

## **THE POST-DARWINIAN CHALLENGE**

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### **The Old Worldview and Theology**

For the last 153 years, Western culture has lived with two conflicting worldviews. The first is the familiar worldview of our Judeo-Christian heritage. And the second is the more recent Post Darwinian worldview that is progressively taking shape. And for each of these worldviews, there is an appropriate theology.

The Judeo-Christian worldview is by far the oldest, dating back about 2,600 years. There are actually two conflicting creation stories in Genesis. This results because some of the Old Testament is the consolidation of four religious literatures.

The first story in Genesis Chapter One has God create everything in six days with man and woman being created on the last day. No Garden of Eden, no apples, no snake, and no punishment. All in all, not very interesting.

Things get more exciting in the Second Chapter of Genesis. Here, the second story has God make man on the first day out of the dust of the ground. Then He made the Garden of Eden, created all the trees and plants, and put Adam in it.

Next, God said, "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him." So out of the ground, the Lord God formed every beast of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to Adam to name them. So Adam spent all day naming animals, but none was a suitable helper for him.

So God caused Adam to go into a deep sleep and made Eve from one of Adam's ribs. God instructed them to be fruitful and multiply and to eat freely of the fruit of every tree in the Garden except the "tree of knowledge of good and evil." -- for in the day that you eat of it, you shall die.

Well, as the story goes, Adam and Eve did eat of the fruit and did gain knowledge of their sexual differences, a naughty thing that greatly displeased God. But they didn't die.

They did worse. They committed the "Original Sin." Not only were they severely punished, but their actions would have cosmic consequences. Specifically, that sin would be passed on to each generation forever. According to this, we are all born in sin and human nature is hopelessly flawed and depraved.

The theology that compliments this worldview is one that offers a way to overcome this original sin, to escape this inherited guilt. It is called salvation by faith. Not just any faith, but faith in Jesus Christ.

I was raised to embrace this Genesis story of creation. And I suppose you were too. The adults whom I trusted seemed to believe it. And my relatives believed it and their relatives' relatives' relatives believed it. People for thousands of years had bought into it. It was part of our culture and tradition. It was always presented with overtones of spirituality and reverence, surrounded by beautiful music, art and architecture.. It was associated with goodness, respectability and acceptance. And no reasonable alternatives had even been whispered. Surely it must be true!!

And yet, it didn't feel right to me, even as a child. It didn't seem right that there was a fully developed language that both God and Adam knew so soon after creation. It didn't seem right that the oral tradition retained the story so faithfully over so many centuries until it was written down. And personally, I have always been suspicious of any religion that proposes a problem like "Original Sin" and then offers the only solution to the problem.

Historically, Jesus never proposed a theology of salvation by faith. Jesus preached that political conditions had gotten so bad in his time that God was going to bring an "end to time" – whatever that means -- and institute a Kingdom of God during the lifetimes of the apostles. This is known as the eschatological vision. Jesus was never explicit about the Kingdom of God. Sometimes the Kingdom of God was coming in the future; other times it was already here. Sometimes the Kingdom of God was within you; other times it was out there. Sometimes it was personal; other times it was political. Sometimes it was earthly, other times it was heavenly.

In any event, Jesus preached that the Kingdom of God was near; that it would come during the lifetimes of the apostles. The apostles truly believed this and Paul, more than anyone, encouraged his followers to "get with the program" because the world was coming to an end.

In Albert Schweitzer's classical study, *The Historicity of Jesus*, he observed that many of the instructions of Jesus only made sense if you believed the world was coming to an end. Instructions like, leaving your job, leaving your family, giving away what you owned, and following him, was a formula for failure unless the world really did come to an end.

To the embarrassment of the church fathers, the world did not come to an end. Not then and at no time since. Could it be that Jesus was wrong? Could it be that an all-knowing son of god could be wrong? Who knows? But clearly, the world did not end.

So the church fathers needed to create a theology to accommodate what did happen and to keep the story going. And the theology they created decades after Jesus' death was that Jesus was sacrificed for our inherited "Original sins –and we needed to "believe in the resurrected Christ" in order to have salvation.

Unfortunately, these early theologians were poor historians. The Roman Senate had passed a law in 97 B.C.E. that outlawed any human sacrifice. And since Jesus was

crucified in Roman territory, it could not have been as a human sacrifice. Jesus was crucified as a political upstart who threatened the peace during Passover.

Nonetheless, that is the prevailing worldview and theology of the Christian church. But it is a system of belief based on pious hope and the desire for institutional power. There is not one shred of historical truth or testable fact in this worldview and theology.

