnostic through high school and lower division biology courses in college, my immersion in atheistic evolutionary theory was deep and wide. Religious sensibilities or theories played no role in my education. But then, God interrupted.

As hippie firefighters, my wife and I encountered *agape* love through a small country church in Eastern Oregon. These plaid shirt, gingham dress wearing, socially conservative Christians made us part of their families...BBQs, firewood cutting, napping in living rooms. They loved us, for real. They loved (not argued) us into the kingdom of God.

Soon after, however, a pastor we befriended during grad school told me in a men’s Sunday school class that “it’s the Bible or evolution, you can’t have both.” Obediently, I became a young earth creationist who rejected evolutionary theory.

Secular scientists also communicated to me a conflict approach to science/religion integration. Hanging on one of our graduate school

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professor’s office walls was a photograph of himself standing, arms extended, on the shore of a lake. It was captioned: “And God saw every thing that he had made, and, behold, it was very good.” I found this mockery of the Biblical creation account offensive.

Both the religious and scientific communities appeared to be telling me the same thing: science and religion cannot cohabit the same space.

But my wife and I met committed Christian graduate students. Soon, we were finding ways to cohere Biblical understandings with science. Scripture and science could both contribute to our understanding of God and His creation.

Evolution, especially of humans, however, remained a “sticky wicket.”

The Smithsonian Scientist

So back to Rick Potts, with his warm and earnest team at The Smithsonian. We toured the exhibit at the Library Center in Springfield, Missouri (the “buckle of the Bible belt”). Rick’s team was authentically interested in honest feedback from us clergy and community leaders; whether well-informed or naive. The exhibit even had a panel of un-redacted visitor comments on sticky notes. While most were positive, there were critical ones too.

While many Christians would find this exhibit on human evolution controversial, the team’s enthusiasm about recent developments and discoveries related to human evolution was genuine and infectious.

The scientists were open to dialogue and even enthusiastic to learn more about the sensitivities of conservative Christians. I left exhilarated by the experience. As I shared with my wife how open to dialogue these Smithsonian researchers were, I remarked “I wish the Church would be as charitable and gracious!”

The Social Impacts Committee

In 2018, I was invited to join the Smithsonian’s Human Origins Program’s *Broader Social Impacts Committee* (BSIC). There were lively discussions among the diverse group representatives, alongside breaking news in paleoanthropology.

The Human Origins Program is headed by *Rick Potts*. Under his direction, the BSIC is chaired by *Connie Bertka* (Ph.D., Unitarian Universalist) and *Jim Miller* (Ph.D., Presbyterian). Members come

¹Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History. (2021, June 4). *The Smithsonian Institution’s Human Origins Program*. Retrieved August 2, 2021, from <http://humanorigins.si.edu/about/human-origins-program-team/rick-potts>; https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rick_Potts.

from various viewpoints including Judaism, Islam, Humanism, Catholic, mainline Protestant, evangelical Protestant, and Mormonism. Several committee members are also science education specialists.

Generally, the role of the BSIC is to offer support and advice to the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History (NMNH). Particularly, advice related to the public exhibition of the science of human origins in light diverse faith community viewpoints on human evolution.

We help the museum develop educational resources to help their audience navigate challenges between “scientific findings and religious reflection.” We advise the museum staff and volunteers on how to address questions about human origins rooted in religious concerns with sensitivity and respect for diversity. We assist them in planning public events that have bearing on these objectives.²

During BSIC meetings, committee members learn of the latest research findings in paleoanthropology along with reports on public engagement with the “What Does it Mean to be Human?” display. From my experience, all of the discussions have been respectful and collegial. There is no mocking of religious views... instead patient interest is expressed in how various religious people react to the project.

The group was particularly interested in my research on Pentecostal attitudes and beliefs about evolution and origins, along with findings on how people attempt to integrate theology and science to evaluate truth claims.³

When I revealed I was a *Pentecostal* scientist to the whole group, several met with me privately afterwards and warmly welcomed me as a Christian brother. The Catholic priest turned out to be Charismatic.

During our Sunday night dinner the first time I was with the group, I sat with Rick and several other members of the committee at one end of the table, and they asked me to share my spiritual journey. My unadulterated account of our salvation experience and receipt of the Baptism of the Holy Spirit was warmly received.

In 2018 I was invited to join the BSIC team, and have since participated in the 2019 and 2020 meetings.

Peaceful Pedagogy on Evolution

These meetings facilitated me collaborating with Jamie Jensen (BYU) on a Howard Hughes funded project.⁴ This is an effort run by

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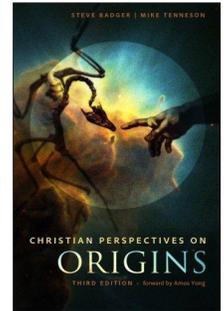
scientists, trying to develop and test practices that respect the religious beliefs of students as we educate them about evolution.

Many students reject evolutionary theory because it seems incompatible with their religious beliefs. We examined instructional approaches that encourage students to investigate how evolutionary theories could be compatible with their religious beliefs.

Entry-level biology students at four religiously affiliated institutions were studied. Each school used a different module to teach students, but all explored different ways to reconcile evolution with religious beliefs.

I teach at Evangel University, a Christian University operated by the Assemblies of God, a Pentecostal denomination. Our module took students through key chapters in *Campbell's Biology*⁵ and *Christian Perspectives on Origins*.⁶ We also read and critiqued Stephen Gould's *Nonoverlapping Magisteria*, and were attentive to the views of people within the denomination on evolution.

Other universities used different curricula. But all of us established that students in all groups found evolutionary science less objectionable. In moving students this direction, they would find it easier to consider the truth claims of evolutionary theory without feeling it directly conflicted with their religious beliefs.



I have found much value in serious academic discussions about human origins and the Christian faith. Whether students end up accepting evolution or not, exposing them to models of reconciliation neutralizes much of the conflict they are experiencing and enables them to critically evaluate evidence without so much fear. This is good for the advance of science, and it is good for the soul too.

This is an area I am continuing to work in. I wonder also how the ideas here could also be implemented in secular universities. I envision a time when biology faculty in secular institutions would also learn and implement “peaceful” pedagogical approaches.

Evolution has been a place of conflict for a long time. Together, I think we have an opportunity to find a better way forward.

On September 7, 2021, the header image was changed to a photo of the Smithsonian's traveling exhibit, in place of the exhibit at the American Museum of Natural History.

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