

Is There a Place for God in Evolution?

Introduction

When Mary invited me to do a presentation and listed some of the topics, I jumped at the opportunity to talk about Evolution. I thought that my starting point would not be about making the case for Evolution because I am assuming that everyone here is pro-evolution and that it has occurred over millions of years. I thought I would present the evolutionist vs creationist debate with the focus being on how to effectively argue the evidence for Evolution. I'm upset and probably to the point of anger that the Creationists are trying to take over the science departments in the public schools and are even being allowed a voice in some medical schools. It seems to me that they are trying to keep our children ignorant and making the US look like it relies on religion not science for technology and using taxpayer money for this purpose. Would I be less angry if I could understand the Creationists perspective? Is there some way to accept both creationism and evolution? Creationism could be the Santa Claus of Christmas: a fun story for children, while evolution is real. It was an intriguing idea to try to calm me down but it wasn't going to stop the creationists from attempting to ban the teaching of evolution in the schools or insist that creationism also be taught in the science class. As I researched my talk I decided that I would provide references at the end of my talk for you to do your own research on the evidence for evolution and that my talk today would take a moral and spiritual approach to evolution. I thought that this discussion might appeal to the religious naturalism of UUs.

My talk today is going to focus on a spiritual perspective for evolution. I am going to start with some polling results on opinions on evolution, present how evolution changed the world view and then explain why I think there is a place for God or some kind of force bigger than myself in evolution.

Background for This debate

For any of you that think science, common sense or divine intervention is going to eventually influence mainstream thinking on evolution, think again. Creationism is catching.

A gallop poll from 2008 collected data on the following three statements:

1st statement. Human beings have developed over millions of years from less advanced forms of life, but God guided the process - 36% (I believe this would include intelligent design.)

2nd statement. Human beings have developed over millions of years from less advanced forms of life, but God had no part in this process 14%

3rd statement. God created human beings pretty much in their present form at one time within the last 10,000 years or so. (44%)

These percentages have remained pretty constant since 1982.

Pew Forum Poll which did not specifically mention humans showed:

Life on Earth has....

Existed in its present form since the beginning of time 42%

Evolved over time 48%

 Evolution through natural selection 26%

 Evolution guided by a Supreme Being 18%

 Evolved but don't know how 4%

Don't know 10%

80% of Brits and French believe that humans evolved from earlier species of animals.

There is also a strong correlation of creationism with conservative religions and low education levels.

Agnostics and atheists are more likely to believe in evolution through natural selection without any kind of creator. I would have expected this finding.

95% of scientists agree that evolution is a true scientific explanation of how life emerged over time on this planet.

42 - 44 % for creationism and another 18% for evolution with a creator shows that it is very main stream and not on the fringe.

Evolution Changed the World View.

Charles Darwin did a huge favor for humans. He changed everything.

With Evolution Human beings become natural.

Before Darwin, people in the Western world thought species were created by God in the exact form in which we find them today. After Darwin, however, we know that all living things have evolved over hundreds of millions of years from single cell organisms that emerged in a kind of primal soup and learned to replicate themselves. After Darwin we know that we humans are connected stretching back across billions of years to countless diverse ancestors. Humans and giraffes both have 7 cervical vertebrae. You would think that if there was a divine creator that the creator would come up with a few more vertebrae for the giraffe. Darwinian evolution destroyed the idea that human beings are a special creation made in the image of the deity. We may be unique with consciousness and the ability to reason but it is because this uniqueness evolved, not because it was bestowed on us by a divine creator.

This changed our self-understanding. Before Darwin we humans thought of ourselves as a little lower than the angels and infused with an immortal soul. But if we are, as evolution tells us, entirely natural rather than part natural and part supernatural, then the ideas of immortality and divine creation in the image of God become problematic.

We are the most highly evolved animal that natural selection has produced (so far as we know). However, this does not mean we are not beings of inherent worth and dignity. We are of great worth precisely because we are highly evolved and because of what we have, our ability to love, to do justice, and to live ethically. In 1894, the Rev. John White Chadwick, a Unitarian minister, wrote that Darwin's theory of human origins seemed the wreck of our high faith in human nature: it has proved its grandest confirmation.

