

[The Following Is An Evolution Education Inspired Short Fiction Piece]

The Science of Religion

Nick Waszkiewicz

Department of Psychology, State University of New York at New Paltz

Rich entered the timeless cathedral: a grey structure, built of brick and the sweat of labored workers. Its giant doors opened, like floodgates, letting the light pour inside. It penetrated the religious ark, filling it with cold, rational thoughts of a modern age.

He adjusted his dark rimmed spectacles and straightened the sprite tie his wife had given him. His calculated steps gave him away: a scientist, entering the temple of the faithful. In the pews sat a scattered bunch of those at wits end. Monkeys, the lot of them; all lined up, bent at the knee asking for permission to survive in a society built on the same foundation as the church; blind faith.

The kaleidoscopic church windows did nothing to take his mind off things. Scientists in South Africa had just discovered a treasure trove of bones in a cave aptly named "Rising Star". They said the remains were called Homo *naledi*, and claimed that the remnants bridged the remaining million-year gap between the ape-like *Australopithecus*, our near relatives Homo *habilis*, and the human-like Homo *erectus*. Rich had seen the fallout of such a discovery on the news. Plastered across every television screen rained the words, "God Challenged?" echoing the philosopher, Frederich Nietzsche's, theory just a century prior. It implicated the closing of what some people would call a "God gap" in our evolution.

Like all men at wits end, he had some questions, but not from the man behind the curtain tugging strings in the sky. No, they were for a different one; an ambassador for their species: the priest.

"What troubles you, my son?" the white collared man asked of Rich. The priest sported a clean, youthful face, but his eyes told a different story. They smoldered with years of experience, masked by smoky color. Both men sat in the sacristy, a room behind the altar, and away from any pressing ears.

Rich adjusted himself in the felt chair across from the black clad priest. He couldn't tell if his compulsive itch was from the question that plagued him or the warm upholstery. He was used to the feel of harsh metal back at the lab, not this.

"I have a question, Father," he said and crossed one leg over another. He was sure of his convictions, ones he had certainty the priest would conform to. "My

name's Rich Wilson," he continued. "I've been a part of this parish for... going on ten years now."

"Wilson..." the priest said and looked to the vaulted ceiling, as if crying for answers already. "Ah yes, your daughter has just been through confirmation, has she not?"

Rich nodded. "Frankly Father, if it were up to me she wouldn't have been. You see, I've been coming here with them for a decade, mostly pressured by my wife," he said. "Every Sunday we come and listen to your homily, and I have to say, you're a great storyteller."

"Why, thank you," the priest said and flashed an all-too-brief smile.

"But a few things happened this week that I have a problem with," Rich said. "I don't know if you've heard, but they recently discovered a bunch of new bones of our potential ancestors."

"The origin of our *Homo* genus, the possible bridge between ape and man. Yes, I have heard," the priest replied with a nod of acknowledgement.

Rich cocked his head, caught off guard that a man of such faith was so attuned to news that could potentially pull the carpet out from underneath his beliefs. He added, "That was the first thing, and you can probably see where I'm going with this."

"Go on, my son."

"Well, a fellow biologist, Patricia, just finished reading a book you might've heard of: *On the Origin of Species* by Charles Darwin. She said that in it he talks about the lack of these transitional fossils and how it creates gaps in our history. Since then, I suppose, there has always been room for people to claim a sort of divine intervention; evidence of intelligent design based on these gaps. So, don't you think with the new evidence it'd be hard to say that there was intelligent design in anything?" Rich adjusted his tie, "I mean, why should I let my wife convince me to still come here? Why should I come listen to your lectures on a mystical deity or dissections on insect behavior?" Rich scratched his throat, feeling an odd lump emerging.

The priest rested his head on his hand, like *The Thinker*. Maybe his primal instincts had kicked in, or perhaps he could smell a bitter challenge on Rich's breath. His face held composure, even against signs of the oncoming deluge.

Rich leaned forward, thinking he had cornered an animal or sent it running in fear. He felt like an elk with the biggest horns or the most muscled chimp, puffing out its chest.

"Then, after your homily, you followed up with a quote from..." He paused, the doctrine's words slipping from the tip of his tongue at the last moment.

"I believe I quoted Corinthians," the priest said and finished for him. "The body is not one member, but many. Now are they many, but of one body."

Rich nodded, certain that he had the priest right where he wanted him. He took a deep breath, plunging into the cold situation. "The new evidence seems against religion's favor. I'm thinking specifically of Occam's razor. When you have two explanations of the same phenomenon, you accept the simplest explanation of cause based on the evidence. In fact he says, "Do not multiply entities beyond necessity".

