

## CREATION AND EVOLUTION

### Creation or Evolution – do we have to choose?

Professor Denis Alexander

One of the surprising aspects of church life in the early 21st century is that many Christians think that the correct answer to this question is "yes": for them the terms 'creation' and 'evolution' are mutually incompatible. I say 'surprising' because I do not remember such questions even arising in the evangelical circles in which I was moving as a student back in the 1960s. Despite being brought up in Brethren assemblies, and then being President of the OICCU during my time at Oxford, I never knowingly encountered a young earth creationist during that time. Indeed we had never heard of creationism, it was not even on the horizon, and evolution was generally seen as simply the way that God had chosen to bring diversity into being, no more than that, but certainly no less, a tradition stretching back to those 19th century Christian leaders such as Frederick Temple, B.B. Warfield, Asa Gray, Henry Drummond and many others, who happily baptised Darwinism into the Christian doctrine of creation.

Clearly something has changed in the intervening decades. In a recent poll carried out by ComRes,<sup>1</sup> in response to an explicit definition of Young Earth Creationism ("the idea that God created the world sometime in the last 10,000 years"), 11% of UK respondents said they thought this was "definitely true" and 21% "probably true". In the year of Charles Darwin's double anniversary (birth: 1809; *On the Origin of Species*, 1859), it is now also more common to find antipathy towards evolution in evangelical circles. Why might this be so?

#### Evolution, creation and ideology

For biologists evolution is the best explanation that we have to explain the origins of all the biological diversity that we see around us on this planet. The 'genome' represents the sum total of all the genetic information contained in the DNA of a living organism. Variant genomes build different organisms. Evolution involves the differential ability of organisms with variant genomes to pass on their particular sets of variants to succeeding generations. When the variation becomes sufficiently high in an inter-breeding population, then speciation can occur, meaning the development of a new population that no longer breeds with the parent population.

Think about morphing software that gradually allows you to change one face into another. In a hundred tiny increments you cannot tell the difference between one face and the next. But look at face No 1 and face No 100 and they are quite different. That gives us some idea as to how evolution works through gradual change.

For Christians, just as God is sovereign over the genetic variation in our own bodies – for without that variation we would all be one giant clone, all humankind looking like identical twins – so God has also been sovereign in evolutionary history in fulfilling his intentions and purposes. If we can believe in God's sovereignty in the one context (our own personal histories), then there seems no good reason not to believe in his sovereignty in the other (evolutionary histories).

But the problem with evolution for some Christians is that the word itself has become loaded with all kinds of ideological connotations in the 150 years since the publication of the *Origin of Species*. Evolution has been used in support of every 'ism imaginable, including socialism, capitalism, racism, eugenics, and atheism. As George Bernard Shaw once remarked, Darwin 'had the luck to please everybody who had an axe to grind'. There is no doubt that many people see evolution as representing a particular ideology, rather than simply a scientific theory, and react accordingly.

That process continues to the present day with Richard Dawkins' campaign to try and invest evolution with the ideology of atheism. The irony is that the Dawkins mantra of "evolution = atheism" is also held by some Christians, who seem more willing to believe the atheists than those scientist Christians in the churches who see little problem in absorbing evolution into the biblical doctrine of creation.

### **Biblical literalism**

A growth in biblical literalism is also often cited as a reason why Christians have a problem with evolution. Of course this depends on what one means by 'literalism'. The 'literal' interpretation of a passage is surely the one intended by the biblical author. So taking Chapters like Genesis 1-3 and treating them as if they were scientific texts is not really being literal at all, but simply interpreting the texts inappropriately. We know they cannot be scientific literature for the simple reason that the specialised type of writing that we now refer to as scientific literature did not start emerging until the founding of the first scientific journals in the 17th century. In this kind of literature we find increasing efforts to give precisely defined meanings to words and ideas relating to the natural world in a way quite distinct from the biblical literature.

### **The power of modernism**

It is a tribute to the power of modernism (the idea that knowledge and culture are defined by scientific criteria) that some Christians think, like the modernists, that the only reliable kind of knowledge is scientific knowledge. Therefore they look to the Bible as a source of scientific knowledge (just as many Muslims do with the Qu'ran), as if science were the ultimate arbiter of reliable knowledge. But of course this is not the case. Most really important and thoroughly reliable knowledge, including of course biblical theology, is not scientific knowledge, but is none the worse for that. Once Christians realise that, then they should feel under no pressure to try and derive scientific truths from biblical texts or, even worse, to impose scientific interpretations upon such texts in a way that does injustice to authorial intent.

### **Anti-science trends amongst Christians**

A further problem contributing to the antipathy that some Christians display towards evolution stems from the anti-science movement within our culture that portrays science in a consistently bad light. Certainly science has been used for evil purposes; no one doubts that. But to write off the whole of science because of that is an over-reaction. For scientist Christians, science is a holy enterprise because we are called to explore God's creation and tell the truth about it to others to the best of our ability. Truth-telling is central to the scientific enterprise.

Evolution is the closest approximation to the truth that we currently have as biologists in order to

describe how God has created all living things on this planet. There are no good biblical or theological reasons for disbelieving this current scientific account, which as a matter of fact provides the framework for all current biological research throughout the world.

### **Conclusion**

We do not need to choose between creation or evolution, because the two words are referring to two levels of complementary discourse: God's will in creation to bring everything that exists into being, evolution the scientific understanding as to how He did it.

Does this answer all our questions? Clearly not. What about Adam and Eve? Death and the Fall? The problem of 'natural evil'? It was specifically to address those familiar questions that I wrote *Creation or Evolution – Do We Have to Choose?* (Monarch, 2008).

For centuries Christians have maintained that we hold the Book of God's Word and the Book of God's Works firmly together in both hands. Let us hold fast to that tradition. It is a tragedy to see Christians, the very ones who contributed so much to the emergence of modern science, now opposing science. Not only does this bring the Gospel into disrepute in the wider secular world, but answering "yes" to the question posed by our title is truly unnecessary, providing we maintain a robust biblical doctrine of God as Creator.

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<sup>1</sup> Nick Spencer and Denis Alexander, *Rescuing Darwin – God and Evolution in Britain Today*, Theos, 2009.