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HOW EVOLUTION BECAME A RELIGION

Creationists correct?: Darwinians wrongly mix science with morality, politics

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By MICHAEL RUSE

In 1980 the young governor of Arkansas, one Bill Clinton, neglected his constituent base and was defeated in his run for re-election. He learned a lesson never to be forgotten, regained office in 1982, and remained governor until he was elected President. During the two-year interregnum, the governor's mansion was occupied by a man called Frank White, whose surprise at his election was equaled only by his inadequacy for the job.

Uncritically, Governor White signed into law a bill promoted by an evangelical Christian state representative, a bill debated by the legislature for less than half an hour. This "balanced treatment" bill required that children be taught not only the theory of evolution, but also the Bible -- taken absolutely literally. Countering the claim that we are all descended by Charles Darwin's glacially slow process of development from very simple organisms, children were also to be told, in their biology classes, that Adam and Eve were real people, and that Noah's Flood once covered the whole earth.

The U. S. constitution separates church and state. Whatever its pedagogical merits -- and they were few -- the Arkansas law was clearly unconstitutional. The American Civil Liberties Union challenged the law, and before the year was out a trial was held and the legislation struck down. Appearing as expert witnesses for the ACLU were the famous -- Stephen Jay Gould, Harvard professor, paleontologist, and America's best known evolutionist -- and the not-so-famous -- a philosophy professor from the University of Guelph, yours truly.

I still remember arguing in the Arkansas court house with one of the most prominent of the literalists (now generally known as creationists). Duane T. Gish, author of the best-selling work, "Evolution: The Fossils Say No!," resented bitterly what he felt was an unwarranted smug superiority assumed by us from the side of science.

"Dr. Ruse," Mr. Gish said, "the trouble with you evolutionists is that you just don't play fair. You want to stop us religious people from teaching our views in schools.

At the time I rather pooh-poohed what Mr. Gish said, but I found myself thinking about his words on the flight back home. And I have been thinking about them ever since. Indeed, they have guided much of my research for the past twenty years. Heretical though it may be to say this -- and many of my scientist friends would be only too happy to chain me to the stake and to light the faggots piled around -- I now think the Creationists like Mr. Gish are absolutely right in their complaint.

Evolution is promoted by its practitioners as more than mere science. Evolution is promulgated as an ideology, a secular religion -- a full-fledged alternative to Christianity, with meaning and morality. I am an ardent evolutionist and an ex-Christian, but I must admit that in this one complaint -- and Mr. Gish is but one of many to make it -- the literalists are absolutely right. Evolution is a religion. This was true of evolution in the beginning, and it is true of evolution still today.

One of the earliest evolutionists was the eighteenth-century physician Erasmus Darwin, grandfather of Charles. He was no atheist, believing rather in God as "Unmoved Mover": a being who decides right at the beginning on the future course of nature, lays down unbreakable laws, and never acts again.

Rightly, Erasmus Darwin saw this "deism" as challenging Christian theism, which takes God as ready always to intervene miraculously in His creation. For Erasmus Darwin, evolution was simply confirmation of his commitment to a law-bound process of creation set down by a non-interventionist God. It was part and parcel of his alternative religion.

To this vision, Darwin's grandfather added an enthusiasm for social progress – as embodied by the Industrial Revolution -- which progress he then read right into his science. Erasmus saw social progress as a rise from a simple village-based society to the complexity of the modern city, and analogously he thought evolution rises progressively from the simple, the undifferentiated blobs of the first life forms (known as "monads"), to the apotheosis of organic complexity, the human race.

In his progressivism -- especially in his belief that we humans ourselves can and do improve our overall well-being -- Erasmus clearly stood in yet another way against Christianity, which stresses that salvation can come only through God. For the Christian, our greatest gains "count for naught."

Evolution therefore came into being as a kind of secular ideology, an explicit substitute for Christianity. It stressed laws against miracles and, by analogy, it promoted progress against providence.

