

## Is Darwinism Theologically Neutral?

By William A. Dembski

Is Darwinism theologically neutral? The short answer would seem to be No. Darwin, in a letter to Lyell, remarked, “I would give nothing for the theory of natural selection if it requires miraculous additions at any one stage of descent.” Expanding on this remark in his *Blind Watchmaker*, Richard Dawkins adds, “In Darwin’s view the whole point of the theory of evolution by natural selection was that it provided a non-miraculous account of the existence of complex adaptations... For Darwin, any evolution that had to be helped over the jumps by God was not evolution at all.” Since many Christians see the Bible as teaching that God specially created living things, thereby ruling out large-scale evolution, Darwinism contradicts the Bible and is not theologically neutral. Case closed.

But does this really answer the question? True, many Christians see Darwinism as hostile to biblical teaching and therefore deny its theological neutrality. But should they view Darwinism and Scripture as theologically opposed? If all Christians rejected Darwinism, its theological neutrality would not be a matter of discussion or controversy among them. But Christians do argue over Darwinian evolution, and the reason is that while all Christians embrace Christ, not all reject Darwin. So the question becomes whether Christians can embrace both Darwin and Christ with integrity, giving each his due without slighting the other. This is the real question underlying Darwinism’s presumed theological neutrality.

Those who embrace Darwin and his ideas regard him and Christ as compatible. Those who don’t, regard them as incompatible. Now compatibility and incompatibility are funny notions. They’re not like strict logical consistency or inconsistency, which admit of proof. At the hands of human rationalization, compatibility and incompatibility have the disconcerting tendency to become infinitely malleable. We’ve already seen how some Christians, by reading Genesis as teaching the special creation of living forms, conclude that Christ and Darwin are incompatible. On the other hand, Michael Ruse (in *Can a Darwinian Be a Christian?*) argues that Christ and Darwin are eminently compatible. Sure, as Ruse puts it, “Darwinism is a theory committed to the ubiquity of law.” But, in Ruse’s mind, that’s not a problem for Christian faith. He continues, “Even the supreme miracle of the resurrection requires no law-breaking return from the dead. One can think of Jesus in a trance, or more likely that he really was physically dead but that on and from the third day a group of people, hitherto downcast, were filled with great joy and hope.”

Ruse claims Darwinism compatible with Christianity, but by Christianity he means a liberalism gutted of miracles. On the other hand, special creationists interpret Genesis as teaching a form of creation that disallows any large-scale evolution. Although I don’t think the evidence supports large-scale evolution, both approaches are too easy. Ruse essentially has to redefine Christianity. And special creationists face challenges to their interpretation of Genesis. For instance, Genesis claims that humans are made of dust, at one point even referring to humans as dust (“dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return” – Genesis 3:19). But if humans are dust, then so are other animals, and thus when

Genesis says that humans were made from dust, what is to prevent God from transforming preexisting ape-like primates (who are dust) into humans (who are also dust) by some evolutionary process? Let me stress, I personally don't buy this argument, but it's one readily advanced by evolutionists against special creationists.

In assessing whether Darwinism is theologically neutral, let's therefore focus on Christ and Darwin not along narrow sectarian lines but in the broadest terms. What can we all agree that Christianity demands, and what can we all agree that Darwinism demands? Without being exhaustive, let me suggest that Christianity and Darwinism each make four claims that are crucial for assessing Darwinism's theological neutrality (or lack thereof):

#### **Non-Negotiables of Christianity:**

- (C1) **Divine Creation:** God by wisdom created the world out of nothing.
- (C2) **Reflected Glory:** The world reflects God's glory, a fact that ought to be evident to humanity.
- (C3) **Human Exceptionalism:** Humans alone among the creatures on earth are made in the image of God.
- (C4) **Christ's Resurrection:** God, in contravention of nature's ordinary powers, raised Jesus bodily from the dead.

#### **Non-Negotiables of Darwinism:**

- (D1) **Common Descent:** All organisms are related by descent with modification from a common ancestor.
- (D2) **Natural Selection:** Natural selection operating on random variations is the principal mechanism responsible for biological adaptations.
- (D3) **Human Continuity:** Humans are continuous with other animals, exhibiting no fundamental difference in kind but only differences in degree.
- (D4) **Methodological Naturalism:** The physical world, for purposes of scientific inquiry, may be assumed to operate by unbroken natural law.

In formulating these claims, I've tried to be careful not to misrepresent either Christianity or Darwinism. What I'm describing as non-negotiables of Christianity is standard orthodox theology, so I won't expand on these claims here. Yes, some theological streams find fault with these claims (process theology, for instance, rejects *creatio ex nihilo* and miraculous interventions). But for the purposes of this discussion, these claims may appropriately be ascribed to basic Christian teaching.

