Evolution and mystery

By Bromleigh McCleneghan
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The same week the European Organization for Nuclear Research announced the discovery of a new sub-atomic particle—which may be the missing puzzle piece for physics' theory of everything—we also learned that some 46 percent of poll respondents hold "creationist views of human origins." I might not be as incensed as Katha Pollitt is, but I'm distressed by this poll. Pollitt points toward the further findings and implications that have me squirming in my seat:

> The proportion of college graduates who are creationists is exactly the same as for the general public. That's right: forty-six percent of Americans with sixteen long years of education under their belt believe the story of Adam and Eve is literally true. Even twenty-five percent of Americans with graduate degrees believe dinosaurs and humans romped together before Noah's flood.

She writes that her husband, a sociologist, contends that these questions are more about identity than actual statements of belief. But this doesn't calm her.

Or me. Because what group is it that Americans are identifying with as they blithely reject a preponderance of scientific evidence? It's Christians, of course. It's Christians—some of them—who want to demonstrate their faithfulness by touting the party line.

But when did a literal reading of Genesis become synonymous with the gospel of Jesus Christ? When did an intrinsically paranoid worldview—that all those scientists are in league to pull Satan's own wool over our eyes—become a litmus test for faith?

Pollitt is nearly as frustrated by the 32 percent of respondents aligned with "theistic evolution," that is, who agree that "humans evolved, with God guiding." But when it comes to responding to a poll, this may be the most viable option.

I don't really like the concept of "theistic evolution," which smacks of the co-opting of science for slightly nefarious ends. Darwin, it is said, was deeply concerned about why a benevolent God would create so many animals that kill their prey so violently.

After hearing about the "zombie ants" a few months back, it's easy to feel a similar, visceral challenge to the notion of divine intervention in nature.

And yet I'm not really willing to say, with the remaining 15 percent of my fellow Americans, that God plays no part in evolution. Bob Russell has suggested that even if God doesn't determine the outcomes of natural selection with foresight or a set plan, any time chromosomes blend, there is a chance of one result over another. And in that chance, somehow, sometimes, is room for the possibility of the in-breaking of the Spirit.

The long and the short of evolution and the unfolding work of creation is that things are more complex and more mysterious than we are used to believing. The more theologically comfortable we can get with the notion of complexity and mystery, the more we might find not stumbling blocks to faith but room to incorporate scientists' ever-increasing understanding.

The Scientists in Congregations program insists that there are people within many of our congregations who are already living into this relationship between science and faith. These are people who ought to be aided in articulating these connections, people who might lead the rest of us in reflection. They might lead some of us out of the 46 percent and into the future.

I hope they're right. The discovery of the mysterious Higgs-Boson particle is astonishing. It opens even armchair scientists to reflection on the nature of existence and the origins and workings of the universe. If Christians are interested in ultimate questions of *what is*, it'd be a shame to let a narrow view of both science and faith isolate us from the conversation.