

DARWIN & EVOLUTION

Science had not developed its empirical procedures by the time that Charles Darwin found himself to be one of the earliest systematic biological researchers. He had set off to study medicine and then for the Ministry but found himself ill-suited to either pursuit. He then had a chance to accompany a 5 year expedition of discovery as Naturalist on the H.M.S. Beagle beginning in 1831 which led him through his research to posit the theory which later was labeled evolution. Prompted to publish his work by the knowledge that others would be publishing their own similar though less well-documented work, he created a firestorm of controversy when his Origin of the Species was released in 1859. Darwin had not wanted to raise controversy nor to challenge common religious beliefs, merely to explain his extensive observations as well as possible.

Darwin was not a church-goer as an adult, was nominally Anglican for his churchgoing wife and cousin, Emma Wedgwood, but was raised and more nearly aligned with the Unitarian Wedgewoods. He was a gentleman researcher as were many of the scientists of his age, but a keen observer with an inquiring mind who carefully documented his findings. His theory of descent among animals and humans set the stage for evolutionary research from his time to the present.

As I was growing up in a more scientifically oriented family, it seemed only obvious that evolution had shaped not only my family tree, but the entire tree of living beings. My liberal Methodist church did not really have much problem with evolution, so long as God was included in the process at least as a driving force. Though it took some work to balance scientific and religious views of evolution, I always was able to make sense of what I believed even within a religious context. It is strange now, as it was earlier to then find that:

According to a 2014 Gallup poll, 42 percent of Americans continue to believe that God created humans in their present form 10,000 years ago, a view that has changed little over the past three decades. Half of Americans believe humans evolved, with the majority of these saying God guided the evolutionary process. However, the percentage who say God was not involved is rising.

I don't know how much those numbers correlate with the percentage who believe the Sun revolves around the earth, or that the earth is flat, but in this modern era, it is actually a bit frightening to realize that so many people who live in our own country do not really believe the science of the last 150 years. I have even heard stories of some scientists who are so able to compartmentalize work and beliefs that they are deniers of evolution.

Of course, there are a number of religious groups who demand that their adherents oppose evolution along with abortion, civil rights for GLBTQ persons, and in some cases even the rights of women. Though I remain firmly in the camp of evolutionary believers, I am glad to live in times when at least a thin majority is rational. I can hardly imagine what it was like to live in an era when all believed the earth was flat, the stars and planets all revolved around the earth and only the strongest survived. Of course, I continue to be amazed at the proportion of people, especially in Congress who deny climate change.

What would our world be like today, had Darwin and others not discovered and documented evolutionary processes? What will our nation be like if one of the Creationist Presidential contenders actually wins? Will they come for our scientific books the way they said President Obama would come for their guns? Even in our modern era, some states have already tried to remove the teaching of evolution from textbooks and classrooms in favor of the new Creationism, Intelligent Design. I just don't understand how people can hold onto some of those views in light of the evidence of science and of the eyes of anyone who looks carefully at plants and animals!

Evolution may proceed a little bit differently than Darwin thought, but he couldn't see the DNA strands and the genes that govern the process. He understood the overall process and because of that, more recent scientists were able to discover the minute details and more recently to map the DNA of a wide variety of plant and animal species. Today, cures to various inherited diseases and genetic abnormalities are being understood and approached with new insight. Even cancers, are likely to have cures or treatments within years or decades. The revolutionary evolutionary ideas that Darwin first published are still making the world a better place and affecting millions of lives every year.

I might have mentioned before that Charles Darwin is one of my heroes! He is often pictured as an armchair gentleman, but what a life he had. Imagine those 5 years of discoveries in travels on the Beagle, followed by more than 2 decades making sense of what he saw, drew, preserved and described. What a mind he had! What an interesting character and a fascinating life! Imagine his concern about contradicting the religious opinions of his era! Even today, science is seen as heretical by many fundamentally literalistic Christians. Imagine what may happen in our time if a fundamentalist is elected President to join the fundamentalists in Congress. Maybe the winters aren't looking all that bad to the north, especially with some effects of Global Climate Change! Parts of Canada are absolutely beautiful! And everyone gets health care!

Darwin's discoveries and careful process helped to shape the sciences, but the idea of evolution has also been applied to the course of society over time to help understand the changes and developments of various kinds of social innovations and discoveries. In engineering and industrial processes, evolution has been used to explain the process by which new ideas build on older ideas to shape more effective and safer machines. Evolution has been the fundamental paradigm of development since Darwin's time and it remains so in our day at least for science and engineering. There is some evidence that politics and government are no longer evolving, are perhaps devolving or at best revolving, and that is a sad case of affairs!

