

## Evolution: A Spiritual Appraisal

By Michael A. Schuler

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Charles Darwin was fifty years old when *Origin of Species*, a scientific treatise based on decades of thought and observation, was published in November 1859. Even the Copernican revolution, which displaced planet Earth from the center of the universe, was greeted with less consternation by traditional religious authorities than this new development.

Indeed, in the 150 years since it was introduced, Darwinian theory has encountered stiff resistance from those who perceive it as a frontal assault on God's word and His sovereignty. Opponents remain skeptical of evolution's claims and fearful of its implications. Thus, a 1999 document posted by the Discovery Institute, a Seattle-based Creationist think-tank, argued that the idea that human beings are created in the image of God is one of the "bedrock principles on which Western civilization was built." By proposing a wholly materialistic conception of human origins, Darwin has left a "catastrophic legacy that has infected virtually every area of our culture," the Institute laments.

Scientists beg to differ. Sean Carroll, an evolutionary biologist at the University of Wisconsin was recently asked to rank the Darwinian theory of evolution in the history of scientific discovery. "For biologists," he replied, it clearly is number one because it is the underlying frame for all of biology." Moreover, the *Origin of Species* was so carefully documented and thought out that "it still makes perfect sense today," Carroll enthused.

Similarly, the late Stephan Jay Gould of Harvard described "our documentation of life's evolutionary tree" as one of science's greatest triumphs. It was a "profoundly liberating discovery that bore out the old maxim that truth can make us free," the celebrated paleontologist declared.

It seems incredible that a scientific proposition of such importance would be rejected by so many as patently subversive. Michael Dowd, who spoke here last fall, believes evolution's detractors can be converted. In his book *Thank God for Evolution* he confidently asserts that in forty years the "majority of religious believers across the globe" will embrace the theory: "A multitude of sacred ways of thinking about evolution will propel a worldwide spiritual revival unlike any that have come before."

If that forecast is to be born out, however, pro-

ponents of evolution will have to get busy. In our own country the tide of popular opinion has been running in the wrong direction lately. As of 1994, 44 percent of Americans rejected the notion that human beings developed from earlier species. By 2006 that figure had actually increased to 54 percent—more than half the population.

Resistance is even more pronounced in the Islamic world. Like conservative Christians, most Muslims see evolution as a cultural threat and an invitation to atheism. In Turkey, perhaps the most secular and literate Muslim nation, only 25 percent of adults agree that human beings had nonhuman antecedents. Figures are much lower in other parts of the Muslim world: 16 percent of Indonesians; 14 percent of Pakistanis; 11 percent of Malaysians, and only 8 percent of Egyptians accept the Darwinian model of development, according to a survey conducted in 2007.

Muslims pridefully note the contributions their own medieval scholars made to the development of mathematics and science. But according to Salman Hameed evolution is the one proposition that "challenges the assumption" that Islam is open to new scientific understandings.

Charles Darwin was himself all too aware that his theory would not be well received in the religious sphere, and this made him reluctant to share his findings. Fearing that the *Origin of Species* would "murder" traditional religion and cast him in the role of "Judas," Darwin delayed publication for two decades.

He surely was aware of what had happened to the scientist Joseph Priestley some seventy years earlier. Priestley, to whose Unitarian congregation in Birmingham Darwin's grandparents belonged, was, like Darwin himself, "kindly and soft-spoken." Nevertheless in response to his radical political views, an angry mob burned down Priestley's house and his laboratory. Seeking to avoid a similar fate, Darwin dilly-dallied before attempting to convince his readers of evolution's spiritual as well as scientific merits.

When I view all beings not as special creations, but as the lineal descendents of some few beings which lived long before the first bed of the Cambrian was deposited, they seem to me to become ennobled.... There is a

grandeur in this view of life, with its several powers, having been originally breathed by the Creator into a few forms or one; and that, whilst this planet has gone cycling on according to the fixed law of gravity, from so simple a beginning endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful have been, and are being evolved.

