

DARWIN and EVOLUTION

The Theory of Evolution has been under siege from Fundamentalist Christians almost from the moment it was first described early in the latter half of the 19th Century, but science generally and especially climate science is currently under renewed attack by Evangelical and Fundamentalist Christians who support the dominionist or millennialist or some other views of the world, also currently embraced by many corporations & Republican representatives for perhaps less than purely religious reasons. In those views, sometimes also described as the young earth belief, creationism or more recently intelligent design, the world and universe are less than 10,000 years old, created in a piece by God as described in one of the Creation Stories in the Judeo-Christian Bible. Now, for those of us more comfortable with evolutionary theory and evolutionary science, or science generally, this raises all kinds of problems. At the core of this dispute, there is a clash of worldviews that has plagued the western world for over a century.

There were Biblical Literalists before Fundamentalism arose near the turn of the 20th Century, but it can and has been argued that modern Fundamentalism arose as a reaction to evolutionary theory, liberalism and the modern worldview. Christian Fundamentalism took its name from a series of tracts called “The Fundamentals: A Testimony to the Truth” published between 1910-1915. Fundamentalism calls for certain fundamental beliefs including a literal interpretation of the Bible, usually utilizing the King James Version, which was translated from only a small number of manuscripts and completed in 1611. Some Evangelical Christian Biblical literalists do recognize that Biblical Scholarship has discovered many disagreements between the KJV and the wide array of ancient Hebrew and Greek manuscripts more recently discovered, but most Fundamentalists gloss over that in favor of the beautiful language of the 1611 KJV. I will save my sermon about Fundamentalism and Biblical Literalism for another day, but I wanted to remind us that evolution has been a controversial theory ever since it was put forth!

Darwin himself grew to be essentially agnostic, believing it possible that a Divine Being could still have created the laws and set it all in motion. Though nominally Anglican in respect for his wife and cousin Emma, Darwin, born on February 12, 1809, had connections to Unitarianism especially from his mother's family, so our movement has long claimed him to be one of our own even if science interested him far more than religion. Darwin hardly set out to challenge religion, he merely followed the logical extension of his observations beginning with his voyage as Naturalist on the H.M.S. Beagle from 1831-36. Darwin had begun studies for the ministry at Cambridge after failing in studies for medicine. He was born to wealth, his father a wealthy physician and his mother the daughter of Josiah Wedgwood, the potter.

Darwin became a controversial figure because he asked questions, observed carefully, and put forth a cogent theory of how change happens in the biological world. We know so much more now about the mechanisms by which biological evolution occurs, through changes in strands of DNA, than Darwin could ever have discovered with the science of his time. Yet Darwin stands out as a singularly important figure because he dared to challenge the beliefs of his day. Other gentleman scientists were discovering the same things that he discovered, but he dared to present his findings to the public. Even today Darwin remains notorious to some religious groups for daring to challenge the notion that God had personally made every change and created everything visible throughout the universe. And yet Darwin never saw himself as an atheist, nor through much of his life as even agnostic. He always allowed for the possibility of at least a deistic kind of God who had set all in motion according to some magnificent set of universal laws.

Knowing that his findings would be controversial, Darwin did not rush to publish his work. He probably would have hesitated even longer were not others preparing to put their evolutionary ideas into print. He separated out his work on the evolution of humans, giving only a few hints about it in *The Origin of Species*, published in 1859. He waited another dozen years before publishing his observations on sexual selection and the evolution of humans in the two volumes of *The Descent of Man*, first published in 1871.

Though it is hard to deny the impact of modern science and the influence of Darwin in shaping empirical scientific studies, even today, a significant percentage of those polled in this country deny believing in evolution. Surprisingly, the battle continues between the newest versions of creationism, now called Intelligent Design, and evolutionary science. In Texas and Kansas, Intelligent Design has been taught as an alternative to evolution. The President who before getting his current gig had shown little interest in religion and most of the Republicans in Congress are anti-evolution, and anti-science. They do still enjoy the modern-life benefits that science has brought to our consumer society, but they deny the warnings of climate science and the impact of air pollution and toxic reactions to the discharge of waste into water and soil. They approve of science when it is to their short-term political and economic benefit, but not when it might impact either adversely.

Of course, it is not quite that simple, many who discount the warnings of climate science and deny the reality of evolution have embraced a worldview in which a benevolent God created everything for human benefit and will take care of any problems that arise, as well as rewarding those who are successful in business and politics. Even many of those of us who may believe in some kind of transcendent deity but embrace the idea that humans have been given agency to solve their own problems have difficulty accepting that creationist worldview. Nonetheless, there are many reasons why people would embrace such a worldview. For those of us who have looked out at the abyss from whence there may be no God to save us individually or as humanity or as the entire web of life, the absence of those loving or judging hands can be a very scary image indeed. What if this life is all that we have and there is nothing beyond? To have stood at the edge of the abyss and fallen back into the comforting embrace of a religious community that preaches that Daddy God will take care of everything can be a very tempting thing. It may be a challenge to believe that humans and dinosaurs shared the planet a few thousand years ago, but compared with the ontological angst of facing nothingness, compartmentalization works even for many scientific and technical people. And there are of course many Christians who believe in evolution and the Big Bang but have found allegorical, metaphorical, and other non-literal ways of understanding scripture and religion while still accepting a scientific understanding of the universe.

