



National Center for Science Education

Defending the Teaching of Evolution in Public Schools

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Evolution and Faith: Conflict? Conversation? Convergence?

Guide to the Series: A 45–60 minute dialogue on the series *Evolution*

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“Hasn’t Darwin’s evolutionary science placed in serious doubt the religious sense that we inhabit a meaningful universe? Or is it instead possible that what scientific skeptics often take to be the religiously ruinous consequences of Darwinian thought are in fact fresh openings to mysterious sacred depths of reality previously unfathomed? And in these depths will we find only an abyss of absurdity, or perhaps instead the sustaining presence of a truly living and renewing God, one who can command the fullness of our worship and one to whom we might still pray with love and confidence?”

— John F. Haught, *God after Darwin* (Boulder CO: Westview Press, 2000), 10.

Image

Many images recur and return throughout the series. One motif, which begins in the account of the development of Darwin’s thought in Episode One and runs through the series, is the tree of life. Another is the hand, exemplified by the negative hand stencil from a French cave wall, but supported by all sorts of images of human and animal hands in most of the episodes. Which of these images caught your imagination?

Dig

What insights did these images stimulate? Why do you think the hand and the tree of life (or other recurring motifs you may have identified) are such strong images in the program? Are there persistent questions that they express?

Dialogue

It may be that the tree of life and the hand stencil speak to us of two facets of a basic question that runs through the series. How are humans related to all living things? How are we unique? Many of the comments in the series are questions about the distinctive qualities of human beings.

Daniel Dennett, for example, says, toward the end of Episode One, “For more than a century people have often thought that the conclusion to draw from Darwin’s vision is that *Homo sapiens*, our species, that we’re just animals, too, we’re just mammals, that there is nothing morally special about us. I myself don’t think that follows at all from Darwin’s vision.” If this is an issue for a secular philosopher, how much more is it an issue for people with strong faith convictions about the unique place of humans in God’s plan of salvation?

What evolutionary evidence (from the series) speaks to the uniqueness of humanity?

What from your faith convictions speaks to the uniqueness of humanity?

Where is there common ground between the two? Divergence?

What evolutionary evidence (from the series) speaks to the connectedness of all life?
What from your faith traditions speaks to the connectedness of all life?
Where is there common ground between the two? Divergence?

Explore

1. Perhaps the greatest temptation to which we fall prey in trying to reconcile our faith and our learning about evolution is doing “God of the gaps” theology. In the first episode, Professor Kenneth Miller is in a radio studio in Tennessee. The show host asks “Let me ask you this — as a cellular biologist ...when you are studying something, reading something, doing some research, do you come to a point and go, ‘That’s God?’” Miller replies, “I don’t find God in the insufficiency of science to explain things.” Miller, who identifies himself as an orthodox Darwinian and an orthodox Catholic Christian, finds a “wonderful consistency” in his work in science and his practice of faith, and has described it in his book *Finding Darwin’s God* (New York: HarperCollins, 1999). Members of your congregation may want to read Miller’s book and discuss it. Or you could interview scientists who are members of your congregation or other nearby communities of faith to find out how they avoid a “God of the gaps” approach to the science–theology dialogue.
2. Episode Two poses the question, what does it mean that we (humans) are the ones telling this story? What evidence can you glean from the series to begin to answer this? Where (including insights from faith traditions) would you look for more ideas to help in answering this question?

Act

There are many possibilities for action steps in the study guides for each of the episodes. A first step might be to research what your denomination or communion has to say about evolution. NCSE’s *Voices of Evolution* is a place to start. The study guides for each of the episodes have more ideas for specific actions.

Please send comments on these guides, and any questions about ideas and resources for extending the conversation, to:

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