

God and Evolution: Controversial or Complementary?

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I have the practice each morning of reading an excerpt from the book, Being Peace, by Thich Nhat Hanh before meditation. A recent reading seems to resonate with this morning's topic: *God and Evolution: Controversial or Complementary?* Thich Nhat Hanh wrote: (pp.92-93)

The situation of the world is [still] like this. People completely identify with one side, one ideology.

Hanh provides an example:

To understand the suffering and the fear of a citizen of the Soviet Union, we have to become one with him or her. To do so is dangerous - we will be suspected by both sides. But if we don't do it, if we align ourselves with one side or the other, we will lose our chance to work for peace. Reconciliation is to understand both sides, to go to one side and describe the suffering being endured by the other side, and then to go to the other side and describe the suffering being endured by the first side. Doing only that will be a great help for peace.

Science and religion have often been seen as working at cross-purposes with each other, creating a sense of conflict and confusion, especially when it comes to teaching evolution in the schools. It is the 200th anniversary of the birth of Charles Darwin, and the 150th anniversary of his publication of *On the Origin of Species*, and yet the controversy over the teaching of evolution continues. My purpose today is to help us see that the theory of *evolution by natural selection* does not contradict religion, except perhaps a narrow view of religion, but can be seen as playing a role complementary to that of science in our ongoing search for greater understanding and meaning in our lives. By trying to understand both sides of the so-called controversy, we can help to create greater respect and peace.

Today we are celebrating Evolution Sunday, so I'd like to provide a little background. When I was doing my internship in the church in Ithaca

several years ago, I received an e-mail from The Clergy Letter Project, requesting my signature. It was directed to Christian Clergy, and I don't exactly see myself as Christian Clergy, but Unitarian Universalism does have roots in Christianity and embraces Christianity as one of the World Religions. Besides that, the letter made a lot of sense, so I signed it. Just this year a Unitarian Universalist Clergy Letter was also drafted and circulated, so I happily signed that as well. So now you know how I got involved in this, but how did The Clergy Letter Project and Evolution Sunday begin?

In the fall of 2004, Dr. Michael Zimmerman, now dean of Butler University's College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, was working in Wisconsin. He is a biologist by training, and had drafted a letter to support the teaching of evolution in the schools. You see, as has happened in a number of school districts, the the school board in Grantsburg, WI had passed a series of anti-evolution policies. Dr. Zimmerman circulated his letter among clergy in the area, and was amazed by the overwhelming response. Within a few weeks, he had almost 200 clergy signatures. Groups of educators and scientists also wrote to the School Board and to the Superintendent of Schools. After much advocacy, the Grantsburg School Board retracted their policies.

It seems that various school boards throughout the country have been infiltrated and taken over by people who have strong religious beliefs which are counter to the evidence provided by scientists who are teaching *evolution by natural selection*. Dover, Pennsylvania has been in the news, and some of you recently saw a DVD of a debate in Kansas. Such school board members try to establish policies in the schools which will require

that evolution, if taught at all, will be taught as “only a theory” along side other theories such as that of *Intelligent Design*. So far, the courts have usually upheld the importance of protecting the separation of church and state in our public schools. It is in our interest, as concerned citizens in a democracy, to ensure that this separation is upheld, and that we have high quality science education for our children.

Dr. Zimmerman received encouragement from clergy around the country, and seeing it as an issue which wasn't confined to Grantsburg, he decided to make it a national project. Thus was born the Clergy Letter Project which has as an offshoot, Evolution Sunday, and now Evolution Weekend, recognizing that various faiths celebrate on different days of the weekend. The goal is to help people understand that religion and evolution by natural selection both have valuable roles in helping us to develop our understanding of life. It's just that the teaching of religion, even under the guise of *Creationism* or *Intelligent Design (I.D.)*, does not belong in the science classroom. And evolution, though a theory which has not been totally proved (such is the nature of scientific theories), is a well-tested theory which is widely accepted by scientists and continues to prove valuable in helping us to understand our world.

This year the Clergy Letter Project has become international, with 1,019 Congregations from all 50 States, the District of Columbia, US Virgin Islands, and 15 Countries scheduled to participate in

Evolution Weekend 2009. At last count there were 11,644 signatures on the Christian Clergy Letter. There is also now a Rabbi letter with 440 signatures, and a UU Clergy Letter with 187 signatures. It is amazing what one person can do, when he or she puts a compelling idea forth, and asks for help in pursuing it!

In preparing for this morning's service, I read a few books provided by the Clergy Letter Project, which I have put on the table here in case any of you wish to read them. There is [A Friendly Letter to Skeptics and Atheists: Musings on why God is good and faith isn't evil](#), by David G. Myers. And then there is [Science, Evolution, and Creationism](#), by the National Academy of Sciences and Institute of Medicine, which has good content and great pictures, but is skewed against Creationism. And my favorite was [God and Evolution: a reader](#), edited by Mary Kathleen Cunningham. I would recommend this as a presentation of many different views from different authors. If you haven't seen the DVD I mentioned on the controversy in the Kansas schools, you are welcome to borrow that, as well. In addition, there is a huge web site for the Clergy Letter Project, which contains sermons from a variety of traditions in the past few years on the topic of evolution. I chose to sample sermons from UU clergy in my reading, but even those were quite diverse (of course, what would you expect?). If you have time and interest and want to browse, there are hours of good reading there.

