

Sermon: “Essential Connections” (Evolution Weekend)
Rev. Martha Hodges Feb 14, 2010

The Clergy Letter Project is now in its sixth year. Michael Zimmerman, a professor of biology at Butler University, has gathered signatures of some 13,000 clergy – Christian, Jewish and Unitarian Universalist – who reject the teaching of creationism in public schools and proclaim that religion need not be at war with science. The project asks its signers to preach on evolution on the yearly anniversary of Darwin’s birth. This is the second year that we have observed this Evolution Weekend at UUCU.

But, really, why should we as UUs bother? It’s a reasonable question. It’s not likely that anyone here today needs to be convinced of the validity of Darwin’s Theory of Evolution. And there’s not much percentage in our sitting around congratulating ourselves on our superior understanding of natural history, or gloating over the ignorance of “those fundamentalists.”

In actuality, less than half of Americans – about 45% -- accept evolution as fact, something that should give us pause. It behooves us to understand why. I hope we can summon some sympathy for the creationists by looking at the implications of Darwin’s work in his day and in our own. I’d also like us to consider what Darwin’s discoveries can teach us about how we know what we know and why we choose to believe what we do. In other words, what can the story of evolutionary thought tell us about our fourth principle, “the free and responsible search for truth and meaning?”

In the exchange between Elizabeth Philpot and Reverend Jones¹ that we just heard, we catch a glimmer of the very real threat to the Christianity of the day posed by the evidence that certain creatures that once existed had become extinct. How could this be if God created all creatures great and small? Did God decide he had made a mistake when he made the ichthyosaur and so allowed it to die out? Did he create some animals as prototypes that he later improved upon? If that were the case, God would not be infallible and omniscient. And if God isn’t omniscient, what kind of god is he? An imperfect god, not to be trusted as the source of all wisdom, all truth and all the rules that believers must obey upon pain of damnation.

Furthermore, if the story of Genesis is disproved by the discovery of creatures that obviously existed before the rocks holding their bones were formed, then what else in scripture might be inaccurate? The text that the Abrahamic religions held to be the literal word of god as communicated by his prophets – the text that formed the foundation of all knowledge -- was called into question. Where were believers to turn for authoritative truth?

By extension, there is no need for a supernatural being to create the world if Darwin’s theory of natural selection is correct. Evolution obviates the necessity for God the Father.

Without a god, what is our purpose? Or the purpose of anything, for that matter, if life and death, creation and extinction, are, if not exactly random, at least not part of any divine design?. If our only purpose is to survive and reproduce, we are no different from, and no better than, the animals over which we supposedly have dominion. And if we humans are merely animals among the rest of the animals, not made in the image of God, what becomes of our special status in the world, not to mention our immortal souls?

Imagine, if you can, what all this must mean to the biblical literalist. How are you to deal with the evidence of evolution, when the conclusions to which it leads refutes everything you know about your reason and purpose, the meaning of your life and your place in the universe? When virtually everything you thought you knew is thrown into doubt? Small wonder that in Darwin's day as in our own, believers should dismiss his findings as the work of the devil.

If this kind of spiritual crisis is hard to imagine, let us try a little thought experiment. Suppose some scientist discovered irrefutable evidence that there *is* a supernatural being who created the world in six days; that every creature, including our own species, was fully formed from the beginning. That all we think we know about the origin of the universe and the natural order is false. That, in fact, our only purpose is to glorify this god, to fear him and obey him and love him like the all-knowing and all-powerful father that he is. That there is no free will; that our destiny is pre-determined and that most of us are going to end up spending eternity in a fiery pit. Imagine the turmoil, the despair, the rage, that this information would cause you to experience. Might the confusion be so great that you would refuse to accept this new evidence? Might you gather with like-minded others and insist on teaching your children the old beliefs, now invalidated by science? Might you condemn the new evidence as the work of charlatans, an evil conspiracy to foist lies upon the world? I know I would.

So, given the very understandable resistance and even hatred that Darwin's ideas engendered, where did he draw the courage from to persist in their promulgation? What made him so sure? And what drove him to risk everything for them?

