

Evolution: A Matter of Belief?

Rev. Kenneth Read-Brown
First Parish in Hingham (Old Ship Church)
Unitarian Universalist
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Readings

from the *Tao Te Ching*, chapter 42

translated by Man-Ho Kwok, Martin Palmer, and Jay Ramsay

The Tao
gives birth to the One:
The One
gives birth to the two;
The two
give birth to the three –
The Three give birth to every living thing.
All things are held in yin, and carry yang:
And they are held together in the *chi* of teeming energy.

from a letter written by Charles Darwin in 1861:

With respect to the theological view of the question: This is always painful to me. I am bewildered. I had no intention to write atheistically, but I own that I cannot see as plainly as others do, and as I should wish to do, evidence of design and beneficence on all sides of us. There seems to me too much misery in the world. I cannot persuade myself that a beneficent and omnipotent God would have designedly created the *Ichneumonidae* with the express intention of their feeding within the living bodies of caterpillars or that a cat should play with mice... On the other hand, I cannot anyhow be contented to view this wonderful universe, and especially the nature of man, and to conclude that everything is the result of brute force. I am inclined to look at everything as resulting from designed laws, with the details, whether good or bad, left to the working out of what we may call chance. Not that this notion at *all* satisfies me. I feel most deeply that the whole subject is too profound for the human intellect. A dog might as well speculate on the mind of Newton. Let each man hope and believe what he can.

Sermon

Does it make any difference what we believe or accept when it comes to the origins of the universe, of life, and of human life in particular?

Well, to begin with I'm reminded of Margaret Fuller, the 19th century transcendentalist, who famously exclaimed "I accept the universe!" When told of her affirmation, the English poet Thomas Carlyle is said to have responded, "By God, she'd better!"

In other words, the universe, life, history... is what it is, regardless of what we may believe it to be. Our views, whether based on religious faith or scientific research, are either right or wrong.

That said, what we believe about the nature of things also makes a difference to our attitude toward life.

For example, wouldn't you have one sort of attitude toward life if you believed that we were created 6,000 years ago by a God who was testing each of us along the way to see if we deserve to go to a place of eternal bliss after we die or to a place of eternal torment... and quite another attitude if you accept the scientific story of creation, beginning with the big bang 15 billion years ago, give or take a couple of billion, and proceeding through the evolution of the universe, and then the evolution of life on earth, and then... here we are?

And whether or not you believed that 15 billion year story to be guided by a divine hand of some sort might make a difference too, wouldn't it?

To offer one example: What he came to believe about such things certainly made a difference to Charles Darwin, that fellow responsible for so many heated debates concerning the origins of life – from his day to ours.

Darwin had for a time studied for the ministry, but his interest in geology led him quite elsewhere, led him on the five year voyage of the *Beagle*, studying geology and the varied species of life on several continents, a voyage which then led to a lifetime of further painstaking research, which led to his theory of natural selection... a lifetime marked by a gradual loss of religious faith, at least faith of the traditional Anglican sort. To be sure there were some less than orthodox folks in Darwin's family – including Unitarians! But even so, all that he came to understand through his research was transformative when it came to matters of religious faith.

When he published *On the Origin of Species By Means of Natural Selection* in 1859 Darwin still affirmed a creator God, but his hold even on this belief was tenuous. The years went by. And Darwin died not an atheist, but a self-confessed agnostic. We hear echoes of this already in the 1861 letter which Kitty read earlier.

It must be noted that his loss of faith had not only to do with the conclusions concerning the evolution of life to which his (and others') scientific research had led him, but also with the death of his ten-year-old daughter Annie. Only those who have experienced such loss can know how devastating it is. We do know that for Darwin this was surely one more mark not only against the God of *Genesis*, but also against the notion of a beneficent God of any variety guiding the creation along the path of evolution; and it was of course a mark striking infinitely deeper for him than the kinds of examples of cruelty and suffering in the natural world which he noted in the letter we heard.

Yes, the years went on. And Darwin's agnosticism was even more clearly expressed in another letter composed near the end of his life, in 1873 (to a correspondent at the University of Utrecht), in which he dismisses various arguments for God and concludes by saying that "The safest conclusion seems to me to be that the whole subject is beyond the scope of man's intellect..."

So, we can safely say that Darwin's research and the conclusions at which he arrived based on his research changed not only his beliefs about life and its origins and development, but changed too *his* attitude toward life as expressed in his loss of unquestioning religious faith. Darwin's ideas, I hardly need say, were transformative for many others as well. And his ideas were, as you also well know, controversial in religious circles at the time – and ever since.

Indeed, Darwin and his ideas are still a matter of sometimes vituperative debate.

The pollsters and pundits divide our nation into red states and blue states. But how about this division for you: A Harris poll from just three years ago, among its other findings, reports that a little over half of all Americans do not believe that humans developed from other species. And almost half do not believe that plants and animals evolved from other species. 64% believe that humans were created directly by God. And only 12% of Americans believe that only the scientific theory of evolution should be taught in our public schools; 27% believe that only either creationism or intelligent design should be taught; and 55% believe that all three should be taught in our public schools.

I don't know about you, but even though I have seen such poll numbers before, I still find these figures utterly astonishing.

Among other things, these numbers suggest to me that we are failing as a nation to distinguish rationally between scientific truths and religious beliefs – not to mention that we are failing to teach our children this critically important distinction.

To be sure, the scientific fact of the evolution of the universe and of life, and the scientific theory of natural selection which accounts for the evolution of life (a theory which itself is still evolving; but like any good theory and unlike the theory of intelligent design, is testable), contradict religious stories of creation when those stories are literally understood. So there will always be some – those who believe in their religious stories absolutely literally – who experience the teaching of evolution as a threat to their faith.

