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Darwin and Religion

Over the summer, I found myself doing a lot of reading about religious responses to Charles Darwin's work and to the evolution science that has come after it. Seeing "Inherit the Wind" last month -- on this very stage -- convinced me that it's about time I put my two cents into the discussion, here on Sunday morning with you. It's daunting to try to say something meaningful about Darwin and religion before this group, because I know that many of you have done extensive reading in this area and are no doubt far more expert than I. However, I see my role as raising questions and opening up discussion, rather than as trying to provide answers. And I lift up the subject in the hope that we can all continue to approach these issues with open minds -- learning and thinking as we go. I know that my own take on how evolution affects our world view is dynamic rather than static, changing as I learn more and think about the issues.

Having said that, it seems appropriate that I share with you the sources I consulted in preparing for this discussion. There are so many books and articles out there, that it seems important to lay out my references. And bear in mind, that my views will continue to "evolve" (if you will) as I continue to read and to learn. My first source is Dr. Francisco Ayala, whose most recent book is called "Darwin's Gift to Science and Religion." Dr. Ayala is professor of biological sciences at UC Irvine and he has made significant contributions in the field of evolutionary biology. He was a chief witness in the creationist trial in 1981, which resulted in overturning an Arkansas law that required the teaching of creation "science" in public schools.

My second source is Philip Kitcher, a professor of philosophy at Columbia University, and the author of numerous books on evolution and creationism. His most recent book is called: "Living with Darwin: Evolution, Design, and the Future of Faith." Both of my sources grapple seriously with the question of evolution and religion -- How do the discoveries of evolutionary science affect our comprehension of God, the world around us, and religion?

Both authors make the point that it is not so much the theory of evolution itself that presents the major conflict with some religions, as the theory of natural selection -- the part of Darwin's theory that explains how organisms change over time through variations that enable them to adapt to survive the challenges of their environments. Let's look first at three central principles of Darwinian theory that may come into conflict with religious beliefs -- for our purposes today, with Judeo-Christian beliefs. First is the principle that the earth is ancient -- something on the order of 4 billion years, and that it has been populated at different periods by many different organisms, most of which are now extinct. Many religious people and many religions are able to accept this principle, even though it conflicts with a literal reading of the Bible as a historical document. According to some readings of the Bible -- based on its genealogies and chronologies, the earth is roughly 6,000 years old. And the creation stories in Genesis tell us that all plants and animals, including humans, were created at the beginning and have lived continuously ever since. Nonetheless, most Jews and Christians are able to take a non-

literal reading of these creation stories and to accept what science tells us about the age of the earth.

The second Darwinian principle that may conflict with religious beliefs is the principle that there is just one tree of life, that all living things are linked by processes of “descent with modification,” and that all living things are thus derived from a common ancestor. Many, if not most, modern Jews and Christians are also able to accept this principle, although not perhaps without some pain. Opposition was at one time based on perceived “gaps” in branches of the evolutionary tree, but modern discoveries of transitional animals have done much to close these “gaps.” Recent examples include *archaeopteryx*, which manifests as an intermediate stage between reptiles and birds, and *Tiktaalik*, which shows an intermediate stage between fishes and four-limbed land animals.

The third Darwinian principle that may conflict with religion concerns the natural processes that give rise to the diversity of life on this planet. The principal agent of evolution, the chief cause of the process of modified descent, is natural selection. For any organism, there will be variations in the descendents produced in each generation, and some of these variants will offer the organisms a better chance of survival in their environments. And, over time, a trait that was once rare may become prevalent. This is the principle that causes the most problems for many religious believers, and it raises the whole question of “design.” How do we account for the “design” of a given organism? Does design occur through a natural process over centuries and millennia? Or does it reveal the hand of an “intelligent” causal agent? Does such a causal agent bestow on descendents traits, organs, and structures that were lacking in their ancestors? Many troubled religious people, especially Christians, would like some indication of planning, purpose, design, at work, a providential hand that reaches in and produces the really important changes.

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On this question of “design,” it’s useful to hark back to some of Darwin’s predecessors. Most influential was William Paley, an English clergyman, who in 1802 published his landmark work, “Natural Theology; or, Evidences of the Existence and Attributes of the Deity.” Paley was a brilliant observer of the natural world, who made remarkable discoveries about the attributes of a number of species. He made some remarkable discoveries about the intricacy of the human eye. And as he compared the eye to a telescope, he felt that the conclusion was inevitable that there must have been a “designer” to have created such a design. This complex mechanism, he argues, could not have come about by chance. The diversity, richness, and pervasiveness of the earth’s many complex designs, Paley argued, show that only an omnipotent creator could be the designer of such wonders. In his argument, Paley was on time-honored theological ground. Both Augustine, writing in the Fourth Century, and Aquinas, writing during the Middle Ages, argued that the wonder and beauty of the natural world demonstrate the existence of God. Closer to Darwin’s time, Voltaire accepted the argument from design and asserted that just as the existence of watch proves the existence of a watchmaker, the design and purpose evident in nature prove that the universe was created by a supreme intelligence.

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So in formulating his theories, Darwin was up against a long history of thought that saw proof of the existence of God in the natural world. When you think about it, it is not surprising that Darwin's theories have proved threatening to religious leaders and believers. One way of looking at the history of ideas is to see two modern revolutions that changed how we see the relationship of God, humans, and nature. And revolutions always produce counter-revolutions because they are profoundly threatening to the established order. The first such revolution followed from the discoveries of Copernicus and Galileo, which displaced the earth from its previously accepted location at the center of the universe, and moved it to a subordinate place as just one planet revolving around the sun. Similarly, the Darwinian revolution displaces humanity from its exalted place as the center of life on earth. According to Genesis, humans were created "in the image of God," with all other species created simply to serve humankind. These two revolutions ushered in the beginning of modern science – the workings of the universe were brought into scientific explanation through discovery of natural laws.