For there is great risk involved in defying the religious status quo. For Copernicus and Galileo, the threat was to their freedom and very lives. If Darwin's theory of natural selection did not place him in physical danger, he certainly risked ostracism, condemnation, the loss of the support of family and friends and colleagues. Darwin, as does any revolutionary thinker, risked these things and more. Loneliness, self-doubt, the necessary reorganization of one's own ideas about the nature of reality. Not a thing to be undertaken lightly.

Charles Darwin was a Christian when he embarked on the voyage of the *Beagle*, the ship that would take him to the Galapagos Islands. In fact, he had at one time considered a career in the Anglican Church. His intention was to record the flora and fauna of the expedition, not to revolutionize science and challenge orthodox religion. But when he observed the variation in finches among the islands and asked himself how this could be explained – why birds in such close proximity and of the same general type

would have differently formed beaks that allowed each of them to specialize in the kind of food available on their particular island – he looked at the evidence and refused to let it go, pondering it and testing it over the course of the next twenty years, until he had arrived at a provable hypothesis. He studied, collected more information, observed the tiny details, consulted with other naturalists and reached what was, to him, the inevitable conclusion. Each type of finch had, over generations, adapted to its particular environment, and what was true of the finches was true of all species, including humankind.

He was well aware of the implications of this theory. Indeed, it broke his own faith in the creator god of Scripture and he came to describe himself as an agnostic. He knew what his discovery would cost the world, how it would challenge the inerrancy of scripture; that it would undermine the predominant world view and sense of stability that had sustained centuries of believers; that it would call into question the very existence of an omniscient and omnipotent god; and he knew what it would cost him personally and professionally. In fact, he delayed publishing his theory until pressed to do so by the imminent publication of the same theory by another man, Alfred Russell Wallace.

Michael Dowd, United Church of Christ minister and “evolutionary evangelist,” distinguishes between two methods of developing an explanation for a phenomenon². The scientific method enables what he calls “public revelation;” the “private revelation,” the flash of insight, the subjective experience, on the other hand, lies at the heart of all religion. Public revelation uncovers fact; private revelation leads to belief. Public revelation can be tested; private revelation cannot. Private revelation becomes codified in religious texts, unchangeable and beyond challenge. Public revelation – science – is by its nature open to question, to challenge and modification. Both kinds of revelation have value and both are necessary to creating a complex and satisfying story of the world. The problem arises when the two are confused. Religious conflict and religious oppression arise from mistaking facts for the story that is formed around them – their explanation and interpretation -- and the meaning that is assigned to them. Darwin’s theory of evolution is empirically demonstrable; the creation stories of religions around the world are not.

This is the significance of a free and responsible search for truth and meaning. A free search for truth requires us to consider every possibility, unhampered by prejudice or personal agenda or officially enshrined beliefs masquerading as fact. The responsible search for truth demands that we share our understanding of the facts with others and subject it to criticism and amendment. And meaning? The free and responsible search for meaning is one that is built around the interpretation of those facts -- or that at least does not ignore or contradict them.

The facts of Darwin’s theory of natural selection are clear and demonstrable. The meaning that we ascribe to them is something else again. For free thinkers, for Darwin and for us as religious liberals, the facts and their explanation lead us to a different conception of God, if we choose to use that name for the force that creates and sustains life. This God is evolving, as is our understanding of reality, as are we. It is not the unchanging and unchangeable god of scripture, but the name we give to Ultimate Reality,

the totality that transcends and embraces all that is. The God that is to be found in the finch beak, in the ichthyosaur, in that line of grandmothers reaching back to the primordial mother, and in ourselves. This God is to be found in our restless minds and spirits, our questions and doubts and our readiness to ditch everything we thought we knew and begin again in our quest for truth.

This is the god of change and uncertainty, the god of the known and unknown, the god of evolution – the god that is the miraculous web that links us to all life, past, present and future, that links us to all nature, and to the very stars.

¹ Excerpt read from *Remarkable Creatures*, by Tracy Chevalier (NY: Penguin, 2010)

² Dowd, Michael. *Thank God for Evolution: How the Marriage of Science and Religion Will Transform Your Life and Our World*, 2007