

A problem with evolution

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Abstract

The paper addresses the problem which arises for Christian theology regarding the doctrine of the Incarnation if human beings evolve into a post-human form. It notes that while current opponents of the idea of evolution are focused on the remote past, and that their position has more to do with upholding biblical literalism than with any real scientific argument, yet there is a real issue for a faith that is founded on the belief that God became man if man ceases to be man. It addresses the options which seem to lie open in the long unknown future as far as they can be surmised at this stage, and discusses the implications of these.

Despite years of science teaching in schools a surprisingly large number of people still have deep doubts about evolution as an explanation of man's origins. Many in America would still opt for a literal interpretation of the *Genesis* creation stories. Efforts to undermine the teaching of evolution in American schools have taken the form of arguing for 'Creationism' or its current variation "Intelligent Design" being taught as alternative explanations in the science classroom. The counter argument that Creationism and Intelligent Design are more theology than science and might properly belong in a course on religious thought seems to carry little weight with those who at bottom are more concerned with ousting evolution from science teaching than with offering alternatives elsewhere.

In fact the opposition to teaching evolution is not really about evolution at all. The opponents of Darwinian or Neo-Darwinian accounts of how species evolved are not really concerned with such explanations in themselves. The well-intentioned but misguided efforts by some scientists to

demonstrate that accepting evolution as a mechanism explanation is not irreconcilable with belief in God misses the point entirely. For the opponents of evolution the issue is not belief in God but belief in the literal inerrancy of the *Genesis* accounts. At bottom it is an issue of what is meant by inspiration. Is inspiration to be understood as meaning that every word of the Bible is literally true and that all human knowledge must either be reconciled with it or rejected; or does inspiration mean that the sacred authors were inspired to address particular topics but allowed to reflect the worldview and limits of their own age ? The opponents of evolution accept only the first view, which means they are committed to a literal seven-day creation and a five thousand year old Earth. Since they cannot reconcile the millions of years involved in evolution with this belief they must perforce reject evolution and all its works. What is generally overlooked in the debate is that they must also reject much of archaeology and ancient history as it is generally taught. It is often forgotten that nascent Egyptology and Assyriology in the 19th century undermined the idea of *Genesis* as literal history quite apart from Darwin, just as most fundamentalists are blissfully unaware that the early Church Fathers viewed much of *Genesis* as metaphor not history.

It is doubtful even if American schools did adopt teaching Intelligent Design in their curricula that the opponents of teaching evolution in science classes would rest. Given their starting point that *Genesis* is literally true in all its details they must inevitably regard the teaching of evolution in any shape as erroneous in fact and pernicious in implication. When people believe that they possess the sole vision of truth any accommodation assumes the character of selling out. The logic of their position excludes accommodation or compromise.

For those who accept evolution as an explanation of the *how*, but not necessarily of the *who* or *why*, and who understand inspiration as it pertains to the Bible in much broader terms, it is easy to dismiss the fundamentalist opposition to evolution as obscurantist. It is true that opponents of teaching evolution in schools are focused entirely on the past, on the origins of humanity. Since they reject the possibility of evolution they must reject also the

possibility of continuing evolution. Yet it is precisely in that last area that they miss what is indeed a major problem for Christian theology.

Christian theology is founded on the Incarnation, that the Word became flesh and dwelt amongst us and that Jesus Christ is God and man. This doctrine was put into formal language by early Church Councils and is reiterated over and again when congregations recite the Creeds and affirm that the Son of God

became incarnate by the Virgin Mary and was made man.

The Incarnation is conceived of as a unique event with no previous parallels. That God revealed himself to prophets and others before this in many and varied ways has always been part of both Jewish and Christian teaching, but within both faiths no-one has ever suggested that God assumed the form of any creature apart from that of a human being.

