

Darwin's Gift to Religions

Evolution Sunday, Epi. 6, b, Feb. 15, 2009

Psalm 8

A couple of years ago former U.S. Senator Rick Santorum of Pennsylvania was talking with a National Public Radio interviewer about his new book entitled, *It Takes A Family*. The interviewer asked him why in the middle of the book he made such a strident attack against evolution. Why, the interviewer asked, did it matter so much to him?

Santorum responded saying that it is tremendously important. It tells us where we come from. If you and I are just a mistake, an accident of nature, that places a different moral demand on us – or actually it doesn't put any moral demands on us! That's different from us being the intentional creation of a Supreme Being that does have moral demands of us.ⁱ If we see our origins in a natural process, according to Senator Santorum, the whole idea of morality, he thinks, necessarily becomes some kind of illusion.

Senator Santorum was expressing one of the major obstacles for many on the conservative side of Christianity of Judaism of Islam, all of whom shared the same 2 different stories of creation we find in Genesis Chapters 1 & 2 and all of whom find it very difficult to accept that evolution does, indeed, describe the way life on earth has developed into the estimated 5 to 30 million different species of plants and animals.ⁱⁱ

Now, on this 200th anniversary of the birth of Charles Darwin and the 150th anniversary of his publication of the groundbreaking *On the Origin of Species*ⁱⁱⁱ, I have no intention this morning of joining the more than 11,000 Christian clergy^{iv} around the country on this Evolution Weekend who are trying to convince their congregations that it is possible to be a Christian and also believe in evolution. I'm

going to assume that all of you already think that appropriate. And if you aren't yet convinced, I'll have some endnotes appended to this sermon posted online that will do the job.^{v vi}

No, despite the embarrassingly immature fracas in the Texas Board of Education these days, since it is a settled fact among the scientific community that evolution does describe the way all the variety of life arose, I would rather share with you what some of the implications of this way of thinking are for those of us who both believe in God and also believe in evolution's descriptive power.

In all our Western religious traditions that have relied on the stories of Genesis to help understand the beginnings of the world, there have also always been mystics, those who understood another aspect of the deepest reality differently. Our ordinary consciousness is an objectifying one. The structure of the world in the state of consciousness that you and I normally live is subject -- object. I, the subject, am perceiving the world and all elements of it, as objects. That which resides within the skin of my body defines me the subject is a being. Everything outside of me is object. As this mode develops further, even our bodies and our own thinking itself can just as well become objects for the Subject that is the center of our universe, the "I."

But if we reflect on it, all of us have also transcended that subject/object split from time to time. It frequently happens when we are dreaming. It happens in the depths of prayer and meditation and worship. It sometimes happens in the ecstatic moments of union with those we love (which let me add aside, is one of the spiritual benefits of a Valentines Day.) As the great German philosopher Martin Buber clarified in his momentous book *I and Thou*, this alternate mode of being

where the subject/object split temporarily resolves, is the great experiential anchor at the root of our hunger to worship and at the heart of living religions.

Though this experience is rare for most people, it is so powerful that the celebration of what one experiences in them and learns from them can alter the way we understand life itself. These moments give rise to the exalted exclamations in the book of Psalms and elsewhere in Scripture. It is this spirit, this experience of deep unity which sets apart the mystic from other people and from other states of mind in the mystic herself. And further, this experience is consistently described as feeling like a union with all other beings human, animal and plant. All feels intimately connected. There is no me and not me. All is one.

One of the fascinating gifts of a Darwinian perspective is that that sensibility -- that mystical union -- that experience of union in the inner world, accurately describes -- according to Darwin -- the way the different life forms actually did develop. We share with birds and crocodiles and gorillas and earthworms and dragonflies and bacteria an un-broken continuity through time back to the very first life form on our planet. Every type of creature developing in small ways from its predecessor over billions of years all from the same source and with remarkable similarity in genetic makeup. 99% of our human genetic makeup and a chimpanzee's, is identical! We all are one. We are all just different adaptations of the same life force seeking wherever it can to express itself, to overcome every resistance to its own living.

Friday I walked with our dog, Moby, out on the trail of a park near our house. Pondering this notion of life striving against the forces that would repress it, I recognized that day -- and I hope you will recognize later on today -- that everywhere I could look there was life overcoming inanimate rock. Here and there

you could see some white rock^{vii} erupting on occasion, but clearly the vast majority of the space that surrounded us on our walk was covered by trees and grasses and leaves falling from the trees to the ground and vines and birds and worms and crickets and over most of our path a brown soil composted of the remains of all the life that had preceded us and would soon be feeding the next stages of life there. It was hard to find a place where life had not for the moment overcome that which might pull it back into inanimate elements!

