

Science and Religion: Evolution

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I cannot think that the world... is the result of chance; and yet I cannot look at each separate thing as the result of Design... I am, and shall ever remain, in a hopeless muddle.
—Charles Darwin

Neither pure chance nor pure absence of chance can explain the world.
—Charles Hartshorne

Ancient Witness: 2 Corinthians 3:12-18

I remember when the “Jesus fish” emblem started to appear on the bumpers of cars. Early Christians adopted the fish symbol because the first letters of the phrase, “Jesus Christ, Son of God, Savior,” spelled the Greek word, “ICTHUS,” which means “fish.” So the fish identified the driver of the car as a Christian.

Then someone came up with the brilliant and funny idea of putting little legs on the fish, creating the “Darwin fish.” And so now you had some cars driving around with a Jesus fish and some driving around with a Darwin fish. Needless to say, some of the Christians took offense to this, and soon enough you started seeing emblems of a Jesus fish actually *eating* the Darwin fish!

And I remember saying back in the '90's that, theologically speaking, they should both co-exist on the same bumper in peace, and that in fact, it would be most appropriate if the Darwin fish and the Jesus fish would be *kissing*!

Years later I happened to notice that Roger Wolsey, a Methodist Minister, had the same idea, and he wrote a book, *Kissing Fish: Christianity for People who don't like Christianity*. And he has a good Facebook page by the same name that I recommend.

And so today, in part two of my series on science and religion, I want to focus on this conflict that has raged since the Scopes trial in the the 1920's between Christianity and evolution, and that amazingly even today still goes on. I want to talk about how these fish can get along. In a nation where there is a growing hostility to science and empirical truth, firing scientists who report facts that one political party doesn't like. We need a progressive Christianity more than ever!

And my point in this series is to *allow scientific understanding to change our model of God*. What I'd like us to do is to *think theologically in light of science*. Just as scientific thought evolves and changes—goes through paradigm shifts—so should religious thinking!

When Charles Darwin set forth on his epic voyage on the *Beagle*, he was convinced that the world was determined to follow a script set forth by God. The “doctrine of divine carpentry,” as

it has been called. Since scientists were expected to provide evidence for this theory, Darwin was in this respect a traitor. Charles Birch writes:

The author of the Origin of the Species had failed to perform what the public expected of its biologists. It was as if the Archbishop of Canterbury had announced his conversion to Buddhism. Darwin had discovered that nature was not made complete and perfect once and for all time. Nature was still in the process of being made.

You see, it had been assumed that the forms of all living life were fixed when they were created. The order of the nature was thought to be essentially static and unchanging. In the evolutionary view, all nature is dynamic and changing.

The modern synthesis of Darwin's theory of natural selection postulates gradual, small changes in nature induced by a changing environment. As those that are the fittest survive, their characteristics are passed along through successive generations. And the species adapts. Later, genes were acknowledged to have an active role in this change through damage or defective replication. More recently, the field of social biology has introduced another layer of cultural evolution where innovation is the agent of change instead of genetic mutation, selection occurs through social experience and transmission happens through memory. People such as Edward O. Wilson assert that traits such as altruism emerged in human societies because even though such altruistic actions might conflict with individual self-interest, it enhanced the genetic survival of the group. So not just nature and the homo sapiens but culture is changing and evolving.

Another way to talk about this is to say that since Darwin, *chance* or *randomness* has been introduced into the process of creation. And for a long time, the two extremes seemed to exist in an unresolvable conflict—evolution vs. creationism.

And so, it is true that the theory of evolution overthrew the doctrine of deterministic design. But does it follow that chance alone rules supreme? As modern biology demonstrates, chance is present through things like mutations and environmental change, but in history we also see a trend toward greater complexity. In other words, dice are thrown, but the dice are loaded. There seems to be *a direction* to the process that cannot be accounted for by natural selection alone.

And so there is another option. Instead of chance and design, randomness and law being in conflict, they are *complementary*: they work together. Here are three different theological responses to chance.

First: *God controls events that appear to be random.* To this, Ian Barbour said,

It is hard to imagine that every detail of evolutionary history is the product of deliberate intelligent design. There have been too many blind alleys and extinct species and too much waste, suffering and evil to attribute every event to God's specific will.

Second: *God designed a system of law and chance.* This means that God set things up to lead to life but that God does not interfere with the system. This leave us with an inactive God like that in deism.

Third: *God influences events without controlling them.* According to this option, *God's purposes and chance co-exist* in the ongoing process of creation. In this view, continuing creation is a trial and error experiment, always building on what is already there. The image which comes to mind is God as an artist, where there is a combination of intention and unpredictability. God is like a poet in whose work there is both plan and surprise, or like a composer of a still-unfinished symphony, experimenting, improving and expanding on a theme and variations. These images imply an active, continuing relationship with the world.

