

David Barash sets students straight

By [Amy Frykholm](#)

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Thank you, [Professor David Barash](#). In his first-year biology class, Barash begins with something he calls “The Talk.” He understands that a “substantial minority” of students come in unprepared by their religious backgrounds for the complexity and strangeness of evolutionary biology. They fear that the study of biology might challenge their “beliefs.” So he takes it upon himself to clear up what vestiges of William Paley and William Jennings Bryan remain among students.

He tells them that science has struck three blows against Christianity and traditional theology. (It does seem to be mainly Christianity that he is arguing with, although he names it as “religion” more broadly.) The first is against the idea that the complexity of nature demands a creator. Evolutionary biology has demonstrated a method of developing complexity “on its own.” The second is the illusion that humans are somehow distinct from the natural world, unlike other creatures. Biology shows that we developed in exactly the same way as everything else in the natural world. And the third strike is that science has undone theological attempts to resolve the problem of suffering. Evolutionary biology demonstrates that suffering just is. It doesn’t have a reason or a cause.

My problem with The Talk is not that Barash takes on this seemingly incongruent task of introducing students to theology in his biology class. I think that’s pretty cool, since most of these students at the University of Washington will never walk into a theology class. My problem is that he thinks he is quickly demonstrating the “intellectual instability of religion,” when in fact he hasn’t even approached this yet. He calls attention to Stephen Jay Gould’s “non-overlapping magisteria” as one attempt to evade any conflict between science and religion, rightfully calling it into question—as have many theologians, who would agree that splitting fact and value is its own kind of problem, and that many people have settled on this so as to avoid questions that trouble them.

But presumably, the purpose of a college education is to lead students more deeply into questions, even questions that can’t finally be answered. The purpose of

theology is essentially the same. It addresses mystery and unknowability. It recognizes the limits of human knowing and marvels at what then can be known. Theology has moved beyond both William Paley and NOMA in its grappling with that mystery. [Here's](#) an essay on complexity published a few years ago by physicist Stephen Barr. Here's [one example](#) grappling with suffering from a recent issue of the *Century*.

One commenter on Barash's essay suggests that a simple change in location would clarify the issue: Barash should give students The Talk under a night sky while "acknowledging that he is a human being with limited intelligence, living on a small planet traveling through space at 67,000 miles per hour, rotating around a medium-size star in a small solar system that is on the fringe of a galaxy that is one of billions out there in the universe." Maybe a little humility would emerge.

I'd second that recommendation and add this from Pablo Neruda:

And I the smallest thing,  
made drunk by the great void,  
starred,  
in the image, likeness  
of mystery,  
felt myself pure part  
of abyss,  
turned with the starlight,  
my heart broken loose in the wind.