

## Evolution -- Postlude

The idea that new species appeared on earth subsequent to God's initial act of creation was never a majority view, but both Augustine and Aquinas toyed with it as did several lesser-known figures after them. But by the time Charles Darwin and Alfred Russell Wallace presented their two famous papers before the Linnaean Society in London, July 1, 1858, theological opinion had hardened around the idea of the fixity of the species. All living species were descended without change from those God had initially created. Darwin's ideas, as one writer put it, had the effect of a plow overturning an anthill. A. D. White, whom I referred to before, devotes ten pages to comments from Darwin's contemporary churchmen. They make depressing reading. I'll quote just one from the French prelate Monsignor Segur, "These infamous doctrines have for their only support the most abject passions. Their father is pride, their mother impurity, their offspring revolutions. They come from hell and return thither, taking with them the gross creatures who blush not to proclaim and accept them." Gradually, however, the scientific community came around to Darwin's way of thinking. So eventually did the Catholic Church and the Anglican Church; and as a matter of fact, Darwin is buried in Westminster Abbey next to the grave of Sir Isaac Newton.

The chapter on evolution in White's book ends with a section with the ironic heading, "The final victory of evolution." Remember, this book was published in 1896. In 2005 a survey was taken of respondents from thirty-two European countries and Japan. They were given the following statement, "Human being as we know them, developed from earlier species of animals." They were then asked if the statement was true or false, or if they were not sure. The results are shown on the next slide. As you see, we rank thirty-second out of thirty-three, just ahead of Turkey.

This raises two questions; why is evolution such a perennial issue, and why is the rejection of it such an American phenomena? On the first question, I can think of several answers. The first is the problem of suffering. Why do bad things happen to good people? Perhaps war, disease, and suffering are God's ways of punishing us or perhaps strengthening our character. Perhaps they are just the work of the devil, and certainly they are insignificant compared to the eternal pleasure of heaven. If you are consoled by these arguments you will not like evolution. According to

Darwin's theory, suffering on an almost cosmic scale is the ever-present dark side of the creation of new life on earth.

Second is that all living beings share a common ancestry and are therefore historically and organically interconnected. Genesis describes the creation of Adam and Eve as a completely separate event from the creation of plants and animals. After all, Adam and Eve were given "dominion" over them.

The third dangerous idea is the theory of natural selection. For one thing, the variations that constitute the raw material for selection are said to be completely random, that is, undirected by any intelligent agency. This suggests that the universe is not governed by a divine providential intelligence after all. The competitive struggle in which the weak are so ruthlessly eliminated reveals a universe apparently untended by divine compassion. And finally, the disinterested way in which natural selection works evokes the suspicion that we live in a remorselessly impersonal universe.

I believe, along with many contemporary theologians, that these are theological problems that have solutions. I will talk about this after I answer the other big question; why is this such an American affair? Here I think the answer is clear. We Americans have a tradition of angry, hateful, polarized politics. As a liberal, I blame this all on the conservatives, and in the case of evolution I think I am right. The conservative churches have presented us with a stark choice; either you are with God and the angels or you are with the devil and Darwin. If you are not aware of the strong scientific case for evolution and perhaps do not trust science anyway, and there are many good reasons for not trusting science, then you will probably opt for God and company. If you are accustomed to thinking scientifically, you will probably decide that a religion that makes such claims is not to be taken seriously. Atheism is the only intellectually honest alternative. Whichever you chose there will be many people ready to use your anger to exploit you. They know that when people get angry they get stupid and easy to manipulate. This exacerbates, perhaps even creates, the conflict between religion and science. I would like to argue that there is a third alternative; that it makes good sense to talk about a theology of evolution. I believe that by embracing such a theology we can heal the current rift between religion and science.

What about a theology of evolution? I am going to start with some name dropping. Ian Barbour, Keith Ward, Arthur Peacock, Alister McGrath, and John Haught. These are all contemporary academic theologians who have written about science and religion. I recommend particularly John Haught. Haught is a professor of theology at Georgetown University. Evolution has been the centerpiece of his work. If you wanted to read just one book on the subject, I would recommend, “God After Darwin.”

