

Christians and the Theory of Evolution

As Kansas Governor Bill Graves is learning, some battles never end. When a crusty defense attorney named Clarence Darrow and a politician named William Jennings Bryan finished their spectacular court fight 75 years ago over whether the theory of evolution should be taught in schools, a great many people thought the issue was settled. It wasn't. Mainline Christian denominations are able to combine faith in God as the ultimate source of life with faith in evolution as the method by which life developed through millions of years, but more conservative believers continue to feel that God and evolution are incompatible ideas. Reading the two *Genesis* stories of creation as literal rather than poetic, and for the most part ignoring the massive but highly technical evidence presented by biologists, they would like to rewrite the textbooks used in science classes.

If it were possible in modern times, they would really prefer to ban the teaching of evolution altogether, as Oklahoma did in 1923, just two years before the famous trial I mentioned a moment ago. Oklahoma had a generous free textbook law, but decided it would no longer include any public school science book which presented the Darwinian theory of evolution. My home state was not alone in this hostility to anything that appeared to contradict a literal reading of the Bible. A year before Oklahoma science students were saved from hearing about evolution, a Kentucky teacher was fired for saying the earth was round, thereby contradicting a verse of Biblical poetry which speaks of its having four corners. [Isa. 11:12]. One year after that, in 1924, Governor Morrison of North Carolina rejected a biology text recommended by the state board of education on

grounds that, as he put it, “I don’t want my daughter or anybody’s daughter to have to study a book that prints pictures of a monkey and a man on the same page.”

In that general climate, Kentucky Wesleyan College suspended five faculty who said evolution does not contradict the creation narrative of *Genesis* when that story is read as the poetry it clearly is, and down in Texas the Rev. J. Frank Norris, whose Fort Worth church would become the biggest Baptist congregation in the world, with 8,000 members, got three professors at Baylor and another at SMU fired for believing that evolution is a logical explanation of what has happened to life forms on earth.

In Tennessee about this time a kindly man named John Butler was elected to the state legislature on a platform that included a law to prohibit the teaching of evolution in public schools. Some of his fellow lawmakers in Nashville thought such a law would make the state ridiculous and tried to pigeonhole it, but Mr. Butler brought it up again and enlisted the help of Biblical literalists in Tennessee’s many conservative churches. The University of Tennessee, trying to get a big new appropriation from the legislature, decided to be quiet about the proposal. Its president disapproved of the bill, but said nothing.

Many Tennessee state legislators would have preferred the bill go away, but they were politicians who had to stand for re-election and they hated to give an opponent a chance to say, “Now there’s Bill over there....good fellow, but an atheist, after all....thinks you are descended from a monkey. I don’t. I believe in the Bible.” So only two members of the state senate spoke against the bill, and after an ardent Campbellite by the

name of Lew Hill took the floor and said, “Save our children for God!” the vote passed 24 to 6 in favor of banning evolution from school textbooks in Tennessee. One senator claimed later that the bill would have failed if it had not been for some Vanderbilt students who heckled its supporters from up in the crowded galleries. I’ve read that most senators later claimed they thought the governor would veto the bill.

And this progressive gentleman would likely have done so, but he found himself in a dilemma. He told senators who visited him that he resented being put in this position at all — that the legislature should have voted the bill down. But the Governor was Baptist, and Baptists were the biggest single voting bloc in the state, so he signed it. In an explanatory speech to the legislature, he said, “Probably the law will never be applied....Nobody believes that it is going to be an active statute.” He was wrong, having misread the passionate hatred of conservative Christians for Darwin’s theory. A writer in a journal called *Christian Fundamentals* declared that “the university crowd” and Communists were the only believers in evolution. A Georgia legislator joined the battle by saying, “Read the Bible. It teaches you how to act. Read the hymn book. It contains the finest poetry ever written. Read the almanac. It shows you how to figure out what the weather will be. There isn’t another book that is necessary for anyone to read, and therefore I am opposed to all libraries.”