Perhaps such reassurances helped, because Darwin's ideas caused less consternation among his own countrymen than he had expected. For a number of years supporters and detractors debated evolution vociferously, but eventually its author rose to become one of Great Britain's most honored figures. Following his death in 1882, Charles Darwin was interred beside Sir Isaac Newton at Westminster Abbey.

What is it about evolutionary thought that makes it so objectionable to a significant portion of the religious population? Citing the enduring popularity of creation myths, Stephen Jay Gould argued that "few people are comfortable with evolutionary modes of explanation in any form." Creation narratives "identify heroes and sacred places ... as symbols for reverence, worship, or patriotism," he remarks, while evolutionary accounts have nothing comparable to offer. But then, echoing Darwin, "Is there not also grandeur in the broad sweep of continuity?" Gould asked.

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Michael Dowd provides another explanation for evolution's rejection. The problem is two-fold, he says. First, what he calls "flat-earth" ideas are hard to dislodge. Second, many people still attribute more truth-value to the "private" revelations of ancient Scripture than to the "public" revelations of modern science.

Flat-earth refers to ideas about the nature of cosmos, its origin, and its development that arose in the pre-scientific past and that are no longer tenable. Still useful as metaphors, perhaps, taken literally they cannot be reconciled with current scientific observations and understandings.

This is true not only for the Bible and the Koran, but for the Hindu Vedas, certain Buddhist sutras, and the Zoroastrian Avesta. They are all "flat-earth" texts, Dowd reminds us, and for believers they represent a stable body of inerrant truth that helps them cope with a complex, confusing, and rapidly changing environment. Any serious attempt to challenge and to qualify these ancient, sacred texts is seen to diminish their "truth-value" and compromise their core message of human redemption.

In other words, if the Biblical *creation* accounts aren't literally true, perhaps its teachings about salvation and eternal life aren't either. Disprove one of its claims and, according to flat-earth reasoning, all of scripture becomes less credible.

A second problem, Michael Dowd says, has to do with the nature of divine revelation. The account of creation in Genesis, the parting of the Red Sea, God's speech to Job from out of the whirlwind, Jacob's wrestling match with the angel, Jesus' miracles—none of these ancient events can be corroborated and must therefore be accepted at face value. Such anecdotes fall into the category of "private" revelations because, Dowd says, they represent "subjective claims for which no evidence for or against would be universally compelling." They can only be believed or not believed. Religious conservatives tend to restrict themselves to revelations of this type.

On the other hand, some religious traditions support the notion of "progressive" revelation, maintaining that "truth and right are still revealed," as one of our own Unitarian Universalist hymns declares. Dowd sees modern science as the bearer of new "public" revelations that religion ought to be receptive to and grateful for. He calls them "public" because their claims about the nature of reality, ... are based on measurable data that can be tested and modified in the light of evidence and concerted attempts to disprove such claims.... From the perspective of public revelation [evolution] is the universally relevant story of how Reality has progressively revealed itself to human beings.

The great advantage of public revelation is that it replaces fragile religious *beliefs* with trustworthy religious *knowledge*. However, it requires religious seekers to adopt a more open and curious disposition and be willing to modify their convictions on the basis of convincing new evidence. Michael Dowd laments that in conservative religious circles the *private* revelations of ancient scripture "have been denied the life-giving breath of ongoing *public* revelations."

Others perceive an even greater problem. The theory of evolution, they say, puts God himself at

risk. Thus, Muzammil Siddiqi, former president of the Islamic Society of America says that by definition Allah is the “absolute controller of every event that has taken place, is taking place, and will take place.” Any theory that attributes life’s development to random forces like mutation and natural selection is “atheistic, has no rational or logical foundation, and is not acceptable in Islam,” Siddiqi insists.

Similarly, in his book *Scientific Creationism*, Henry Morris argues that from a Christian perspective Darwinian evolution is inconsistent with God’s personality, God’s omniscience, and God’s purposefulness.

If God’s primary intention was to “create man in his own image,” why would he defer that operation for three billion years, thereby depriving Himself of another intelligent personality with whom he could commune?

Moreover, if God is by definition omniscient, He would not have created so many misfits, creatures doomed to extinction. God is a better planner than that.