So – once we get past this idea of identifying Darwin directly with the devil, what can Christian theology make of evolution? So far we have looked at evolution only in the context of life on earth. Nature left to her own devices has taken single-cell, blue-green algae and created out of it creature of exquisite complexity and organization. Taking a larger perspective, we could say that nature, left to her own devices, started with a universe that was almost infinitely hot, perfectly uniform, and homogeneous and evolved from this galaxies and stars. It then created heavy elements and built planets. On one planet at least it provided the raw material of life. Then DNA with its staggering amount of data compressed into a tiny spiral molecule appeared, somehow, and the rest, as they say, is history. Clearly evolution has been going on for the last 13.7 billion years. Not only that, the universe itself seems to be exquisitely fine-tuned to make carbon-based life forms possible. There are any number of physical parameters, which, if they were slightly different, make life impossible.

There is a point of view called “natural theology” which seeks to find God’s footprints in the natural world. The 18<sup>th</sup> century churchman, William Paley, famously argued that if you were to find a watch lying on the ground, you would conclude from its complexity and design that there must be a watchmaker. So when we look at the complexity and design in the natural world, we conclude the existence of a designer, i.e. God. This argument has gone out of fashion. What seems like miraculous creation to one generation is often understood by the next as the product of understandable physical processes. We have come to call this argument the “God of the gaps” proof of the existence of God. The creation of the universe, however; this is not just a gap, it’s a void we perhaps cannot see beyond.

Maybe we can bring Paley's argument up to date, and say that the universe itself is proof of God's existence.

Theologians are divided on whether this constitutes a good proof. The creation of the universe might itself prove to be a gap that we will eventually understand; and many physicists today claim to have done just that. They postulate that our universe is one of an infinite number of universes, each with different physical parameters. Ours quite logically is that one in which life is possible. Physicists in turn are divided on whether this is a reasonable hypothesis. Even if it is, it raises the further question, how did this multiverse ensemble come about in the first place? To take a very anthropocentric view of all this, it seems that God has worked prodigiously hard to bring us into existence. Notice that this idea resembles Darwin's theory of natural selection. It's not that the other universes died; rather they didn't bring forth life.

That's all I want to say about natural theology. Suppose we are chary of the idea that God created the universe in one colossal act of miraculous physics. Can we have an evolutionary theology? Evolutionary theology, unlike natural theology, does not search for definitive footprints of the divine in nature. Instead of trying to prove God's existence from nature, evolutionary theology seeks to show how our new awareness of cosmic and biological evolution can enhance and enrich traditional teachings about God and God's way of acting in the world. Here are some examples.

*Creation.* Evolution now allows us to understand that creation is not just an "original" but also an ongoing and constantly new reality. In an evolving cosmos, creation is still happening. The big bang universe continues to unfold, and so every day is still the "dawn of creation." You might say that life is really a *tendency* rather than something rounded off and complete. An unfinished, or evolving, universe is essential to this tendency's realization.

*Eschatology.* Biblical faith is concerned especially with what we humans may hope for, that is, with what awaits us as our final destiny and ultimate fulfillment. The scientific epic of evolution invites us to extend out human hope outward and forward to embrace the entire cosmos.

*Revelation.* Revelation is not fundamentally the communication of propositional information from a divine source of knowledge. Rather, it is at root the communication of God's *own selfhood* to the world; the infinite gives itself away to the finite. But the fullness of divine infinity cannot be received instantaneously by a finite cosmos. A finite world could "adapt" to an infinite source of love only by a process of gradual expansion and ongoing self-transcendence, the external manifestation of which might appear to science as cosmic and biological evolution.

*Grace.* The doctrine of grace claims that God loves the world and all of its various elements fully and unconditionally. By definition, however, love does not absorb, annihilate, or force itself upon the beloved. Instead it longs for the beloved to become more and more "other" or differentiated. In a word, grace must mean "letting the world be itself." The randomness and undirected features of evolution are in fact, essential features of any world created by a gracious God.

*Divine Power.* Evolution only occurs because God's power and action in relation to the world takes the form of persuasive love rather than coercive force. To compel, after all, would be contrary to the very nature of love.

*Redemption.* Finally, some very speculative thoughts on the subject of redemption. According to biblical tradition, God is infinitely responsive to the world as well as creative and nurturing of it. Following the pattern of love, God intimately "feels" the world. Whatsoever that occurs in evolution – all the suffering and tragedy as well as the emergence of new life and intense beauty – is "saved" by being taken eternally into God's own feeling of the world. Even though all events and achievements in evolution are temporal and perishable, they still abide permanently within the everlasting compassion of God. That we abide in darkness on something of such ultimate moment is itself consistent with the fact that we live in an unfinished, imperfect universe.