

God in evolution: The nature of divine power

by [Amy Frykholm](#) in the [February 12, 2008](#) issue

While controversies over evolution continue to arise in some sectors of American Christianity, most mainline Christians have made their peace with Darwin. We may not grasp all the nuances of the scientific debate, but we have concluded that evolutionary theory is good science and therefore must be compatible with good theology. Darwin's name doesn't send chills up our spines. We are theistic evolutionists: we believe that natural selection is evidently part of God's method of shaping the natural world.

But I suspect that the compatibility of evolutionary science with Christian theology is more often asserted than explored. I, for one, do most of my thinking about science out of one mental box and my thinking about religion out of another. On questions about evolution, the origin of life and the future of the planet, I look into the science box. On questions about God, salvation, theology and ethics, I turn to the religion box. While I think that the contents of the two boxes are compatible, I rarely try to work out the terms of their relationship.

Perhaps that's because the contents of the two boxes are, when mixed, still combustible. When theology faces off against the account of the world set forth by evolutionary biology, God's goodness and power and God's plans for the future seem to be called into question with new force.

For instance, knowledge of evolutionary history raises questions of theodicy in an especially disconcerting way. Evolution reveals a vast history of unfathomable waste, loss, extinction, suffering and death in the natural world. What has God been up to all these millennia? And what is God up to now? If we believe that God oversees creation, then God's way of doing it through evolution seems strange and even appalling.

Over the 4.5 billion years of our planet's existence, 98 percent of species have become extinct. Extinction is written into the pattern of life. What does it mean,

then, to talk about a God who cares for “each sparrow that falls”? How can we think of God’s care for the world in light of the millions of years of suffering and death that have been a feature of evolution in the natural world?

While traditional theology separated “human evil” from “natural evil,” I would venture to guess that for most Americans, the category of natural evil is a strange one. We understand nature as perhaps neutral or even good. Human evil is obvious, but is a tsunami or an earthquake, even while causing terrible effects, evil?

Evolutionary biology intensifies this problem because it connects humans to the natural world. We stand not outside of nature observing it but inside of it, an extension of the tree of life. Biologically speaking, we are animals, and our development as animals comes out of a slow process and deep connection to all of life. The field of evolutionary psychology is demonstrating great-ape behavior so similar to human behavior that even some of our cherished “human” attributes like peacemaking and expressions of selflessness might be attributed to our animal selves. We may be, as the psalmist says, “a little lower than the angels,” but we are also, literally, beasts. Understanding humans as connected inextricably to nature makes it very hard to distinguish human evil from natural evil, because we cannot distinguish the human from the natural. Human evil is natural evil. As Lutheran theologian Ted Peters puts it, “We inherit evil from the tree of life.”

If that’s the case, I would be tempted to set aside the category of evil altogether, as observers such as Richard Dawkins have done.

It might seem strange to use the term *evil* to describe the struggle for survival among animals that we see in evolutionary history, but Peters thinks such a label is necessary if we are to hold the human and animal worlds together—which is something we must do given the insights of evolutionary science. And if we refrain from using the category of evil in talking about the natural world, Peters says, we will end up in the intellectual position of having to view horrendous events in the human world—genocide, for example—as the natural product of evolutionary struggle and natural selection.

The notion that God oversees creation and is leading it toward redemption is deeply embedded in Christian language. Some modern defenders of Darwin—like Daniel Dennett, director of the Center for Cognitive Studies and professor of philosophy at Tufts University—argue that it is just such a notion of God that has to be discarded

in view of evolutionary science. The processes of evolutionary development are simply too random, too intertwined with natural circumstances, for us to believe that an outside force, like God, is directing them.

But Robert Jenson, Lutheran theologian at the Center of Theological Inquiry at Princeton Seminary, suggests that such arguments are off target in that they operate with a view of God as external to the cosmos, acting on it from outside. This idea of God derives more from the Enlightenment than from Christianity. Christians, Jenson says, have traditionally conceived of the cosmos as contained *in* God. Holding to this conception of God, one can view natural selection not as a process separate from God but as a process that takes place in God.

The benefit of this approach is that God is not consigned to the gaps in scientific knowledge. While this view may not solve problems of theodicy, at least it does not pit theology against biology to see which has more explanatory power. Jenson's formulation suggests that God may not oversee creation so much as work through it.

But how does God work through creation? The fact that suffering, pain, death and extinction are part of life in the evolutionary scheme—that the sacrifice of some creatures is necessary to the survival of others—remains a theological problem, but it is also an invitation to think more deeply about the nature of God's power. To make sense of God's role in this scheme, some theologians focus not on God's directive power but on God's self-sacrificing love in and for creation.

In the Christian understanding, God's love shown in Jesus involves God's own death and sacrifice for the sake of new life. Perhaps we can see this kind of self-sacrifice by God in the suffering of creation. Following this vein of thought, Denis Edwards, Catholic priest and a senior lecturer in theology at Flinders University and Adelaide College in Australia, says that the cross of Christ teaches us that God's power is of a specific kind: "It does not destroy human integrity or natural processes, but brings life in and through them."

Still, evolutionary biology makes it hard to discern purpose or direction in creation. For some theologians, facing a universe that includes randomness and chance may require a shift in thinking about how God works. John Haught, Catholic theologian and professor of theology at Georgetown University, suggests that we think in terms of a God who offers "a wide range of possibilities that the world can realize, a universe of innumerable possibilities." Realization of any one possibility happens

amid the play between God and creatures.

While in some ways this is a new and unfamiliar way of thinking about God, it is consistent with one key part of the scriptural tradition: in the Bible, God is the one who makes things new. God is the source of novelty. Evolutionary science, according to Haught's way of thinking, shows us the dance between order and randomness by which novelty is produced.

Humans have their own special part in the creation of novelty, for we are a conscious part of the dance of order and randomness. Philip Clayton, a theologian at Claremont School of Theology, picks up on this dimension of evolutionary process and likens creaturely life to the unfolding of a jazz composition: God provides the motifs, but creatures (of various kinds, from the smallest to the largest) provide the original riffs.

The theological problem with going in this direction, of course, is that such a view leaves little sense of divine direction or action. Clayton argues that evolutionary biology severely limits what we can call divine action, though he believes that science does allow a small but significant space for interaction between creature and Creator. Nature can be "biologically constrained without being biologically determined," he says. He calls the divine-creature interaction "the divine lure." As evolution occurs, more complex structures emerge. And the more complex forms that emerge are not reducible to a mere compilation of the kinds that come before them. In the space between what is and what is becoming, God might be said to act.

Theologies that emphasize God as deeply involved in natural, open-ended processes seem better able to make sense of evolution than do the classical accounts of an omnipotent God. On the other hand, if Jenson is right, perhaps what is needed is a richer notion of the God in whom these processes occur. At the very least, substantial interaction between Christian theology and evolutionary biology is prompting new metaphors and new ways of thinking about God.

Perhaps the most tangible outcome of such interaction will be a new attitude toward the natural world. The drama of creation and evolution is being played out all the time, all around us, from the minute interaction between insects and plants to the vast realms of weather and climate. Perhaps we will learn to pay closer, more humble attention to our part in this drama. And as we contemplate the reaches of space and time, we can learn to say yet more earnestly with the psalmist, "What are we that You take thought of us?"