

DARWIN and EVOLUTION

Charles Darwin has long been one of my heroes. Others were working on what came to be called evolution, but he had the courage to publish *The Origin of the Species* in 1859. Much of the *Origin* was based on his carefully recorded observations as Naturalist on the H.M.S. Beagle on a 5 year voyage beginning in 1831. *The Origin* challenged the evangelical belief that the earth was merely 6,000 years old, while the *The Descent of Man*, not published until 1871, raised the hypothesis that humans were descended from what were thought to be lower forms of primates. Neither book was actually intended to challenge religious beliefs or to deny the existence of God. In fact, Darwin waited because he did not want to be seen as a controversialist and only published *The Origin* when Naturalist Alfred Russel Wallace reached similar conclusions.

Darwin was the grandson of radical physician Erasmus Darwin and Unitarian Josiah Wedgewood, the potter, and was further influenced by radical evolutionary ideas at Cambridge where he had been sent to study for the ministry after failing in medical studies. The voyage on the Beagle allowed him to avoid further studies toward ministry, while also allowing him the opportunity to have his inquiring mind opened to the evolutionary process. Though a gentleman researcher of some family means and not a scientist in the modern sense, he was a keen observer who carefully documented his observations, eventually building a theory of descent among animals and humans, a term he preferred over the newly coined evolution.

Though nominally Anglican in respect for his churchgoing wife and cousin, Emma Wedgewood, he was not a churchgoer and eventually worked himself to religious agnosticism. He never quite embraced atheism, but he is honestly claimed for his mother's family's anti-Trinitarian Unitarianism. Darwin and his family were abolitionists, and his views of the racism allowing slavery are thought to have influenced his theories and writings. He later became very interested in sexual selection among animals and humans.

Like the discoveries of Galileo, Copernicus, and Newton, the theory of evolution revolutionized human thought and the understanding of the world and universe. Darwin's *Origin of Species* and *Descent of Man* opened the door for modern scientific investigations. The mechanisms and processes whose fruit he observed with the limited tools of his time are now well-documented. He was not able to see nor understand exactly how heritable traits were actually passed down or mutated through genetics, but he described the processes in ways that opened the door to many of the discoveries of the past century and a half. His groundbreaking and controversial writings would set the stage for many fields of modern science.

His theory of descent, and the patterns which were captured in the popular term evolution were controversial because they overturned the understanding that God had at least set the universe and each part in motion if not intervening to create and care for each individual being throughout their lives. Thus evolution came to be seen as opposed to God and the created order. Even as recently as last summer a Gallup poll discovered that only half of the population of the United States believes in evolution and more than 60% of those who believe in evolution believe God guided the process. 42% of those polled believe God created humans as is within the last 10,000 years. In the breakdown of the data, church attendance, education, and age significantly affect the percentages believing in evolution or creationism. It continues to astound me that so many people believe in creationism and a young earth in which dinosaurs and people shared the planet. Small wonder that states like Texas and Kansas want to teach creationism, or its most recent incarnation as Intelligent Design instead of or with Evolution.

The now well tested and frequently refined theories that help to comprise a scientific understanding of evolution are hardly comparable to the dogmatic theological position described by Creationism and Intelligent Design. Most mainstream, progressive, and liberal Christian churches do not teach Creationism other than in the broad belief that God created everything and evolution throughout history is generally accepted in those churches. Evangelical churches most often do teach Creationism or Intelligent Design as an important doctrine through which God's power has been exhibited and for which the Bible is the only textbook.

Evidence in the natural world for evolution is harmonized with evangelical beliefs through absurd theories such as human coexistence with Dinosaurs which nonetheless have been touted by prominent officials and even candidates for Presidential office. There even is a Creation Museum in Kentucky near Cincinnati which exhibits Dinosaur skeletons and explains how they were killed off by the worldwide flood 4500 years ago.

Though many of us progressives believe the culture wars over religion have largely been settled, a sizable proportion of the population is not satisfied, and readily sets aside modern science in favor of a literal English reading of the library of writings about faith comprising the Christian Bible. Even the progressive development of evolutionary science is used by some to suggest that because there are aspects of Darwin's work that have been proven wrong, that it is not a true theory of how things change over time. I suppose the unchanging certainty of a Biblical doctrine when taken literally could seem more true than the ongoing process of refining evolutionary theory, but only when you assume so many things about the truth of scripture that you must ignore science and your own perceptions of the world.

I for one, would rather have the best possible description of the universe and its inhabitants, even if it is constantly changing and becoming more complete with continuing scientific explorations. I expect that there are many Unitarian Universalists who do believe that a divine hand assisted in the evolution of the world and its inhabitants including us. I would have joined in that assessment for most of my early years. There are others who have adopted a more deistic approach, affirming that God set things in motion but has not further intervened in creation. Though I no longer believe in an intervening deity, I am neither convinced of God's existence or the lack thereof at this point in my life. I would like to believe in a benevolent deity and some kind of heaven that follows this life, but my own explorations and my understanding of evolving science no longer make either seem likely.