In the recent past we became aware that there were closet gays and lesbians who were afraid to make their sexual preferences known. What is less commonly recognized is that there are Christian ministers who are closet agnostics and atheists who are afraid to acknowledge that they have lost their faith.

The philosopher Daniel Dennett of Tufts University is doing a study of closet ministers. He is finding that many started having doubts in theological school when they studied Biblical criticism and found that the Bible was filled with inconsistencies and could not be the word of an all-knowing god.

Now they have moved from doubt to agnosticism and are living in the closet. They are afraid of telling their congregation for fear of losing their jobs. And they are afraid of telling their wives for fear of losing their marriage and their children.

But more and more ministers are coming out of the closet. Unitarian-Universalism gets its share of converts – ministers who were trained in Christian seminaries and found they did not believe the creed and could not serve that faith.

One of the most vocal of these ministers is Bishop John Shelby Spong. Rev. Spong was the former bishop of the Episcopal diocese of Newark, New Jersey, and is now retired. He has published more than 21 books with titles such as “Why Christianity Must Change or Die.” and “A New Christianity for a New World.” He urges the church to drop the metaphysical concept of the Trinity and to rebuild its theology on the person of Jesus, unencumbered with the mythical Christ figure.

I want to bring this section to a close, so that you can hear an affirmation by the retired Episcopalian Bishop John Shelby Spong on how he has come to terms with the Old Worldview and its theology.

[Reading: Affirmation of Bishop John Shelby Spong]

## The New Worldview and Challenge

Today, we are witness to a new evolving worldview. While the Genesis creation story is based on mythology, the new worldview is based on evidence. The current creation story starts with an enormous energy eruption of unknown origin that has been labeled the "Big Bang." The residual radiation from that explosion was detected in 1964 at Bell Telephone Laboratories in Holmdel, N. J. by Arno Penzias and Robert Wilson. Since the hum came from all directions, it could only be explained as cosmic background radiation coming from a central source. The strength of the decaying signal suggested the origin was about 13.7 billion year ago.

This new creation story is now the accepted norm in science and Penzias and Wilson were awarded the Nobel Prize. Of interest, Robert Wilson is a Unitarian-Universalist, so the theory must be correct.

The "Big Bang" produced two elements – hydrogen and helium. Under the pull of gravity, the hydrogen and helium accreted, fused, and became stars. As the stars burnt up the hydrogen fuel, they began to collapse, increasing the internal pressure and creating all the heavier elements. This includes the principle elements necessary for life as we know it, namely carbon, oxygen, nitrogen and hydrogen.

When the stars exploded, stardust containing these elements was flung into space. Over time, gravity pulled the stardust together to form the solar systems. Our solar system, including planet Earth, was form by accretion about 4.5 billion years ago.

Now, the new creation story gets exciting. We learn that life itself was formed from inorganic material; or, as Genesis said, from the dust of the earth. The elemental gasses in our primordial soup --such as methane and ammonia -- interacted with various energy sources to form the first amino acids and bases that evolved into the first molecules capable of survival, adaptation, and reproduction, namely DNA. Stanley Miller and Harold Urey set up an experiment at the University of Chicago in 1953 that approximated those primordial conditions and replicated the first amino acids in the laboratory. For this ground-breaking work, Miller and Urey also received the Nobel Award.

Single-cell organisms dominated the planet for the next two billion years. During this time, these small organisms invented numerous survival techniques including fermentation and photosynthesis as ways of extracting food, metabolism, locomotion and pigmentation to avoid damaging radiation, and mechanisms for repairing damaged DNA

Slowly multi-celled organism began to appear producing plants, taking in carbon dioxide and producing oxygen. Animal life emerged that used the oxygen for respiration and we moved from hominines to Homo sapiens, where we are now. As far as we know, all life has emerged from the same DNA – plants, animals, bacteria, viruses. There is less than 1% difference in the genomes of that of a human and a chimpanzee.

Let me quote Bishop Spong again: “Homo sapiens are the winners of the evolutionary struggle. Our humanity was shaped not by a mythical fall but by a very real battle for survival. We have survived our biological history by our wits and our radical self-centeredness. The evil we human beings seem prone to do is not a commentary on our fallen nature; it is a manifestation of our dedication to put ourselves first, for that is what our evolutionary history has required of us.”

The modern worldview talks of an unending, evolving process. At no time was there a near-instantaneous creation or an ideal, perfect Garden of Eden. At no time was there an Original Sin. And if there was, according to modern heredity the sins of the parents are not traits that can be passed on to the children. In short, the modern worldview does not support “Original Sin” and has no need for salvation or atonement.