It was in this cultural atmosphere that a young public school teacher in Dayton, Tennessee was indicted for making the theory of evolution part of his science lectures, an indictment that set the stage for one of the most dramatic trials in American history, with a famous orator testifying for the prosecution and a brilliant

lawyer called in from Chicago by the defense. The jury was made up of six Baptists, four Methodists, one Campbellite, and one non-church member from a Baptist family. One juror was illiterate, three of them admitted to having read no books other than the Bible. The trial, predictably, turned into a circus which has been described in detail by magazine articles and books, and turned into a popular play called *Inherit The Wind*, revived on TV in '99. Many thought the Dayton court case would settle the issue, but as I said at the beginning, they were wrong. Even as the evidence in favor of evolution increased enormously in the years following the famous trial, so did the fervor and sophistication of the opposition. The battle goes on, sometimes quietly, at other times noisy and highly public — and it is not even close to going away.

Partly, of course, because it takes a strenuous semester in college to make even a start at presenting the massive and highly complex evidence which convinces most scientists that evolution explains the amazing **diversity** of animal life — and the amazing **similarities** in their forms and functioning. Think of the great host of different animals — lions, tigers, donkeys, dogs, monkeys, men — all with arms, legs, eyes, ears, hearts, brains, livers, kidneys, reproductive organs. Given this structural kinship, Darwin and others in the 19th century wondered why so many separate creations would employ the same blueprint. Is it possible, they wondered, that we are related to one another?

The questions piled up as the sciences of geology and biology converged in their study of the earth's history. What did it mean that of 50,000 species of vertebrates living 70 million years ago nearly 80% suffered

mass extinction? If God had made them one by one, and urged Adam to name them, why were they allowed to perish? And since the numbers built back up again, did that mean that God performed new creations or did the life remaining after the catastrophic extinction somehow branch and diversify on its own into the 100,000 vertebrate species alive today? And why so many hundreds of thousands of different species of insects — including the house fly, which can hardly be counted among our blessings!

It is not widely known, but another scientist, Alfred Russell Wallace, independently and simultaneously hit on the theory of evolution of species by natural selection, and when he was asked why that happened he said it was probably because both he and Darwin were ardent beetle hunters in early life. Beetles have an almost infinite number of specific forms — an endless modification of structure, shape, color and surface markings to distinguish them from each other. Darwin spent an astonishing 10 years studying these countless beetle adaptations to different environments before he began to ponder how more **complex** life forms may have done the same thing, over and over through countless ages. Slowly, over a lifetime of careful observation, he found it hard to believe that the Creator of the universe would have superintended this enormous radiation of life into so many divergent and often grotesque forms. In an essay he wrote about 17 years before the publication of his world-shaking *Origin of Species* he wrote: “It is derogatory that the Creator of countless systems of worlds should have created each of the myriads of creeping parasites and slimy worms which have swarmed each day of life....on this one globe.”

Maligned by more conservative Christians, I suppose, than any man who ever lived, Charles Darwin may have been the most reluctant disturber of human tranquility in all the history of the world. Quiet, modest, and retiring, he hated controversy so much he simply would not engage in public debates about his conclusions. He almost lost his unique place in history by waiting so many years to publish a book he knew would upset millions. Far from being the villain I used to hear described by my boyhood preachers, this courtly gentleman was unusually sensitive to the suffering of others. Writing about his five-year voyage on a research ship that stopped at many foreign ports, he said: “I thank God, I shall never again visit a slave country.” And when he wrote the superintendent of the London Zoo that for research purposes he wished to observe the face of a screaming monkey, he added characteristically: “Could you make it scream without hurting it much?”

He was his own harshest critic, freely admitting problems with his theory which he had insufficient evidence to solve, and accepting criticism eagerly and graciously even when it had no real merit. He was painfully modest. “I believe I am the slowest (perhaps the worst) thinker in England,” he wrote to a colleague, and even his most ardent defender, Thomas Huxley, wrote a friend to say about Darwin, “There is a marvelous dumb sagacity about him — like that of a sort of miraculous dog...” But it was this persistent plodding that finally paid off, because when Darwin published his own findings, it was not the novelty of his theory that made him famous (others, had already anticipated most of it). It was the fact that no one else had ever provided such massive and compelling documentation of the evidence.

I would be amazed at how many people who reject the theory of evolution have never made a serious study of it, except for the fact that I did exactly the same thing. Programmed at church to believe one could not believe simultaneously in evolution and in God, I carried that conviction off to one of our church-related colleges where I heard a respected teacher respond to a student who had asked about ancient fossil remains of ocean life embedded in a Texas hillside by saying that God had deliberately put them there to confuse and confound sceptics. That did not seem a game worthy of God, so I decided it might be helpful to broaden my reading. Darwin was certainly not easy, but he was a totally different person from the villain I had heard about, and his careful piling up of evidence was impressive. It took a while, but as time passed I became more and more fascinated with the writings of modern evolutionary biologists like Loren Eiseley, Stephen Jay Gould, and Edmund O. Wilson. I have no reluctance at all about saying that, for me, the theory of evolution makes overwhelming sense of what has happened in the natural world.