And so things continued. In 1859, Charles Darwin, the father of modern evolutionary thought, published his great work *On the Origin of Species*. With this book, Darwin hoped to change things and make a less ideological system of evolution. He offered a systematic survey of the biological world, showing how many different factors – the fossil record, the geographical distributions of organisms, the discoveries from embryology -- point to evolution. At the same time, he proposed his celebrated mechanism of natural selection: thanks to population pressures, some creatures flourish and have offspring and some do not and, over the ages, this "survival of the fittest" leads to full-blown change.

But almost at once Darwin's efforts were frustrated by (of all people) his greatest supporter, his famous "bulldog," Thomas Henry Huxley.

When Jesus died he left no functioning religion. This was the work of his supporters, especially Saint Paul, and as we all know the Christianity of Saint Paul was not exactly identical to the Christianity of Jesus. Like the great apostle and Christianity, Huxley -- one of the most prominent scientists and greatest educators and social reformers of his day -- had begun by denying evolution, and when converted had the same enthusiasm as Paul.

But like Paul also, for all that Huxley venerated Charles Darwin, he could see in the master's writings only a glimpse of what he himself needed for his own purposes. And in working to his own ends, Huxley was led to the same consequences as Paul: a functioning system, but not that of the man in whose name he worked and preached.

Origin appeared at just that time in Victorian Britain when it was necessary to transform the country from a rural-based, near-feudal society and to fit it for an urbanized, industrialized future. There was need for reform everywhere: in the civil service, merit had to count, not connection. In medicine, doctors had to stop killing patients and start curing them. In education, learning had to be for today and

not to glorify the past. Huxley and his fellow reformers were in the thick of all this – Huxley himself was a college dean, served as a member of the new London School Board and on numerous royal commissions looking into the state of things.

Correctly, Huxley saw Christianity -- the established Anglican Church particularly – as allied with the forces of reaction and power. He fought it vigorously, most famously when he debated Samuel Wilberforce, the Bishop of Oxford. (Supposedly, on being asked whether he was descended from monkeys on his grandfather's side or his grandmother's side, Huxley replied he had rather be descended from an ape than from a bishop of the Church of England.)

As a social reformer therefore, Huxley, known in the papers as "Pope Huxley", was determined to find a substitute for Christianity. Evolution, with its stress on unbroken law -- which could be used to reflect messages of social progress -- was the perfect candidate. Life is on an upwardly moving escalator. It has reached Victorian Britain. Who knows what glories and triumphs might lie ahead? Thus the vision of Saint Thomas -- something to be preached far and wide. Working men's clubs, popular scientific congresses, debating societies, university convocations were Huxley's Corinthians and Galatians.

Indeed, recognizing that a good religion needs a moral message as well as a history and promise of future reward, Huxley increasingly turned from Darwin (who was not very good at providing these things) toward another English evolutionist.

Herbert Spencer -- prolific writer and immensely popular philosopher to the masses -- shared Huxley's vision of evolution as a kind of metaphysics rather than a straight science. He was happy to insist that even moral directives come from the evolutionary process itself.

"Social Darwinism" (more accurately, Social Spencerianism) took evolution to entail struggle and success for the few, and so the moral message was understood as enthusiasm for laissez-faire individualism. The state should stay out of the running of society, and the best should be allowed to rise to the top. Failures deserve their fates.

Of course, there were differences between Social Darwinians. Socialists, Marxists and anarchists also justified their beliefs in the name of Darwin. The point is that the harnessing of evolution to ends that were explicitly moral, even political, went on right through the nineteenth century.

The even greater point is that it continued to go on right through the twentieth century. Evolutionary ideas were to undergo a great transformation in the 1930s and 1940s, when a professional science of evolutionary studies was developed – a professional science which stood on its own legs by its own merits, having no need for an alternative career as secular ideology. But this secular ideology or religion hardly folded its tents and crept away. One of the most popular books of the era was *Religion without Revelation*, by evolutionist Julian Huxley, grandson of Thomas Henry. First published in 1927, the book was revised (for a second time) and reissued in the 1950s. "All thought and emotion," Huxley wrote, even the highest, spring from natural mind, whose slow development can be traced in life's evolution, so that life in general and man in particular are those parts of the world substance in which the latent mental properties are revealed to their fullest extent." As always, evolution was doing everything expected of religion, and more.