And, if God’s ultimate objective was the creation and redemption of humankind, what possible divine purpose could the hundred million year reign of the dinosaurs have served? Why would God have waited so long before getting down to serious business of salvation?

For someone like Henry Morris, to accept evolution would require him to radically revise his understanding and estimation of God—something he is not willing to do.

But some religious traditions don’t see this as an issue. “None of the essential contentions of Judaism is vitally affected by the propositions of evolution,” Kaufmann Kohler and Emil Hirsch assure us. Since evolution only addresses the “how” of species development, it remains possible to look to God for the “what” and the “why” of that process, they write.

For the most part, the Roman Catholic Church has also adjusted. Parochial schools have eschewed Creationism or Intelligent Design in favor of Darwin, and Pope Benedict XVI himself has written that the theory of evolution rightfully “seeks to understand and describe biological developments.”

However, the Pope goes on to say, that theory

... cannot explain where the “project” of human persons comes from, nor their inner origins, nor their particular nature.... To that extent, we are faced here with two complementary rather than mutually exclusive realities.

Roman Catholicism does insist that evolutionary development is in some sense guided by God, but it does not dogmatize and has left the nature and degree of his involvement as an open question.

Charles Darwin would find little to criticize in the Jewish and Catholic positions. As Stephen Jay Gould points out, Darwin never tried to grasp the meaning of life, or even the manner of its origin on this planet. The sole concern of evolutionary biology is to “study the pathways and mechanisms of organic change following the origin of life,” Gould insists. Because for the most part they cannot be tested, scientists don’t tackle “ultimate questions” of meaning, purpose and origination. These rightfully belong in the realm of philosophy and religion.

In general, the Eastern religions have not been affected by the ongoing controversy that evolutionary theory has provoked in the West. “It has not harmed or affected Buddhism in any way,”

Amarasiri Weeraratne writes. In fact, he says, evolution actually supports three of Buddhism’s core teachings:

- adaptation and extinction underscore the impermanence of all living and non-living things;
- natural selection confirms the Buddha’s observation that all sentient beings must suffer.
- And, having descended from other species, humankind would appear *not* to have a separable soul, as Buddhism also teaches.

“Buddhists are pleased,” Weeraratne concludes, “that as science advances, the truths enunciated by the Buddha get more and more support and acceptance.”

Judging from the quotation on the cover of today’s program, it appears that Darwin is not a danger to Taoist thought either. Substitute “evolution” for the word Tao in the following passage from the *Tao Te Ching*, and it still makes almost perfect sense:

Every being in the universe is an expression of the Tao.

It springs into existence ... takes on a physical body, lets circumstances complete it.

The Tao gives birth to all beings ...

Creating without possessing,

**In general, the Eastern religions have not been affected by the ongoing controversy that evolutionary theory has provoked in the West.**

Acting without expecting,  
Guiding without interfering...  
That is why every being spontaneously honors the Tao.

As Unitarian Universalists, we are each free to make up our own minds about such matters. Members of this association are expected to engage in a “free and responsible search for truth” and periodically to test their beliefs, but we don’t expect that everyone will reach the same conclusions. By comparing the results of our personal search, we broaden our perspective and deepen our understanding of the world and each other.

Charles Darwin’s amazing discoveries were largely a function of his own Unitarian heritage and the curiosity and open-mindedness it encouraged. That helps explain why, in the religious world, Unitarian Universalists have always been enthusiastic advocates for his “public revelations” that he provided.

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## Postscript

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### “The Seekers” by Kenneth Patton

Praise them who scrape dust from tombs, ease  
from the earth bones as old as the earth.  
Here is the luck of lovers of knowledge, fanatics of  
discovery...  
They shape present opinion, undo creeds and  
sanctities with a fist of old bones and a basket of  
shards...  
The seekers rescue from nameless dust that which  
is almost dust...  
From rubble of gorges they sift relics, photos of  
our forebears, a few heirlooms, what history we  
have...  
How much do we remember of the day before yesterday?  
Praise remnants and the seekers of remnants, who  
change our faces, who remodel the flesh on our  
skeletons.  
When they tell us what we have been, we see what  
we are.