Thus the theory of evolution by natural selection has resulted in a radical naturalization both in our self-understanding and in our understanding of the world, and we now seek to understand ourselves in relationship to our evolutionary biological origins rather than in relationship to a supernatural being. Darwin's idea has greatly expanded our understanding of who we are and why we act as we do by giving birth to two important areas of research: evolutionary biology and evolutionary psychology. The former has added greatly to our knowledge of how we evolved and how our brains work, and the latter has increased our understanding of human behavior. The more we learn about ourselves through these disciplines, the more significant the implications of Darwin's idea of evolution become.

With Evolution God becomes natural

In the Western world before Darwin the belief in an omnipotent divine being seemed necessary. Many scientists and philosophers viewed God as the creator of the laws of nature, and the being who designed the world and its many complex inhabitants. By showing how the complexity of living things could arise from the process of natural selection, however, Darwin removed the need for a Designer or Creator. Does this mean that believers in God had to stop believing in God? No necessarily, it means that it is now more difficult to think of God as a personal supernatural being who is both all-powerful and all-knowing, as Western theology has long maintained, or as the being who brought all things into existence. Instead, many liberal theologians now conceive of God as a power within the natural universe rather than a source outside it. That God is not omnipotent. This fits rather well with Janet's belief in some unknowable life force.

This also fits with Ronn's talk about the simplest explanation is usually the correct one. Evolution which explains everything except the first single cell life form is much more plausible than a creator which created complex life forms.

In *Reinventing the Sacred*, scientist Stuart Kauffman suggests we rename God, not as the Generator of the universe, but as the creativity in the natural universe itself.□ He regards nature's creativity as worthy of awe, gratitude, and respect that it is God enough for many of us. God, a fully natural God, is the very creativity in the universe.

Within the young Unitarian movement in the United States were both proponents and opponents (notably, Louis Agassiz) of Darwin's theory. Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau accepted it. In 1874 Minot Savage, a Unitarian minister in New York City published a book of sermons that became a best seller under the title *The Religion of Evolution*. Noting that religion needs to adapt to the new discoveries of science if it is to remain a vital force, Savage pointed out that Christianity originally opposed other scientific advances that it now accepts and argued that evolution is just such a scientific breakthrough.

Darwinian thinking is one of the major reasons most UUs are naturalists as opposed to supernaturalists. Although few of us may be aware of it in those terms, most UUs, whether theistic or non-theistic, do not believe in the existence of a supernatural realm, and that is one of the things that make us unique among Western religions. Darwin had considered becoming a clergyman when he was young but ended up becoming an Agnostic because he could see no reason in believing there is a divine creator.

Without Darwin our religious movement would be different from what it is today. Darwin's theory changed our understanding of ourselves, calls us out of our little self-centered worlds to see ourselves as part of a great living system. As Darwin wrote at the end of *The Origin of Species*, "There is grandeur in this view of life."□

Answering the Question, “Is There a Place for God in Evolution?”

Janet Ashear stated last time that a need for or belief in some kind of ultimate authority exists in every culture and in the vast majority of individuals. I, like Janet believe that there is some unknowable sort of life force. I don't use this force to explain, justify, or do anything. I'm not going to give this force responsibility for the first single-cell life form. I think science will eventually figure it out.

The following is some paraphrasing I've done from a sermon given by Unitarian Universalist Minister, Claire Feingold. She uses the story and the thoughts of fundamentalist turned evolutionist Michael Dowd on the power of evolution and the force behind it.

Michael Dowd was a passionate fundamentalist Christian as a young man. He eventually accepted evolution but his heart wasn't in it until he heard the story of evolution told as a sacred epic. He was “born again” becoming converted into a view that evolution is the greatest story humankind can ever know. It is a story of vast time, space, and power; it is a story that glorifies God and makes meaning out of chaos. And ever since he has been evangelizing this story: the story of evolution. He then wrote the book: “Thank God for Evolution!”