But the truths of religious stories and of religious teachings and religious faith need not be understood as literal attempts at scientific explanation. The stories in *Genesis*, like the creation stories of hundreds of cultures, work at a metaphorical, spiritual, psychological, and mythological level – whether or not they are literally true. Many, many people of faith understand this. The Catholic Church, to give one pretty significant example, accepts in broad outline the story of evolution as science gives it to us.

Religious faith and science need not conflict. One is poetry, the other prose. One is true spiritually; the other is true factually.

As for me... I find my truths where I find them, like a good Unitarian Universalist, from many sources – tested by reason, yet emerging from poetry and myth, from ancient scripture as well as yesterday's conversation and today's first hand experience.

A personal anecdote:

Many years ago I attended a conference about which I remember little. But I remember this much. We had just heard a presentation concerning liberal UU Christian theology. It was a good presentation. I learned things.

And then we had a break.

As it happens, the conference was held near a beach; and I went walking. It was a splendid afternoon. Cold, clear – the blue sky creating the deep blue of the sea, in turn mirroring the sky; a bracing breeze; wind-swept and wind-shaped dunes.

And as I walked I found myself feeling liberated from a relatively small story into an infinitely larger story, the earth story, the life story, the universe story.

It is not that I don't find meaning in the Christian story, in the life of Jesus, in the parables, in his teaching and example. Because I do. You have heard me preach from the life and teaching of Jesus. But the life and teachings of Jesus, along with the teachings of all the world's wisdom traditions, from which I also preach, are nested within this larger story of the universe – a story which neither Jesus nor Mohammed nor Confucius nor Socrates could have

begun to imagine. (Michael Dowd, who has helped to shape some of my thinking on these matters, puts this all very well in his book *Thank God for Evolution*.)

Well... this personal recollection leads me to ask you a question. It is not about which story you *believe*; rather, it is a question about the story's influence on your attitude toward life. Which story makes you feel more alive?

Now, is such a question a test of truth value? Not really. But it does, for me anyway, answer a question sometimes posed by those fundamentalist religious believers who make the claim that to believe in (or accept, as I would put it) the scientific facts and theories (and story) of the evolution of the universe and of life is to be condemned to experiencing life as meaningless. After all, this line of argument goes, if life and human life in particular is the result of nothing other than blind and random chance... then where is meaning and purpose to be had?

But my *experience* is different than that. I find that the scientific story (by which I mean the facts as we assemble them into a narrative) of the evolution of the universe and of life to be as bracing as that fresh sea-breeze on a clear day those many years ago. What a gift this story is! I feel *more* alive, not less, as I contemplate the grand story in which we are still living, of which we are after all a part. I do *not* conclude that my life is "nothing but the result of blind and random chance." That would be to go as much beyond what we actually know as it would be to say that a Creator God got the whole shebang rolling. On this question of ultimate beginnings I am, with Darwin, agnostic.

But I do know that this grand, incredible story of deep time and deep space enlivens my experience of life.

And this is *not* how I feel if I imagine believing in the Christian scheme of salvation *narrowly and literally understood*. I respect those who feel otherwise. But for me, that story, when literally understood, just feels too small, too constricting... and it feels disconnected from life as I experience it every day.

And then... this is not just about me! There are broader – and important – implications for all of us at this moment in history. To believe in our religious stories too literally – whether Christian or Muslim or whatever – condemns us (by which I mean the human species) to continuing religious and cultural conflict. We must be transcending these stories rather than defending each of our stories against those who have other stories; we must open the doors and windows of our souls and spirits to the world of the Great Story of the Universe which includes all stories and all people, all life, rather than shutting ourselves up in the little room of our one story only.

Unitarian Universalists have been doing this sort of thing for a long time. But we are not alone in this. Liberal Christians, liberal Muslims, religious liberals of every stripe understand this too. The Catholic Church itself accepts the reality of the scientific story of evolution; and strives, sometimes haltingly, to find common ground, or at least friendly relations, with other traditions.

So – evolution is *not* a matter of belief – whatever the pollsters and those polls might say. The development of the universe and of life over time is an established fact. And by what process that development took place is well-tested theory, even though there is much yet to understand.

But evolution *is* compatible with religious belief and ancient wisdom when such belief and wisdom is understood as it ought to be understood – as poetry and metaphor, as pointing to spiritual truths, not scientific truths.

And in one of the most important ways, the scientific story of evolution and the highest wisdom of most of the world's religious traditions reach at least one conclusion that is quite similar: *we are all related*. Evolution teaches this quite directly: we all descend from common ancestors... the stars and the earliest forms of life. Religion uses metaphor and myth to teach the same truth more poetically: we are all children of God, we are all connected in the Hindu net of Indra, we are part of the Buddhist web of interdependent co-arising.

But by whatever route we reach this truth, on our too-often fractious planet and in our too-often fractious nation, it is a truth we need now more than ever. A truth which unites rather than divides, a truth which transcends while at the same time still honors differences.

So, here are a few questions with which to end this morning – spiritual questions with political implications in this political year (or maybe they are political questions with spiritual implications): How do we understand ourselves in the world? Americans as separate from, better than the rest of the world? Christians as separate from, better than the rest of the world? Human beings as separate from, better than other species?

Or do we understand ourselves as part and parcel of one another, related, cousins, all part of one story – a fact, not just a belief?

And which view is more likely to promote the survival, health, and well-being of the human species – for that matter of all life?

I expect – I at least hope – that the answers are clear.

So may it be.