With regard to the non-negotiables of Darwinism, no one will dispute claims (D1) and (D2), Common Descent and Natural Selection. Christians who embrace Darwin, however, may feel uncomfortable with (D3), which entails that, among other things, our moral and linguistic capacities are simply enhanced versions of those same capacities in other primates. Francis Collins, for instance, won't go along with Darwin on claim (D3). And yet, that is precisely Darwin's main thesis in his sequel to the *Origin*, *The Descent of*

*Man.* Finally, with regard to (D4), Darwin himself was more than a methodological naturalist. Once he became convinced of evolution by natural selection, he gave no credence to God ever having acted in contravention of natural law. Methodological naturalism is a weaker claim, allowing that God may have acted miraculously (in salvation history, say), only not in areas under scientific investigation (such as biological evolution).

We are now in a position to clarify our original question: Darwinism, let us agree, is theologically neutral if claims (D1)-(D4) in no way undercut claims (C1)-(C4), and Darwinism fails to be theologically neutral to the degree that (D1)-(D4) do undercut (C1)-(C4). Given this restatement of our original question, what do we find? Looking at these two lists of non-negotiables, we find certain tensions that are not readily resolved and that suggest (D1)-(D4) do in fact undercut (C1)-(C4). Note that I call them “tensions” rather than outright contradictions. Strict logical contradictions are difficult to find in the science-theology dialogue because the language of science and the language of theology tend to be so different. Even the clash of (C3), Human Exceptionalism, and (D3), Human Continuity, might be finessed by arguing that a sufficiently large difference in degree can appear as a difference in kind. So I’ll focus on the tensions between these two lists of non-negotiables and how, in particular, (D1)-(D4) undercut (C1)-(C4).

Let’s start with (D1), Common Descent, the claim that all organisms trace their lineage to a common ancestor. This claim seems unproblematic for (C1)-(C4). Indeed, (C1)-(C4) allow that God might have used an evolutionary process of some form or other to bring about the organisms on planet earth. To be sure, one might want to bring in further theological reasons for rejecting Common Descent (such as that large-scale evolution implied by (D1) is wasteful and unworthy of a good God), but (C1)-(C4) don’t address how God implemented his plan to create living forms. By themselves, (C1)-(C4) allow that God might have specially created living forms or brought them about via an evolutionary process. As an aside, it may be noted that a minority of intelligent design proponents, notably Michael Behe, accepts Common Descent but rejects much of the rest of Darwinism (in particular, he rejects (D2)-(D4)).

In contrast to Common Descent, Natural Selection, (D2), does raise some tensions with (C1)-(C4). Natural selection, as Darwin defined it, is non-teleological. Nature, unlike human artificial selection, is not trying to build certain structures or functions according to a design plan. Natural selection is an instant-gratification mechanism that capitalizes on any advantage accruing to the organism in the present generation, not in future generations. Moreover, any such advantage results from variations that are random. Darwin did not use the word “random,” but he did reject that God or any teleological force was somehow guiding variations with an eye to future function (cf. Darwin’s correspondence with Asa Gray, who thought God might guide the variations, a view Darwin rejected). Variations for Darwin were not correlated with any future benefit to the organism.

Natural Selection, or (D2), is therefore in tension with both (C1) and (C2). (D2) implies that biological evolution does not give, and indeed cannot give, any scientific evidence of

teleology in nature. We see this denial of teleology in Darwin's own writings and we find it among his contemporary disciples, even among theistic evolutionists. For instance, Brown University biologist Kenneth Miller, who calls himself an orthodox Catholic and an orthodox Darwinian, will write in *Finding Darwin's God* that design (or teleology) in biology is "scientifically undetectable." Now to say that something is scientifically undetectable isn't to say that it doesn't exist. Hence there's no strict contradiction between (D2) and (C1)-(C2). God might, as a master of stealth, wipe away all fingerprints of his activity. He might be guiding evolution in ways that to us look like chance (e.g., random variation) and necessity (e.g., natural selection).

But if so, how could we know? The most controversial claim of intelligent design is that compelling scientific evidence exists for design in biology, from which it would follow that Darwinian evolution is on its own terms a failed explanation of the complexity and diversity of life. But leaving aside intelligent design, it seems odd, given (C1), that God would create by Darwinian processes, which suggest that unguided forces can do all the work necessary for biological evolution. As Phillip Johnson noted in *Darwin on Trial*, Darwinism doesn't so much say that God doesn't exist as that God need not exist. Sure, God's ways are higher than ours and he might have good reasons for occluding his purposeful activity in nature. But if God does occlude his purposeful activity in nature, that raises a tension with (C2), which states that the world clearly reflects God's glory (Psalm 19) and that this fact should be evident to all humanity (Romans 1).

