

Evolution

Evolution in the biological sense of one species mutating into a new species is an ancient idea evident in both magical and scientific thinking. Even natural selection in roughly Darwin's sense is ancient; Aristotle presented it and argued against it (*Physics* II.8). Evolution in the historical sense of cultural and technological development is also ancient. And evolution in the trans-historical sense of moral and spiritual development toward an ultimate end, variously conceived, may be the oldest type of evolutionary thinking. Yet Christian theology developed extensive forms of evolutionary thinking only as its enclosing cultures did, which in Europe (despite antecedents such as Marcion's pseudo-supersessionism, Origen's transmigration theory, and Augustine's *City of God*) occurred primarily in and after the Renaissance. The two dominant forms of evolutionary thinking in the modern period of Christian theology are associated with philosophy of history and evolutionary biology.

The rise of historical consciousness refers especially to an inquiring attitude to the past based on an awareness of having a particular historical setting. From the Renaissance onwards, this attitude dramatically changed the interpretation of texts and artifacts. It also produced a new form of philosophy of history that sought to relate the meaning of the whole sweep of cosmic and human history to the cultural dynamics of any specific location in the historical process. The theologically most influential figure in this line of thinking was G.W.F. Hegel (1770-1831). He proposed that the unfolding of the universe is in fact the flowering of divine self-consciousness, and argued that historical developments are governed by strict rational principles. This view imputes a primordial innocence or perhaps an undifferentiated vagueness to God and interprets the overcoming or determination of this state of affairs as the ultimate purpose of history and the ultimate cause of its underlying rational dynamics. Every part of nature plays a role in this

process of theo-cosmic evolution, including especially every conscious being. Jesus Christ has a unique historic role as perfectly overcoming the chasm between the material and spiritual—a crucial phase in the development of God's self-consciousness. Hegel applied this framework to the interpretation of civilizations and religions and cultural institutions, identifying Christianity as the absolute religion and German state as the absolute form of national political organization—understanding these as culminations of long processes of rational historical development in each case.

Though Hegel's claims for an overall meaning and purpose to history could not be sustained in light of the increasingly intricate knowledge of historical details and cultural particularities, parts of his system were borrowed for numerous purposes. Left-wing Hegelians (e.g. L. Feuerbach) tried to rescue Christian theology from its self-delusory attachment to self-serving mythologies, while right-wing Hegelians (e.g. A. Biedermann) used the Hegelian system to redescribe the true message of the Christian faith, with both wings presupposing a distinctive kind of evolutionary framework.

Among conservative evangelical Christians, Hegel was less important than biblical portrayals of the consummation of the world. One of their key debates concerned evolutionary development in relation to the book of Revelation. Pre-millennialists imagined the perpetual striving of humanity under the curse of sin producing only ultimate disaster, from which God would extract the faithful and execute judgment prior to a thousand-year reign of Christ. Post-millennialists pictured a gradual increase in peace and goodness through technological and cultural development leading to the thousand-year reign of Christ, followed by the final consummation and judgment. There are numerous variations, and other views besides, but the thrust of the debate concerns cultural and moral evolution as much as biblical interpretation.

These strands of evolutionary thinking within Christian theology pre-date the consolidation of evolutionary theories in the natural sciences. In some circles (e.g. W. Temple and L. Thornton), this eased reception of proposals for gradual change in geology (e.g. C. Lyell) and biology (e.g. C. Darwin); the scientific accounts of evolutionary change seemed to confirm what theological accounts of history already suggested, namely, that the cosmos and the human spirit are slowly evolving toward a better state. In fact, there is no theoretical basis in biological evolution for teleological interpretations of this kind. Moreover, the optimism they evoke has repeatedly stumbled over the wars and genocides of the twentieth century. Yet this optimism has never completely subsided, particularly among theologians who stress God's work in every part of reality.

Meanwhile, in other circles, Christian theologians were alarmed by the alignment of evolutionary science with evolutionary ideas of history. This seemed to promise an explanation of everything in nature and history with no distinctive role for God, while eliminating any robust basis for moral values. Fearing a surging tide of atheistic moral relativism, some of these theologians took action. Within their own communities, they re-asserted the decisive authority of a plain-sense, literal reading of the Genesis creation account. In relation to scientific cultural luminaries, they sought to unmask the lurking atheism. They challenged secular educational movements (e.g. the "Monkey Trial" of John Scopes in 1925) and evolutionary science (e.g. H.M. Morris and the Institute for Creation Research). This originally North American resistance to evolution has been welcomed among theologically conservative Christians all over the world. It has also influenced other religious traditions, including Islam and Hinduism, where Qur'anic and Vedic authority is a resource for resistance analogous to biblical authority in Christianity.

Toward the end of the twentieth century, a new generation of lawyers (e.g. P.E. Johnson), theologians (e.g. W. Dembski), scientists (e.g. M. Behe), and organizers (e.g. S.C. Mayer) turned their back on futile creation-science debates and launched the “Intelligent Design” movement. Despite claims that it is part of science, Intelligent Design is best understood as a philosophical interpretation of transient scientific ignorance. It argues that evolutionary science can never explain certain special kinds of complex biological phenomena, and that the explanatory gap requires the postulation of an intelligent designer (e.g. God). This movement has made negligible headway within the scientific community because it asks scientists to recognize permanent limits on the explanatory reach of evolutionary science, whereas scientists are committed to finding more and better explanations, and in fact are discovering explanations for the very phenomena that Intelligent Design theorists predicted cannot be explained. The movement has made significant political gains, attracting the attention of conservative politicians who sympathize with its cultural goals, but its attempts to change school curricula have provoked fierce resistance (e.g. the 2005 US Federal Court decision from Dover, PA).

Many Christian theologians at the beginning of the twenty-first century assert that God works providentially in and through the evolutionary process. This “theistic evolution” position is dominant in the science-religion dialogue (e.g. I. Barbour, A. Peacocke). It is also the official position of the Roman Catholic Church, save that the Church further claims that God supernaturally infuses a soul during human conception. Critics charge that aligning divine providence with the evolutionary process minimizes the morally dubious character of predation, selection, and extinction. The persuasiveness of this point is met in some circles with pantheism (e.g. J. Haught, S. McFague), which protects divine goodness while preserving a role for God in the evolutionary process. Others defend a naturalistic understanding of the God

of evolution as the depths of nature itself, surpassing human moral categories (e.g. C. Hardwick, K. Peters).

W.A. Dembski and M. Ruse (eds.), *Debating Design* (2004); L. Gilkey, *Creationism on Trial* (1986); J.F. Haught, *God After Darwin* (2000); G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807); R. Numbers, *Darwinism Comes to America* (1998); P. Teilhard de Chardin, *The Phenomenon of Man* (1959).

Wesley J. Wildman