

Origin of debate

On the bicentennial of his birth, confronting Darwin's theory and its impact on faith

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His name alone is inflammatory, sparking emotionally charged responses ranging from fury to enthusiasm. Its mere mention in public is liable to incite a heated debate the volume of which may rise above all surrounding conversations. Charles Darwin.

Though none have ever met him and few have cracked the spine of any of his famous works — namely *On the Origin of Species* and *Descent of Man* — everyone has an opinion about where Darwin ranks among the iconoclasts of history.

To some he stands alongside great thinkers like Copernicus, Einstein, Socrates, Galileo and Freud. Others are less kind, labeling him a devil's advocate; a corrupting force whose ideas of evolution contradict tightly guarded biblical beliefs and challenge the very existence of God.

The truth, however, lies somewhere in between.

But whether demonized or deified, Charles Darwin is credited with having forever altered the way human beings perceive their place in the universe.

"If I were to give an award for the single best idea anyone ever had, I'd give it to Darwin," writes philosopher Daniel Dennett in his 1995 book *Darwin's Dangerous Idea*. "In a single stroke, the idea of evolution by natural selection unifies the realm of life, meaning and purpose with the realm of space and time, cause and effect, mechanism and physical law."

Feb. 12 is Darwin's 200th birthday and 2009 marks the 150th anniversary of his masterpiece, *On the Origin of Species*. But before the controversy, the legal wrangling, religious posturing and scientific bullying ... there was a ship named the HMS Beagle.

Evolution of an idea

In 1835 at the age of 26, self-taught naturalist Charles Darwin, having recently graduated from Cambridge University with a degree in theology, stepped aboard the HMS Beagle for a five-year voyage around the world.

Though his father tried to dissuade him, Darwin jumped at the chance to study the natural world. Much like Albert Einstein, he was a poor student trapped by the rigidity of a scholastic curriculum. It was during the 57-month journey that Darwin found his true calling, characterizing it "the first real training or education of my mind."

Along the way, Darwin witnessed a diversity of species in tropical Brazil and the discovery fossils, including a giant sloth 400 miles south of Buenos Aires. And there was the five-week stay in the Galapagos Islands, where he noticed that closely related species of turtles and mockingbirds inhabited nearby islands, implying a common ancestry to both.

At sea, Darwin put his theological training to use, quoting Bible passages to the ill-mannered, foul-mouthed sailors aboard the Beagle. Later in life, Darwin distanced himself from the church, partially because of his discoveries where he came to see that species were not fixed over time but rather adapted to their environment.

By all accounts, Darwin was not an atheist, having never openly denied the existence of God. In his autobiography, Darwin writes of being a theist when *Origin of Species* was published. But over time, he came to view science and religion as separate intellectual pursuits and that knowledge of God was beyond human comprehension.

"I cannot pretend to throw the least light on such abstruse problems," he wrote near the end of his life. "The mystery of the beginning of all things is insoluble to us, and I for one must be content to remain agnostic."

Darwin never experienced a grand revelation aboard the Beagle. But when he returned home to England in 1836, carrying with him 1,529 species preserved in bottles of alcohol, 3,907 dried specimens and two live tortoises, the seeds of inspiration had been planted. It would only take 23 years to bring those ideas to the masses.

Published in 1859, the 155,000-word *Origin of Species* presented Darwin's scientific theory of evolution by natural selection, an idea that *Scientific American* magazine hailed recently as "a foundational pillar of modern science that stands alongside relativity, quantum mechanics and other vital support structures."

God of love

Charles Darwin didn't invent evolution any more than Abraham Lincoln, who shares his birthday, invented freedom. What Darwin did was transform evolution from concept to scientific theory.

Not everyone appreciates Darwin's leap.

"I think it's crap — complete and total crap," says 36-year old Joel Sheers, waiting for his daughter in one of the benches outside the Amstar movie theater in Quintard Mall. "All evolution does is give people an excuse to deny God. It's used to poison children's minds by pretending evolution explains what's in the Bible.

"I don't think it's possible to be a Christian and accept evolution."

Thus the firestorm rages, pitting science vs. religion and evolution vs. creationism. But there is a middle ground that intersects this intellectual divide.

Because it suggests that the universe is essentially blind and indifferent to life, John Haught, professor of religion at Georgetown University and author of *God after Darwin*, understands why evolution is so theologically disturbing. But there is hope for those willing to wrestle with these contradictory concepts.

"Evolution is completely compatible with Christian teaching," he says.

Beginning with the belief that God is a god of infinite love, Christians can recast theology into evolutionary terms. Love doesn't work by coercion or by force, but by allowing the other to be and to become itself. In those terms, we shouldn't expect the world to be perfectly designed from the beginning, Haught explains.

"Because the world that is perfectly designed is dead," he says. "There is no place for freedom as everything is fixed."

To have a world based on freedom, evolution is vital. It then becomes a world that allows for an "emerging consciousness," moral sensitivity and religious aspiration, Haught says.

"It all fits very nicely if we start with the idea that the Creator has not forced the world into a particular mold but instead offers endless possibilities," he says. "Ours is a God that creates out of the future rather than out of the past."

'Fancy monkeys'

Michael Plavcan doesn't have to lecture to be confronted by Christian students who disagree with his teaching of evolution. He needs only to look out his classroom door. That's where students occasionally gather to pray for his soul.

"I don't know why they sat outside," says Plavcan, an associate professor of anthropology at the University of Arkansas, "I would have welcomed them in to talk."

And it's not just Plavcan whose life is interrupted. His children are also targeted. They are routinely mocked and picked on at school because their father teaches evolution.