The priest sat in silence. His head had left his fist and again he turned to the cross perched to their right. Moments passed and he sat tight lipped. Then, his fiery eyes broke away and flicked back to Rich. His face did not hold a hint of fear; instead, it radiated with enlightenment. He cleared his throat, as he had always done when preparing for homilies. He spoke, thus saying, "If you were to read *On the Origin of Species* Chapter XIV, page. 428, you would find that Darwin himself struggled with the idea that such evolutionary vastness and complexity could be inspired out of nothing." The priest scratched his chin and said, "If my memory serves, I believe the late scientist can be quoted as saying, 'I should infer from analogy that probably all the organic beings which have ever lived on this earth have descended from some one primordial form, into which life was first breathed by the Creator'," the priest said and added, "the idea that even the forefather of evolutionary theory would conclude on such a note, might perhaps reveal that even he was not fully convinced."

Rich shifted in his chair again, ready to shift gears. He could see the priest wasn't ready to go down without locking horns first. "OK sure, maybe we *could* say that, but *why* do we need religion then? Science seems to be filling in the blanks and checking the boxes where religion doesn't at all. It seems the only purpose religion really serves is just to trade blows or surrender itself as a step-ladder to science. Maybe that's the nature of things; conflict, I mean. After all, Alfred Tennyson said it best, 'Nature, red in tooth and claw,'" Rich said and leaned back, folding his arms. "I guess what I'm asking is why should I put my chips on black when red seems to be paying out round after round?"

The priest took a deep breath. "As you are well aware, at some time, humans came into the fold through hominization. Now whether you believe in ensoulment by way of Adam and Eve or our descent from a Mitochondrial Eve, the fact remains that we descend from something primordial indeed. Now, ask yourself this, my son, why were we so special? Why were we the ones to carry on? After all, our distant cousins, the Neanderthals, lived around the same time and seemed just as capable to survive in this world." He leaned back in his seat, but remained straight and still as Zeno's arrow. He continued, "The answer is that we learned to utilize our mind-tools best; our cooperation, coordination and creations.

Rich interjected before the priest had time to send another volley of words his way. "Well, we were 'chosen' because our prefrontal cortices evolved and we managed to alter the environment to our needs."

The priest gave a curt nod, "In essence, yes. We learned to work hand in hand, using our cooperation and awareness to expand our knowledge; finding a common cause to transform ourselves and our society into the complexity and beauty it finds itself in today," he said. "Both the sons and daughters sitting in this very church and those draped in lab coats searching for the very essence of our existence." The priest raised a finger, "Do you know what this cooperation came out of?"

Rich moved to interject, but the priest didn't wait for an answer. The faithful was on a roll now.

"It came out of shared needs, ideas, and helping others — known as altruism in your scientific circles," the priest said and reached behind his chair, grabbing a messenger bag draped over the back. He dug inside, his hand withdrawing two bottles of water. "Someone would have something another needed, and they would give it up," the priest said and offered Rich the second bottle of water.

Rich took it and without even thinking, uttered the words, "Thank you."

The priest beamed. "And in return, they would get something back," he said, finishing his thought. It hadn't even crossed Rich's mind that the priest was using the water to illustrate his point.

The priest continued with his thought, "From this communion of people, ritual was born: shared beliefs, bonding our ancestors together. If my memory serves, in France they have found a cave called Trois-Frères depicting drawings of animal worship, symbols, and the like. Our Paleolithic ancestors found comfort in praising those earthly and familiar beings of ours. Then, one day someone found greater forces at work: insight into the complex nature of this Earth and this life. Ceremonies became a work of many; all participants in a commonality. This spurred us forward, allowing us to take action; all of us working together to build in the name of something greater. That was when we came to understand unseen hands in it all, molding us like clay: an omnipotent force guiding us all forward. Thus religion was birthed, granting us hope and further cooperation to the benefit of man."

Rich couldn't help but speak his mind. "And the Inquisitions came out of it all as well." He folded his arms, adding, "A distilled form of religious conflict, you could say."

The priest held up a hand until Rich backed down. Then he continued, "Atrocious, there is no doubt, but in a twisted way they served a purpose; a purpose and a lesson that propelled science forward. In fact, I believe that the idea of atomism was suppressed for years in the Dark Ages, only to be rediscovered in the Renaissance. It helped trigger the scientific revolution and gave way to what you and people such as Peter Higgs call the standard model." He took a breath and said, "When you craft steel, do you not strike iron over and over first to make it stronger? When you deny a person of water, do they not yearn for it more? Yes, it is

all a very empty affair, but it ultimately leads to a deepened desire and stronger resolve." The priest took only a small sip of water, tightened the cap, and placed it back in his bag. Rich's meanwhile was nearly half empty.

