

Wilson, E.O. *The Creation: An Appeal to Save Life on Earth*. New York: Norton, 2006. Pp. 178, b&w illustrations, \$21.95

E.O. Wilson's *The Creation* is a *cri de coeur* on behalf of a wounded planet, a planet he argues can only be healed if religious believers and scientists join forces to save it. He presents his call in the form of a letter to a Baptist pastor, with whom Wilson shares the common experiences of having been called to the altar as a boy, and undergoing baptism into the Baptist church. Of course Wilson, famous to lay (so to speak) audiences not as a religious thinker, but as a scientist and communicator of science, has long since left the fold, and attempts to engage with his imagined interlocutor as a secular humanist, an American, and a Southerner.

The Creation is divided into four parts, each divided into chapters. Part One, "The Creation," begins with Wilson's salutation and lays out important definitions of nature, of evolution, and of the enlightened self-interest that should lead us to care about the biosphere. Part Two, "The Decline," indicts humanity for its devastation of biodiversity, for the denial of humanity's role in mass extinction and global warming, but ends by suggesting that through concerted action we can overcome these obstacles. In "What Science Has Learned," Wilson offers a précis on the state of biology and offers a moral argument for conservation from the sciences. In "Teaching the Creation," Wilson offers ideas on raising awareness of biology and of the challenges facing mankind among the public at large. Finally, in "Reaching Across," Wilson extends the hand of friendship to his religious interlocutor, asking for his help in saving the Creation.

The most important aspect of Wilson's book is the search for common ground, and the common ground on which Wilson supposes his unnamed correspondent to stand with him is that of love and awe at the splendor of "the Creation," as Wilson terms the Earth throughout. In pursuit of establishing this common ground, Wilson employs analogy in an attempt to bring secular humanists like himself and religious believers like the Baptist pastor closer together. Arguing that civilization "was purchased by the betrayal of nature," (11) he makes a powerful rhetorical connection between the state of the world before civilization and life in the Garden of Eden as detailed in the Book of Genesis. He further suggests a rough equivalency between the Fall and the adoption of civilized living, in which the mismatch between the speed of genetic evolution, which is slow, and cultural evolution, which is rapid and becoming moreso, has ripped humanity from its earlier harmony with the biosphere into a more adversarial relationship.

Against this backdrop, he argues that conservation is simple prudence. Since nature is essential to human flourishing and our ability to, perhaps irreparably, damage it grows unabated, careful attention to our actions is required. Thus, in damaging the environment, we place ourselves at risk. And perhaps as bad as intentional destruction is the unthinking everyday destruction we unleash through our lifestyles. Indeed, the rapid progress of cultural evolution far outpaces the ability of natural systems to adapt, lending the matter greater urgency.

One necessary step, Wilson argues, is to attempt a recovery of some of our original relationship to nature. He suggests there is a pull exercised by Nature on the human mind, which he calls *biophilia* and defines as an "innate tendency to affiliate with life and lifelike processes," concluding that "the more we

come to understand other life forms, the more our learning expands to include their vast diversity, and the greater value we will place on them and, inevitably, on ourselves." (69) This is the basis for Wilson's naturalistic morality—that we are embedded in supportive systems and that by coming to know them we will be less likely to pursue courses destructive of them. Such an attitude, he argues, will sensitize us to a sort of blind spot we have when it comes to our abuse of Nature. We easily recognize, Wilson suggests, the danger in things our distant ancestors saw as dangerous. New dangers, however, have not had time to settle into our awareness and since our cultural evolution races ahead of our biological evolution, recognizing new dangers requires effort. *Biophilia* as a conscious awareness of our place and of our surroundings provides us a means of cherishing, thus seeking to protect, all life on Earth.

Having offered his vision of love for the natural world in the first, and largest, section of the book, Wilson then sets out to make the case for the damage man has inflicted on natural systems and how we can work to mitigate that damage. The second part of the book makes his position clear as he lays out an indictment of mankind. His main charge in this is that in destroying so many species, mankind has "pauperized" the Earth. Mincing no words, Wilson declares that we are in the midst of a sixth mass extinction, one caused by our destruction of natural habitat, unchecked invasive species, pollution, population growth, and overharvesting, concluding that mankind is "the giant meteorite of our time," the one hurtling towards the natural world, leaving a legacy that the inheritors of the Earth will not honor. (81)

Alongside the risks from pauperizing the planet, Wilson takes on the scourge of denialism. Having done so much to embed humanity in natural systems, he notes the ideas of exceptionalism, as both a secular and religious philosophy, and the danger they represents. So long as we think ourselves, whether from religious or patriotic conviction, somehow exempt from and above natural processes, we will not take the necessary action to save life on Earth. It is only by approaching Nature humbly, with full awareness of our limitations, that we can save it and ourselves. His indictment concludes:

"Life on this planet can stand no more plundering. Quite apart from obedience to the universal moral imperative of saving the Creation, based upon religion and science alike, conserving biodiversity is the best economic deal humanity has ever had placed before it since the invention of agriculture. The time to act, my respected friend, is now. The science is sound, and improving. Those living today will either win the race against extinction or lose it, the latter for all time. They will earn either everlasting honor or everlasting contempt." (99)

In the third section, Wilson lays out the state of the science. Here he once again becomes a teacher, explaining in clear terms what biology, what we have learned, what we have yet to learn. Though he explicitly embraces evolution through natural selection, though he takes it as a given, he is not contentious. His most important consideration herein is that every species of life on Earth is important, worthy of study and celebration and that this fact is the basis for "the compelling moral argument from science for saving the Creation." (123)

Saving the creation, Wilson concludes in his final two sections, requires education and, as the title of the final chapter has it, "An Alliance for Life." Each of us, he suggests, is a born naturalist and this inclination is a flame that can be either extinguished or nurtured by parents, educators, schools, and society at large. Citizen involvement in science is also key, as it is through the hands-on experience of doing science that one becomes attuned to its lessons. Only then can we become responsible stewards of the Creation.

There is much in this little book to please and displease parties on both sides of the putative divide between science and religion. Committed secularists might complain that Wilson gives too much credence to the religious. Some committed Christians will take issue with his embrace of evolution, and, for various reasons, his arguments that humans are having a devastating and potentially lethal impact on the natural environment. But this is missing the point. The point is not to convince religious believers to give up their faith. It is not even to convince them that evolution is true. His aim is to convince them that we are failing in our roles as caretakers of the natural environment, a role enjoined upon them by their faith, and to ask them to join with him in the exercise of that one function. One need not believe in an Earth that is billions of years old, nor in biological evolution, to see the mess.

This conciliatory approach is what makes books like this so important, even if to the zealous on either side they seem imperfect. Wilson has recognized what all who love this planet must—that in order to save ourselves we are going to have to work together. In order to do that, we must meet each other where we live, not in some imagined place where we all think alike. Our commonality on this issue is far more important than what Wilson occasionally refers to as the "metaphysical divide" between believer and non-believer.

In reaching out to the pastor, Wilson is making a canny move. Among Americans, resistance to the science that explains what is happening to our natural environment is strongest among Evangelical Protestants, a huge percentage of the population. Engaging prayer and thought leaders of these congregations is essential to creating partnerships for action. These leaders can catalyze their congregants in ways others cannot, calling them to care for this planet based on Biblical principles. Only by such action, Wilson reminds us, only by not letting differences of belief and of ways of knowing obscure our common humanity, can we save the Creation. His extended letter, one this reviewer considers worth reading by participants on both sides of the divide, is an important pointer in the right direction.

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