Keep in mind that evolution does not deal with the question of who caused life to exist, or why it should exist, or how those of us who belong to the species called homo sapiens should behave ourselves. Those questions belong to the realm of faith and ethics. They are properly taught in church, in homes, and in classes about religion. They do not belong in a classroom in biology, which rightly studies the massive and complex evidence about how life, once it began, has been affected by the never-ending struggle for survival.

If you have time, and curiosity, the history of the theory of evolution makes fascinating reading. From the 30 or 40 books in my own library, I would recommend discovering how the great French naturalists, Lamarck and Cuvier, struggled to explain fossil evidence; the importance of Thomas Malthus on the struggle to survive in nature; Sir Charles Lyell's *Principles of Geology*, which Darwin was reading on that famous 5-year sea voyage; and too many modern books to mention, except that I would pay any of my children to read Loren Eiseley's *The Immense Journey* and *The Firmament of Time*, and especially the best book of all for anyone who really wants to make a good beginning with this topic, his award-winning book called *Darwin's Century: Evolution And the Men Who Discovered It*.

If those books take you into an irresistible world, you won't be satisfied until you've read Harvard professor Stephen Jay Gould's classic book called *Ever Since Darwin*, by which time you will be so challenged by this man's mind that you will buy five more of his books filled with the essays he published over an 18 year span in the scholarly journal called *Natural History*. By then you are likely to have become such an ardent fan of books on evolutionary biology that you will want for dessert still another Harvard scientist's '92 classic called *The Diversity of Life*.

His name is Edward Wilson. He has been a Distinguished Professor of Science at the University, as well as Curator in its Museum of Comparative Zoology. He has won two Pulitzer prizes, which surely must account for his latest book's becoming a best-seller, because it certainly is not an easy one to read when you're sleepy.

Among other things he describes the five enormous extinctions that have struck this planet over the past 500 million years, each one requiring 20 to 100 million years of evolutionary repair. The sixth great spasm of extinction — the disappearance of one species after another — is occurring now and is caused this time not by climate change or catastrophic events, but by the conquering species known as homo sapiens. With all the fervor of an evangelist, he pleads for us to change our ways before we do irreparable harm.

By the way, if you hadn't time this morning to read the Eagle's editorial page, I hope you will. There's a good Crowson cartoon, and a couple of letters to the editor — one from a man from Marion, Kansas who manages to say all sorts of misleading things about evolution, and another from a science professor at WSU which bears quoting in part: "I am ashamed that, as we approach the 2nd millennium, we are still arguing about an idea as simple and self-evident as evolution., Indeed, one of the greatest wonders about evolution is that no one seems to have noticed it before Charles Darwin. [Editorial comment: Actually, some WERE talking about the idea before Darwin, espec. including his own grandfather, Erasmus, who was writing about it 50 years before his grandson published]. Now back to the letter, which asks:

"Are there questions still unresolved on the issue of evolution?" Prof. McDonald says, "Of course!" and points out that given the immense time scales involved with evolution research, some of those questions are likely to remain unresolved for a long time. "Does this men that the theory of evolution will teeter and fall? No. No more so than Christianity will teeter and fall if we admit that the biblical account of creation is a

beautiful but metaphorical narrative. Evolution is here to stay precisely because it towers above any competing idea for explaining the origin and diversity of the living things in the world around us.....An education in biology at any level without inclusion of evolution is a farce.”

Since millions of Christians, and thousands of Christian ministers agree, you may wish to send a supportive card to Governor Graves, and to his Lieutenant Governor, Garry Scherer, who is a member of this church, as they deal with the latest anti-evolutionary skirmish in the hallowed halls of the Kansas legislature. Next week, some thoughts about mandatory prayer in public schools, the voucher system, and our selfish refusal to recognize how class size affects the most precious resource we have: our children. Please come back.

Remind us once again, Eternal Spirit of truth, that ultimately all truth is one and we need never be afraid to seek it with open, sincere, and educated hearts. Amen.