"And is that not what both science and religion seek to do?" The priest asked. "To search for answers in the hope of uniting and evolving us as a people?" The priest gently wiped his mouth and continued, "Now, you ask me why you should stay, and I answer: it is your choice. However, there are things at work that have brought us to this very moment in history; that being our evolution as a species."

Rich gave him a blank look, trying not to show his sense of awe at the priest's wisdom and profound knowledge. He narrowed his eyes, trying to draw up the best poker face possible. "You talk about the origin of man being a result of these 'unseen hands' of yours, but science is throwing back the curtain. Take 1909, in the Canadian Rockies they discovered the Burgess shale. You know how old it is? Five hundred and seventy million years old...it showed an explosion of life in the Cambrian period. You know what else they found in that ancient limestone quarry?" Rich asked and held up his pointer and thumb. "They found a two inch chordate called *Pikaia gracilens*. If by chance, according to Chaos Theory, that vertebrae hadn't survived, you and I might very well not be here at all. That's what is at work here, with all due respect Father."

The priest smiled, authentic as any. "Every moment..." he started, "Every death, every life, has been a brushstroke on a larger canvas: some broad, some small, but all changing time and time again into something beautiful and complex. Everyone has their own idea of what that may be," the priest said and folded his hands over his lap. "You ponder why religion should continue limping forward with all this new evidence and William of Ockham to say otherwise? Well, that is because religion and science go hand in hand, two sides of the same coin, spun by our shared efforts. Yes, there had been competition at first, but you may argue it was only to yield to cooperation. We see this now in our society; war and violence are at the lowest in human history. Is that not at least some evidence to say cooperation has now won out?" He folded his hands and looked toward his lap as if to pray. "We see now what happens when cooperation falls out of balance and chaos, do we not? Cells' coordination breaking down and dividing exponentially, destined to become cancerous."

The priest held a finger in the air, letting silence breathe for a moment. "Now, to return to my homily from last Sunday on the bees. They are workers, laboring underneath some instinct that dictates their actions. Together they work toward a common goal: the survival and sustenance of their society. I believe your fellow brethren call this eusociality," the priest said. "By sharing this common act they assist the colony through their selfless endeavors — as William Hamilton would tell us. This is done all while answering to the queen bee herself: the creator of life." He gazed back up to the wall where two sticks crossed one another with the marker

"INRI" nailed above. Then he said, "This is evident not just in bees, but termites and ants as well. Now, you might be asking what this has to do with religion and evolution. The answer is simple; everything. We can attribute this to ourselves, can we not?" The priest asked, looked up and opened his hands towards the ceiling as if trying to draw comparison between the cathedral, beehives hives, ant hills and termite mounds." The priest returned his gaze to Rich. "All of us, laborers, working day in and out as a means of self-preservation and continued advancement of our society. However, now we're all faced with the challenge of the preservation of our ideas and information." The priest chuckled, "Not unlike to the ones we are exchanging at this very moment."

Rich still sat there, mouth agape, nothing coming out.

"Let me ask you," the priest said and stroked his chin, "Where did you come by the information about the discovery of the *Homo naledi*?"

"My wife," Rich replied and raised an eyebrow, knowing an attack was imminent.

"And how did she hear about this information?"

"Her brother-in-law."

"Ah, and where did she talk to him?"

Rich's heart sank. He felt his power play slipping away and the sense of defeat looming over his head like the Sword of Damocles.

"At church," Rich muttered.

The priest nodded, "Now tell me, my son, do you believe that would have been possible without socialization and exchanging ideas?"

Rich raised an eyebrow. "How'd you know I would say the church and not say Facebook or something?"

The priest barely gave his answer any thought and said, "Because I told your brother-in-law, Bill Trivers, that is why."

Rich didn't know what to say. His mouth unhinged and words vanished from thought.

The priest filled the void that Rich could not. "Information comes out of interaction, which in turn comes from organization. In that light, our religious organization does not seem so vestigial, no? Science and religion are cousins; kin that must work together for the betterment of our society. After all, is science not a form of religion? Millions of people steeped in cooperation, searching for a single truth; using guidance, rules, and schematics allowing for functionality that we see even at the smallest of levels. This is whether it be particles forming complex molecules, a team of scientists working to put a man on the moon, a corporation with workers designing the next piece of technology...Or even a mere hive of bees." He took a deep breath and added, "The body is not one member, but many. Now are they many, but of one body."

Rich didn't know what to say. What could he say? The man of faith had turned the tables and proceeded to remake them like a seasoned carpenter. The only thought that he seemed capable of processing was how happy his wife would be when he didn't refuse to attend mass anymore. He did not confuse this with shunning science at all. Instead he found himself more comfortable with the idea of keeping both in his life — together.

The priest cleared his throat, beamed, and with a glint in his eye asked, "Have I answered your questions?"