So, what did I take from all this research and from my own

thinking on the topic? I realize that Unitarian Universalist congregations are much more open to the value of science and the use of reason than might be said of more fundamentalist churches, in which the Bible is viewed as the word of God. But I already knew that, and I suspect you did too. I guess it has mystified me why so many people still view the Bible in this way. By some recent surveys, almost half of Americans agree with creationists that God created human beings in their present form, all at once, in about the past 10,000 years. About 35 to 40 percent believe that humans evolved, but with guidance from God. Somehow it is difficult for humans to accept that they evolved over billions of years, through random genetic mutations, acted on by natural selection, from bacteria and eventually from the same ancestors as chimpanzees. And yet evolution by natural selection has been taught in our science classes. Is it not having any effect?

Why is it that so many people cling to their belief that human beings were created in the image of God, as written in Genesis? As you know, there are two different stories of creation in Genesis. Are both of the stories true? If they are true, in the sense of meaningful, are either of them scientifically accurate?

My readings helped me see that science and religion are two different, but both valid, ways of looking at the world. One author noted that the scientist Stephen Jay Gould described science and religion as two patches on a patchwork quilt of

wisdom. He said there are other patches as well, and that all contribute to the beauty and utility of the quilt, but can't be compared to each other.

Another author pointed out that scientists, even when they are personally religious, are amoral in their practice of science. In science, theories are proposed and tested through experimentation and dispassionate observation and collection of evidence. It is not expected that science will result in final answers, but in more and more questions. That is the nature of science. Evolution by natural selection has not been "proved", much to the chagrin of Creationists. But it is a great scientific theory because it has helped to shed light on a lot of questions, has been supported by much evidence (including fossil records, carbon-dating, biological and genetic studies), and has led to many new questions for research.

Perhaps Unitarian Universalists are comfortable, or at least used to, living with a lot of questions. Many of us accept that there is some sort of *Mystery* which helps to lend meaning to our lives. But many of us don't know whether or not there is a God.

As I try to put myself in the place of someone who grew up believing strongly in God, and in the Bible as the word of God, I can imagine how horrifying it would be to be taught in science class that we were not, in fact, created by God, in His (sic) image, but instead arose from primordial slime, evolving over billions of

years, by random mutations and natural selection, finally to chimp-like animals and then to human beings. It would be like having the rug yanked out from under me. . . all I had grown up believing in would be thrown into question, like Monopoly pieces and money being tossed in the air in the middle of a hard-fought game I was winning.

Creationists have argued that evolution has not been able to explain everything, like the “irreducible complexity” that is sometimes found in nature. As I have already noted, science usually has more questions than answers. But *Creationists* have sometimes argued for a “God of the gaps”, that is an Intelligent Designer who has intervened at critical points to achieve something where there is no other explanation. One problem with this is that as science discovers more, the gaps get smaller, and so does God. Another problem is there is no evidence that God exists.

There has also been an argument made that God laid down the fossil record in such a way that we would think there was evolution, when in fact the Bible was scientifically true (at least one of the stories in Genesis as well as the Great Flood and Noah’s adventure with the ark). This makes God seem like a great deceiver. So much for a God of love.

It makes more sense to me to believe in the scientific verity of evolution. Actually, the idea of evolution through natural

selection helps to answer some of the questions I had about the image of God while I was growing up (and even more recently). For example, why do children die? Why are there still births? Why do predators kill prey? How is God Omnipotent and Omnipresent and yet bad things happen to “good” people? Why would God send some people to burn in hell forever, while their loved ones went to heaven? How does free will work if God is all powerful?

In closing,

I am happy knowing that there are orderly laws of nature operating in a way that helps to explain evolution through natural selection.

I am glad that there are “mistakes” or mutations in the replication of cells which provides an opportunity for growth and change.

I am delighted when I look around me, knowing that I am related to everything else in the Universe, and that the *interdependent web of existence* is more than just a grand idea.

I am thankful that those who came before me struggled for survival in conditions more difficult than I am likely to ever have to face.

I am humbled to know that the nature of this world is change, and that as a human being I am not the end of that chain, but just another link.

I am motivated to know that I am a link in the chain, and that I have responsibility to all who may come after me.

I don't know whether or not there is a God, but long ago I stopped envisioning God as an old man sitting on a cloud at a computer terminal, directing life on earth and throughout the universe. If there is a God, and if she had anything to do with creation, I like to think of her as having laid down some ground rules (the laws of nature), put in an element of chance for spice, and then let creation evolve as it would. There is a lot of Mystery in life, and that's all right with me.