The world, as a matter of general revelation, testifies to the divine glory, and failure by humans to acknowledge this fact results not from a dearth of evidence but from human wickedness, which willfully suppresses the truth of God's revelation in creation (Romans 1:20). Now the theistic evolutionist might reply that creation does indeed testify to the divine glory, only this testimony looks not to scientific evidence. But in that case, how is the creation providing a general revelation of God and what exactly is it saying? Given that science is widely regarded as our most reliable universal form of knowledge, the failure of science to provide evidence of God, and in particular Darwin's exclusion of design from biological origins, undercuts (C2).

The most difficult tension to resolve in our present discussion is the one between Human Exceptionalism, (C3), and Human Continuity, (D3). In *The Descent of Man*, Darwin drew out the implications for the human species that followed from his general account of evolution as presented in his *Origin of Species*. As he wrote in the *Descent*,

The difference in mind between man and the higher animals, great as it is, certainly is one of degree and not of kind. We have seen that the senses and intuitions, the various emotions and faculties, such as love, memory, attention, curiosity, imitation, reason, etc., of which man boasts, may be found in an incipient, or even sometimes in a well-developed condition, in the lower animals.

Years earlier, in his notebooks, Darwin explicitly distanced human exceptionalism from God's care and concern: "Man in his arrogance thinks himself a great work, worthy the

interposition of a deity.” The implication is clear: if this is what man thinks of himself in his arrogance, a more sober assessment regards man as a mediocre work, not worthy of special divine attention, and with no prerogatives above the rest of the animal world.

Some theistic evolutionists are ready to follow Darwin here, such as Karl Giberson (see his *Saving Darwin*), and abandon Human Exceptionalism as conceived within orthodox theology. Others, desiring to stay within orthodoxy, punt. Take Francis Collins, who denies that our moral capacities represent the natural development of the same essential capacities in other primates. Yet to say that our moral or cognitive or linguistic capacities are unprecedented in the rest of the animal world flies in the face of Darwinian evolution, certainly as Darwin conceived it. Darwinism’s logic is inexorable. Evolution works by borrowing, taking existing capacities and reworking them. But if our moral or cognitive or linguistic capacities are unprecedented, then they are, for all intents and purposes, miracles.

And this brings us to the last non-negotiable on our list, Methodological Naturalism, or (D4). According to this claim, science treats the world as autonomous, regulated by natural laws that allow no exceptions. Accordingly, Darwinism, in embracing (D4), rules out miracles and, more generally, any teleology external to the material world. Now granted, Darwinism so characterized limits this prohibition against miracles/teleology to the study of nature. But the problem for Christians is that salvation history occurs against the backdrop of nature. In particular, Christ’s Resurrection, or (C4), occurs against this backdrop. To tie God’s hands by saying that God can act only one way in natural history (i.e., in accord with natural law) but has a freer rein in salvation history (i.e., can there perform miracles) seems arbitrary.

Christians who embrace Darwin therefore find themselves pulled in two directions. On the one hand, if committed to miracles such as the Resurrection, they have to confront why God doesn’t likewise do miracles in natural history. On the other hand, if committed to Methodological Naturalism, or (D4), they have to confront why this naturalism shouldn’t extend to salvation history as well (compare Michael Ruse above, who explains away the Resurrection as a trance or wish fulfillment of Jesus’ disciples). Trying to maintain (C4) and (D4) together constitutes an unstable equilibrium. People tend to jettison one or the other. For instance, Howard Van Till gave up on (C4) whereas Michael Behe gave up on (D4).

To sum up, Darwinism and Christianity, even when generously construed, exhibit significant tensions. Are these tensions so serious that Darwinism may rightly be regarded as not theologically neutral? I would say the tensions are indeed that serious. Such a conclusion, however, ultimately becomes a matter of personal judgment. Just as marriages can exist with serious tensions, some Christians are willing to tolerate the wedding of Darwinism and Christianity despite the tensions. That said, it’s worth asking why anyone would want this wedding in the first place. If Darwinism were incredibly well established – if the evidence for it were indeed as “overwhelming” as its advocates endlessly proclaim – then Christians might feel some compulsion for maintaining their union. But the evidence for common descent is mixed and the evidence for the creative

power of natural selection to build complex biological forms is nil (see, for instance, my book *The Design of Life*, co-authored with Jonathan Wells). So the theological neutrality of Darwinism aside, there's a prior question that needs to be asked, namely, Is the evidence for Darwinism sufficient that one should even be concerned whether it is theological neutral?