



## Is it possible to be a Christian and believe in Evolution?

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It all depends what you mean by the term 'evolution'. Charles Darwin published the *Origin of Species* in 1859 as a theory to explain the origins of biological diversity. And at that time, that's all it was – a biological theory, a theory in fact that Christians were quick to baptise into a Biblical doctrine of creation. Asa Gray, Professor of Natural History at Harvard and a committed Christian, had long been Darwin's confidante and organised the publication of the *Origin of Species* in N. America. Christians such as Gray maintained that God had providentially arranged the biological processes of evolution to bring about God's purposes in creation. The Princeton theologian and prominent defender of the inspiration of Scripture, B.B. Warfield, spoke of himself as a 'Darwinian of the purest water'. The British historian James Moore writes that 'with but few exceptions the leading Christian thinkers in Great Britain and America came to terms quite readily with Darwinism and evolution', and the American sociologist George Marsden reports that '...with the exception of Harvard's Louis Agassiz, virtually every American Protestant zoologist and botanist accepted some form of evolution by the early 1870s'.

So given this initially warm reception, why did hostility towards evolution by Christians gain such prominence in the USA a century later, even giving rise to 'text-book battles' in which legal attempts have been made in some states to ban the teaching of evolution in schools? Unfortunately, as often happens with the 'big theories' of science, evolution has become encrusted with all kinds of ideological baggage down the years, 'barnacles' which are not part of

the theory itself. Herbert Spencer (1820-1903) was a great populariser of evolution in N. America in the latter part of the 19th century (selling 370,000 books), but unfortunately tried to make evolution into a 'theory-of-everything' in which the entire universe was ascending towards ultimate perfection. It was Spencer (not Darwin) who coined the term 'survival of the fittest', a notion that was to be misapplied with such terrible consequences by the Kaiser during the first world war and then by Hitler in the Third Reich.

Today when Richard Dawkins recounts how Darwinian evolution enables him to be an 'intellectually fulfilled atheist', this only reinforces the idea that there must be something deeply anti-Christian about evolution. But the fact that evolutionary theory over the years has been called upon to justify as wide a range of ideologies as communism, capitalism, racism and militarism, some of them mutually exclusive, should alert us to the dangers of extrapolating scientific theories into arenas in which they actually have little or nothing to say.

So is it possible to be a Christian and believe in evolution? Certainly, as long as 'evolution' refers not to some secular philosophy, but to the biological theory describing how God has created all living things. This explains why the vast majority of Christians who are active in biological research today have no problem with incorporating evolutionary theory within their belief in God as creator. Our task as scientists is to describe the actions of God in the created order as accurately as we can. We are called by God to be truth-tellers. If an evolutionary process provides the best explanation for the origins of biological diversity, then that's fine – it is not our job to second-guess God as to how he should have made things, but to describe what he has actually done.

Evolution combines together two mechanisms: first, variation is introduced into genes (stretches of DNA) by various mechanisms, second, the consequences of these mutations are 'tested out' by the criterion of 'reproductive success', the extent to which mutations impact on the ability of individual organisms to generate offspring. Taken overall, this is a tightly regulated process, as far from the idea of 'random chance' as can be imagined. As the Cambridge evolutionary biologist, Simon Conway Morris, points out in his

recent book *Life's Solution – Inevitable Humans in a Lonely Universe* (CUP 2003), if you re-play the tape of life again, then what you'll get is something remarkably similar to what we have now. If you imagine the world as a matrix of millions of little boxes representing 'design space', then some of those boxes will get filled up, but not others. Eyes have evolved independently many times during evolution. Such findings are entirely consistent with the actions of a creator God who has intentions and purposes for his creation.

But of course evolutionary processes are not there to teach us morality – Christians are called to behave like children of God, according to God's moral law, as revealed in the Bible. Conversely Christians should not abuse the Bible by trying to treat it as a scientific text-book, when scientific writing as we understand it now did not even get going until thousands of years after the writing of the early chapters of Genesis. It is anachronistic to treat Biblical texts as if they were articles out of a contemporary scientific journal. And anyway, if they were, they would soon be out of date! The Biblical creation accounts tell us timeless truths about God's purposes for his creation in general, and for humankind in particular. It is up to scientists to find out *how* exactly God carries out his creative handiwork.

Some Christians think belief in evolution undermines the uniqueness of humankind and the reality of evil and the Fall. Not so. The Genesis account portrays Adam and Eve as Neolithic farmers. It is perfectly feasible that God bestowed his image on representative *Homo sapiens* already living in the Near East to generate what John Stott has called *Homo divinus*, those who first enjoyed personal fellowship with God, but who then fell most terribly from their close walk with God (Gen. 3:8). All those who disobey God and trust in their own wisdom in place of God's law reiterate the historical Fall in their own being (Ezek. 28: 11-19).

Those many Christians today who are active in the biological sciences are amazed as we uncover more and more of God's creative actions in our daily research. We do not look for God in the 'gaps' in our scientific knowledge, but instead worship God for the whole of his created order, including those remarkable evolutionary processes that God has used for his creative