

STATEMENT BY

Holmes Rolston, III

AT THE TEMPLETON PRIZE BREAKFAST MEDIA BRIEFING, LONDON, MAY 7, 2003

Biology and religion have new opportunities for drawing together in the cause of conservation.

Biologists and theologians can often agree on a course of action for the future, even when issues of past evolutionary origins are left unsettled. We can often agree on values present in nature, although the deeper sources of such value have to be left unsettled.

Having said that, I also notice a certain tension with what I just said. There is no scientific guidance to life. Biology can help us to discover a wonderland Earth, invite us to think about this biodiversity, generate in us concerns about the life support system that is present on our planet, raise questions about our origins in natural history. Biology invites us to conserve our wonderland Earth.

But the deeper sense of obligation, responsibility, stewardship, trusteeship—that doesn't seem to me to be something that is easily derived from biology.

politically appealing and gets the job half done, but only half done. This enlightened self-interest is the way I might approach the English parliament or the Colorado legislature.

But now I do want to claim that we're only halfway there. An ethic of enlightened self-interest will get you clean water, clean air, and sustainable forestry, but it doesn't do much in terms of the conservation of endangered species. It doesn't do much in terms of the preservation of wildlife and wildlands, unless of course, you enjoy fox hunting or something of that sort. It doesn't get you much in terms of the humane treatment of animals, the foxes included.

So now I'm going to claim that an ethic of enlightened self-interest is incomplete and falls short of an ethic of respect for life or reverence for life.

I might say that the altruism we also need, in addition to that one human to another, is a sense of deep, caring concern for God's other creatures, for the animals, for the plants, for the other five million species with which we co-inhabit this Earth.

In that sense I can say, perhaps a bit provocatively, that science doesn't teach us what we most need to know about nature: how we ought to value it.

Continuing with a third claim, I do think it is reasonably easy and plausible to get from biology an ethic of enlightened self-interest. There biology and religion combine—at first, at least. And an environmental ethic based on enlightened self-interest is

Continuing with a fourth claim developing from this, biology does discover for us a kind of wonderland Earth, it invites us to think about values in nature, about which I've had a good deal to say. Biology opens up a concern for conservation. But biology poorly addresses the main items on the world agenda.

What are they? I would say that they are four: (1) war and peace, (2) escalating population, (3) escalating consumerism and (4) a deteriorating environment. All these are deeply interconnected. Biology gives us no real guidance on any of the four. Biology does give us an enlightened self-interest perhaps, but it gets us no further than, as biologists like to call it, “tribalism”: group self-interest, competing pluralism, peoples concerned about the condition of their local environment or their own natural resources. You don’t get from the biological world the kind of inclusive, comprehensive global ethic that we so much now need.

Lastly, as a fifth claim, I worry about the rich and the poor, connecting, of course, with this escalating consumption of natural resources, and with war and peace. In the broad, general picture, about 80 percent of the production of the world is consumed by about 20 percent of its people, and on the other side about 20 percent of the production of the world is consumed by about 80 percent of the world’s people. And in general over the last half century the rich have been getting richer and the poor poorer.

Now if we look about us in this elegant setting, we are left with no doubt which part of the world we are living in. But maybe now we do need to think about the sense of justice, the sense of fairness, the sense of the equitable distribution of the world’s resources.

In closing, I’d like to claim that, since we are not able to get that sort of ethic easily derived from any biology with which I am familiar, that we do need the ethical insights of the Christian religion—and these convictions are shared by many other of the world’s faiths. Any lasting solutions to these four main threats on the world agenda will require some deep sense of justice, some deep sense of caring.

That’s theology. That’s not biology. I welcome the Templeton Foundation and this prize; and if you want a miracle, in my mind it’s Sir John Templeton with his genius on the markets, the consummate capitalist, who then turns around and gives his money away—in this case even to a kind of crazy tree-hugger. Sir John is celebrated for his philanthropic interests; and in recent years, he has concentrated on human altruism, on research—scientific research—into the possibilities for motivating and understanding altruistic consideration for others. That’s the kind of thing we may well need if we are to solve our deeper environmental problems.

If I were to claim a greater wisdom than Sir John, if that were possible, I might say that the altruism we also need, in addition to that one human to another, is a sense of deep, caring concern for God’s other creatures, for the animals, for the plants, for the other five million species with which we co-inhabit this Earth.



Rev. Dr. John C. Polkinghorne, Bishop Michael Marshall, Holmes Rolston, III, and John M. Templeton, Jr., M.D., at the Templeton Prize Breakfast Media Briefing.

Rev. Dr. John C. Polkinghorne

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Let me first of all say to Holmes what an enormous pleasure it is to your many friends in science to see you here as this year's Templeton Prize winner.

Holmes and I have known each other for a good many years. I remember once we were talking about a beautiful garden and Holmes, who is a real 'wilderness man,' said to me, "What a pity," he said, "it could have been a swamp."

Rolston: or a wetland

Polkinghorne: Biology has made enormous progress in the last fifty years, particularly through the discovery of the molecular basis of genetics. It's made this progress in the way that all subjects make initial progress, by thinking in terms of bits and pieces—constituents—and thinking about them mechanically.

Of course you can learn some important things that way but you can't learn everything that way. The need to think holistically and ecologically, as well as constitutively and genetically, has been one of the most important contributions made by Holmes to contemporary discussion and debate. He's taught us, for example, that evolution is not simply about struggle, it's also about cooperation, about symbiosis. He's taught us there is more to life than molecular biology. There are in fact organisms, a most important aspect of life! One day, biologists generally will have to recover that side of this subject.

Rolston: and ecosystems... and wetlands....

Polkinghorne: and also, I think, that interaction between humans and nature that we call gardening.

I think what's going to happen in the 21st century is that we are going slowly to move in the direction of recovering some of those insights about holistic ways of thinking, about totality. Even the mere physicists know that more is different, that there are properties of complexes that you can't possibly see in terms of their parts.

There's more to thinking than simply bits and pieces. I was a particle physicist, which is a real bits and pieces person, but that's interesting but limited, and Holmes has encouraged us to go beyond reductionism.

One thing I'm most grateful for, Holmes, is that you really encourage us not to lose our urge about finding value in nature.

Science has always had the rubric of being value-free, and that's true in the sense that you can't argue that this is the way it is because this is the way it ought to be.

Nevertheless, the search for truth and intellectual beauty is, after all, the expression of the recognition of value, and it is a very important part of the scientific experience.

One of my favorite quotations from the Old Testament is from the end of Job, where God says, “Behold, Behemoth”—a sort of mythical monster representing the non-human aspects of creation—“Behold, Behemoth, who I made as I made you....”

We all, intuitively, when we see some splendid animal like a rhinoceros, or we see a splendid landscape, like a wetlands, have a feeling of value, and of the recognition of gratitude that, in a sense, comes with that. Holmes has encouraged us not to lose our nerve about values, and I think that’s an extremely valuable contribution.

One of my favorite quotations from the Old Testament is from the end of Job, where God says, “Behold, Behemoth”—a sort of mythical monster representing the non-human aspects of creation—“Behold, Behemoth, who I made as I made you....” In other

words: Job didn’t think that it’s only human beings who matter. All creation matters to its Creator and so it should matter to us, too.

And I think much of the same thing with the last part of your introduction, which sounds very much like an affirmation of that, and I am very much grateful to you.