

# God and Darwin: Are They Compatible?

Can you believe in God and Darwinian evolution at the same time? The following quotes and discussion questions will help you explore this question by examining what leading proponents of evolution say. ***Especially suitable for:** Small group discussions, or as part of a larger adult Sunday School class on science and faith or evolution.*

**Key Terms:** In order to get the most out of these discussion questions, participants should first have a good grasp of the definitions of Darwinian evolution and related terms. Below are some basic definitions you can use. Read these definitions aloud before your discussion begins. The definitions come from <http://www.faithandevolution.org/terms.php>.

**evolution:** of the many meanings of this word, three are most important: (1) change over time—the fact that most of the organisms alive today are different from organisms that existed in the past; (2) universal common descent—the hypothesis that all organisms are modified descendants of a single common ancestor in the distant past; (3) the mechanism of biological change—the hypothesis that an undirected process of natural selection acting on random mutations has been the principal cause of modification. The latter two meanings encapsulate the modern theory of evolution accepted by most scientists, sometimes known as “neo-Darwinism.”

**natural selection:** the undirected process in which organisms better adapted to their environment survive and reproduce at a higher rate than those less adapted, with the result that the survivors' characteristics are more prevalent in subsequent generations.

**universal common ancestry:** the hypothesis that all species are biological descendants of a single common ancestor, and that all life can be portrayed as a tree with a single root.

**Darwinian evolution or Darwinism:** the theory that all living things are descended from a common ancestor and modified by the unguided process of natural selection acting on random variations.

1. Read the quotes from section 1 (“Is Evolution Directed or Undirected?”). (a) According to the proponents quoted here does Darwin’s theory allow for evolution to be guided or directed? (b) What was Darwin’s own view? (c) Is the belief in undirected evolution compatible or incompatible with your view of God? Why? (d) According to the “Open Letter” by leading evolutionists, what kind of God does evolution allow? What kind of God does evolution *not* allow? Is this view of evolution compatible with your faith? Why?

2. Read the quotes from section 2 (“Are Humans the Result of God’s Specific Intention?”). (a) According to the evolution proponents quoted here, should human beings be regarded as the result of God’s specific intention? Why or why not? (b) Kenneth Miller is a leading proponent of theistic evolution. Are you comfortable with his view of the development of human beings? Is it compatible with your view of God? Why or why not? (c) In one quote, Kenneth Miller calls the development of humans “happenstance,” but in another quote he says that if evolution replayed “you would get an intelligent, self-aware and reflective organism, which is to say you’d get

something like us.” What are the two examples Miller gives of organisms he would consider “something like us”? Would you agree that these organisms are “something like us”? Why or why not? (d) If God knew that evolution would produce *some* kind of self-aware organism, but not necessarily human beings, would that be sufficient in your view? Why or why not?

3. Read the quote from section 3 (“What Does God Know?”). (a) According to Catholic priest and theistic evolution proponent George Coyne, does the “scientific view” (in this case, the evolutionary view) allow God to know the outcome of evolution with certainty? Why? (b) Could God even have known that human beings would develop through evolution according to Coyne? (c) Is Coyne’s view of God’s foreknowledge compatible or incompatible with your understanding of God? Why?

4. Read the quotes from section 4 (“What Is the Impact of Darwin’s Theory on Faith?”). (a) What do you think Richard Dawkins means when he writes “Darwin made it possible to be an intellectually fulfilled atheist”? How does Darwin’s theory supply a grounding for atheism? (Also read the quote from evolutionary biologist Douglas Futuyma.) (b) How did Darwin’s theory of evolution impact Darwin’s own faith? (c) Sometimes Richard Dawkins and other atheists evolutionists are criticized for importing implications into Darwin’s theory that Darwin himself would not have shared. Do you think this criticism is fair? Why or why not?

5. Read the quote from section 5 (“How Can the Tension between Faith and Darwin Be Resolved?”). (a) What is Philip Kitcher’s proposed solution to the tension between Darwin’s theory and religion? (b) Is Kitcher’s solution acceptable to you? Why or why not?

6. In summary, do you think Darwin’s theory is compatible with your faith in God? Why or why not?

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## ***Quotations about God and Evolution from Leading Proponents of Evolution***

### **1. Is Evolution Directed or Undirected?**

*“Evolution is a natural process, and natural processes are undirected.”*

—Brown University biologist and theistic evolutionist Kenneth Miller in *Finding Darwin’s God*, p. 244.

*“[N]o shadow of reason can be assigned for the belief that variations... which have been the groundwork through natural selection of the formation of the most perfectly adapted animals in the world, man included, were intentionally and specially guided. However much we may wish it, we can hardly follow Professor Asa Gray in his belief ‘that variation has been led along certain beneficial lines,’ like a stream ‘along definite and useful lines of irrigation.’”*

—Charles Darwin, *The Variation of Animals and Plants under Domestication*, second edition (New York: D. Appleton & Co., 1883), vol. II, pp. 428-429.

