

Did Darwin Kill God?



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For many, Charles Darwin is an ogre. With his theory of evolution by natural selection, he apparently destroyed the credibility of God. Is that true?

Science seems to tell us that the world is an enormous machine kept going by energy from the Sun, and that we are nothing but animals struggling to survive. To this way of thinking, God is unnecessary, or if he exists, irrelevant. Success in life depends solely on oneself. Religion is wishful thinking.

Not surprisingly, men and women of all religions react against such an assessment. They argue that it results from a distorted and incomplete understanding of life, the universe, and everything—an understanding that itself depends on faith. Some insist that the evidence for evolution is dangerous guesswork. They claim there is no compelling evidence for humans having evolved from apes. They point to gaps in the fossil record. They dismiss as faulty logic the notion that order and complexity could evolve through time contrary to the second law of thermodynamics, which shows the world to be running down. They point to the sacred writings (Bible, Quran, Vedas, and so on), which all insist that we are distinct from animals in a way that enables us to recognize and respond to spiritual forces.

Unfortunately for such attempts at a total rejection of Darwinian science, the evidence for evolutionary change is now overwhelming. Radioactive dating has shown that the world is billions of years old; we know that extinctions have occurred on a vast scale from the earliest times; and molecular biology has made it possible to compare species genetically in a way previously impossible—showing, for instance, that we humans differ from chimpanzees in fewer than 2 percent of our genes.

A rather more sophisticated way of keeping God around is to use him as an explanation for events that science cannot explain. The problem with this is that such a “God of the gaps” notion gets ever smaller as we learn more and more about the natural world. It smacks of the medieval belief that the soul must live in the pineal gland, because until recent times no one had yet figured out what the pineal gland did.

Attempts to consign science to the rubbish heap so as to find room for God are unnecessary. Aristotle recognized that any happening is likely to have more than one cause. For example, a painting is caused by the distribution of chemicals on a canvas, but it is just as much “caused” by the painter who had a plan for his work of art. We can describe the painting either in chemical (i.e., scientific) terms or as an artistic design: two completely different but noncontradictory explanations for the same thing.

God’s work in creation and evolution can be described in exactly the same way. Reason tells me that evolution has taken place in the way Darwin described it, while my faith tells me that God governed the whole process. Indeed, the Bible suggests that the correct approach involves both God and science. In the New Testament we read that “through faith we understand that the world was framed by the word of God so that the things which are seen were made from those which are not seen.” It is just as much an act of faith to believe that God did not make the world as it is to believe that he did. Unbelievers use faith as much as believers, although in an opposite direction.

It is a historic fact that most thinking people accepted evolution within a generation of Darwin’s *Origin of Species* appearing. Some of the authors of the *Fundamentals* (1909–15), which were intended as definitive

statements of orthodox Christianity, were entirely happy with the idea that God had used evolution as his method of creation.

What about the well-known debate between Bishop Samuel Wilberforce and T. H. Huxley in 1860? This was not really over science and religion. On the bishop's side it was about the danger of regarding change for its own sake as some kind of God. Churchgoing at the time was declining as workers moved from agriculture to factory life; attitudes toward the Bible were in a state of flux as its authority came under attack from "higher critics." Huxley's motives were entirely different; they were about removing the idea that the church should pronounce on science.

Other complicated agenda lay behind the Scopes "monkey trial" in Dayton, Tennessee, in 1925. The issue there was the nature of human beings as divine creations, not the occurrence of evolution as such. Modern creationism did not start from Darwin or from the original fundamentalists, but rather from Seventh-day Adventist George McCready Price, who claimed that Noah's flood so disrupted the geological record that orthodox geologists have been utterly misled. His turn-of-the-century views have been widely repeated and elaborated, but lack all scientific credibility.

As for the situation today, we find creationists claiming that evolutionists have been brainwashed by materialism, while evolutionists believe that creationists are muddleheaded in not accepting scientific reality. The tragedy is that the efforts of creationists to retain God as Creator by denigrating science are both misplaced and unnecessary.

There are proper scientific debates about whether Darwin's suggested mechanism of natural selection is adequate for explaining all the features of evolution, and there are continuing questions about the roots

of human nature. But science and God, evolution and creation, are not alternatives. They are complements. The God of the Bible might well be a miracle worker on occasion, but normally he is to be seen at work through natural processes. It is God the Creator who gives meaning to the blind mechanisms of science.

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