Where does Dowd find God in the “great story” of evolution? *Everywhere.*

Yet Dowd's work is NOT an offshoot of “Intelligent Design.” In intelligent design theory, God is a separate entity from the universe, somehow on another plane of existence, masterminding everything from a distance. “Intelligent Design” is really just a retelling of the classical view of the world as a clock, and God as the clockmaker.

In evolutionary spirituality, or as Dowd calls it, “Creathism,” God IS the Universe. The Universe is like a set of Russian nesting dolls. Here's how he puts it:

Reality consists of nested forms of creativity and intelligence. That is, we have ... atoms within molecules, molecules within cells, cells within organisms, organisms within planets, planets within galaxies. And, at every level, there is an intelligence that the other levels don't have access to. ... [N]o matter how smart my kidney cells get, they're never going to fully comprehend the wisdom and intelligence of my body, because they're a part of it.

What does that have to do with God?

If this idea of nested intelligence is a fundamental truth that we can agree on, then what shall we name the ultimate reality, the only form of intelligence that's not a subset of some larger reality or creativity? Traditional names for that ultimate reality have been the Goddess, or God, or Allah, or, as the Greeks refer to it, Cosmos. We ... have different names and understandings of this ultimate reality because we're a subset of it.

How does science fit into that view?

If God is a sacred name for the whole of reality, then scientists are empirical theologians—that is, everything we learn about the nature of reality, we're learning something about the divine.[1]

How do we reconcile the Bible, and all of its magic and myth, with the Great Story of evolution?

We take what is inspiring, loving, and life-giving, and we discard what is not.

Dowd points out that if someone were to call a 2,000 year old medical treatise or legal document “new,” we'd all have a good laugh. Now consider the term “New Testament.” He says, “What keeps us from noticing how outdated it is to continue calling the early Christian scriptures the New Testament is the erroneous belief that God stopped revealing truth vital to human well-being and destiny when people thought the earth was flat, only a few thousand years old, and at the center of the Universe.” God is still speaking, and God's voice is all around us, revealed in the facts of science. God's language is love—reverence—curiosity—discovery—new ideas about God, science, and religion, a nested faith that every new scientific revelation enhances, rather than threatens. The Bible still contains relevant wisdom for today.

But we also have new ways of understanding truth. Our world is bigger than the writers of this ancient story could have dreamed of. You can't teach disbelief, only wonderful stories, and all around us, within us, before us and behind us, is the most wonderful story of all.

What Dowd, is saying is that Evolution is incredible. Just think about how complex, magnificent and fascinating it is. The author Richard Dawkins calls it The Greatest Show on Earth!!! So why wouldn't every religion want to claim it as part of their own story?

In Conclusion

It was difficult for me to talk about evolution without a discussion of God since so much of the discourse on Evolution vs. Creationism is about the role of God. With moral values framing a lot of our public discourse in schools and politics I felt compelled to make the case that evolution is both spiritual and moral.

I also have to respect the religious freedom of creationists. On the other hand I will not tolerate creationists that want to set school curriculum, influence research grants and affect other areas of government and my life.

I think it is important for all of us to be well informed about the facts of evolution as well as appreciate it as the greatest show on earth. As I said earlier I have included a set of references at the end of this talk.

□

The following passage is from the last paragraph of Darwin's "On the Origin of Species."

Thus, from the war of nature, from famine and death," the most exalted object which we are capable of conceiving, namely, the production of the higher animals, directly follows. There is grandeur in this view of life, with its several powers, having been originally breathed into a few forms or into 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.

I conclude my talk by asking you "Is There a Place for God in Evolution?"

A few quotes:

"In the long history of humankind (and animal kind, too) those who learned to collaborate and improvise most effectively have prevailed" ~ Darwin

Look deep into nature, and then you will understand everything better. ~Albert Einstein

References:

1. NCSE.com/creationism This site stands for National Center for Science Education; Defending the teaching of evolution in public schools.
2. Dawkins, Richard. The Greatest Show on Earth, The Evidence for Evolution. Free Press 2009.