"There's definitely a social ostracism," he says. "But what's weird is that in academic circles ... no one really cares."

Though far from the norm, these experiences signify a greater crisis that is allowed to fester in the deep crevices separating evolutionary science from religion. It's a fatal flaw that exists on both sides of the debate.

"Evolution is frequently presented as a conspiracy," says Plavcan, who is a Christian and regularly attends an Episcopal church in Fayetteville. "Like all these scientists are getting together and going to Evolution School to corrupt people's children. It's ludicrous.

"We're scientists. We're not looking to undermine anyone's faith or religion."

According to a 2006 survey conducted by National Geographic, in the United States, only 14 percent of adults thought that evolution was "definitely true," while about one-third firmly rejected the idea. In European countries, including Denmark, Sweden and France, more than 80 percent of adults said they accepted evolution.

Of the 34 countries included in the study, only in Turkey were more adults likely to reject evolution. The survey also found that the percentage of U.S. adults who are uncertain about evolution has risen from seven to 21 percent in the past 20 years. The main influence researchers found upon Americans was fundamentalist religion.

"There is, in this country, a powerful anti-intellectual thread," Plavcan says. "People don't understand or appreciate the value of science. There is a very practical, 'what good does that do?' side to American culture and there's no value in knowledge for knowledge's sake."

Evolution, in the minds of many Christians, challenges the Bible, allowing it, and Darwin himself, to symbolize perceived evils of modern society — abortion, pornography, homosexuality and other deviant behavior, says Michael Ruse, professor of philosophy at Florida State University and author of numerous books on Darwin and evolution, including *The Evolution-Creation Struggle*.

"Evolution is threatening," he says. "It scares people to think we're animals like everything else, that we're essentially fancy monkeys. People find that terrifying."

That's not to suggest people must reject evolution in order to believe in God. Working out these ideas about how humanity came to be is the highest use of our natural gifts, Ruse adds.

"What is it that makes us created in God's image ... clearly it's our intelligence," he says. "So what does God want for us to do with this intelligence? Even if you're a non-believer, you've got an obligation not to waste this ability.

"The creativity of the human spirit should be looked upon as sacred."

Footsteps of divinity

Many focus on evolution as being referred to as a "theory." But in scientific terms, that word means something entirely different than it does to the layperson. Keeping in mind that both gravity and relativity are considered theories, Plavcan says.

"What's amazing about Darwin's theory is how obvious it is," he says. "The fact that it's managed to survive for so long makes it even more brilliant. And that's the fundamental misunderstanding of science. Science is a destructive process. Theories are held up only after they survive repeated attempts to destroy and disprove them. Evolutionary theory has survived 150 years of people trying to tear it down.

"Nobody looks for evidence to support it. The goal is to kill the idea."

But when it comes to rejecting Darwinian evolution, the blame doesn't rest solely on fundamentalists' literal interpretation of the Bible.

The so-called "new atheist" movement has cast shadows of doubt upon evolution because those who preach this philosophy often do so at the expense of Christians. These attacks are led by British zoologist Richard Dawkins, author of the bestselling *God Delusion*, who equates raising a child to be Christian with child abuse.

With these proponents, no wonder so many Christians are skeptical, says Dennis Wagner, founder of the Access Research Network, a nonprofit organization that promotes intelligent design.

"They use science as their pulpits for promoting an atheistic worldview," he says. "And that's what the average person rails against. In America, people of faith have become suspicious of science — or, more to the point, scientists — because they denigrate and disrespect everything about their beliefs.

"Christians then become defensive and turn a deaf ear."

When it comes to seeking answers in terms of their place in the universe, Christians turn to the Bible, says Donald Musser, professor of religious studies at Stetson University in DeLand, Fla.

"We go to the Bible to find truth and meaning about ourselves and the world we live in," he says. "We're looking for spiritual truth, a transcendent world, and the footsteps of divinity. Is that the best place to go for scientific information, to learn about physics, geometry, biology? Some say absolutely because every word in the Bible is accurate."

This is difficult for atheistic scientists promoting Darwinian evolution because many are ignorant and even hostile toward religion, Musser says.

"They aren't particularly educated about faith," he says. "They characterize all religion as dogmatic, anti-science and wrong. They treat all Christians as fools, which accomplishes nothing."

There are inherent flaws on both sides because they share the same mindset. Scientists dismiss theology just as many fundamentalist Christians dismiss evolution, Haught says.

"Both sides have been brainwashed by the idea that scientific discourse is the only authoritative way in which the mind can approach reality," he says. "And both sides view the meaning of 'science' differently. But science is a very self-limiting method.

"Science cannot even tell you about your wife's love, and that's as real as anything in existence."

Haught has dedicated his career to reconciling science and religion. He has stood on the frontlines of this debate, testifying in a court case in Dover, Pa., where the judge eventually ruled the teaching of intelligent design to be unconstitutional.

On the stand, Haught spoke about "layers of explanation" for creation. To illustrate his point, Haught used a pot of water sitting on a stove and the three reasons why the water was boiling:

- 1) Because the water molecules are moving around excitedly, making the transition from the liquid state to the gaseous state.
- 2) Because he turned the gas on, heating the eye beneath the pot, causing the water to boil.
- 3) Because he wanted tea.

Each explanation is correct with neither answer contradicting the other. The same could be said for evolution.

"In this debate over evolution, people want absolutes," he says. "They want direct answers — natural selection or divine creativity — but these don't have to be contradictory. There is room for both."

But the only way to bridge this gap is for both sides to make a concession, Wagner says.

"If we want to make progress and reach a point where people are neither demonizing nor deifying Darwin" he says, "we must first admit ... we don't know."