Religion Today
October 3 - 9, 2010

Religion and Biology
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The University of Wyoming had a distinguished visitor last week, biologist E. O. Wilson.

Wilson has the usual kinds of academic achievements and awards, only more of them: More books, more articles, more speaking engagements, more honorary degrees. He has won many scientific prizes and awards, and research institutes and ships are named after him. Wilson is the person who coined the term, "biodiversity."

Edward Wilson also founded a field called sociobiology. It has become a major force in the study of living organisms, but has also brought him much opposition and criticism. Prominent scientists have written entire books arguing against his approach and research, and although his writings sell widely (even earning him Pulitzer Prizes!), it is often easier to find negative reviews of them than positive ones.

The primary reason for Wilson's UW visit was to give a talk about the need for people of all walks of life to join together to save the planet's biodiversity. He had two main points. First, it is the biodiversity that is being threatened, not just habitat. Humanity needs to work to preserve the many different species found in an area. While this will necessarily require the preservation of habitat, it is the variety of species that is important.

Second, Wilson recognizes that religion and science will never agree on questions such as creation, the origin of human beings, and the beginnings of the universe and our world. However, he argues, we all have a stake in preserving it. If we believe it is God's handiwork, then we should be working to honor and continue it. If we believe it is the result of evolution but necessary to sustaining human life, then we should be working to preserve it as well.

This second point has become a key message for Wilson in recent years: That we need to work together for the sake of humanity, despite our differences. There is much that biology and religion do not agree upon, and Wilson himself has been keen to point that out during his career. Indeed, more than a few of his writings evidence a scientific triumphalism at the expense of the belief and faith of religion. But if truth be told, it is also at the expense of humanism, the humanities, the fine arts and the social sciences.

The science of sociobiology, Wilson is not shy about pointing out, will transform the study of the human organism. Evolution was the mode of biological explanation of the 20th century. Sociobiology will take our understanding of life far beyond that.

Sociobiology has the capacity to transform the rather vague guidelines of biological evolution, even as applied to humans, into detailed specifics about human emotions, values and motivations that are transmitted from generation to generation through human genes. That means that aspects of the way we shape our societies, our beliefs, are impacted by our genetic makeup.

Under evolution, a common example of biological development was humans' acquisition of an opposable thumb. This enabled us to grasp and hold a variety of objects and to develop not only tool-using but tool-making. Sociobiology takes that kind of evolutionary thinking into human personal and social behavior. For example, you know the common evangelistic phrase, "we all have a god-shaped hole in our hearts which we seek to fill"? Well, sociobiology would put it this way: "The predisposition to religious belief is an ineradicable part of human behavior." (Quote from Michael McGoodwin.)

In other words, humans have evolved a tendency toward religious beliefs and practices. Religious behavior, sociobiology argues, is part of our biological human nature, not just part of our social organization or personal behavior and belief.

And that is sociobiology's challenge to the social sciences and the humanities, to theology and religion. It is redefining the biological definition of human nature, and in detailed specifics. That new understanding of humanity's biological character will bring on shifts in our notions of human nature, and that change will not come without serious debate and disagreement. We are in for a ride.