

DARWIN DAY
BRUTON PARISH CHURCH
THE REVEREND JOHN MAXWELL KERR
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Signs and wonders. Light and enlightenment.

It's Darwin Day and in about 2500 American churches, sermons and homilies are being preached to acknowledge that fact. I guess in about 25000 churches, sermons are being produced to say why the preacher doesn't believe in evolution but in God the Creator because the Bible tells him so.

Well, is it possible to do both? Is it possible to believe in the God revealed in the Bible, to believe in God the Creator of all that is, to believe that, and also to believe that the scientific Theory of Evolution in its modern neo-Darwinian synthesis form is correct? We shall see, but as Episcopalians, we have a distinct advantage: we are good at both/and rather than either/or.

But to affirm both biblical creation and scientific evolution, you need to know a bit about the Bible and what it actually says. The three lessons this evening describe short-lived bursts of intense radiation in the visible spectrum. These events fall into the category of wonders. The Greek word "terata" translates the Hebrew word "mopheth": both mean wonders. This term focuses on the amazement produced in onlookers rather than the meaning of the miraculous event itself. You need to know that. As in tonight's lessons: "WOW! Look at all those photons!"

There are two other Biblical words for miracle; dunameis, from which we get our word dynamite. This word focuses on God's power being evident in an unique event. The third word is semeion or sign: this is the word John the Evangelist uses to describe miracles. Semeia are unique acts of God that reveal God's character as love. Three words: wonders, acts of divine power, signs of love.

Three words; three ways to interpret miraculous unique events and the common factor is the Ancient Hebrew fixation on unique events: God saving Israel from Egyptian slavery by taking them across the Red Sea, or returning them from Babylonian Captivity, or in the New Testament by healings, Christ's resurrection, ascension.

The common factor is that they pay no attention to another common factor: the regularity of the background against which unique events stand out. No regular and intelligible background, and how would you even notice an unique event: all events would be unique. Think about that.

That is, these concepts pay no attention to the subject matter of science. The Bible doesn't teach science. It does not and cannot teach Evolution. Ever. Impossible.

But the Bible does teach that God is Creator. Yes, it does, and any Christian who takes the Bible seriously knows this.

However, any Christian who really takes the Bible seriously also knows that almost all the biblical teaching about creation is found outside the book of Genesis, important though that is. Most does not refer back to origins, important though they are. Most of the emphasis in the Scriptural references to God's work in creation are scattered throughout the rest of the Bible and do not refer to one-off miraculous origins, blasts of light energy and so forth. And most of the sermons preached this day against evolution will ignore that inconvenient truth and will do so on grounds of being Biblical.

Alas, when people contrast God as Creator with scientific theories, especially evolution, they are too often just plain wrong about both science and Scripture. But we can do better.

If you know Ancient Hebrew, as I'm sure you do, and go looking through the Scriptures, again and again you find, 84 times, the word bara'. Bara' is a special Hebrew word, it means create and it only ever refers to God creating. And, as I have just said, it hardly ever refers to the Genesis story of creation in the past tense. Try the Book of Job (9:9 –10) or Nehemiah (9: 6). God is presently, continuously, actively creating. The Psalms are full of this present-tense 'creating'; and in the New Testament? God creates by "holding in being" (Col 1: 16-17), "sustaining all things by His powerful Word" (Hebrews 1:3). God is nowhere a God who sets up the laws of the Universe and then withdraws after creating light, darkness and all species of animals once for all out of nothing. Read the Bible without creationist selective blindness and what do you find? God causes new things to happen and is continuously doing so, continuously. God is transcendent and immanent, if theological technical jargon means anything to you.

So far: now we all know there are Biblical words for miracles, one-off events; wonders, mighty acts of divine power, signs of love. And there are words for create, creation.

But there is a word which isn't in the Bible. Well, there are lots of words: tetrahedron, polyploidy, deoxyribonucleic acid, antibiotic, global warming, Stegosaurus, stainless steel, string theory, evolution.