Whenever I talk about Darwin, I want to explore the societal ramifications of evolution, even though such matters were not ones he addressed. He stuck to the evidence as best he understood it, firmly basing his theory on what he observed, chronicled in detail in his books. Science has built on his theory, adding in the details he couldn't see with the technology of his day, modifying the processes to better match more detailed analysis, but continuing to discover how much his theory was able to explain.

Society has not always evidenced the same forward progress, though some unsuccessful modes of life have nearly disappeared and larger cities have become safer because of the evolutionary development of infrastructure especially in water and sewage treatment systems, food and shopping centers, electrical grids, and natural gas piping, and in the use of steel girders to construct ever taller buildings. The delivery of health and medical services and the insurance to pay for such have not continued to progress to become accessible to all persons, and the egalitarian values of foundation documents of our nation have not yet been fully implemented.

There are certain arguments that could be made for the survival of the richest 1% of society, but that is not necessarily a significant advance over the monarchy period. And while socialist and communist systems have largely collapsed, democracy is certainly faltering. Capitalism has won out for now, but it exacts a high cost on all but the top 1% and could also be criticized for its tendency to become the newest form of feudalism. Is this really different from what history has shown time and time again? Societies rise and fall, often due to the amount of corruption and the tendency for wealth and power to fall into fewer and fewer hands. This may not be evolution!

How might evolution yet offer something new for the future? Is there anything new possible under the sun? Would Darwin's discoveries have been possible had there not been somewhat more room for seeing in new ways that enlightenment philosophy allowed?

When religions control societies, they have tended to be more often conservative and not open to new ideas, especially ideas that might conflict in any way with religious dogma. The innovations of the enlightenment period reshaped societies and opened the door for new ways of seeing to match new ways of thinking. The fundamentalists in many religions want to close the door on innovation, especially when it challenges their belief in an unchanging God. Deeply held within our Unitarian Universalist tradition is the belief that revelation is not sealed, that new discoveries in every part of life, including religion are apt to happen at any time and that such are good and healthy! More than any other religion, we have and hopefully will continue to embrace evolution as a good thing, as something to be welcomed.

Michael Servetus was burned at the stake for challenging Catholic and Reformed doctrine. Unitarian leader Francis David died in a dungeon in Transylvania in 1579 rather than accept a Unitarianism confined to what it had been before, without the possibility of innovation. Unitarians eventually embraced Emerson's Transcendentalism in the 19th century after significant struggle. In the 20th Century, it was Humanism that reshaped Unitarianism and Universalism. I'm not sure I like the ways that Unitarian Universalism is evolving in the current era, but changing it most certainly is!

Would things have evolved without Darwin? Most certainly, but he helped to explain the process in ways that inspired generations of scientists to explore and discover how it worked. Whether governments or religions evolve along similar paths is still up for debate, but Darwin's careful observations and notations helped to shape all of science. His willingness to think differently about how things worked reshaped the world, even if somewhat at the expense of religion.

I'm glad that we can claim Darwin as a Unitarian. He truly was a world changer! What a different world we would live in had he not made his discoveries and published his findings. What a different world we will live in if political and religious leaders can close the door on discoveries.

We need the spirit of Darwin today to face those who believe that dinosaurs lived at the same time as people just 6-10 thousand years ago when the earth was created, or that dinosaur bones were hidden by God in the strata as a test of our belief in the unchanging nature of God and the Universe, or that humans have never gone to the moon. Depending on who wins the coming elections, this may be far more than an academic or intellectual exercise. Life as we know it may depend on what we believe and what we stand for in coming months. In his day, Darwin hesitated long before publishing what he knew was true, but today ignorance is again running rampant, fueled by religious leaders who selectively read their scriptures to prove their own prejudices.

Today, Unitarian Universalism stands, a bit unsteadily at times, to affirm the rights and inherent worth of all persons: male or female, gay, straight, bi, trans, or non-conforming, white black, red, yellow, tan, or green, large or small, able or physically or mentally challenged. We affirm the value of both science and religion, the wisdom within virtually all religions, the importance of equal treatment, democratic processes, and the need to protect our world even as we explore the universe. We also call for housing and shelter for all in need, affordable health care for all, and education for all. We stand for a world even better than what we see, and we challenge humanity to evolve to meet the needs of all!

So endeth the preaching of the day! Thanks be to Darwin!

Shalom, Salaam, Blessed Be, Namaste, and Amen!