

Meeting Rivers Series-4

Alliance for life: religion and the protection of nature

Review: E.O.Wilson: Creation: An Appeal to Save Life on Earth, New York and London: W.W. Norton and Company, 2007.

Reviewed by John Clammer*

Edward O.Wilson is probably best known to the world outside of technical biology (to which he has made distinguished contributions in the fields of island biogeography, the biology of ants and the social structure of insect populations) as the author of the controversial book *Sociobiology: The New Synthesis*, originally published in 1975 and its 1978 sequel *On Human Nature*. In those two books he suggested with substantial empirical evidence, the now, thirty years later, not unexceptional thesis that a great deal of human behavior is heavily influenced by our biological make-up. At that time this occasioned a virulent response from the Left which rather paradoxically saw this thesis as proposing a determinism, not of an economic nature as in many of the forms of Marxism then espoused by that very Left, but of a genetic kind and saw in this argument potential new sources of control and dictatorship. In the context of newer ecological thinking, and in particular from the perspective of Deep Ecology, Wilson's theory with its assumption of continuity between the human species and other members of the Earth biosphere makes good sense, whatever argument there may be about specific details such as the important and still much debated question of whether aggression is innate (biologically determined) or a product of socialization. In fact a survey of Wilson's own life work demonstrates a deep love of nature and the constant attempt to locate humans within the bigger shared matrix of the total Earth community, a project that has surfaced not as a marginal adjunct to his technical work, but as central to and arising from his detailed biological field work.

This aspect of Wilson's work is embodied in a number of his earlier works including his celebrated and influential book *Biophilia* (1984), *Consilience: The Unity of Knowledge* (1998) and in *Biological Diversity: The Oldest Human Heritage* (1999). In the present book Wilson carries forward this project of utilizing biology, not as a reductionist tool for deconstructing nature, but as a means for grasping the holism and complexity of the biosphere and of human's place within it rather than over it. What is particularly interesting is the form that the book takes – as a series of letters between Wilson and an (imaginary) Southern Baptist pastor, between an avowed secular humanist and a believing Protestant Christian, on the subject of whether they can find common ground, as Wilson puts it “on the near side of metaphysics”. His suggestion, as set out on the very second page of this small but significant book, is that “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 arise from, nor does it promote, any religious or ideological dogma. Rather, it serves without discrimination the interests of all humanity”. The book is inspired by three main claims – that what throughout he calls Creation – living nature - is

in deep trouble as signaled by many indicators and in particular loss of biodiversity, and that this is a universal problem that transcends all religious, political or ideological boundaries; that religion and science are the two most powerful forces in the world today; and that, in Wilson's own words, "I am puzzled that so many religious leaders, who spiritually represent a large majority of people around the world, have hesitated to make protection of the Creation an important part of their magisterium". While there is plenty of evidence that this third claim is no longer nearly as true as it was only a few years ago, it is certainly the case that with only a few notable exceptions, theologians and religious notables have been remarkably slow to respond to the growing and now critical environmental crisis that we now all face, but as usual falls most heavily on the vulnerable and the poor who cannot easily move, change their diets or install airconditioning.

Wilson consequently opens up an important debate here – although a rather one sided one as we never get to hear back from his Baptist correspondent. The book however is not a critique of Christianity: it is an attempt to establish common ground between very different positions – one humanist and the other rooted in Biblical religion – on the basis of awe in the face of the complexity and magnificence of nature, to say nothing of its importance to our continued viability as a species. Much of the book is also in effect a relatively painless introduction to environmental biology for the lay person in a way that introduces biodiversity, invasive species, human impact on the biosphere, the wonders of exploring nature and the idea of "citizen science". As he rightly suggests "For those who love adventure and real-world challenges, body and mind, Nature is a heaven on Earth. Here, Pastor, we surely agree. The Creation, whether you believe that it was placed on this planet by a single act of God or accept the scientific evidence that it evolved autonomously during billions of years, is the greatest heritage, other than the reasoning mind itself, ever provided to humanity" (p.61).

This position of course leads Wilson to some practical conclusions – the creative teaching of biology in such a way that it can capture the imagination and become a means for many to explore the wonders of the natural universe, the necessity of stopping what he terms the "pauperization of Earth" and to assume the stewardship of the natural world, to overcome the denial about the magnitude of the problems that still plagues public awareness, and to create what he terms "an alliance for life" between the two powerful forces of religion and science to save our common natural heritage. He is correct, although he does not here offer a plan for achieving this laudable goal. Nevertheless this is an important little book, coming as it does from the pen of a distinguished biologist who despite his own secular humanist position, is prepared to bring his scientific learning into dialogue with religion (or in this book one example of it). Both sides of this divide, if such it is, can learn much here. Perhaps what the book really points to is the as yet unrealized project of shaping a secular spirituality with rootedness in the Earth as its common and shared basis, regardless of particular religious persuasion. Indeed, even as the mystics of all religions have found common ground, so reverence for the Earth might provide us with a common basis for collective action to save and treasure the creation.

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