Evolution need not be seen as denying core religious beliefs, in fact the Catholic Church over the centuries has come to accept much of the modern scientific worldview even if a number of early scientists were tormented and killed in the name of religion. Catholicism and most of the mainstream Protestant Churches do not broadly embrace Biblical Literalism or Fundamentalism, though each seems to include a faction that does. The scholars within each of those traditions know the choices and errors that were made in creating the current Bible. The mystics in each tradition see far beyond the narrow-minded devotion to any set of words that puts barriers around a selection of beliefs. The spirit of Christianity at its core teaches a message in harmony with other religions as well as the discoveries of science. It is the radical literalists in each tradition that have selected beliefs which come into conflict with each other as well as with the scientific worldview.

Evolution happens in ways that can and have been empirically tested. Though Darwin got several things wrong in his descriptions, he got far more correct and would certainly have done even better if he were able to view life with modern microscopic tools and other tools now readily available. Evolutionary theory became the primary tool for understanding differences and change in species and throughout the animal and plant worlds. Evolution also came to be applied conceptually to social interactions, institutions, and behavior. Evolutionary theory in time became the framework upon which much of the modern scientific worldview was stretched. Liberalism, with its hope of unlimited forward progress within society may have overlooked the significance of a number of counter tendencies and the power of evolutionary theory to predict outcomes in the social realm is surely hampered by the ever increasing number of variables at play in an increasingly complex society.

There is one sense in which evolution surely did provide an alternative to the belief that God controlled and initiated every incident in the universe. Evolution offered a way to see the universe that let God off the hook at least for the minutiae. A deistic understanding already allowed that God set things in motion, presumably to follow a set of laws or patterns, but that God did not intervene in the ordinary happenings of life. Evolution took it a step further in offering a means by which many changes occurred, which could be viewed as uncovering the deistic laws or patterns that had been set in motion.

If Deism allowed God to take one step back from the universe, Evolution offered God the opportunity to take another. Alternatively it could be seen that, through Evolution, humanity claimed the agency to understand the development and progress of matter and life forms in the universe, arguably taking God out of the equation. If the latter is more the case, then the Big Bang Theory may have been perhaps the final step in removing God from the creation of the universe. Of course, philosophically, the time before the Big Bang and after the expansion and possible contraction of the universe have yet to be explained, leaving some space for some kind of God. And then there is string theory with its multiple universes, but I'm not even going to try to preach about that!

Tomorrow would be Charles Darwin's 209th birthday. Had he not been born and not have published the *Origin of Species* and the *Descent of Man*, we would be talking about other observers who had put forth their evolutionary understandings perhaps nearer their birthdays. Darwin was a brilliant and courageous innovator, but evolution was there for any careful observer to see and the science would surely have come forth within a few years. Darwin was also not the source of the term Evolution which later came to be used to describe the processes that he described as Natural Selection. None of this ought to take away from his accomplishment in observing and describing the processes of Natural Selection and daring to overturn the beliefs of his day. Much as Fundamentalists may still revile him, Darwin was not the only one observing Evolution, and the science that evolved would not have been slowed long had he hesitated further to publish his findings. The modern scientific worldview owes much to Darwin and other early observers of evolution, but it does not rely on just one scholar, it is a consensus view of millions of scientists and other observers.

It is that modern scientific worldview which remains in conflict with the creationist worldview of evangelical fundamentalists. There are many worldviews in between, but it is that hardline fundamentalist view which has been embraced by the religious right and alt-right that has allowed the current backlash response to triumph against apathetic liberalism. Though I am discouraged and disheartened by the excesses of the current administration, I do believe that previously apathetic voters will rise up to return democracy.

Trump and his cronies, in collaboration with rightwing Republicans may have won the battle, but the war for modernity continues. We may not offer the certainty of belief in an unseen deity promising relief in heaven, but we do offer acceptance for all the diversity that has come to mark our society.

Unitarian Universalism continues to evolve from the twin roots of our tradition in the humanistic elaboration of enlightenment ideas. We embrace science and education and mental and physical health. We offer our appreciation today of the writings of Charles Darwin and the courage he had to publish them, not as a slap to religion but as a push forward for humanity!

May we face our uncertain future with the courage and tenacity of Darwin!

So May it Be! Shalom, Salaam, Blessed Be, Namaste, and Amen!