How is this possible? How does God influence events in the world without controlling them? As we explore this third option, I think that an important question to ask is whether non-human creatures experience purpose.

Now this is an important question because it can help us understand how God relates to the world. To have a purpose is to make choices. So we are asking if organisms besides humans choose. Do they have some degree of self-determination? Are they subjects and not just objects? Are they more than just matter?

Those of us who have pets consider them to be more than machines. They have awareness and consciousness like we do. They can suffer and they can have enjoyment. They have an urge to live. Charles Birch asks,

How far down the scale of nature can we suppose that living organisms are subjects that have some element of self-determination, that have internal relations and so in some sense have mind and feeling?

The conventional wisdom, he says, is that at some point in the evolutionary sequence from atoms to human beings, mind and feeling appeared for the first time. "Something that was an object only, without any aspect of mind, becomes a subject with mind." Birch argues that there is a kind of "mind" in *all* things. The poet, Robert Frost, saw this intuitively in "A Considerable Speck":

*A speck that would have been beneath my sight
On any but a paper sheet so white
Set off across what I had written there.
And I had idly poised my pen in air
To stop it with a period of ink
When something strange about it made me think,
This was no dust speck by my breathing blown,
But unmistakably a living mite
With inclinations it could call its own.
It paused as with suspicion of my pen,
And then came racing wildly on again
To where my manuscript was not yet dry;
Then paused again and either drank or smelt--
With loathing, for again it turned to fly.
Plainly with an intelligence I dealt.
It seemed too tiny to have room for feet,
Yet must have had a set of them complete*

*To express how much it didn't want to die.
It ran with terror and with cunning crept.
It faltered: I could see it hesitate;
Then in the middle of the open sheet
Cower down in desperation to accept
Whatever I accorded it of fate.
I have none of the tenderer-than-thou
Collectivistic regimenting love
With which the modern world is being swept.
But this poor microscopic item now!
Since it was nothing I knew evil of
I let it lie there till I hope it slept.*

*I have a mind myself and recognize
Mind when I meet with it in any guise
No one can know how glad I am to find
On any sheet the least display of mind.*

What Birch and poets are saying is that there is a *mind aspect* to all reality; there is a continuity. The mind aspect of the cell is different from the mind aspect of the human brain, but there is a continuity that has to do with the ability to take account of the environment internally. And so there is no line to be drawn between living organism or even molecules, atoms and elections; there is a form of feeling and freedom with all things. Sometimes the freedom is very great; sometimes it is barely there. Everything has an *inner aspect*, a subjective experience. And this means that evolution is a *directional process*.

There is an internal subjective aspect to all things, to all reality. And God is felt not by the external aspect, from the outside. But God's love and wisdom is felt by the internal aspect, from the inside.

So it is not just external objective forces that called forth molecules and cells, but this internal voice, as well. From the very beginning with the simplest of elements to now with complex human life.

This internal aspect of protons, molecules, cells and living things is like a mind. Wordsworth wrote:

*And never for each other shall we feel
As we may feel, till we have sympathy
With nature in her forms inanimate,
With objects such as have no power to hold
Articulate language. In all forms of things
There is a mind. ("Tintern Abbey")*

Next week we'll see how quantum physics leads us to view mind and matter as two aspects of the same phenomenon. That is, there is only one reality, and it is not substance. It is mind-matter.

And so when we talk about evolution, it is the evolution of mind *and* matter, of external and internal reality. Why is this significant? Because this is a way of thinking about how God influences events without controlling them, how God's purposes and chance co-exist. God works with and through the freedom of all things. And what we call freedom is always there to a great or lesser extent. God's influence is persuasive, not dictatorial. God speaks to the heart of all things, *transforming humankind and the world with love*, "from one degree of glory to another," wrote Paul.

As I have said, there is both chance and design. Charles Darwin wrote:

I cannot think that the world... is the result of chance; and yet I cannot look at each separate thing as the result of Design... I am, and shall ever remain, in a hopeless muddle.

About a century later, philosopher, Charles Hartshorne said, "Neither pure chance nor pure absence of chance can explain the world."

There is a direction to the evolutionary process. And to experience this direction, this pull, is to experience the mystical presence which is at the heart of all things and which unites all things. It is the experience of being in communion with all things, connected through the Divine. Ultimately, this is our hope. The process of creation continues, and it will continue long after humanity is gone.

As a species, we can consciously participate in this process. We can listen to the interior call of love, justice and wisdom amidst the chance occurrences in the flux of life. And to paraphrase Karl Rahner, "The people of the future will be mystics or they won't be at all."

(NOTE: The spoken sermon, available online, may differ slightly in phrasing and detail from this manuscript version.)