DARWIN, EVOLUTION & FAITH

BIG HISTORY PROJECT

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Nothing in modern science is more challenging to religious believers than the theory of evolution. For more than 150 years people have fought over what evolution means for religion. The debate is just as heated today as ever.
Darwin and God

Why has Darwin’s science been such a troubling idea for religious believers? For Christians and Muslims, we can point to at least five reasons:

1. Darwinian biology tells a story of creation that is very different than religious creation stories;
2. Evolution and natural selection seem to make God unnecessary in creating the various species of life;
3. Darwin argued that humans descended from nonhuman forms. Traditional religious belief holds that humans are unique, and created “in the image and likeness of God”;
4. In evolution, chance and accidents are important. This raises questions about whether a creator truly cares for the world; and
5. The competitive “struggle for existence” in evolution doesn’t seem to fit with a Universe created by God.

What did Darwin think about God? After his sea voyage, he spent 20 years thinking about what impact his discoveries would have on religion. Darwin once believed that all living species were created by God. However, what he learned on his sea voyage caused him to doubt his Christian faith. The deaths of his father and 10-year-old daughter probably increased his doubts.

In his autobiography, Darwin wrote: “Disbelief crept over me at a very slow rate, but was at last complete. The rate was so slow that I felt no distress, and have never since doubted for a single second that my conclusion was correct.”

Still, Darwin never considered himself an atheist. He sometimes referred to a “Creator” who made the Universe and its general laws, but left living things to chance and natural selection. In any case, the religious world in Darwin’s time was not prepared for his ideas. Even now, some people are still recovering from the shock Darwin delivered to traditional beliefs. For others, an appreciation of his ideas deepens and widens their faith in God.
Three approaches

When Darwin’s On the Origin of Species first appeared, most people read the biblical creation account word for word. They thought the world was only around 6,000 years old and all living species had been created separately and permanently at the world’s beginning.

Can ancient religious accounts of the world’s creation by God fit with Darwin’s new story? Here are three ways to answer that question:

1. Conflict

This approach says that Darwin’s theories can never fit with belief in God. Both religious believers and skeptics can take this approach.

Among religious believers, there are “creationists” and supporters of “intelligent design.” Both groups have problems with evolution. Creationists consider their holy books to be the source of true science. They therefore reject Darwinian evolution as simply wrong.

Supporters of intelligent design don’t always read their holy book literally. But they consider the complexity of life too detailed to be the result of natural causes alone. They argue that only a supernatural force could be responsible for the “design” of life.

There are also people who believe strongly in evolution and use it to argue against the existence of God. These people reject both creationism and intelligent design. Conflict surrounds public debate on evolution, especially in the United States. However, there are other ways of looking at the issue.

2. Contrast

This approach claims that science and faith answer different questions. Here, there can be no real conflict between evolution and religion. The contrast approach argues that people should understand that holy books are not science. Similarly, Darwinian science has nothing to do with faith.

Pope Leo XIII told his followers not to look for scientific information in biblical texts. Galileo had given his fellow Catholics the same advice back in the seventeenth century. In this approach, Darwin’s theory of evolution should not compete the Bible’s origin stories. The creation stories in the Bible were not meant to teach science. Instead, they were meant to urge believers to be grateful for the richness of creation.

The Bible never meant to answer questions such as “Why is there anything at all rather than nothing?” and “Is there an eternal reason for trusting that life is worthwhile?”

For the most part, mainstream Christian churches have recognized that science and religion answer different questions and serve different needs. Still, some fundamentalist groups view the Bible as scientifically accurate. They think Darwin’s science cannot exist alongside biblical “science.”

According to the contrast position, reading the Bible as a source of scientific information misses the point of the ancient religious literature.
3. Convergence

This approach sees truth in both science and religion. Scientific and religious truths are both valid. In this model, science and faith enrich each other. After Darwin, people of faith must adjust their thinking about God. The same thing happened when Copernicus showed a Sun-centered Solar System.

Challenges such as evolution are important for keeping faith alive and healthy. Religion was able to adjust to a heliocentric Universe. It can now adjust to evolution. In this model, the theory of evolution and faith in God do not contradict each other. Many religious scholars and scientists have found ways to balance both beliefs.

In this view, there is no danger to thinking bold new thoughts about God after Darwin. After all, the idea of God has evolved over time and will continue to do so. For example, Anglican priest and religious scholar Charles Kingsley thanked Darwin. He said Darwin’s ideas of ingenious and creative evolution helped enlarge his understanding of the Creator.

Kingsley liked the idea of a God who created the Universe, but made it so that it could maintain itself through natural processes. He said this was more impressive than a God who controlled every little thing that happened.

Likewise, Catholic priest and renowned geologist and paleontologist Pierre Teilhard de Chardin said that his own faith makes more sense after Darwin. Teilhard argued that modern science demonstrated that the Universe is still being created. This process involves struggle, chance, failure and loss — as well as beauty and majesty.

Along with Kingsley, he believed God creates this Universe through natural processes. Teilhard suggested that the meaning of human life includes our contributions to the great work of ongoing creation.
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