Today, professional evolution thrives. But the old religion survives and thrives right alongside it. Evolution now has its mystical visionary, its Saint John of the Cross. Harvard entomologist and

sociobiologist Edward O. Wilson tells us that we now have an "alternative mythology" to defeat traditional religion. "Its narrative form is the epic: the evolution of the universe from the big bang of fifteen years ago through the origin of the elements and celestial bodies to the beginnings of life on earth."

Faithful to the oldest tradition of evolutionary theorizing -- reading his morality and politics into his science and then reading it right back out again -- Mr. Wilson warns us that we have evolved in symbiotic relationship with the rest of living nature, and lest we cherish and preserve biodiversity we will all perish. Drawing on the dispensationalism of his Southern Baptist childhood, with the eloquence and moral fervour of Billy Graham, Mr. Wilson begs us to repent, to stand up and acknowledge our sins and to walk forward in the ways of evolution. We have but a short time, else moral darkness will fall on us all.

The language of Stephen Jay Gould is hardly more tempered. We learn that evolution "liberates the human spirit," that for sheer excitement evolution "beats any myth of human origins by light years," and that we should "praise this evolutionary nexus -- a far more stately mansion for the human soul than any pretty or parochial comfort ever conjured by our swollen neurology to obscure the source of physical being."

Mr. Gould ultimately rejects traditional readings of evolution for a more inspiring, liberating version: "We must assume that consciousness would not have evolved on our planet if a cosmic catastrophe had not claimed the dinosaurs as victims. In an entirely literal sense, we owe our existence, as large and reasoning mammals, to our lucky stars." If this is not to rival traditional Judaeo-Christian teaching -- with its central belief that we humans are not just random happenstances, but a major reason why God created heaven and earth -- I do not know what is.

What is the moral to be drawn from all of this? You might think that the time has come to save evolution from the evolutionists.

Darwinism is a terrific theory that stimulates research in every area of the life sciences. In the human realm, for instance, discoveries in Africa trace our immediate past in ever greater detail, while at the same time the Human Genome Project opens up fascinating evolutionary questions as we learn of the molecular similarities between ourselves and organisms as apparently different as fruit flies and earthworms. Surely this is enough.

There is no need to make a religion of evolution. On its own merits, evolution as science is just that -- good, tough, forward-looking science, which should be taught as a matter of course to all children, regardless of creed.

But, let us be tolerant. If people want to make a religion of evolution, that is their business. Who would deny the value of Mr. Wilson's plea for biodiversity? Who would argue against Mr. Gould's hatred of racial and sexual prejudice, which he has used evolution to attack?

The important point is that we should recognize when people are going beyond the strict science, moving into moral and social claims, thinking of their theory as an all-embracing world picture. All too often, there is a slide from science to something more, and this slide goes unmentioned -- unrealized even.

For pointing this out we should be grateful for the opponents of evolution. The Creationists are wrong in their Creationism, but they are right in at least one of their criticisms. Evolution, Darwinian evolution, is wonderful science. Let us teach it to our children. And, in the classroom, let us leave it at that. The moral messages, the underlying ideology, may be worthy. But if we feel strongly, there are other times and places to preach that gospel to the world.

Michael Ruse is professor of philosophy and zoology at the University of Guelph. His next book, *Can a Darwinian be a Christian? The Relationship between Science and Religion*, will be published this fall.

Note from omniology.com website editor:

"But you evolutionists are just as religious in your way. Christianity tells us where we came from, where we're going, and what we should do on the way. I defy you to show any difference with evolution. It tells you where you came from, where you are going, and what you should do on the way. You evolutionists have your God, and his name is Charles Darwin."