

I'm writing this on tax day '85, the day after the 50th anniversary of Black Sunday (14Apr35), the Dust Bowl's worst day. And I'm raising some dust (over) about this editorial, which shows how far advanced into militant atheism are some media-leaders, whose ignorance even outpaces their militancy. (Feuerbach and Marx used these arguments more suavely, with nuance and tighter reasoning.)

# Dust to Dust?

The preoccupations of science and religion intersected recently, in what may eventually be interpreted as an unexpected boon to the creationism movement.

National Aeronautics and Space Administration scientists at Ames Research Center in Mountainview, Calif., have announced findings that suggest life on earth may have begun in clay rather than in the planet's oceans. The notion that primordial life originated in the seas has dominated science for more than 50 years, and even proponents of the novel "clay theory" still mostly agree with it. They do suggest, however, that more investigations into the likelihood of the link between clay and the earliest forms of life be made.

A report of the new theory in The New York Times points out that "the theory is also evocative of the biblical account of the creation: 'And the Lord God formed man out of the dust of the ground.'"

This narrative, from the second chapter of Genesis, is not the Bible's oldest creation story. An even more ancient story, recorded in Genesis 1, reads: "Then God said, 'Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over the cattle and over the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.'"

The story captures the interweaving of primitive religions' polytheism, the belief in many gods, and the strains of Judaism's monotheism, the belief in one creator god who established in the world a hierarchy in which human beings occupied the top, and, therefore, dominant spot.

Ordinarily, we assume that the transition from polytheism to monotheism marks an advance in the evolution of ancient culture. Further, we generally take for granted that the findings of modern science chronicle progress over the world views of primitive religions.

Yet monotheism and science brought some losses as well. People lost a connection to nature, an intimacy with their environment, that the so-called primitive religions revere. These faiths acknowledge divinity in all of life, and see all aspects of nature — whether human, animal, plant or rock — as equally essential participants in an all-inclusive sacred cycle.

Now modern science has gathered data that easily could draw biblical myth and scientific interpretation closer to one another, because clay and creationism make a tidy fit. This may lead fundamentalists to rejoice while scientists grind their teeth, since a rise in the influence of religious conservatism often means that scientists are sent scrambling.

The most profound impact of the "from clay into life" proposition, however, may not come within science, or even religion. Rather it may come in ways of living and making decisions that are affected by the subtle underpinnings of monotheism — such as unwavering devotion to a hierarchy that renders animals inferior to humans, women less than men, inorganic matter less than organic.

Scientific findings or social developments that promote the idea that the Genesis myth is *fact rather than faith* lend force to the arguments for a hierarchy in which some are always excluded from privilege or treated with less regard than others — simply because they do not rank as high in the "order of things." The religions that grant man "dominion over the earth" are the religions that grant man license.

We have seen what the tinkering of science, unchecked, can yield: They bequeathed to us a variety of ills, from an environment contaminated by man-made chemicals to the nuclear menace that threatens to obliterate existence itself. On the other hand, history is replete with examples of the violent excesses monotheistic religious fervor is capable of delivering: from the Crusades to the Inquisition to the Nazi prison camps.

To know that recent scientific discoveries may assist in mingling the principles of science and religion may hardly be cause for celebration. We would be far better off to look deeper, as a later prophet advised, and recall the words: "Beware of false prophets who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits."

The English historian Arnold Toynbee recognized this risk and warned of it not long before his death when he wrote in The New York Times: "For premonotheistic man, nature was not just a treasure-trove of 'natural resources.' Nature was, for him, a goddess. 'Mother Earth,' and the vegetation that sprang from the earth's surface, the animals that roamed, like man himself, over the earth's surface, and the minerals hiding in the earth's bowels, all partook of nature's divinity."

"My observation of the living religion of eastern Asia, and my book knowledge of the extinguished Greek and Roman religion, have made me aware of a startling and disturbing truth: that monotheism, as enunciated in the Book of Genesis, has removed the age-old restraint that once was placed on man's greed by his awe. Man's greedy impulse to exploit nature used to be held in check by his pious worship of nature."

## MANGLED MYTHOLOGIES

#1952.2

Your today's editorial is, of the five-year's-worth I've been reading in the TIMES, the most muddle-headed. Muddle-headedness + power = damage. And as you have some power, this letter is an attempt at damage-control.

I hasten to add that the muddle-headedness is not an instance of TIMES creativity. You are reflecting a societal condition--due somewhat to pluralism, but mainly to our people's ignorance in religion and science, especially the former.

Because of space-constriction, I must limit myself to a few major comments:

1. Almost all biblical scholars teach the opposite of what you say about the two Creation stories. We believe that Genesis 2:4a-3 is older than the story the Bible begins with. Since you have this upside-down, your inferences are wrong; and since these inferences attack the heart of the Bible's religion, they are also perverse and dangerous. We don't need your addition to the alienation of our society from its spiritual roots.
2. In arguing your case against Western religion and science, you commit the genetic fallacy (also called *post hoc, ergo propter hoc*), arguing from mere temporal sequence to cause-effect relationship. Your (il)logic: Since Genesis 1 is earlier (which it isn't), polytheism must precede monotheism (which it doesn't, except in a now-discredited prescientific fairytale). Then you push your luck even further: You now reverse the fallacy, to aver that the earlier (for you, polytheism) is closer to "nature" and therefore truer than monotheism (Biblical religion).
3. Speaking of fairytales, "evolution" is being taught, using tax money, in our public schools as though it were "science"--along with the soup theory of our origin (concocted by a Russian in 1930). It's probable that the educationist establishment will now flip over to the mud theory. If you stuck with your genetic fallacy, you would argue to weaken the mud theory, since it's in what you consider the later (and so, inferior) version of Creation. Your (il)logic through the editorial reminds me of Bertrand Russell's saying, "Human beings are most interesting where their logic breaks down."
4. Instead of taking comfort from the present rapprochement of religion and science, you see it as insidious, almost as a plot against nature and all "inferior" beings in what you call a "hierarchy." Most learned culture-watchers see our civilization as doomed unless the split between the "two cultures" (Snow's term) can be overcome--so should you not rather rejoice in evidences of reconciliation and cooperation?
5. Another fallacy you commit is the myth of the noble savage. You say that "primitive" societies and religions had "intimacy with their environmnet" and so were more careful with it, less hard on it than we are. There's no evidence they were more careful in the use of nature. Within their technological powers, they raped the earth as much as we do--their overgrazing leading to desertification; their overcutting leading to soil-erosion by rain, wind, and flood; their food-gathering and hunting having no regard for values we now seek to engender in the world's peoples. In being bad news to nature, the difference is not (as you suggest) one of kind, but only one of degree. You commit the arithmetic fallacy in idealizing them and denigrating us.
6. As for God's telling us to tend the garden, you look at only the dark underside of our efforts. How about looking (1) at the dark underside of primitive life (as in the old farmer-joke, "You should have seen it when God had it alone") and (2) at the bright topside of our gardening stewardship under God?
7. And what's all this about hierarchy? As a liberal newspaper, you constantly appeal to your public to take responsibility, as (your words) "human beings (who) occupy the top." You are, as I am, for environmnetal control in the interest of the biosphere; but, unlike me, you fail to see this as a commandment from God--the "god" you say is bad news to the environment and everything else in sight! The Bible knows no hierarchy of privilege, only one of service.

Willis Elliott <sup>over</sup>