The possibility that God might manifest himself to non-human creatures in their own form has not escaped the imagination of story-tellers, but Christian theology has always assumed no pre-human incarnation for earlier animal species and more importantly has never suggested a possible post-human one. The Incarnation is therefore embedded in Christian thinking as unique and final, sufficient in itself for humankind and with no thought that humankind itself might change. Yet if we reached our present human forms by a process of gradual evolution there is nothing in that process which would indicate that it must end with *Homo Sapiens Sapiens*. And if human beings continue to evolve so that our present condition becomes as ancestral to some future descendant form as *Homo Habilis* is for us, what then becomes of a once and for all Incarnation as a human being? If we could discover definitely that our remote hominid ancestors had some sense of the divine we would still not think of revering and worshiping what they revered and worshiped. Along with their primitive stone implements we should regard their religious sensibilities as equally embryonic and ill-formed. If

human beings continue to evolve into some post-human form might not our future descendants adopt the same attitude towards an Incarnation which we believe occurred at a definite point in history, in which God became a human being?

Christians affirm in the Creeds that the Son of God came down from Heaven

for us and for our salvation.

Here the words *us* and *our* are understood to refer to human beings not to some hypothetical post-human form. The Creeds also teach the resurrection of the dead, and while theology had taken its cue from Paul in *1 Corinthians 15* that the resurrection is not resuscitation but the endowment of a new kind of spiritual body the presumption has always been that this will still constitute some kind of recognizable humanity. It is conceivable that such a spiritual body might well correspond to a more post-human form, but this conversely assumes that Teilhard De Chardin was right in positing a spiritual evolution paralleling a physical one. If De Chardin was also correct in suspecting that humanity was still in the earliest stages of its ultimate evolution, this would imply based on the time allowed for past developments that millions of years still stretch before human beings. If however there is continued physical evolution without a corresponding spiritual one, then we would still reach the issue of how such future post-humans would view an Incarnation in human form. Even with a spiritual evolution that question is not entirely absent.

Many Christians currently shows little interest in apocalyptic predictions of the end-time, whether the Old Testament Day of the Lord or the New Jerusalem of *Revelation*. Yet the concept of a final judgment is still embedded in the Christian consciousness, whether an individual judgment at death or a general one at some indeterminate point in the future. As with other religions such a Judgment is normally related to our actions in this life, but those actions are assumed to be what we do as human beings. The sins and

failings that we confess are human sins and failings however we account for their origin. We do not regard non-human creatures as sinful, though we may use anthropomorphic language to describe their actions. Sinning is viewed as a human activity, though tradition also ascribes it to demonic beings outside the natural order. Whether the latter are capable of evolution lies beyond our capacity even to guess, but if we conceive of sin as essentially a human characteristic then the evolution of humans into post-humans raises the question of whether sin would change its nature or whether sin as we know it would become obsolete. Further speculation down this path is probably unprofitable but we have raised enough issues to show that the continuing evolution of human beings poses a number of problems in terms of traditional Christian belief.

It is possible to imagine possible solutions to this problem, but they largely presume that humanity marks the end of the evolutionary process.. One obvious answer is that human beings will become extinct (or be extinguished) before they change into some post-human species. When De Chardin wrote *The Phenomenon of Man* he presumed the possibility of the proverbial Nuclear Winter but thought enough human beings would emerge to carry on, and even postulated the survivors would have moved a step forward in spiritual evolution as a result of their experience. Today the possibility that most life on this planet could be obliterated in a nuclear catastrophe remains on the table, and even if some forms of life survived there is no way of knowing if this might include human beings. Since microbacterial life manages to exist in places on the ocean floor under seemingly very inhospitable conditions, it is conceivable that over time these might give rise to a whole new evolutionary chain which might one day even include creatures capable of rational thought. Such hypothetical beings might resemble humans in their skills and capacities, but they would not be human beings. Therefore while the eradication of human life by war, disease, or other catastrophe does not have to entail the end of all life on the Earth it would mean the end of that life form which is understood to be a necessary constituent of the Incarnation.

In any event there appears to be a time limit to the survival of any life on this planet. Astronomers tell us that billions of years down the road the Sun will turn into a red giant star that will have expanded certainly to Venus and perhaps to the Earth. At this point all life on the Earth would cease. From the viewpoint of mankind billions of years is a very long time. Yet in just the last fifty years human beings have traveled to the Moon. It is not unreasonable to suppose that over the next million years (when based on past development periods human beings would still be human beings), travel to places beyond our solar system would become feasible. Given the colonizing history of humans the possibility of human outposts or offshoots on other worlds is a reasonable hypothesis.