Scientific discoveries and hypotheses about genetics, DNA, Bio-Chemistry, Physics, dark matter, the God Particle and various other matters tend to enhance my beliefs in the connections between all things, the great web of life, and the laws and force or forces connecting everything.

These are not harmed by an evolving science of everything and anything. One need not believe in any God to understand the connections through genes, DNA, and forces that hold all things in relationship. Darwin did not have the tools to observe genes or DNA nor to otherwise test his theories in an empirical manner. Even so he set off a revolution in scientific thought. Modern science owes Darwin a great debt of gratitude for opening the door to better understandings of how the world works.

In any discussion of the impact of Darwin, one must also consider the social upheaval of evolutionary thought. If animals and their most obvious characteristics are subject to change over time, it is not hard to analogize about the changes in nations, societies, and families through the ages. Change happens within organisms and change happens within societies. Living beings evolve and institutions evolve.

Darwin did not intend to do any harm to the church, and some might say that he actually opened the doors to air out stuffy and inadequate theologies which long had held an understanding of the universe, religion, and God that was too small to carry Christianity into the future. Perhaps in part because of those churches that still deny evolution, the fastest growing group in religious surveys is the unchurched, unbelievers. Personally, I think that that group is our best target audience, particularly the millions of cultural creatives who are looking for communities with values and principles that do things that make a difference. More on that in a future sermon!

For today, I want to continue to consider the revolutionary impact of Darwin's treatises. His style is at times awkward and rambling, his arguments somewhat less than tightly phrased, his appeal to the modern reader somewhat limited, but the breadth and depth of his observations and the massive weight of the material compiled make it hard for any serious reader to ignore the sense of many of his theories and hypotheses. The work is monumental in scope, with *the Descent of Man* an expansion and completion of the work begun in *the Origin of the Species*. Even so, Darwin remains perhaps the most vilified man, especially among evangelicals, in the western world for the controversy he set off. He also is hailed by those more progressive and scientific for his groundbreaking work.

Like Galileo before him in moving man and earth out of the center of the solar system, Darwin rearranged the known universe and relegated God to at the very least, a less active role in the ongoing unfolding of creation. Evangelicals, especially those who would become Fundamentalists, most of whom never read his work, chose to attack the man rather than consider the implications of the work. Modern Fundamentalists continue to attack Darwin, evolution, and humanism as the greatest threats to their understanding of God and the universe. Many religious observers find this mindless focus on enemies of God to be among the most significant reasons for the increasing numbers of unchurched among younger generations. That so many religious leaders and followers are so far out of step with the obvious development, evolution of the world is truly amazing. And of course, for more progressive Christians, UUs and others, evolution has simply been accepted for its ability to explain the changes among the species.

Evolution, change, is for many of us the most constant thing in our world. Over time, all things change. Animals, plants, people, the earth, and all our institutions and societies change and evolve. The reassuring constancy of an unchanging God in an unchanging world, long affirmed by writers of old, was never really more than an attempt to hold onto something in an ever-changing world. Affirming those changes offers its own kind of reassurance that things will get better or worse but not long remain the same.

Unitarian Universalism is perhaps the most quickly changing religion, though where it is currently headed remains a large question. As a movement we embrace evolution, change, which we also frequently observe and comment upon in society. Few of us would speak against evolution, other than to clarify where Darwinian evolution hit the boundaries of scientific observation in the 19th century. Most of us would certainly agree to the value of Darwin's work and to the ways the general idea of evolution is applied to all manner of things in society. Few if any of us would join Fundamentalists in choosing Creationism over evolutionary science, nor would we attempt to hold onto notions of society that are past their time.

In Unitarian Universalism we comprise an evolutionary religion, one that continues to change to reflect and respond to what we hope are the best trends in society. Our namesake traditions gave us the belief in at most one God and the expectation that all would be saved if any are saved. Though more theistic currently than during much of the 20th Century, Unitarian Universalism continues to embrace humanists, atheists, and agnostics, as well as Christians, Buddhists, Jews and Pagans. We have evolved from our Christian roots into a small world religion and we continue to evolve to best meet the needs of the 21st Century.

Our British Unitarian ancestor, Charles Darwin, has helped to shape the discourse about how life and society works for more than a century and a half. As we honor him today, we continue to explore the many ways that evolutionary thought helps us along our journeys as individuals and as a movement. I invite and challenge you to go out there and evolve!

Peace, out! Amen and Blessed Be!