



# On Growing Trust Between Worlds

Jordan Mantha 

<https://peacefulscience.org/articles/trust-between-worlds/>



Jordan Mantha is an Associate Professor of Chemistry and Director of the [MidAmerica Nazarene University Center for Science & Faith](#). He attended the January 2019 workshops on [The Genealogical Adam and Eve](#), and has been serving as one of the moderators on [our forum](#). He is also a member of the newly formed *Peaceful Science* advisory council.

I spend a lot of my time between worlds. I was born somewhere between the Gen X and Millennial generations, what some have called the [Xennial](#) or [Oregon Trail generation](#). I am a scientist working in Christian higher education. I am a chemist, the central science between physics and biology. In both politics and theology, I find myself drawn more to the center than the poles.

Society, and social media in particular, is much like a horror film. We are appalled by much of what we see, but we cannot look away. It seems as if there are two predominate models for public engagement.

Either we surround ourselves with like-minded people who won't challenge our existing beliefs about the world and perceptions about those outside the group. Or we go on the offensive. We reinforce our beliefs and perceptions by building rhetorical arguments and sharing the latest "slam dunk" memes and tweets.

It is easy to get caught up in the desire to defend what is right against those who are wrong. I know I am not immune from these modes of engagement, even if I believe them to be ultimately negative. Sometimes I wonder if Romans 7:15 was written for our moment: "I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate."

When it comes to the big questions, like "where do we come from?" and "what does it mean to be human?", the polarization is often most extreme.

The battle lines are drawn between Christians and atheists. The trenches are set with a creator God on one side and a purposeless, godless evolution on the other. The future of everything we hold dear, we are told, will depend on which side wins and which side loses. The closer the war gets to each side's sense of identity, the nastier and more defensive the rhetoric grows. Skepticism is weakness and questions demonstrate poor commitment to the cause. Often intellectual content becomes the weaponization of ideas, not an honest pursuit of true understanding.

In this difficult and conflicted world of ours, I tried over the years to engage in meaningful dialogue with people who have different beliefs

than my own. As a postdoc in New England my lab-mate was an atheist socialist, about as far from my rural Evangelical Republican upbringing as one can get. We had many great hours of discussion about politics and religion while working on the lasers and setting up experiments in the vacuum chambers.

I learned to listen, not as way to formulate take-down response, but to try to understand why this good person thought so differently than I did. I learned that despite such stark differences, we actually had a lot of common ground when it came right down to it. I also learned the value of being a trusted voice. I am convinced that if you haven't taken the time to understand a person or to listen to their experience, it is much too easy to write off whole groups of people: Evangelicals, Democrats, gun owners, the LGBT community.

We focus so much on our differences that we forget the larger common human experience. This last year I focused on the question of "what it means to be human." This question brought me to an important sensibility; empathetic thinking, being able to put ourselves in another's shoes, is a critical piece of public engagement on the contentious issues of our day. As human beings, I believe we need to both hear the story of others and have our own stories be heard. This mutual "hearing" requires trust across the battle lines. That's why I want to be part of communities where disagreements can be strong, not to debate, but to understand and be understood.

So how can we create an environment where a diverse dialogue, pursuit of understanding, and building of trusted voices can happen?

I believe *Peaceful Science* is such an opportunity. *Peaceful Science* has tried to be a place of open inquiry, where people of many beliefs are welcome to join in the journey of discovery. One of the things I appreciate so much about the forum is that we don't have to agree to get along. I disagree strongly with many of my atheist friends in the *Peaceful Science* community about a whole host of issues. Some of these disagreements are very important to me and to them. Still, we have found enough common ground that I know they share many of the same core concerns as I.

Another key, in my opinion, to the success of *Peaceful Science* is in the focus on scholarship, and not just argumentation. There is certainly still sometimes stereotypically negative forum behavior (aka, the internet troll). For me the occasional noise is drowned out by the community of scientists, theologians, and philosophers that are available to discuss real issues with knowledge and clarity. Astrophysicists talk me through the spectroscopy of gas clouds millions of light years away. Biologists talk me through running population genetics simulations. Historians of science discuss the

history of creationism with me. I've wondered about the nature of the inspiration of scripture with a professor of Old Testament. No other place I've seen has this broad an engaged scholarly community.

Finding myself between worlds, I think *Peaceful Science* is at a pivotal place in the future of the public engagement of science and communities of faith.

I want to share a story about a workshop in St. Louis I attended at the beginning of this year. It was a workshop to review Dr. Swamidass's [Genealogical Adam and Eve](#). Going into it, I had no idea what to expect. When the 20-30 people in the room started doing introductions, I was deeply impressed, and more than a little intimidated.

At the workshops, one of the most peculiar participants was Nathan Lents. Dr. Lents was a biology professor in New York, and he was an atheist. I wasn't really sure why he was at the workshop. Perhaps he would give feedback on the genetics in the book and that was it. Much of the book is theological and focused Genesis. Once we go to this part of the book, I figured Dr. Lents would quickly slip away, most likely muttering "those poor delusional fools."

I was wrong. Dr. Lents not only stayed the full two days, but he engaged with the whole book. I saw Nathan interact meaningfully with people from Intelligent Design and Old Earth Creationism, as well as Bible scholars and theologians. After the workshop was done for the day, the group headed off for dinner, where of course more conversation ensued. I was impressed with Nathan's willingness to come into what could easily be seen as "hostile territory," a group of Christians. He didn't shy away from us, but graciously engaged us as friends and colleagues.

Fast forward a couple months. Someone [posted a link to Dr. Lents's website](#). On his blog, Dr. Lents shared his reaction to two negative reviews of his books. Both seem to take cheap political shots, which

seems very unprofessional to me. One of the reviews oddly referenced Nathan's sexual orientation, which had nothing to do with the substance of the book. Having lived my entire life in the American Evangelical Christian culture, I had heard, and no doubt thought, sentiments similar to those of the reviewer before. This time it was like a gut punch. Coming off of the workshop, I had just seen Nathan graciously engage a largely conservative Christian gather with kindness, perhaps even at professional or personal risk.

Despite our, no doubt, significant differences, Nathan and I found common ground in science, in education, and in our common humanity, and I think that's worth celebrating and encouraging.

This is what I appreciate the most about *Peaceful Science*. It is a place where people from all kinds of backgrounds can come and learn from each other. That exchange is changing me, giving me a more hopeful view of our moment.

We take science seriously. We respect each other. We seek a better dialogue. Come explore the grand questions with us.



Jordan Mantha, with Walter Bradley and Nathan Lents, at the Genealogical Adam and Eve workshop.

## References

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