

**Darwin: A Conversation about
Fundamentalism**

Sermon by the Rev. Jim Eller

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Reading

“Ever Since Darwin,” by Stephen J. Gould

Our world is not an optimal place, fine tuned by omnipotent forces of selection. It is a quirky mass of imperfection, working well enough; a jury-rigged set of adaptations built of curious parts made available by past histories in different contexts. Darwin, who was a keen student of history, understood this principle as the primary proof of evolution itself. A world optimally adapted to current environments might have been created as we find it. History matters; it confounds perfection and proves that current life transformed its own past. Respect the past and inform the present.

How can we know that the world is regulated by selection and not by some other evolutionary principle? Darwin’s answer is brilliant, paradoxical, and usually misunderstood. Do not, he cautions, rest your case of what might seem to be the most elegant expression of selection – the beautiful, optimally designed adaptations of organisms to their environments: the aerodynamic perfection of a bird’s wing, or the streamlined beauty of a marlin. For good design is the expectation of most evolutionary theories (and of creationism as well, for that matter). There is nothing distinctively Darwinian about perfection. Instead, look for the oddities and imperfection that occur only if selection is based on the reproductive success of individuals.

Sermon

Fundamentalism seems to be alive and well and even flourishing in our world. In the face this rising intolerance worldwide, we need to encourage pluralism and dialogue. In the face of a current United States administration that preaches democracy abroad while stifling dissent at home, we need to defend the processes of lawful disagreement and democracy.

John Scopes said, "I believe the Dayton (Monkey) Trial marked the beginning of the decline of fundamentalism.... I feel that restrictive legislation on academic freedom is forever a thing of the past, that religion and science may now address one another in an atmosphere of mutual respect and of a common quest for...truth. I like to think that the Dayton Trial had some part in bringing to birth this new era."

The Scopes Monkey trial was a monumental moment in American history. The power of this moment in time was reinforced by the remarkable dramatization of the trial, "Inherit the Wind."

Dayton was looking for a way to put this little town in rural Tennessee on the map. The Tennessee legislature had passed a bill outlawing the teaching of evolution. The legislators were assuming the Governor was going to veto this legislation, making illegal the teaching of evolution or "any theory which puts into question the story of Divine Creation as taught in the

Bible.” The teaching of evolution became illegal in any public school or University. It was called the Butler Act, which was passed in March of 1925.

Rep. Butler had had a bad legislative session, not getting a single bill passed. So, the state legislators of Tennessee decided to give Rep. Butler this little bone, assuming the Governor would veto it. And, the bill outlawing evolution passed, and the Governor signed it. The Governor did so, believing it would never amount to anything. It would never be enforced. He thought it would be inconsequential. It was a sham, a ruse – there were no enforcement provisions written into the law.

However, the ACLU hoped to strike it down, as a way of affirming academic freedom and maintaining religious separation of church and state. Looking for a test case, they assumed it would be in one of the bigger cities, like Chattanooga or Nashville, but the men at the corner drug store in Dayton changed history. They did not all agree on what the outcome would be or should be, but they did think it would be fun to bring this town of 4000 into national prominence. It would make it a national tourist attraction, and it did. It is still a small town, but it is a town in Tennessee with a name that has lived within our American cultural history.

John Scopes was a substitute teacher. He had not really taught evolution or Darwinian theory, he had just assigned the chapter

in the biology book that contained that section. But, it was enough to create the test case. He was convicted of teaching evolution. Then, the case was overturned on a narrow technical question.

The forces on both sides really wanted to debate the tenets of Fundamentalism and science or the questions of religious freedom versus academic freedom. Judge Raulston, who presided, allowed very little testimony about the authority of the Bible or about the nature and validity of evolution. They were not relevant questions. The legal issue was not the validity of evolution or its mechanisms, but only a narrow legal technicality. He did allow Creationism and Darwinian evolutionary theory some expression, but they had to be submitted as written arguments inserted in the record. They did not bear on the case.

