

Darwin's God  
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Channing Memorial Church  
February 17, 2007

In the first Republican Presidential debate, the candidates were asked, "Is there anyone on the stage who does not believe in evolution?" Of the ten candidates who were running at the time, three raised their hands: Kansas Senator Sam Brownback, Colorado Representative Tom Tancredo, and former Arkansas governor Mike Huckabee.

The fact that this question was posed to politicians running for our nation's highest office and that one of the candidates who denied evolution has won in eight states, tells us something about the role science and religion plays in our country. Of course, Mike Huckabee is also an ordained Baptist minister. When pressed if he believed that God created the Heavens and the Earth in six twenty-four hour days six thousand years ago, he simply stated that he did not know exactly when or how life began because he was not there. For Huckabee, either God created life or it happened by accident. The following statement was met with applause, "If anyone wants to believe they are descended from a primate, they are welcome to it."

A few weeks ago, Ken Miller, Biology Professor at Brown University gave a lecture on "God, Darwin, and Design" at the Newport Art Museum. Professor Miller told the packed audience, that if any of us bumps into Mike Huckabee we should let him know that not only are we descended from a primate, we are primates. Humans were classified as primates well before Darwin's theory of evolution emerged.

So, what is all the fuss? Why do many people still view evolution as a dangerous idea? How does evolution challenge traditional religious beliefs particularly belief in God? How does evolution change the way we view the world, the sacred, and ourselves?

This reminds me of a story: One day a zoo-keeper noticed that an orangutan was reading two books: the Bible and Darwin's *Origin of Species*. In surprise he asked the ape, "Why are you reading both those books?" "Well," said the orangutan, "I just wanted to know if I was my brother's keeper or my keeper's brother."

Charles Darwin himself saw an ape for the first time not on his famous voyage around the world but over a year after returning home. The Regent Park Zoo had acquired an orangutan called Jenny who caused quite a stir in London. Englishmen and women were surprised to encounter an animal with such human qualities. When Darwin visited her in 1838, he wrote in his private notebook, "Let man visit the *Ouranoutang* in domestication...see its intelligence...and then let him boast of his proud prominence...Man in his arrogance thinks himself a great work, worthy the interposition of a deity. More humble and I believe true to consider him created from animals."

Twenty years would pass before Charles Darwin published "*On the Origin of Species*". Darwin recognized that his discoveries raised uncomfortable questions about

the distinction between people and animals. Darwin was hesitant about revealing his conclusions knowing that evolution countered many firmly held beliefs.

Despite the way Darwin is portrayed by some as a godless man, the truth is not that simple. I would love to claim him as a Unitarian but he only attended a Unitarian chapel and day school as a boy later becoming christened in the Church of England. Dr. Darwin, his father wanted his boys to receive a classical education sending them to boarding school after their mother's death. Charles was a poor student. His real love was exploring the natural world. His friends gave him the nickname "Gas" because of the chemistry experiments he often performed in the tool shed.

At the age of sixteen, Charles followed his older brother to medical school but had no interest in becoming a physician. Observing surgery made his stomach turn—can't say I blame him when the operations he witnessed were performed on children without anesthesia!

While at Edinburgh University, Charles Darwin was profoundly influenced by Robert Grant, a professor who introduced him to the evolutionary writings of Jean-Baptiste Lamarck and Erasmus Darwin, Charles's own grandfather. Grant studied primitive sea life like sponges believing that all plants and animals shared a simple marine ancestor. With Grant's encouragement, Darwin wrote his first scientific paper on sea life for a student group.

Darwin left medical school after two years entering Christ's College at Cambridge intent on becoming a clergyman. Truly, he thought being a country parson would afford him time to continue studying natural history. To understand his enthusiasm for collecting, let me tell you a famous anecdote. Charles was such an avid insect collector that once he captured a beetle in one hand, a second in the other and upon seeing a third, popped one into his mouth. To his dismay the beetle secreted a bitter fluid causing him to spit it out and lose all three.

More than the study of scripture, botany and geology were the subjects that captured Darwin's attention. The professors who most influenced him were both ordained ministers and scientific scholars: Rev. J. S. Henslow and Rev. Andrew Sedgwick. Darwin was such a devoted pupil that he took the one botany course offered by Henslow not once but three times. Darwin studied geology with Sedgwick, accompanying him on a geological expedition to Wales. At this time there was an outpouring of discoveries about the Earth's composition and history. As the machines of the Industrial Revolution dug tunnels and canals, remarkable fossils and distinct layers of earth revealed that the world had undergone dramatic changes over time.

At the age of 22, Charles Darwin received an offer to join the voyage of the HMS Beagle. The mission was to chart the southern coast of South America. Captain FitzRoy commissioned Darwin as a Naturalist to conduct a geological survey en route. During the five-year expedition, he kept detailed journals and methodically collected samples of

fossils and living organisms; sending many specimens and letters about his findings back to England.

On the Galapagos Islands, Darwin encountered an astounding variety of species. The commonly held view at the time of the expedition was that each species was created by God to be perfectly suited to the conditions of a particular place. Yet, here on these geologically young volcanic islands, the species differed from island to island. Since the islands had similar conditions, why did such variety exist? For example, there was an incredible variety of finches and tortoises with different shells. Through out the journey Darwin found fossils and animals never before encountered by science. By observing the distribution of Galapagos organisms, Darwin became increasingly convinced that species are not immutable. Animals and plants from the mainland evolved into unique types over time.

