

The God of Evolution

Dr. Brian Edgar

*Professor of Theological Studies
Asbury Theological Seminary*

It is somewhat paradoxical that, contrary to popular exposition, the early supporters of Darwin's evolutionary theory were closely in touch with orthodox theology. More so, according to contemporary historians of science such as Colin Russell and John Moore, than their more liberal counterparts who tended to reject or reinterpret Darwin.

Those with a Deistic tendency (those for whom God was a somewhat remote and impersonal being) found it hard to accept the implication that evolutionary theory was a means by which God was intimately involved in the world. On the other hand, there were at least four factors which made orthodoxy and Darwinism compatible, and they still have relevance today.

Firstly, it seemed that Darwinism fitted with a Christian teleology — that is, the belief that events in the world occur in accord with an over-arching purpose. The biological and behavioural processes associated with the selection of the fittest and the emergence of new species seems to describe a purposeful dimension to the natural world. This is something of an assumption, and it is not an actual proof of anything, yet for those with the eye of faith it appears to attribute to the natural world a direction which is consistent with a divine calling.

Secondly, it seemed to some that a Darwinian understanding of the selection of the fittest could explain competition and loss of life in the animal world in terms of altruism and even sacrifice done on behalf of life as a whole. And thus it could be seen as a form of a theodicy, that is, an explanation of the apparent evil of the world – and thus it could be consistent with Christian thought.

Thirdly, it allowed for a belief in divine providence in that it made sense to see God as the one guiding the process. Evolutionary theory was not perceived as the result of random processes, but as a process occurring with evident purpose. And this was connected, finally, with the very orthodox view that God is both transcendent (over and beyond creation) and immanent (within and interacting with the world).

Yet, despite this, it is more common for people to be aware of the problems that were raised with Darwinism than with the parallels and, after a while the problems seemed to grow in people's minds and become more significant.

It seemed to some, theologically speaking, that evolutionary theory had become a competitor to God, an alternative explanation for the origin of new species and a challenge to divine

providence. And then, scripturally, it seemed to conflict with traditional interpretations of Genesis.

Nor was the situation helped by the later development of "social Darwinism" where the biological theory was extrapolated into the social sphere where it was argued, for example, that capitalism (or communism if you prefer) or one racial grouping (usually 'mine') was more highly evolved than the alternatives. This was not helpful.

As a result there are three, closely related, dimensions of the debate which need to be clarified. One is theological, one biblical and one historical.

Theologically speaking it is often, incorrectly, assumed that there is a choice between direct creation, which necessarily excludes any form of evolution; and some form of evolution which necessarily excludes any form of divine involvement. There is no doubt that extremists on both sides have argued that one must choose between these alternatives. But the forced alternative is based on a confusion about causes. It is possible to describe an event as being caused by God and at the same time see that same event as being caused by various physical means. The formal distinction is between the *efficient cause* which is God and the *material cause* which is the event seen in the natural realm.

The essential point is that God is not just one cause among a series of causes. Divine causation is of a different type and order altogether, it is operative along with, in, through and under all other causes. God is involved at every stage of the development of the world, sustaining all things. God is not simply the one who starts things off, then leaves it all to natural processes; nor does God act only through special miraculous action.

The simple logic relating to causes needs to be combined with an understanding of literature types when reading scripture. The Bible should be read *literarily* – according to the genre – rather than *literally*. Only in a scientific era does the need to interpret Genesis scientifically arise.

Historically, the interpretation of the biblical material in the last century has fluctuated. In 1909 a series of booklets (64 in all) began to appear in the U.S.A. to establish 'the fundamentals' of the faith and to combat liberalism. They gave their name to a movement. It has often been assumed that 'the Fundamentalists' (in the original sense of the term) were unanimously opposed to evolutionary theory. However, this is not the case. G. F. Wright's objections were limited in scope and basically scientific and there were a number of other writers of 'the fundamentals' who had no objections to theistic evolution (including James Orr, B. B. Warfield and J. G. Machen).

It was later that 'fundamentalism' became more closely associated with anti-evolutionism under the influence of the Scopes trial (1925) regarding the teaching of evolution in schools. Scopes was charged with teaching evolution which had recently been banned.

In court the chief anti-evolutionist W.J.Bryan could, under oath only name two people whose views on earth history he respected: G.F.Wright who had been dead four years and George McCready Price, the Seventh Day Adventist 'deluge geologist'.

Because of this connection with Price, the interpretation of Genesis was significantly influenced by the unusual visions and teachings of the founder of Seventh Day Adventism, Ellen Gould White, who was a major influence on Price. Her descriptions of the early life of the world — its creation and subsequent physical development and of pre-edenic life on other worlds — were considered authoritative by Adventists and on a par with scripture.

The defence of these teachings concerning life on other planets required belief in a young earth and, as part of the overall account, a literal world-wide, catastrophic flood as described in Genesis 7-8. As far as Price was concerned White's interpretation of Genesis fitted exceptionally well with the notion of the flood as an alternative explanation for the geological data which geologists were attributing to gradual processes over long periods of time. The flood became the basis of 'catastrophic geology' which denies the geological column and thus the great age of the world and which thus denies evolution the long periods of time which it requires.

This explains why the defence of the world-wide Noahic flood and a young earth became so important in evolutionary debate. The whole theory is incompatible with any interpretation of scripture other than a rigidly literal one which has a young earth and creation taking place in seven twenty-four hour days.

The young-earth theory was originally really a young *earth* theory in origin in that it was assumed that this solar system was young but they held open the possibility of the rest of the universe being much older. The inconsistencies though, of having a young solar system in an old universe, has been replaced by a belief in a young universe. Thus consistency is achieved but this view now not only has to argue against the usual geological evidence for the age of the world but astronomical evidence as well.

This position was popularised by J. Whitcomb and H. Morris in *The Genesis Flood* (1961). Ironically when Whitcomb and Morris's book came out it was lauded by many conservatives although the fact that it conflicted with the very widespread belief in day-age theory was not given its due significance. The extreme age of the earth had not been a problem, even for the most conservative, for a long time.

Whitcomb and Morris' book was, in large part a response to the evangelical theologian Bernard Ramm's *The Christian View of Science and Scripture*. Ramm himself opted for what he called a 'progressive creation' but he understood that which is still the case today: that, theologically speaking, one does not have to choose between God and natural processes and that in terms of scriptural interpretation a highly literal understanding is less than helpful.

Beyond all this, however, of even greater importance in discussing a theology of creation is the need to maintain a focus on that which is truly central, and that is Jesus Christ who is the centre and focus of all that God has done. As the apostle Paul said in his letter to the Colossians, ‘in him all things were created, in heaven and on earth ... He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.’

Bibliography

Moore, James. *The post-Darwinian controversies: a study of the Protestant struggle to come to terms with Darwin in Great Britain and America, 1870-1900*. Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1979.

Numbers, Ronald. *The creationists*. 1st ed. New York: A.A. Knopf; Distributed by Random House, 1992.

Ramm, Bernard. *The Christian view of science and Scripture*. 1st ed. Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1954.

Russell, Colin. *Cross-currents: interactions between science and faith*. Grand Rapids Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1985.

Whitcomb, John, and Morris, Madison. *The Genesis Flood: the Biblical record and its scientific implications*. Mich.: Baker Book House, 1964.