So, it's not so surprising that Darwinism is seen as a threat by many religious believers, and to me it seems important that we understand that. As we have seen, Darwinism certainly threatens a literal reading of the Bible. Many religions, including most mainstream religions, are able to retain their belief in the Bible as a foundational and normative document, without having to accept its historical accuracy.

But there's a more "fundamental" problem it seems to me when we get to the question of design and natural selection, and that's where I find my two authors, Ayala and Kitcher diverging. In the recent *Dover* decision in Pennsylvania, the Judge wrote that proponents of intelligent design falsely presuppose that evolutionary theory is antithetical to "belief in the existence of a supreme being and to religion in general." And Dr. Ayala proceeds from this statement to his argument that there is no contradiction between evolutionary theory and what he calls a "Divine Creator." I agree with him when he writes that scientific claims and religious beliefs don't contradict each other because they belong to different realms of knowledge. But I tend to part company with Dr. Ayala when he writes that it is possible to believe that "God" created the world while also accepting that the planets, mountains, plants, and animals came about through natural causes. Well, maybe -- but this certainly seems to conflict with what many, if not most, people think of when they think of "God."

Philip Kitcher argues that Darwinism is indeed subversive of what he calls "providentialist religion." Many Christians, not only those who believe in a literal reading of the Bible, believe that the universe was created by a supreme Being who has a grand design; a being who cares for the creatures of the world; who observes the fall of every sparrow; who is especially concerned with humans; and who intervenes in life on earth at various times and in various ways, perhaps in response to prayers, perhaps to create new forms in the design of organisms.

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The Darwinian view of the history of life on earth is very hard to reconcile with an all-powerful, just, and loving supreme being. Darwin gives us a story of "nature red in tooth and claw." Evolution proceeds by fits and starts. Many branches of the tree of life lead nowhere; there are many dead ends. When we look at this story over billions of years, it is hard to see the providential hand of an all-powerful supreme being. But not all religions are committed to this vision of a wise and benevolent ruler with an

unfathomable plan. Most religions, although not all, are, however, committed to the existence of supernatural beings and to the truth of particular stories about them. In many cases, belief in the literal truth of these claims is required. Taking his argument one step further, Kitcher argues that Darwinism, and enlightenment thinking generally, serve to refute all such systems that require belief in the literal truth of claims about supernatural beings. It seems to me that most of us would agree with Kitcher here. From what we have learned of the natural world in the century and half since Darwin, it seems extremely difficult, if not impossible, to continue to hold to claims about supernatural “Gods.”

So what are we left with then? Must we reject all religion if we reject providentialist and supernaturalist claims? What is it that brings us together as a Unitarian Universalist congregation? Are we strictly secular? Some would say yes; others would say no. Science, and especially evolutionary science, tells us much about the world around us. That’s its function. What it doesn’t tell us is the meaning and purpose of it all. Humans will continue to seek ways to bring meaning and purpose to their lives. We will seek to understand what it is that might transcend our daily lives. And these quests take us into realms where Darwin doesn’t help us. As Kitcher notes, “Darwin doesn’t provide much consolation at a funeral.”

When we gather together, here, we are empowered – we share, one with another, the fruits of our individual searching. Religion has been central to the lives of most people who have ever lived, because it promises benefits that we find nowhere else. In particular, people turn to religion for comfort when they are experiencing deep distress. We turn to religion when we need a place to weep, but we also gather to sing, to celebrate, to acknowledge common needs and aspirations, and to deal with a world we can’t control. There is, as Kitcher suggests, the genuine possibility of comfort without supernaturalist hope. If there is no “God” to wipe the tears from our eyes, there is consolation in our shared music, in the love and sympathy of others, in the support of a caring community.

Life in modern America is a highly competitive scramble for material goods, one in which many people don’t fare well. When the material rewards seem tawdry and unsatisfying, when consumerist culture seems arid and empty, religious communities provide places to explore possibilities, to grow and to be transformed. Religious communities offer the possibility of finding meaning and purpose in lives that feel empty.

And what about the capacity of religion to focus legitimate protest for the victims of injustice, for those who find themselves marginalized or stigmatized? At their best, religions champion the cause of the oppressed, and they speak out against killing and violence. Think of Dr. Martin Luther King, and the rootedness of the civil rights movement in the churches. Think of Mahatma Gandhi and his struggles for political freedom for his people, so rooted in his Hinduism. Think of the catholic priests – many of them silenced by the current Pope – who have spoken up on behalf of the poor and oppressed in Latin America. Dr. King’s work was rooted in his belief in God, but he also said: “The arc of the universe is long, but it bends toward justice.” This is the kind of assertion that is simply not addressed by Darwinism. It is a statement about belief, about hope, about justice. Evolutionary science does not address the bending of the arc of the universe toward justice, nor should it.

So – on the one hand, we could acknowledge how subversive Darwinism might be to people of certain kinds of faith. And perhaps we could feel some sympathy for their pain rather than simply telling them to stop believing. And, on the other hand, we can strive toward creating new religious forms that speak to people in a troubling and troubled world.

We can make sure that is the beginning of the conversation, not its end point. We can keep our minds open to new discoveries of science, to new ways of looking at the world. After all, if we are part of an evolutionary process, then we have to see that whatever we are today is bound to evolve over the years to come.

And, we can work to find ways to honor the gifts that reason, and science, bring to us, yet also find ways to take care of our most important human needs – for comfort, for caring, for community, for justice, for love.