I know that this is to some degree an illusion, because if you go beneath the thin top layer of earth the inanimate reigns. If you go very far up in our atmosphere again, the inanimate reigns supreme. But in this vital, robust crust of our earth is the most amazing diversity of life in climate after climate and environment after environment. Life is victorious, victorious, over the forces that would hold us back.^{viii}

And here we find another gift to us from the vision of Darwin. Pre-Darwinian thought and those who continue to resist it, would suggest that Almighty God had it in some particular time in the past created *ex nihilo*, that is, out of nothing, all the universe and each of the species of creatures and plants and microbes that inhabit our planet. Now think of that carefully, if creation was “once and for all,” if there was no clear Darwinian style lineage of life form to previous life form and the ongoing opportunity for more such changes, then we earthlings would be of all creatures most to be pitied.^{ix} For as we look around our earth every single day an estimated 35-125^x species of plants and animals disappear from the face of the earth forever, up to 46,000 species a year, are becoming extinct by changes in climate or changes in competition with other species with which they strove. If creation was once and for all, and not an ongoing phenomena, how long

would it be that in our quick elimination of species from the earth that there would be no chance of life progressing or surviving at all? Eventually all species on Earth will come and go, according to Darwinian prospects. Even humanity.

Which leads us to another insight that we humans might take forward from Darwinian thought. As Psalm 8 pronounces for us...

“...what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them? Yet you have made them a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honor. You have given them dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under their feet”

So close to the God. So advantaged over the birds of the air and the fish of the sea. Darwinian thought would offer this insight: human beings have through genetic progression and cultural advancement taken our particular place in the community of species. We are unique in our use of language and symbolism, far advanced in our cultural life in our moral development and more, but we are still a just one species of the panoply of creatures and certainly not the only one of any value or with potential.

Yet even though Psalm 8 makes it appear that we are currently the pinnacles of creation, Darwinian thought would lead us to expect that something more may be a rising even as we speak. Perhaps some small but significant genetic changes in some humans will give them a new and advantageous trajectory of development. Or perhaps those changes will arise in the chimpanzee genetic makeup, the gorilla, or perhaps the dolphin. In the same way that Roman culture overcame the Greek culture -- even though the Greek culture looked like it would dominate inexorably -- new creatures that will eventually be of a different species than *Homo sapiens* may take our place at the top of the hierarchy.^{xi} As people of faith, rather than recoil from such a vision, we can, instead, see here again is the guidance of God's

evolutionary plan to produce new life forms ever more able to relate thankfully, more worshipfully and more helpfully to God and to the rich web of earthly life.

Scientists now believe that the earliest forms of life began about 4 billion years ago and that earth is theoretically capable of sustaining life for another 4 billion years before our dying Sun destroys our home planet. If the length of time there has been life on earth was a year, human beings have been only around for 31 seconds^{xii} and from early Biblical times to our own, a mere 1 sec. We've got another 40,000 times that long here before the Sun gets us!

With such a long road ahead for us, is it so hard to imagine that another creature similar to us but different and advantaged over us would take our place given that time span? If we are wise and fortunate enough to keep our planet in livable shape, it would seem much more reasonable that there is more positive evolving to come.^{xiii}

Fr. Teilhard de Chardin, a Catholic Jesuit priest and paleontologist, in his book *The Phenomenon of Man* published 50 years ago wrote "The consciousness of each of us is evolution looking at itself and reflecting upon itself...[Humanity] is not the center of the universe as once we thought in our simplicity, but something much more wonderful – [Humanity is] the arrow pointing the way to the final unification of the world in terms of life.[Humanity] alone constitutes the last-born, the freshest, the most complicated, the most subtle of all the successive layers of life." (pp.221-222)

The goal he envisions is a new permanence of the fleeting world that the mystic dips her toes into, a new stage of formation called Noogenesis – that is a united planetary consciousness.

Let me suggest that this is our emerging challenge, to follow the leadings of the Spirit of God forward beyond merely claiming a common destiny with all human beings – as hard as that it is to do-to a radical new common consciousness with all life itself.

Let us close then with that visionary Chardin’s prayer,

“Lord, we know and feel that you are everywhere around us; but it seems that there is a veil before our eyes. Let the light of your countenance shine upon us in its fullness. May your deep brilliance light up the innermost part of the [shadows] in which we move. And, to that end, send us your Spirit, whose flaming action alone can operate the birth and achievement of the great transformation which sums up all inward perfection and towards the unity for which your creation yearns.”^{xiv}

ⁱ The following text is in the article on Rick Santorum at Wikipedia: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rick_Santorum

