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Ready for This? Harvard's E. O. Wilson Writes to an Imaginary Southern Baptist Pastor

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A rather amazing proposal comes in the form of a letter written by Harvard's radical sociobiologist [Edward O. Wilson](#) to an "imagined Southern Baptist pastor." What he proposes is a common commitment to work together for the protection of biodiversity and life forms. His [letter](#) is published in the September 9, 2006 edition of *The New Republic*.

Professor Wilson was raised in a Southern Baptist home, but he abandoned belief in God many years ago. In his academic career, he has emerged as the most ardent defender of sociobiology and as an evangelist for evolutionary thought. Thus, his current proposal comes as something of a shock.

But Professor Wilson understands that, and he is honest in explaining why he is making this overture:

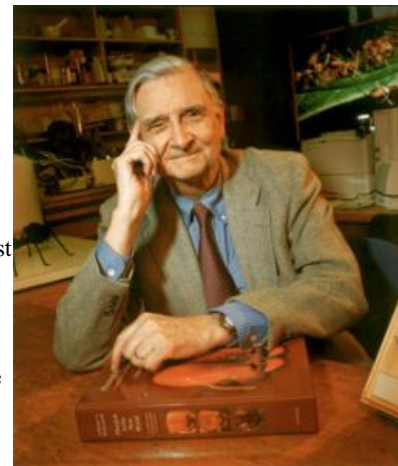
It may seem far-fetched for a secular scientist to propose an alliance between science and religion. But the fact is that environmental activists cannot succeed without you and your followers as allies. The political process in American democracy, with rare exceptions, does not start at the top and work its way down to the voting masses. It proceeds in the opposite direction. Political leaders are compelled to calculate as precisely as they can what it will take to win the next election. The United States is an intensely religious nation. It is overwhelmingly Judeo-Christian, with a powerful undercurrent of evangelism. We secularists must face reality. The National Association of Evangelicals has 30 million members; the three leading American humanist organizations combined have, at best, a few thousand. Those who, for religious reasons, believe in saving the Creation, have the strength to do so through the political process; acting alone, secular environmentalists do not. An alliance between science and religion, forged in an atmosphere of mutual respect, may be the only way to protect life on earth, including, in the end, our own.

That is an amazingly candid statement — not at all the kind of thing likely to be well received in the faculty lounge.

To his great credit, Professor Wilson acknowledges the radical divergence of worldviews that is at stake here:

I write to you now for your counsel and help. Of course, in doing so, I see no way to avoid the fundamental differences in our worldviews. You are a strict interpreter of Christian Holy Scripture; I am a secular humanist. You believe that each person's soul is immortal, making this planet a waystation to a second, eternal life; I think heaven and hell are what we create for ourselves, on this planet. 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 your final truth; I am still searching. You may be wrong; I may be wrong. We both may be partly right.

Do these differences in worldview separate us in all things? They do not. You and I and every other human being strive for the same imperatives of security, freedom of choice, personal dignity, and a cause to believe in that is larger than ourselves. Let us see, then, if we can meet on the near side of metaphysics in order to deal with the real world we share. You have the power to help solve a great problem about which I care deeply. I hope you have the same concern. I



suggest that we set aside our differences in order to save the Creation. The defense of living nature is a universal value. It doesn't rise from, nor does it promote, any religious or ideological dogma. Rather, it serves without discrimination the interests of all humanity. Pastor, we need your help. The Creation—living nature—is in deep trouble.

This may shock Dr. Wilson, but I really think he is on to something here. A biblical environmentalism begins with the fact that the world is the arena of God's glory — creation glorifies the Creator. We will answer to the Creator for our use and enjoyment of the created order, and for our stewardship of the earth and all that is within it. This surely includes the glory of God revealed in what Professor Wilson calls "biodiversity."

Now, there are any number of ways in which this proposed partnership could be derailed. Are humans to be considered just another species? Does the opportunity really exist to "make the environment a universal concern and to render it politically nonpartisan?"

This is the kind of argument in his letter that should lead to fruitful conversation:

Surely we can agree that each species, however inconspicuous and humble it may seem to us at this moment, is a masterpiece of biology and well worth saving. Each species possesses a unique combination of genetic traits that fits it more or less precisely to a particular part of the environment. Prudence alone dictates that we act quickly to prevent the extinction of species and, with it, the pauperization of earth's ecosystems.

Other sections of his missive raise vexing problems that might spell doom for his proposal. Nevertheless, Professor Wilson's [letter](#) to an "imagined Southern Baptist pastor" is an amazing overture. We owe him the courtesy of taking him seriously.

