

Opinion

## Evolution and Religion: Conflict or Compatibility?

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### Opinion

Theologically conservative Christians frequently reject Darwin's theory of evolution by natural selection because they say that evolution denies a role for God in the creation and governance of His universe. They claim that the denial of God's significance undermines the moral authority of the Bible and encourages the flourishing of multiple social evils. But if it can be shown that evolution and religion are not in conflict, but may be compatible, some degree of biblical authority could be restored and thus aid in combating the evils so identified.

The late Henry Morris, a leading Young Earth Creationist who believed in biblical inerrancy and founded the Institute for Creation Research, wrote that as a "consequence of the evolutionary basis of modern thought" which excludes God as a causal agent of anything, the world is afflicted by:

*Huge nuclear arsenals in the great nations, developing  
nuclear capabilities in many smaller nations, the  
imminent AIDS pandemic, chemical and biological  
weapons waiting to be unleashed, the unknown dangers  
of genetic engineering looming ahead, the terrors and  
conflicts generated by world communism (not to mention  
Nazism, racism, imperialism, and other evil systems),  
the wide resurgence of paganism and occultism, the  
inexorable spread of the cancerous drug culture,  
giant crime syndicates in the capitalist nations,  
Pan-Arabic aggression in the Islamic nations, and*

*a worldwide breakdown of personal and governmental morality [1].*

And the Discovery Institute, a socially and theologically conservative think tank headquartered in Seattle, Washington, likewise claims that evolution undermines biblical authority and thereby allows more evil to flourish:

*The proposition that human beings are created in the image of God is one of the bedrock principles on which Western civilization was built...*

*Yet a little over a century ago, this cardinal idea came under wholesale attack by individuals drawing on the discoveries of modern science. Debunking the traditional conceptions of both God and man, thinkers such as Charles Darwin, Karl Marx, and Sigmund Freud portrayed humans not as moral and spiritual beings, but as animals or machines who inhabited a universe ruled by purely impersonal forces and whose behavior and very thoughts were dictated by the unbending forces of biology, chemistry, and environment. This materialistic conception of reality eventually infected virtually every area of our culture, from politics and economics to literature and art [2].*

But blaming evolution for denying God's agency and thereby permitting evil reflects a fundamental misunderstanding of science. Neither science in general nor evolution in particular denies or rejects God. The National Academy of Science says:

*Science is a way of knowing about the natural world. It is limited to explaining the natural world through natural causes. Science can say nothing about the supernatural. Whether God exists or not is a question about which science is neutral [3].*

But the silence of science and evolution on the question of God by no means prohibits speculation and discussion on what role He might play on earth or throughout the cosmos. As the NAC explains:

*Most religions of the world do not have any direct conflict with the idea of evolution. Within the Judeo-Christian religions, many*

*people believe that God works through the process of evolution.  
that is, God has created a world that is ever-changing and a  
mechanism through which creatures can adapt to environmental  
change over time.  
At the root of the apparent conflict between some religions and  
evolution is a misunderstanding of the critical difference between  
religious and scientific ways of knowing. Religions and science  
answer different questions about the world. Whether there is a  
purpose to the universe or a purpose for human existence are not  
questions for science. Religious and scientific ways of knowing  
have played, and will continue to play, significant roles in human  
history [4].*

Scientists who are also religious—who believe in both Darwin and God—respect the fact that science can neither prove God’s existence nor that He devised evolution as His means by which “creatures can adapt to environmental change over time.” But they can nonetheless discuss philosophically how evolution can be seen as compatible with a world and indeed a universe created by God, and how God uses evolution to allow descent with modification. For example, Dr. Kenneth Miller, recently retired biologist from Brown University and both a devout Catholic and a firm believer in Darwin, speculates that God could conceivably promote change through manipulating the subatomic particles in genes or our timeline to change the course of events. Neither action would be humanly detectable and hence impossible to prove or disprove. Humans would retain their free will to accept God as an act of faith, rather than be forced to accept and worship God out of fear [5].

Dr. Francis Collins, born again Christian, former head of America’s Human Genome Project and the National Institutes of Health, sees evolution as part of a larger pattern of divine governance beginning with the Big Bang, of which he says:

*The Big Bang cries out for a divine explanation. It forces the  
conclusion that nature had a defined beginning. I cannot see  
how nature could have created itself. Only a supernatural  
force that is outside of space and time could have done that [6].*

And Drs. Deborah and Loren Haarsma, astrophysicists, write:

*The careful construction of the universe is consistent with  
The biblical belief that God planned the universe to include  
Intelligent human beings who can in turn relate to [H]im.  
The universe itself testifies to God’s amazing craftsmanship [7].*

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So, to Drs. Miller, Collins, the Haarsmas, and other religious scientists, science does not bar discussion of evolution from a religious perspective. Rather, science provides the factual basis on which informed speculation on the compatibility of evolution with an earth and a universe governed by God can be offered. And showing the compatibility of evolution with God's rule may someday help restore some degree of biblical authority and help combat the evils which evolution's theologically conservative detractors identify.

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## Conflict of Interest

None.

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