The Judge convicted and fined Scopes \$100 for teaching evolution, but the state of Tennessee required a jury trial for all fines over \$50. The conviction was overturned, not because evolution was upheld, but because the judge made a wrong decision over fifty dollars. But, the public impression then and now was that evolution was upheld, and fundamentalism was put away. Actually that was not the case.

Historically, Unitarian Universalists have welcomed Darwin and his theory of evolution. The first minister in the United States to preach in favor of Darwin's theories of natural selection was

a Unitarian, Newton Mann. Other Unitarian ministers also claimed to be the first, notably Moncure Conway, who claimed to be the popularizer of evolution. Conway and Mann both preached in favor of evolution during 1859. Conway visited with Darwin and debated the religious implications of evolution with him. Unitarian Universalism has generally been a religion that is highly hospitable to science. During the Scopes trial the minister then serving here at All Souls, Rev. Leon Birkhead, was Darrow's Biblical expert, ally and council for the defense.

There is really no debate about evolution within the scientific community, then or now. Darwin did not generate the idea of evolution. Evolution was widely accepted in the nineteenth century. His theory details the mechanism for the processes of evolution, and can be stated as environmental or geographical isolation and the superior reproductive capacity of one variation of species over another.

The importance of the theory of natural selection is that the world evolves as the result of random natural phenomena. If the natural world evolves, it was not created in seven days. If the world was not created in seven days, then the Bible is not literally true. If the Bible is not literally true then what is the nature of creation? What is the place of humanity? Can we readily admit that we really are animals and deeply related to other primates and mammals? Are we really the gorilla's brothers and sisters?

If there was no absolute Biblical accuracy about creation, then we are free to question whether there was a literal Adam and Eve. If there was no Adam and Eve, then was there ever the temptation by the serpent and a “fall” of humanity? If there was no fall, what is the point of the coming of the second Adam, also called Jesus or the Christ? If Jesus did not need to die for our sins, then maybe this substitutionary atonement doesn't hold either? Which by the way is very bad theology and dangerous as a metaphor or as spiritual wisdom, but that is another sermon.

Darwinian evolution as science is clear, but its religious implications are complex and profound. The debate is obviously not over, despite what John Scopes had hoped. For Fundamentalist Christians evolution is very threatening. It proves that the Bible cannot be literally true. This is to say, that for fundamentalist Christians, evolution is the undoing of their religion. There are enormous consequences to the acceptance of evolution for them and for their religious understandings.

Biblical literalism is not easy for thoughtful people and religious liberals.

Quoting from the Scopes trial, “If the Bible is literally true, then who is Mrs. Cain and where did she come from?” asks Clarence Darrow. “Mrs. Cain. Cain's wife. If, 'in the Beginning' there only Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, where'd this extra woman spring from? Ever figure that out?”

William Jennings Bryan responds, "No, sir. I will leave it to the agnostics to hunt for her."

William Cullen Bryan did in fact go on to claim that the world was created 6000 years ago, probably in October, according to his clergy advisor. A nearly absurd debate ensued about how we know. It is faith and the Bible that is enough for me said Bryan. Then, Darrow comments about the lack of intellectual curiosity of Bryan and other fundamentalists.

These religious implications are so serious; hopefully it has become clear how threatening Darwin's views have been to the orthodox and rigid Christian.

Did Adam have a belly button? Early depictions of Adam and Eve show them with fig leaves, not just over their genitals, but also over where you might see a belly buttons. Later, they were shown with belly buttons. This was designed to be comforting in the same way that geology is placed here by a loving supernatural Father God for the purpose of giving us the illusion of precondition and a pre-history that never existed, or so say some Creationists or Fundamentalists.

John Scopes hoped that the Monkey Trial had put Fundamentalists in their place, but the recent emergence of "Intelligent Design" and the actions of the Kansas Board of

Education make it clear that they are hardly gone. They do not seem gone but instead seem to be increasing in strength.