Even though Darwin was met with acclaim by all the academic institutions of his day, he was hesitant to share his theory of transmutation (the original term for evolution) until he could explain the mechanism that caused it to occur. In the meantime, he engaged in a detailed study of barnacles, bred pigeons, and conducted experiments with plants and seeds.

Interestingly, it was an essay written by a minister that helped Darwin to articulate the mechanism behind the development of species. Rev. Thomas Malthus' "Essay on the Principle of Population" outlined the effect of famine and disease in limiting the increasing human population.

Charles Darwin was not the first evolutionary thinker but he was the first to articulate the mechanism behind it. Quite simply plants and animals have more offspring than are needed to replace the parents. The offspring of a set of parents are not all alike. The offspring with variations most suited to the environment will survive leading to natural selection and evolution of species over time.

In the words of Charles Darwin, "Life on earth has been generated over billions of years in a single branching tree-the Tree of Life". Here we are one hundred and fifty years after Darwin published his theory. Why do some people still view evolution as a dangerous idea? Quite simply evolution calls into question the authority of the Bible as a literal document. Evolution challenges the worldview that human beings have a unique relationship with God, superior to other living beings like plants and animals. Evolution also challenges the idea of a detailed Divine plan.

Have you heard of the Creation Museum? A group of Fundamentalist Christians called Answers in Genesis have constructed a 27 million dollar state-of-the-art facility in Petersburg, Kentucky. The location selected to make it accessible for families all over the United States. The exhibits include life-size models of the Garden of Eden and other scenes from the Bible. Through out the Museum are answers to skeptics' questions explaining the errors of evolution and the sovereignty of God. Evidence of evolution like the existence of Dinosaurs and the fossil record are explained by the Flood. Some pairs

of dinosaurs are shown on Noah's Ark. Geological wonders like the Grand Canyon are also explained by the Flood.

I don't know about you but I find Presidential candidates denying evolution, School Boards trying to pass off Intelligent Design as Science, and the Creation Museum distressing. So, I want to share some good news with you. Today we are joining with 809 congregations from all 50 states, the District of Columbia, and nine countries in celebrating Evolution Sunday. Since the Fall of 2004, Michael Zimmerman, Dean of the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences at Butler University has launched the Clergy Letter Project encouraging clergy of many denominations to publicly express their "respect for evolutionary theory as a core component of human knowledge, fully harmonious with religious faith." 11,183 signatures have been collected to date. There is also an increasing dialogue between scientists and clergy seeking to heal the rift between science and religion.

Personally, evolution heightens my sense of reverence for life. At the recent Art Museum lecture, Ken Miller showed a slide of Darwin's first sketch of evolutionary change showing how one species branched off into others some continuing others becoming extinct. Professor Miller explained that the fossil record is beginning to be filled in with amazing evidence of intermediate species as Darwin predicted. I was struck by the images projected on the screen, from the simple sketch to a diagram outlining one species to what we know today about the tree of life. It is almost a complete circle with all of life descended from a common ancestor. Human beings are just a single branch in the complexity of our interdependent world.

This is an exciting time as we become conscious of our history and our interdependence with all of life. We have been here on this planet since the beginning of time. Only now, we are becoming more aware of ourselves and the relatedness of life. We have cause to be humble when we recognize how recently humanity emerged on this earth.

Buddhist and environmental activist Joanna Macy invites us to imagine our creation story in a new way. If we imagine life on this planet as condensed into twenty-four hours beginning at midnight, until five o'clock in the afternoon Earth's adventures are geological. After the volcanic flaming and steaming rains washing over the shifting continents and shifting seas—organic life emerges at five o'clock.

*"In these bodies of ours we carry traces of Earth's story as organic life. We were aquatic first, as we remember in our mother's womb, growing vestigial gills and fins. The salt from those early seas flows still in our sweat and tears. And the age of dinosaurs we carry with us, too, in our reptilian brain, suited so conveniently at the end of our spinal column. Complex organic life was learning to protect itself and it is all right there in our neurological system, in the rush of instinct to flee or fight. And when did we appear as mammals? In those twenty-four hours of [Earth's] life, it was 11:30 P.M.! And when did we become human? One second to midnight."*<sup>i</sup>

We are not set part from creation, we are an integral piece of the whole becoming conscious of itself. Just as God is not omnipotent, guiding life from a distant place or a superior stance—the sacred breathes and moves through life itself.

When I think of all the growth and change that led to us being here in this moment, the sacredness of life is magnified. My view of God is not called into question because plants, animals and humans were not created perfectly at the beginning of time. On the contrary, the structures and dynamic relatedness of life is inspiring. Our challenge as a species is to more fully realize our relatedness in the way we live our lives—to do so calls on the best in both science and religion.

I will close with Darwin's own Conclusion to *The Origin of Species* (1859):

*It is interesting to contemplate a tangled bank, clothed with many plants of many kinds, with birds singing on the bushes, with various insects flitting about, and with worms crawling through the damp earth, and to reflect that these elaborately constructed forms, so different from each other, and dependent on each other in so complex a manner, have all been produced by laws acting around us...*

*Thus, from the war of nature, from famine and death, the most exalted object which we are capable of conceiving, namely, the production of the higher animals, directly follows. There is grandeur in this view of life, with its several powers, having been originally breathed into a few forms or into one; and that, whilst this planet has gone cycling on according to the fixed law of gravity, from so simple a beginning endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful have been, and are being, evolved.*

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<sup>i</sup> p.61, "Our Life as Gaia", Joanna Macy, *Thinking Like a Mountain*, New Society Publishers, PA: 1988.