*“Science, and evolutionary biology in particular, cannot prove or disprove the existence of some kind of god. On the other hand, the reason the American public perceives a direct conflict is because indeed evolution denies many attributes of various forms of Christian god... the possibility that evolution is in fact supervised in a personal manner... is a prospect that every evolutionary biologist should vigorously and positively deny... In conclusion, we reiterate that evolution indeed is, to the best of our knowledge, an impersonal and unsupervised process.”*

—Open letter to the National Association of Biology Teachers from more than 100 evolution proponents (1997), including prominent Harvard evolutionary biologist Richard Lewontin.

### **2. Are Humans the Result of God’s Specific Intention?**

*“Man is the result of a purposeless and natural process that did not have him in mind.”*

—Harvard paleontologist George Gaylord Simpson in *The Meaning of Evolution: A Study of the History of Life and of Its Significance for Man*, revised edition (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967), p. 345.

*“No question about it. Rewind that tape [of the history of evolution], let it run again, and events might come out differently at every turn. Surely this means that mankind’s appearance on this planet was not preordained, that we are here not as the products of an inevitable procession of evolutionary success, but as an afterthought, a minor detail, a happenstance in a history that might just as well have left us out.”*

—Brown University biologist and theistic evolutionist Kenneth Miller in *Finding Darwin’s God*, p. 272.

*“If you let the videotape of life run again, I think you’d get large streamlined predators that swam in the ocean. I think you’d get something that used photosynthesis not unlike plants but it might not be plants today. And eventually I think you would also get a large, intelligent, reflective, self-aware organism with a highly developed nervous system. **Now it might be a big-brained dinosaur, or it might be a mollusk with exceptional mental capabilities...** my point is that I think eventually under the conditions that we have in this universe you would get an intelligent, self-aware and reflective organism, which is to say you’d get something like us. It might not come out of the primates, it might come from somewhere else.”*

—Brown University biologist and theistic evolutionist Kenneth Miller, comments at the “Shifting Ground” conference, Bedford, NH, March 24, 2007, emphasis added.

### 3. What Does God Know?

*“If we take the results of modern science seriously, it is difficult to believe that God is omnipotent and omniscient in the sense of the scholastic philosophers... Let us suppose that God possessed the theory of everything, knew all the laws of physics, all the fundamental forces. **Even then could God know with certainty that human life would come to be? If we truly accept the scientific view that, in addition to necessary processes and the immense opportunities offered by the universe, there are also chance processes, then it would appear that not even God could know the outcome with certainty.**”*

—Catholic priest and theistic evolutionist George Coyne in [“The Dance of the Fertile Universe,”](#) p. 7.

### 4. What Is the Impact of Darwin’s Theory on Faith?

*“Darwin made it possible to be an intellectually fulfilled atheist.”*

—Biologist Richard Dawkins in *The Blind Watchmaker: Why the Evidence of Evolution Reveals a Universe Without Design* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1996), p. 6.

*“[B]y coupling undirected, purposeless variation to the blind, uncaring process of natural selection, Darwin made theological or spiritual explanations of the life processes superfluous.”*

—Douglas Futuyma, *Evolutionary Biology*, third edition (1998), p. 5.

*“I gradually came to disbelieve in Christianity as a divine revelation...disbelief crept over me at a very slow rate, but was at last complete... The old argument from design in Nature... which formerly seemed to me so conclusive, fails, now that the law of natural selection has been discovered... Formerly... I wrote that whilst standing in the midst of the grandeur of a Brazilian forest, ‘it is not possible to give an adequate idea of the higher feelings of wonder, admiration, and devotion which fill and elevate the mind.’ I well remember my conviction that there is more in man than the mere breath of his body; but now the grandest scenes would not cause any such convictions.”*

—Charles Darwin (1809-1882) in his *Autobiography*.

### 5. How Can the Tension between Faith and Darwin Be Resolved?

*“When we understand the messiness of the processes through which life unfolds, any design must be judged as largely unintelligent, any Creator as, at best, whimsical and capricious. Providential religion can only be sustained by supposing that God’s design is an unfathomable mystery...[However, the Darwinian] critique of providentialism and supernaturalism leaves open the possibility of what I have called ‘spiritual religion.’ Each of the major Western monotheisms can generate a version of spiritual religion by giving up the literal truth of the stories contested by the enlightenment case. How can this be done? I shall illustrate the possibility by using the example of Christianity. **Spiritual Christians abandon almost all the standard stories about the life of Jesus. They give up on the extraordinary birth, the miracles, the literal resurrection.** What survive are the teachings, the precepts, and the parables, and the eventual journey to Jerusalem and the culminating moment of the Crucifixion. That moment of suffering and sacrifice is seen, not as the prelude to some triumphant return and the promise of eternal salvation—**all that, to repeat, is literally false**—but as a symbolic presentation of the importance of compassion and of love without limits.”*

—Columbia University philosopher of science Philip Kitcher in *Living with Darwin*, pp. 149, 152, emphasis added.