

Darwin Day Feb. 7, 2010 Finding Darwin's God

As illustrated by the dramatic culture wars of recent years, there is a widespread belief, especially but not exclusively in the United States, that Darwin's theory of evolution, now a little more than 150 years old, threatens religion, especially the Christian religion, but also, in many believers' minds, Judaism and Islam as well. The acceptance of evolutionary theory as the best explanation of why the living world looks and behaves the way it does is thought by some to undermine the basis of morality, the acceptance of a spiritual dimension in human life, and even the very concept of God.

Anti-evolutionists are largely responsible for fostering a rigid definition of Christianity that insists that one cannot take evolution seriously and be a Christian. This despite the fact that many Christian denominations including the Roman Catholic and Episcopalian churches, as well as most of the other traditional Protestant denominations, assert quite clearly that an acceptance of the theory of evolution and the profession of Christianity are *not* mutually exclusive.

I should point out, however, that anti-evolutionists are not the only people responsible for the public perception that evolution and religion are at odds. A number of well-known evolutionists, especially Richard Dawkins, author of "The God Delusion" and "The Blind Watchmaker," have made very strong assertions that an understanding of evolutionary theory leads inevitably to atheism. Even Stephen Jay Gould, one of the best-known evolutionists of the Twentieth Century, wrote a splendid essay asserting that "The lack of conflict between science and religion arises from a lack of overlap between their respective domains ...science in the empirical construction of the universe and religion in the search for proper ethical values and the spiritual meaning of our lives," and shortly afterward was interviewed on television announcing that, in his opinion, "that notion that... we are in God's embracing love...it's just a story we tell ourselves." Not exactly a ringing endorsement of the importance of religion.

I used to teach evolutionary theory quite regularly as part of various biology courses, but I freely admit that compared to Dawkins and Gould, I am barely more than an amateur in the field. Nevertheless, I disagree with their conclusions about religious belief for a variety of reasons. In describing those reasons, I want to give credit to Kenneth Miller, a molecular biologist at Brown University and a Roman Catholic, whose book "Finding Darwin's God" informed much of my thought on the matter.

It may seem a little odd that I'm citing a Catholic author when I described today's presentation as looking at the science-religion conflict from the perspective of "liberal religion," not a term usually ascribed to Catholicism, especially within these walls. In his book, however, Miller's view of God and religion pretty much

ignores some of the elements of Catholic theology that UUs tend to have the most conflicted feelings about, such as the disposition of the soul after death and the divinity and essential importance of Jesus. What he is concerned about is the nature of God, and in his book, he argues repeatedly that it is precisely by initiating a universe in which chance and randomness play significant roles that God makes it possible for human choices – to do good, to do evil, to accept or reject the existence of God – to be meaningful. Makes sense to me, although I don't know if that would be described as a conservative or liberal point of view.

The reason I described a reconciliation of science and religion as occurring in a liberal perspective is that confidence in the correctness of evolutionary theory is not, obviously, congruent with a literal interpretation of the Bible and probably not with a literal interpretation of the Koran either, although I'm too ignorant to know that for sure. I do know that Muslim fundamentalists reportedly also reject evolutionary theory.

Most Christian and Jewish denominations, however, don't insist on a literal dependence on the Bible. In Catholic tradition, this goes all the way back to Saint Augustine, who wrote a book called "The Literal Meaning of Genesis," one thesis of which is that Scripture "has been written to nourish our souls," not to provide a scientific description of the world. The saint seems to have been quite annoyed by literalists, whom he refers to as "Reckless and incompetent expounders of Holy Scripture."

What liberal religions or liberal religious interpretations tend to believe is that God is good, and that God loves us and wants to help us to be and to do good. Does an acceptance of evolutionary theory mean that a person can't believe this?

There is a fairly numerous population that would argue that looking at the natural world suggests that God is not good. Darwin himself wrote that "I cannot persuade myself that a beneficent and omnipotent God would have designedly created the Ichneumonidae wasps with the express intention of their larvae feeding within the living bodies of caterpillars." Archibald MacLeish summed up the problem in his verse, "If God is God, he is not good. If God is good, he is not God."

In both these cases, the key element seems to be the idea of God as, as Darwin explicitly says, "omnipotent." If one believes in a God who does everything, then clearly that God is not good, at least on any terms that are likely to make sense to us as humans.

But if God does everything, then humans have no free will anyway, and that contradicts the idea that God wants people to choose good (and God) of their own free will. Arguably, it makes sense to suppose that that kind of God chose in the initial creation of the universe to play consistently by the rules of that universe and let the natural processes play out as they would over time, rather than

cheating and avoiding the rules at will in order to manipulate the outcome. The fact that that often leads to results that we as individuals find unsatisfactory does not invalidate the possibility.

In suggesting that God might be both responsible for the creation of the universe (which, as Kenneth Miller points out, is organized in several ways essential both to the formation of a universe and to the development and evolution of life) and concerned with the lives of relatively small creatures living on a smallish planet, I would undoubtedly draw down the scorn of Richard Dawkins, among others. Their assertion would be that, in the words of Douglas Futuyma, “Some shrink from the conclusion that the human species was not designed, has no purpose, and is the product of mere mechanical mechanisms – but this seems to be the message of evolution.” My reaction is more like a yawn and a memory of the old adage: “If you want to send a message, try Western Union.” Purpose, in the broad philosophical sense, is not really an attribute that science, let alone the evolutionary process, can extract from the world. [It is no more plausible to say that science tells us, because evolutionary studies indicate that we were not designed, that we have no purpose, than to say that because the human eye is such a complicated mechanism it must have been made by a supernatural designer and that that tells us that there is a purpose to human existence.]

Some of the proponents of so-called “intelligent design” insist that because they personally can’t understand how complex biological mechanisms evolved, they must have been created by a designer. Some of those folks are very bright, but I don’t see why their inability to solve a problem implies a certain kind of God. Similarly, I don’t find the conclusion about the absence of God that other very bright people are drawn to as a result of their study of the natural world necessarily compelling.

My own belief is that evolutionary theory is the correct explanation of how we got to be here in the way we are, but that that does not invalidate my personal perception of God, nor should it do so for others. Darwin himself, as I’ve said, struggled with his concept of God, describing himself for much of his life as an agnostic, but also as a theist. In the end, I think the relation of evolution and liberal religion is well summarized in Darwin’s own words, as follows: (Last para. of *The Origin...*)