

Catholic News Service

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Bury the hatchet on conflicts between religion, science, authors say

By Wayne A. Holst

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Bury the hatchet, they say. Let's not dissipate our energies in fruitless conflict between science and religion, but attempt better understanding and cooperation to save creation while there is still time.

Those statements capture the essence of these two books. Both authors are biologists who want to call a halt to the fighting and build collaboration between what they consider unnecessary antagonists.

Wilson is an agnostic while Roughgarden is a Christian. Each considers religion and science to be very powerful forces in our contemporary world. Each is profoundly saddened and offended by the poisoned atmosphere of the culture wars and of nature itself.

Unfortunately an enlightened contemporary discussion about modern science and faith is hardly possible in many congregations since few seem equipped to engage it. For their part, many scientists are dismissive of efforts by some to bring God into the scientific conversation. These books contribute to greater awareness and a more level playing field.

"I sense a deep desire to talk about God," says Roughgarden in her attempt to understand why many religious people are upset.

She finds them going about finding redress in the wrong way. "I believe this pent-up urge for talking about God is being met through the work-around of shoehorning God into a debate about teaching evolution." Scientists should be free to talk about God, she says. "I speak openly and explicitly about God.... (But) not God camouflaged as science."

Wilson, a secular humanist with roots in the Southern Baptist Church, uses the literary device of writing an irenic letter to a pastor friend who is an evangelical biblical literalist. The author treats him respectfully. "You have found your final truth," he says. "I am still searching."

Finding literal common ground, however, is Wilson's concern. "Hopefully, we can meet on the nearside of metaphysics in order to deal with the real world we share. ... Pastor, we need your help."

Wilson wonders why the protection of creation is not more supported by the church today. "Does the second coming make the condition of the planet of little consequence?" he wonders. When so much attention is directed to the destruction of the world at the end of human history, that is not a gospel of hope and compassion, but of cruelty and despair.

"The great challenge of the 21st century," Wilson argues, "is to raise people everywhere to a decent standard of living while preserving as much of the rest of life as possible. ... To protect the beauty of the earth and its prodigious variety of life should be a common goal regardless of differences in our metaphysical beliefs."

No matter what your present stance on the intriguing topics of human origins, evolution and the survival of life on this planet you will find substance and your mental horizons expanded by these authors, even if you may not always agree with them.

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The Creation: An Appeal to Save Life on Earth, by E.O. Wilson. W.W. Norton (New York, 2006). 178 pp., \$21.95. Evolution and Christian Faith: Reflections of an Evolutionary Biologist by Joan Roughgarden. Island Press (Washington, 2006). 155 pp., \$14.95.

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