

Theology of Evolution

A Message for All Faiths Unitarian Congregation

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I have a good friend and former co-worker in Massachusetts who is a Seventh Day Adventist. While at work we would often debate the story of creation as written in Genesis, the first book of the Bible, and evolution. I of course was promoting evolution. As a Seventh Day Adventist he believes in the biblical account of creation. That is, that God created the universe, the planet, everything on the planet and humans to care for the planet. That hasn't worked out, has it? We might call my friend a Creationist. I challenged him often. He once told me that he didn't believe in life before the time of Jesus. I think my head spun three hundred and sixty degrees. I was gobsmacked. I asked him to explain the Museum of Natural History in Manhattan which is the home to one of the, if not the, largest collection of dinosaur bones and fossils predating Jesus. He believes in the biblical account of creation and called it a matter of faith. "No matter what we believe", he said, "no matter which side we are on, we are exercising faith." It was a shaky argument for me.

Albert Einstein thought that the human capacity to ask questions is an important part of who we are and why we are here. He talked about a "holy curiosity," one that never stops asking questions but at the same time is filled with awe and wonder. "One cannot help but be in awe," Einstein said, "when [contemplating] the mysteries of eternity, of life, of the marvelous structure of reality." Contemplating the mysteries was something Einstein did every day. He was the foremost theoretical physicist of the 20th century. His theories were unprovable when he formed them but proved absolutely over the next 75 years. As his general theory of relativity opened the door to quantum physics, he gnashed his teeth at the impossibilities that his own ideas predicted were true. (Perhaps it was the maddening nature of reality that made his hair stand on end.)

Evolution is one aspect of the nature of reality, but it has stirred controversy since Darwin published "The Origin of the Species" in 1859. Evolution says that all species developed from less complex ancestors in a stop-and-start, trial-and-error way. The life-forms that survived are those that worked—that were able to survive in their environments long enough to reproduce. If Darwin's assertion is true, then the world should be filled with many different species (as it is); there should be many styles and features of living things that did not survive (as the fossil record shows). It is the evolution of truth and ideas that has been stunted.

The classic religious challenge to evolution has been the argument that humankind is made in the image of God. If that is so, the argument goes, humans were made as they are; as they are they reflect God; and because God is eternal and changeless humanity also cannot change. This is, they say, God's plan. But curiosity has its own reason for existing. Some people, like Einstein, find the mysteries thrilling. Others find it frightening to think that their touchstone understanding, "created in the image of God," might be susceptible to revision. For them, use of the phrase "random mutation" in the scientific literature seems like a contradiction of God's

plan. But theologians who fully embrace the awe and mystery of life long ago concluded that they do not have to choose between evolution and the belief in a Creator. Traditional theology sees in the miracle of life and the existence of humanity evidence of a divine hand, without the need to specify changelessness; the proponents of “intelligent design,” while uncomfortable with the idea of “random” mutation, say that they “do not doubt that evolution occurred.”

What is the issue for people who reject evolution completely? Not only is the style of moral reasoning one of relying on authority, the authority relied upon has taken up an inflexible belief that “God” created life as we see it exactly as we see it, sometime less than 10,000 years ago. All scientific evidence about the age of the earth (4.5 billion years) or the age of the universe (14 billion years) and the fossil evidence is explained away in the same way people explain the special effects in Star Wars: somebody created the Star Wars universe in a short time, not only so that it looks and seems real but also so that it looks and seems as if it had been there a long time. Why? To test our faith in the authoritative statement that the earth and its occupants were created just a short time ago. Circular? Yes. Worth engaging? Probably not.

We might, as good Unitarian Universalists instead, ask questions that can affect ourselves and our own relationship to creation. What makes sense to us, in our lives, with what we know about the world? What matters to us? How do we think life emerged on earth? Does it matter whether life was designed or randomly generated? Perhaps we should cut the creationists some slack.

The creationist concept of God is of an eternal power or being that has existed since the beginning of time, however time might be measured. This answer has never satisfied me, because I still want to know what was before the beginning. Energy, matter: Einstein explained that they are equivalents, simply taking a different form under different circumstances—the same way that water (hydrogen dioxide, H₂O) can be a liquid when we turn on the tap; a vapor when we heat the teakettle; or (on a really cold day) a solid.

So where did the energy come from, the energy that started everything that is? What was the origin of the original “stuff”? These are mystifying questions that science is not likely to answer in our lifetimes. They are also questions that religion does not answer very well. Einstein said, ““What I see in Nature is a magnificent structure that we can comprehend only very imperfectly, and that must fill a thinking person with a feeling of humility. This is a genuinely religious feeling that has nothing to do with mysticism.”

It may be a toss-up whether it’s more satisfying to think that the original stuff was energy, and something set it off, or to believe that God is the original stuff, and God set everything in motion. Einstein said, provocatively, “What really interests me is whether God had any choice in the creation of the world.” Process theology, which is a naturalistic take on the understanding of life, suggests that a creative force imbues all that is; we can call this creative force God if we like but there is no requirement that we do so. A creative force for growth, for order, for positive development: from an amoeba to the human mind, each living thing—and perhaps each grain of sand, each atom—everything has within it, or is a part of, that creativity.

This is rather a poetic way of looking at the evolution of life in our universe and on our planet. And for those who wish it to, it offers a sort of one-size-fits-all description of “God” without specifying appearance, gender, size, or hair style. I like the idea that something is in action in the universe, something positive, something creative, something that leans toward the order that is reflected in the periodic table and the spiral of a seashell. I like to think that the genetic material

that makes us human, only 3% different from the genetic material that makes a chimpanzee not human, has evolved in a “process” that spins out “creatively” from whatever stuff was lying around at the beginning of time. I’m not sure this “creative principle” is a correct answer, but one of the things I like about it is its open-endedness.

The idea of life as creative process doesn’t require us to believe or disbelieve in God—or science. It opens the door to questions about both, without supplying particular answers. Its very indeterminacy invites us to continue to think, to grow, to imagine, to create. It’s positive, not nihilistic, and the positive stance is based in reality: the reality that life exists. And here is where I find hope and illumination and joy. No theology, no religion, no science can explain it, but life is. Humanity is. To exist at all, we humans must be connected to all life, all matter, all energy, at a very deep level and in a very consistent way just as our seventh principle guides us.

So the weather, the Earth, the stars, the gorgeous wings of a butterfly, the green of the trees, and the blue sky are connected to me and to all of you. That pulse we feel at the center of our being beats also in the hearts of stars. Evolution unfolds the interconnectedness of all life. It’s not an either-or choice between religion and science, and it doesn’t begin to explain the origin of the species. When we consider the miracle of our presence, of our sentience, may we always be open to the unknown, the unanswered, the inexplicable. Rather than flee from mystery, may we embrace it; rather than grasp at pat explanations and claim to know the answers, may we live with awe and gratitude at the miracle of life.

May it be so.