It is therefore conceivable that even if humanity was extinguished on this planet through war or natural calamity, it might survive elsewhere.

But this in its turn raises another issue. Given the vastness of the known universe (let alone the unknown universe) the possibility of intelligent life elsewhere in the cosmos cannot be excluded. To say that it cannot be excluded is not to assert that it probably exists. Probability theory aside, there is no intrinsic reason why human beings may not be unique in the universe in this respect. If we are unique then future extension of humanity's story across the heavens remains just that, magnificent no doubt but essentially our former history writ large. If however there is intelligent life elsewhere then this raises the question of the role of future human beings in salvation history. Central to Christian faith is the doctrine that salvation is through Jesus Christ (not the same as knowledge of Jesus Christ but through his atoning death). Underlying that belief is the Incarnation. But again this is God becoming man not some unknown hypothetical intelligent being elsewhere in the universe. On the premise that other rational beings would stand as much in need of salvation as human beings do, two possibilities would seem to lie open here. The first is the equivalent of the Incarnation for other rational creatures elsewhere. The creedal affirmation that "for us men and for our salvation he came down from heaven" does not exclude God's parallel action for the salvation of other rational beings.

An alternative and perhaps more romantic possibility is a future role of human beings as missionaries through the galaxy. However appealing this might seem at first glance it presumes that non-human intelligent beings would be open to believing that their salvation derived from God taking the form of an alien. The likelihood of this can be gauged from what the human response would be if human beings were presented with that choice now.

Fantastic as these possibilities may seem, they belong not to science fiction but to extrapolating from humanity's past history of exploration and mission and projecting similar issues into the future based on current technological developments. Throughout human history explorers have taken their religious beliefs with them, and even when not consciously proselytizing they have frequently left traces of their varied faiths wherever they settled. Yet set in the remote future the continuum between what has been and what may be still depends on human beings remaining human beings. An encounter between post-humans and non-humans at some unknown future date would probably have little or no connection with Christian faith as we know it. We come back inevitably to the fact that Christianity is at bottom based on the Incarnation and the Incarnation is about God becoming a human being.

For Christians then evolution poses a real problem. The problem lies not in the past about when and how human beings began, but in the possibility of continuing evolution until human beings cease to be human beings and become post-human. Whether such an evolutionary development would be paralleled by a spiritual development remains unknowable. Nor is it clear that any spiritual evolution would be recognizable as spiritual in the sense that we understand it. Christian ideas of what is spiritual derive from the mingling of past cultures with present understandings, and these ideas will be themselves subject to continuing refinement and change. We cannot project our minds into the future to guess at what we might understand then by either humanity or what is spiritual since the mental framework of our effort would always be anchored in the here and now. Similarly while we

may know much about former civilizations and cultures we cannot ever enter into what it felt like to be a member of them. We are always constrained by the present. We can only understand our world as human beings living in the age we live, and we can only look at the past or the future through those eyes. Even our efforts to imagine what post-human might mean are governed by the paradigm we start from, ourselves today. It is no coincidence that most science fiction involving future conversations with other life forms usually depict them as vaguely humanoid or resembling some current animal species.

The prospect of continuing human evolution can only be dismissed on the assumption that the evolutionary journey which may have begun with some early pre-hominid has reached its ultimate point of development. There is nothing in the record of human evolution to sustain that assumption. There have been apparent dead ends in the general known evolutionary picture and probably among our own ancestry, but there is no evidence to suggest that human beings represent a similar dead end. Continuing biological human evolution is therefore possible and perhaps even probable. Past physical evolution has also been accompanied by increases in mental functioning, and this also would presumably characterize future developments. If human evolution therefore continues through a future two million year period like that roughly separating *Homo Habilis* from *Homo Sapiens Sapiens* it is possible that the end result will be a creature very different from that human being into which Christian theology teaches that the Eternal Word of God became incarnate. For Christians this is not an insuperable problem, since at bottom they believe that all things are governed by God's providence, even the unknown future. It is however an issue that merits some discussion by both theologians and perhaps science.