The real issue may not be over biblical interpretation but a battle of between Christian fundamentalists and mainstream cultural expectations. The Scope trial demonstrated a clear cultural decision and also a victory in favor of academic freedom. Will we teach superstition or scientific method and its conclusions? We collectively chose science. Given this direction in education and society, Fundamentalists are forced to endure the reality that they pay taxes in order to have their children taught a world view that they do not believe. Some Creationists then argue, "Do we believe in the establishment of a religious perspective by the state?" No, but in part we do that very thing, at least from their Fundamentalist perspective. Therefore, why not teach both creationism and biblical literalism along side evolution and Darwin's theories? Is this not academic freedom and intellectual liberalism – that is, to hear from both sides of an issue?

Stephen J. Gould, the Harvard paleontologist, suggests that this is actually religious intolerance. By teaching one religion, while not teaching others, we are actually promoting a single and narrow version of religion. This is a kind of intolerance. Teaching religion along side science and treating them as the same is both bad science and bad for religion. Science, not religion, should be taught in schools.

Religion should be taught in churches and sometimes science, too.

Martin Marty, a University of Chicago Divinity School professor, has been involved in what he calls the Fundamentalism Project. He has studied not only Christian Fundamentalism in the United States, but also fundamentalism all over the world and across history.

Marty says that the Christian Fundamentalists were not defeated in Dayton, Tenn., in 1925, they were just driven underground. They became a counterculture, with their own school, publishers, teachers, theories and culture, which has existed outside of the mainstream culture for decades. For Dr. Marty, the appearance of the Moral Majority, Pat Robertson and the like, marks the re-surfacing of a movement that had been alive and well but primarily underground.

The culture wars surrounding prayer in school, creationism, so called family values, the attempts to remove legal access to safe abortions may not seem like good news. It is actually good news in a number of regards. Now they are again a part of our collective conversation. Rather than being set away as a counterculture, which invites the events such as those at the Branch Davidian Compound in Waco or the Oklahoma City bombing; these are countercultural moves and small scale wars of frustration. Better to have Fundamentalists in the process, rather than acting out outside the mainstream. This does not

mean that we shouldn't fight them. It means we would do well to understand their wisdom and the fallacies of their positions.

The power of evolution and natural selection does not do away with God. They simply describe the mechanism through which the natural processes of creation emerge. Sure creation happened in seven days, but those days are geological eras or moments in an expanding universe. It is a matter of poetry or context. Darwin was not an atheist or even an agnostic. He was an enlightenment naturalistic Deist. He was not rejected by Unitarians of his day, but welcomed, because he simply demonstrated the ways in which God acts and is present in the world. The natural world is not a denial of an eminent God but proof of it.

The Scopes Monkey Trial was significant not because it vindicated Darwin. It did not. Not because it put an end to Christian Fundamentalism in the United States, it did not, but because it was one of the first major clashes between US Christian fundamentalism and the emerging mainstream liberal culture. It was a fight between narrowness and open mindedness, between academic freedom and religious rights. The fight is not over, in fact it has just begun. The American Taliban is alive and well and may be residing in Kansas.

Yet, we should remember the wise counsel of M. K. Gandhi. He said that no one is ever wrong all of the time or ever one hundred percent right. Even our worst enemy has something to

teach us. They may be only one or two percent correct, but if we are serious about finding the truth, we should seek out the truth they know that we do not.

The Fundamentalist and Creationist critique of evolution and science as we so often teach it is that we are simply teaching dogma and scientism. They are right. Too often we teach the conclusions of science as truth. Educators do not present the original hypothesis, the data that supports it, other conclusions that can be drawn and why we assume the truth we know to be true. We do not teach the scientific method. We only teach the dogmas and assumptions of science. This is neither good science, nor is it good education.

The way to maintain democracy is to engage those with whom we disagree. The danger of fundamentalism is when it is isolated and ignored and allowed to be even more extreme and violent. The struggle is ours to wage.