

TIME

FROM THE MAGAZINE

Sunday, Aug. 07, 2005

Can You Believe in God and Evolution?

Four experts with very different views weigh in on the underlying question.

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FRANCIS COLLINS

Director, National Human Genome Research Institute

I see no conflict in what the Bible tells me about God and what science tells me about nature. Like St. Augustine in A.D. 400, I do not find the wording of Genesis 1 and 2 to suggest a scientific textbook but a powerful and poetic description of God's intentions in creating the universe. The mechanism of creation is left unspecified. If God, who is all powerful and who is not limited by space and time, chose to use the mechanism of evolution to create you and me, who are we to say that wasn't an absolutely elegant plan? And if God has now given us the intelligence and the opportunity to discover his methods, that is something to celebrate.

I lead the Human Genome Project, which has now revealed all of the 3 billion letters of our own DNA instruction book. I am also a Christian. For me scientific discovery is also an occasion of worship.

Nearly all working biologists accept that the principles of variation and natural selection explain how multiple species evolved from a common ancestor over very long periods of time. I find no compelling examples that this process is insufficient to explain the rich variety of life forms present on this planet. While no one could claim yet to have ferreted out every detail of how evolution works, I do not see any significant "gaps" in the progressive development of life's complex structures that would require divine intervention. In any case, efforts to insert God into the gaps of contemporary human understanding of nature have not fared well in the past, and we should be careful not to do that now.

Science's tools will never prove or disprove God's existence. For me the fundamental answers about the meaning of life come not from science but from a consideration of the origins of our uniquely human sense of right and wrong, and from the historical record of Christ's life on Earth.

STEVEN PINKER

Psychology professor, Harvard University

It's natural to think that living things must be the handiwork of a designer. But it was also natural to think that the sun went around the earth. Overcoming naive impressions to figure out how things really work is one of humanity's highest callings.

Our own bodies are riddled with quirks that no competent engineer would have planned but that disclose a history of trial-and-error tinkering: a retina installed backward, a seminal duct that hooks over the ureter like a garden hose snagged on a tree, goose bumps that uselessly try to warm us by fluffing up long-gone fur.

The moral design of nature is as bungled as its engineering design. What twisted sadist would have invented a parasite that blinds millions of people or a gene that covers babies with excruciating blisters? To adapt a Yiddish expression about God: If an intelligent designer lived on Earth, people would break his windows.

The theory of natural selection explains life as we find it, with all its quirks and tragedies. We can prove mathematically that it is capable of producing adaptive life forms and track it in computer simulations, lab experiments and real ecosystems. It doesn't pretend to solve one mystery (the origin of complex life) by slipping in another (the origin of a complex designer).

Many people who accept evolution still feel that a belief in God is necessary to give life meaning and to justify morality. But that is exactly backward. In practice, religion has given us stonings, inquisitions and 9/11. Morality comes from a commitment to treat others as we wish to be treated, which follows from the realization that none of us is the sole occupant of the universe. Like physical evolution, it does not require a white-coated technician in the sky.

MICHAEL BEHE

Biochemistry professor, Lehigh University; Senior fellow, Discovery Institute

Sure, it's possible to believe in both God and evolution. I'm a Roman Catholic, and Catholics have always understood that God could make life any way he wanted to. If he wanted to make it by the playing out of natural law, then who were we to object? We were taught in parochial school that Darwin's theory was the best guess at how God could have made life.

I'm still not against Darwinian evolution on theological grounds. I'm against it on scientific grounds. I think God could have made life using apparently random mutation and natural selection. But my reading of the scientific evidence is that he did not do it that way, that there was a more active guiding. I think that we are all descended from some single cell in the distant past but that that cell and later parts of life were intentionally produced as the result of intelligent activity. As a Christian, I say that intelligence is very likely to be God.

Several Christian positions are theologically consistent with the theory of mutation and selection. Some people believe that God is guiding the process from moment to moment. Others think he set up the universe from the Big Bang to unfold like a computer program. Others take scientific positions that are indistinguishable from those atheist materialists might take but say that their nonscientific intuitions or philosophical considerations or the existence of the mind lead them to deduce that there is a God.

I used to be part of that last group. I just think now that the science is not nearly as strong as they think.

ALBERT MOHLER

President, Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

Given the human tendency toward inconsistency, there are people who will say they hold both positions. But you cannot coherently affirm the Christian-truth claim and the dominant model of evolutionary theory at the same time.

Personally, I am a young-Earth creationist. I believe the Bible is adequately clear about how God created the world, and that its most natural reading points to a six-day creation that included not just the animal and plant species but the earth itself. But there have always been Evangelicals who asserted that it might have taken longer. What they should not be asserting is the idea of God's having set the rules for evolution and then stepped back. And even less so, the model held by much of the scientific academy: of evolution as the result of a random process of mutation and selection.

For one thing, there's the issue of human "descent." Evangelicals must absolutely affirm the special creation of humans in God's image, with no physical evolution from

any nonhuman species. Just as important, the Bible clearly teaches that God is involved in every aspect and moment in the life of His creation and the universe. That rules out the image of a kind of divine watchmaker.

I think it's interesting that many of evolution's most ardent academic defenders have moved away from the old claim that evolution is God's means to bring life into being in its various forms. More of them are saying that a truly informed belief in evolution entails a stance that the material world is all there is and that the natural must be explained in purely natural terms. They're saying that anyone who truly feels this way must exclude God from the story. I think their self-analysis is correct. I just couldn't disagree more with their premise.

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