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Let's accept the fault line between faith and science

By Edward O. Wilson

If the perennial culture war between science and fundamentalist Christianity about evolution seems insoluble, the reason is that it is insoluble.

The fault line, which affects conservative belief not just in Christianity but in almost all other religions around the world, can be found along the outer edge of biology. On one side is the acceptance of evolution of all life independently of God held by a small minority of Americans. On the other lies a spread of beliefs, from denial that evolution ever occurred to acceptance that it did but under the direction of God.

FOCUS ON FAITH

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Darwin in his 1859 *On the Origin of Species*, has not been narrowed by the endless debates that ensued. Quite the contrary, it has been steadily widened by the growth of science.

Modern biology has arrived at two major principles that are supported by so much interlocking evidence as to rank as laws of nature. The first is that all biological elements and processes are ultimately obedient to the laws of physics and chemistry. The second principle is that all life has evolved by random mutation and natural selection.

Although as many as half of Americans choose not to believe it, evolution, including the origin of species, is an undoubted fact. Furthermore, the evidence supporting the principle of natural selection has improved year by year, and it is accepted with virtual unanimity by the biologists who have put it to the test.

The evolving mind

The great question remaining is whether the human mind originated the same way. Many scientists, I among them, think it did so evolve. Nevertheless, how all of the complex operations of the brain fit together to generate consciousness remains one of the major unsolved problems of science.

In the explanation of evolution, and especially of the human mind, might intelligent design provide a compromise between biology and religion? This now-famous proposal asserts that evolution is real but guided by a supernatural intelligence. Evidence, however, consists solely of a default argument followed by a non-sequitur. Its logic is this: Biologists have explained how some complex systems, such as the human eye and brain, could have evolved by random mutations and natural selection. More important, proponents say such an explanation is impossible. Therefore, they claim, a higher intelligence must have guided evolution.

Unfortunately, no positive evidence exists for such a claim. No scientific theory has been proffered or even imagined to explain the transcription from a supernatural force to organic reality. This absence of the elementary requirements of science is why intelligent design is better taught as religion or science fiction. Thankfully, educators and administrators, including most recently those in Dover, Pa. — are arriving at a similar conclusion.

Scientists are not opposed to the search for intelligent design, only to the claim that it is supported by scientific evidence. To think otherwise is to misunderstand the culture of science. Discoveries and the testing of discoveries are the currency of science; they are our silver and gold.

If positive and repeatable evidence were adduced for an intelligent force that created and guided the evolution of life, it would deservedly rank as one of the greatest scientific achievements of all time. I doubt that there is a researcher alive who would not race to make such a breakthrough if the minimum criteria of science could be met.

Religious conservatives risk a loss in credibility by signing on to intelligent design in the absence of a testable theory or positive evidence. Research biologists are in the business of uncovering steps for the autonomous origin of complex systems, and they have become very good at it. As the number of unsolved systems dwindles, so will the idea that a supernatural force intervenes in evolution.

A trend is clear: Biology is biology, conservative Christianity is conservative Christianity. The two world views — science-based explanations and faith-based religions — cannot be reconciled.

Earth's Creation

What then are we to do? Put the differences aside, I say. Meet on common ground where we can find it. An excellent example taking form is the cooperation between science and religion, the two most powerful forces in the world, to protect Earth's vanishing natural habitats and species — in other words, the Creation, however we believe it came into existence.

That might not be as difficult as it seems at first. There is not a great deal of variation among segments of society in ethics, patriotism and respect for the law. American civilization was born of both religion and the science-based Enlightenment. Science will go on expanding its way, and religion will continue to evolve its way. Our culture is strong in civility and common sense. As always, we'll work things out.

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