“In 2001, Santorum tried unsuccessfully to insert language which came to be known as the "[Santorum Amendment](#)" into the [No Child Left Behind](#) bill that sought to promote the teaching of [intelligent design](#) while questioning the academic standing of [evolution in public schools](#).^[22] The amendment, crafted with the assistance of the [Discovery Institute](#),^{[22][23]} would have required schools to discuss supposed controversies surrounding scientific topics, and gave the theory of evolution as an example, opening the door for intelligent design as an opposing theory to be presented in science classrooms.^[24] A federal court in Santorum's own state, along with the majority of scientific organizations, including the [American Association for the Advancement of Science](#), say the Institute has manufactured the controversy they want to teach by promoting a false perception that evolution is "a theory in crisis", portraying it as being the subject of wide controversy and debate within the scientific community.^{[25][26][27]}

Though not included in the final version of the Act made law, the language from the amendment was included in a report attached to the Act known as the Conference Report. The Discovery Institute and many intelligent design proponents, including two Ohio Congressmen, have repeatedly invoked this to suggest that intelligent design should be included in public school science standards as an alternative to evolution.^{[28][29]}

ⁱⁱ <http://www.enviroliteracy.org/article.php/58.html>

ⁱⁱⁱ Complete text online at <http://www.talkorigins.org/faqs/origin.html>

^{iv} <http://theclergyletterproject.org/>

^v Start with www.teachthescience.org which will lead to a host of sites with convincing evidence on this matter.

^{vi} A fine short video by evolution educator Ken Miller makes the powerful case.
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zi8FfMBYCKk>

^{vii} Even this rock around Austin is limestone, the sedimentary rock that is deposited shells of formerly living sea creatures!

^{viii} In the closing sentences of *On the Origin of Species* Darwin expressed a similar awe and wonder...

“It is interesting to contemplate an entangled bank, clothed with many plants of many kinds, with birds singing on the bushes, with various insects flitting about, and with worms crawling through the damp earth, and to reflect that these elaborately constructed forms, so different from each other, and dependent on each other in so complex a manner, have all been produced by laws acting around us. . . . Thus, from the war of nature, from famine and death, the most exalted object which we are capable of conceiving, namely, the production of the higher animals, directly follows. There is grandeur in this view of life, with its several powers, having been originally breathed into a few forms or into one; and that, whilst this planet has gone cycling on according to the fixed law of gravity, from so simple a beginning endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful have been, and are being, evolved.”

^{ix} An allusion to 1 Cor. 15:19 “If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied.”

^x <http://forests.org/archive/general/coolfact.htm>

^{xi} Authors of the highest eminence seem to be fully satisfied with the view that each species has been independently created. To my mind it accords better with what we know of the laws impressed on matter by the Creator, that the production and extinction of the past and present inhabitants of the world should have been due to secondary causes, like those determining the birth and death of the individual. When I view all beings not as special creations, but as the lineal descendants of some few beings which lived long before the first bed of the Silurian system was deposited, they seem to me to become ennobled. Judging from the past, we may safely infer that not one living species will transmit its unaltered likeness to a distant futurity. And of the species now living very few will transmit progeny of any kind to a far distant futurity; for the manner in which all organic beings are grouped, shows that the greater number of species of each genus, and all the species of many genera, have left no descendants, but have become utterly extinct. We can so far take a prophetic glance into futurity as to foretel that it will be the common and widely-spread species, belonging to the larger and dominant groups, which will ultimately prevail and procreate new and dominant species. As all the living forms of life are the lineal descendants of those which lived long before the Silurian epoch, we may feel certain that the ordinary succession by generation has never once been broken, and that no cataclysm has desolated the whole world. Hence we may look with some confidence to a secure future of equally inappreciable length. And as natural selection works solely by and for the good of each being, all corporeal and mental endowments will tend to progress towards perfection.

It is interesting to contemplate an entangled bank, clothed with many plants of many kinds, with birds singing on the bushes, with various insects flitting about, and with worms crawling through the damp earth, and to reflect that these elaborately constructed forms, so different from each other, and dependent on each other in so complex a manner, have all been produced by laws acting around us. These laws, taken in the largest sense, being Growth with Reproduction; inheritance which is almost implied by reproduction; Variability from the indirect and direct action of the external conditions of life, and from use and disuse; a Ratio of Increase so high as to lead to a Struggle for Life, and as a consequence to Natural Selection, entailing Divergence of Character and the Extinction of less-improved forms. Thus, from the war of nature, from famine and death, the most exalted object which we are capable of conceiving, namely, the production of the higher animals, directly follows. There is grandeur in this view of life, with its several powers, having been originally breathed into a few forms or into one; and that, whilst this planet has gone cycling on according to the fixed law of gravity, from so simple a beginning endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful have been, and are being, evolved.

^{xii} <http://www.historyoftheuniverse.com/tl1.html>

^{xiii} We've 4 billion years before the sun turns into a Red Giant and makes life on earth impossible.
<http://www.historyoftheuniverse.com/futueart.html>

^{xiv} The Divine Milieu, p.132