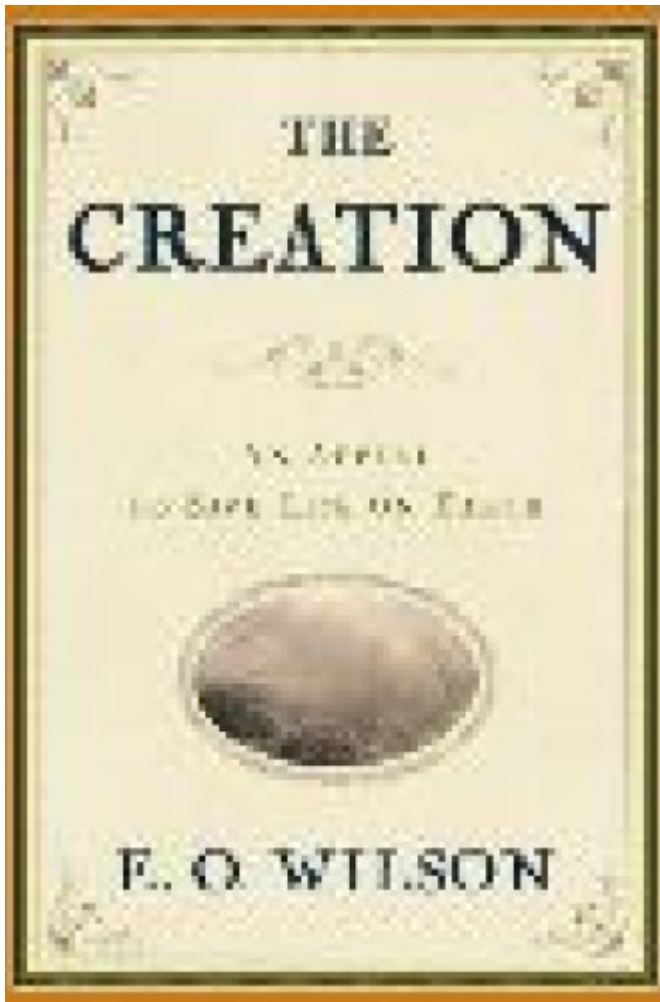


Creation conversation

By [Kyle Childress](#) in the [April 17, 2007](#) issue

In Review



The Creation: An Appeal to Save Life on Earth

Edward O. Wilson

Norton

Dear Ed: Thank you for your book addressed to a “Southern Baptist pastor.” As a Baptist pastor on the western edge of the South (and a Southern Baptist until a few

years ago), let me say that it was good to hear from you. I appreciate your southern civility and good manners, as you put it. They go a long way toward starting a conversation about “saving the planet.”

Scientists like Richard Dawkins of Oxford (*The God Delusion*) and Sam Harris of Stanford (*Letter to a Christian Nation*) also have new books dealing with science and religion. The fact that they are fundamentalist scientists does not help the cause of dialogue any more than that many of my fellow pastors and theologians are fundamentalist Christians. An increasing number of us who are Christian are working at caring for God’s creation, and if we are going to work with scientists like you, good manners between us all helps.

Ed, you say you were baptized as a boy in a Southern Baptist church in Alabama and then left the church and the faith during your studies in biology at the University of Alabama and later at Harvard. You’ve been at Harvard ever since you began your Ph.D. work there in 1951. I’m not sure what you remember from your adolescent faith, but allow me to mention that not many Southern Baptist pastors I know believe that each “person’s soul is immortal” or that our species came abruptly into existence “by a touch of divine fire.” We tend to believe in the resurrection of the body and that God spoke creation into existence. There are several places where you make little comments about what we pastors believe or do not believe, and all I can say is that you need to get out more; there is much more to what we believe than what you might remember.

I’ve read that you have written 21 books, two of which have won Pulitzer prizes (*On Human Nature*, 1978, and *The Ants*, 1990). You write with a cadenced, lyrical prose, so I’m not surprised about the Pulitzers. An example comes early in this book: “For you, the glory of an unseen divinity; for me, the glory of the universe revealed at last. For you, the belief in God made flesh to save mankind; for me, the belief in Promethean fire seized to set men free. You have found the final truth; I am still searching. I may be wrong, you may be wrong. We may both be partly right.” This is not exactly how I might put it, but it is a pleasure to read. I’d love to hear you read King James Version scripture in church someday.

You say that biology is primarily a descriptive science, and your book is at its best when you stick to description. When you get to talking about ants a third of the way through the book you are hitting your best stride. The chapter on the ant plagues in the Caribbean during the 1500s and 1600s, which were caused by a combination of

human importation of ants and monocultural farming practices and which resulted in environmental and agricultural devastation, is fascinating. You make a convincing argument as you explain that the same kind of thing is happening to the rest of life on the planet today with our increasing globalization and the homogenization of Earth's ecosystems.

But, Ed, as the old saying goes, you should have quit while you were ahead. After your wonderful descriptions of Earth's biodiversity (somewhere between 1.5 million and 1.8 million species of plants, animals and microorganisms have been discovered to date) and the alarming threat posed by habitat loss, invasive species, pollution, human overpopulation and overharvesting—and after you plead for pastors like me to join you in helping care for our planet—you then move off on tangents, writing about why we need science, especially biology, to unify the natural sciences, the social sciences and the humanities, and how “humanity's self-image has risen far during the past three hundred centuries. First lifted by religion and the creative arts, it can rise still higher on the wings of science.”

You say, “Science has become the most democratic of all human endeavors. It is neither religion nor ideology. It makes no claims beyond what can be sensed in the real world. It generates knowledge in the most productive and unifying manner contrived in history, and it serves humanity without obeisance to any particular tribal deity.” If you make no claims beyond what can be sensed in the real world, why the “tribal deity” language? To say that the God I worship is a “tribal deity” seems to be another way of saying that because you can't sense it, then it must not exist. In other words, you are making a claim beyond what can be sensed. Why can't you simply use “science does not know” language?

Not content to stop there, you name some of the “great goals of present-day biology.” The first goal you mention is to “create life.” No claims beyond what can be sensed in the real world?

Now, Ed, let me be frank. It is true that we are in one hell of a mess on this planet of ours, and no small part of it is due to religion. But Ed, the goal of creating life is what 300 centuries of humanity might call hubris. Your call for unifying knowledge under science, for creating an electronic “Encyclopedia of Life” (why not simply call it the “Encyclopedia of Comparative Biology”?), smacks of the same hubris. Indeed, the entire last third of the book, once you leave the call to come together on the common ground of saving the planet, is an exercise in arrogance and pride. A major

portion of the mess we're in today comes from this sort of scientific hubris. We don't need more.

Ed, if we are to come together—science and religion—in the interests of caring for creation and saving the planet, then instead of making grand claims and uttering patronizing pleas, we need to concentrate on the task at hand. You have a lot to teach pastors like me about the biodiversity of our planet. Stick to what you know. While we're arguing, mountaintops are being removed and poisons are being poured into our air and water and soil, all in the name of what my Southern Baptist grandfather called big business and my “tribal deity” calls greed. You never mention any of that at all. Maybe you could learn something in church.

Thanks for the letter. Come see me in church. Let's keep up the conversation.