

EVOLUTIONARY RELIGION
A Sermon by Rev. Dr. Ed Piper
 Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Waynesboro
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Let me begin my sermon with a visual image: a painting by the Spanish artist Goya titled “Men Fighting with Sticks.” In reflecting on this painting, the French philosopher of science Michel Serres writes: “A pair of enemies brandishing sticks is fighting in the midst of a patch of quicksand. Attentive to the other’s tactics, each answers blow for blow, counterattacking and dodging. . . . With every move they make, a slimy hole swallows them up, so that they are gradually burying themselves together. How quickly depends on how aggressive they are: the more heated the struggle, the more violent their moves become and the faster they sink in. The belligerents don’t notice the abyss they’re rushing into; from the outside, however, we see it clearly.” [quoted by Michael S. Hogue, “Global Warming and Religious Stick Fighting,” *Cross Currents*, Spring 2007, p. 119]

This painting offers a rich metaphor for understanding the futility of all kinds of “blind” conflict, from the arms race to global warming. It might also serve as a metaphor for the never-ending debate between advocates and opponents of the theory of evolution, who continue to devote a great deal of energy attacking one another’s view about the origins of the natural world. Meanwhile, the natural world that surrounds them continues to deteriorate.

This morning I am assuming that the people in this room do not need to be persuaded about the validity of the theory of evolution. Instead, I would like to reflect on its religious implications. Let me first acknowledge that for millions of Americans, the title of my sermon, “evolutionary religion,” is an oxymoron—a self-contradictory phrase like the term “friendly fire” used by the military. “According to a 2005 poll by the Pew Research Center, 42 percent of Americans hold strict creationist views that ‘living things have existed in their present form since the beginning of time’ compared to 48 percent who believe that humans ‘evolved over time.’ Evolution has made news as the fight over teaching evolution has entered the courts and the school boards yet again. To that point, the Pew survey found that 64 percent said that they were open to the idea of teaching creationism in addition to evolution in public schools, and more than half of those individuals [i.e., one-third of all respondents] said they think evolution should be **replaced** by creationism in biology classrooms.” [Michael Shermer, *Why Darwin Matters*, p. xvii-xviii]

At the opposite end of the debate about evolution are those who use the theory of evolution to try to **disprove the very existence of God**. One of their most avid and eloquent spokesmen is the British biologist Richard Dawkins. The title of his recent book, *The God Delusion*, makes his position transparent. In nearly 400 pages of elegant and sometimes humorous prose, Dawkins attacks the various arguments for the existence of a designer God. He argues that “Darwin and his successors have shown how living creatures, with their spectacular statistical improbability and appearance of design, have evolved by slow, gradual degrees from simple beginnings. We can now safely say,” Dawkins concludes, “that the illusion of design in living creatures is just that—an illusion.” [p. 158]

Fortunately, there is a growing middle ground between these two extreme positions. One of the most earnest attempts at compromise has been mounted by Michael Dowd, an ordained minister in the United Church of Christ who calls himself an “evolutionary evangelist,” and his

Unitarian Universalist wife Connie Barlow, who is a science writer. They have spent the past seven years traveling around the country spreading the word about how we might bridge the gap between science and religion. Dowd's book titled *Thank God for Evolution!* represents an admirable attempt to reconcile traditional Christian faith with the facts of evolutionary science.

Michael Dowd calls his approach **creatheism**. (Dowd: "cree-uh-THEISM"; Barlow: "cree-ATHEISM"). He insists this is more than just a clever term. "For creatheists 'God' is a holy name for Ultimate Reality—the all-encompassing Wholeness—that which includes yet transcends all other realities. . . . Both creatheism and atheism affirm that all language of Ultimate Reality, without exception, is metaphorical (i.e., there is not an invisible being up there somewhere). But creatheism goes on to say that, if we are going to relate to [Ultimate] Reality personally, it is both acceptable and beneficial to use metaphors that engage the heart—metaphors such as Father, Mother, Beloved, Larger Self, Higher Power, and many more. Creatheism is still, of course, a newborn. It is a term that has a long way to go to prove its merit. Nevertheless, for Connie and me it has already done its job: it has bridged our differences." [pp.117-18]

William Murry, who is the former president of Meadville Lombard Theological School, says that evolution has generated three profound transformations. First, it has transformed our **self-understanding**. Writing in the Spring 2009 issue of *UU World* magazine, he says, "Before Darwin we humans thought of ourselves as in the words of the Psalmist, 'a little lower than the angels' and infused with an immortal soul. But if we are, as evolution tells us, wholly natural rather than part natural and part supernatural, then the ideas of immortality and divine creation in God's image become problematic. We are not as special as we once thought. We are simply the most highly evolved animal that natural selection has produced (so far as we know). However, that does not mean we are not beings of 'inherent worth and dignity.' We are of great worth precisely because we are highly evolved and because of what we have created—great art, beautiful music, inspiring literature, magnificent architecture—and because of our ability to love, to do justice, and to live ethically." [Murry, "Natural Faith," *UU World*, Spring 2009, p. 28]

A second major impact of evolutionary theory is in our **understanding of God**. "Before Darwin the belief in an omnipotent divine being seemed self-evident in the Western world. Many scientists and philosophers viewed God as the First Cause, the creator of the laws of nature, and the being who designed the world and its many complex inhabitants. By showing how the complexity of living things could arise from the process of natural selection, however, Darwin removed the need for a Designer. Does this mean that we can no longer believe in God? Not necessarily, but it does mean that our conception of deity changes. It means that it is now more difficult to think of God as a personal supernatural being who is both all-powerful and all-knowing. . . . Instead, many liberal theologians now conceive God as a power within the natural universe rather than a source outside it." [Murry, p. 28]

"Is it really possible," Michael Shermer asks, "that this entire cosmological multiverse was designed and exists for one tiny subgroup of a single species on one planet in a lone galaxy in that solitary bubble universe? It seems unlikely. Herein lies the spiritual side of science If religion and spirituality are supposed to generate awe and humility in the face of the creator, what could be more awesome and humbling than the deep space discovered by . . . the cosmologists, and the deep time discovered by Darwin and the evolutionists?" [p. 161]

Finally, evolutionary theory holds the potential for transforming our **relationship with the natural world**. "Despite the great variety of life forms that have evolved over the millennia, the awareness, rooted in evolutionary biology, of the kinship of all living organisms leads us to

regard all human beings as members of one extended family. . . . This sense of unity arising out of Darwinian thinking provides a deep spiritual grounding for the commitment of Unitarian Universalists to a strong environmental ethic. The Seventh Principle of the UUA emphasizes this insight in affirming the ‘interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.’ . . . Our connection to nature is a profound spiritual experience that evokes awe, reverence, and respect for all living things.

“Every religion needs a story, and Darwin’s idea has given us a place in a new story with multiple layers of meaning. That story, the great epic of cosmic and biological evolution, is a **religious** story because it calls us out of our little self-centered worlds to see ourselves as part of a great living system. It gives a larger meaning and a broader ethic to our lives. As Darwin wrote at the end of *The Origin of Species*: “There is grandeur in this view of life.” [Murry, p. 29] I will close with a poem by Hermann Hesse:

Sometimes when a bird cries out, or the wind sweeps through a tree,
Or a dog howls in a far-off farm, I hold still and listen a long time.
My world turns and goes back to the place where, a thousand forgotten years ago,
The bird and the blowing wind were like me, and were my brothers.
My soul turns into a tree, and an animal, and a cloud bank.
Then changed and odd it comes home and asks me questions.
What should I reply?

[Elizabeth Roberts & Elias Amidon (eds.), *Earth Prayers*, p. 7]