None of these words are Biblical because they arise out of a Greek idea, a non-Biblical idea: Nature. Nature as something in and of itself. Nature, which is what science studies. Science is an account of the way the Natural world is, not what it would be nice to believe about the way the world is. Science is its theories.

So, when sermons tell parishioners to dismiss evolution “because it’s only a theory” and insist that the Doctrine of Creation is literal fact about origins, they are living in a modernist fantasy world. They are wrong. Anyone who wants to show that evolution is wrong, it’s easy! Just do the scientific research! Just go and find a human skeleton among the dinosaur fossils, OK, not a human, a fossilized rabbit will do. Or a mouse. Find a life form on this planet not based upon DNA and RNA. There. Do that research and evolution as a scientific theory is disproved! It takes much less effort to rant from a pulpit misrepresenting both science and religion.

And anyway, is this what Christianity is based on? Occasional floods of photons? God’s special effects?

What about all the rest of created space-time? Occasional presence implies usual absence, is that what our faith in the Creator and Redeemer of all that is depends on?

Darwin Day: frankly I’m not very interested in Darwin. I’ve read biographies of Charles Darwin (best is by Desmond and Moore), as of Albert Einstein, Werner Heisenberg, Paul Dirac and so forth: I’m a scientist and I’m interested in the lives of the truly great scientists.

But the truth of a scientific theory doesn’t depend on who construed it, what their background was, or what they believed or didn’t believe. Heisenberg was a Nazi: does that make his contributions to Quantum Theory false? The physicist P.A.M. Dirac was a very strange man but so were all the Old Testament prophets and so is many an Anglican Bishop. Darwin’s personal faith faded from that of a potential Ordinand in the Church of England - tenth out of two hundred in the class list in Theology at Cambridge University, to a very unhappy agnostic. That is all very interesting, to some, perhaps, but has nothing whatsoever to do with the validity of the theory named after him and developed further for a century and a half in ways that would have astonished him: a wonder!

The Theory of Evolution is the reasoned inference to the best explanation for the diversity and molecular structure of life on earth and the fossil record. Is it absolutely true? Do I believe in Evolution? Of course not. I believe IN God: believe in means trust with my whole life. I believe THAT Evolution is a correct account of the way the world is, based on a century and more of enormous amounts of detailed, peer-reviewed research in many interlocking fields of study. Evolutionary theory, at least at the level of mechanism, is and must be provisional. As research continues, the details of the theory will change. Darwin’s great idea about organisms - descent with modification acted upon by natural selection - is the best scientific account of Nature we have. And the basic theory is as well established as Harvey’s Theory of the circulation of the blood.

As a Christian and a scientist, I expect that Evolutionary theory at least not contradict what I find in Scripture: it doesn't. To find out what Scripture actually says and means is the result of a centuries-long slog by theologians doing careful research, applying their very fine minds indeed. To find out what Nature is like, including Evolution, is also the result of a centuries-long slog by scientists doing painstaking life-long research, applying their very fine minds indeed. Both quests continue.

How science and religion relate, taking both seriously and in an informed way, has only recently become a mature scholarly discipline. But that careful meticulous research shows that there is no reason to believe, let alone preach, that Evolution makes you an atheist. And it is quite clear that belief in the creativity of God is consistent with accepting Evolutionary science.

We still want signs and wonders. We still want to be amazed. We still seek light and enlightenment. We Christians have come to know and love God in Christ and we Christians too have a good grasp, a coherent scientific notion, of God's creating in and by Evolution. Well, we CAN have them both.

But let's not call today Darwin Day. That only makes Richard Dawkins more smug and irritates all those anti-evolutionists who call themselves creationists.

Let's call today Creation and Evolution Day instead of Darwin Day. The Church has Feasts to celebrate the lives of saints for whom there is no shred of evidence that they existed. But, isn't it odd? There is no Feast of God the Creator. Let's change that and each year on the day closest to Darwin's birthday (Why not?) let us proclaim the Feast of God the Creator! A great day to read the Book of God's words and the Book of God's works and find out what is really there and then give thanks to the God who declares, "Behold, I make all things new."