What then is an appropriate theology for this new worldview? First, we need to separate morality from religion. Every religion claims that they are the champion and guardian of morality. Religion has hid behind morality for so long that many think they are the same thing. But they are not. Morality and religion are two very different things.

According to Nicholas Wade in his recent book, *The Faith Instinct*, morality came long before religion. Moral behavior grew out of the realization that survival was enhanced when people helped each other.

As long as primitive society was Alpha-male dominated, morality could be enforced. But when society became egalitarian hunters and gathers, there was no one in hierarchical control to enforce morality. It is then that people, sensing their dead ancestors in dreams, began to believe that their ancestors were alive in another dimension – a supernatural afterlife – and ancestor worship became common.

From there it was an easy step to propose an ultimate tribal ancestor, a God in this supernatural domain to enforce morality: a God to judge moral behavior, to reward conformance with a blissful life after death and to punish non-conformance with eternal torment. Hence, religion was born. And it exists to this day as the metaphysical enforcer of morality.

In the new worldview, there is the continuing need for morality, possibly more than ever as life becomes more complex. However, the need for religion as the enforcer of morality is questionable. None of the classical elements of religion fit within the modern worldview. There has yet to be established by any testable methodology any trace of a heaven or hell, of a cosmic judgment, of original sin or need for salvation, no evidence of miracles, revelation or answered-prayers, or even a God.

That leaves us with morality. But what rules of morality? That is a very major issue. We live in a world that is fragmented with many ethnic groups and diverse religions. We know that all the mystical, metaphysical theologies divide us at a time when we need to be united. Peter Ustinov once said, “I believe men are united by their doubt and separated by their convictions.”

I remember as a child singing a familiar hymn: “Bless Be The Ties That Bind.” What could tie us together? What is common to all of us? What is undeniably at the root of life itself that could serve as the basis of a common morality?

I suggest that the oldest, proven rules that support life are the rules of our genes themselves. Our genes have survived for billions of years, being passed from generation to generation in an unbroken line. If there is anything approaching immortality it is this DNA. It is not us. We are the temporary torch bearers.

From the gene perspective you and I are carriers of the precious, still-undefined miraculous life-formula called DNA. It has passed from generation to generation for millions of years without interruption, and it is our job to keep this life force alive. And we might do well to model our social rules after them.

Any moral code that is counter to the genetic code is destined to fail. Life is not arbitrary and the moral rules regulating life cannot be arbitrary. Rather, morality should sustain, enhance and support the genetic rules of life itself.

What are the rules governing genes? Simple, they are survival, adaptation and reproduction. How might these become the basis of human morality. Lets look..

The first rule is survival. We are born with the instinct to live, to protect ourselves, to acquire what we need. This self-centered trait was named the “selfish gene” by Richard Dawkins in 1976. It brings up negative social images like greed and selfishness. But that is simplistic. Meaningful survival requires cultivating the social values of friendship, sharing, helping, altruism, generosity and love.

Self-interest is at the root of progress. Out of self-interest inventors give us products that improve the quality of life. Out of self-interest, entrepreneurs create businesses that provide jobs. Out of self-interest creditors make loans that fund home mortgages and business start-ups.

Furthermore, there is no way to legislate against self-interest. The failed political experiment called communism showed that no utopian idea of group sharing can displace the genetic drive of self-interest.

For our primitive ancestor, survival meant individual survival, staying alive under harsh conditions. It meant territorial control of food supplies, stealing, hoarding and killing of rivals if necessary. And the average life expectancy was 30 years at best. In the early agricultural period, people entered a new collective phase of life. Living together, they engaged in collective support. And the life expectancy grew to about 40 years where it stayed until about 1600.

Then something interesting happened. We start moving from a modality of individual survival to one of collective survival. Nutrition moved from individual hunting and

gathering to collective farming and crop sharing. Schools and universities blossomed in the 1600s. Education was no longer individual and private, but became public and collective. Medicine was no longer available just to the privileged, but was available to all. Cities grew into collective societies. Slowly, all parts of society were moving to the collective. And guess what, the average age expectancy has moved to almost 80 years.

Well, since the purpose of the survival gene is to maintain life, it should be obvious that survival has been enhanced more under collective than individual approaches. And since genes are adaptive, I believe that genetic intelligence is migrating from individual to collective survival. As self-interest is reduced, crime, power-seeking and even war would diminish and life expectancy would increase even more.

One must hope this is so. For in our technologically advanced, complex world, our survival or demise will most probably be on a collective scale.

The moral of survival is to live and let live. All people carry the gene and should be treated as equal – regardless of race, class or ethnicity. It argues for equality. It argues against crime, wars and capital punishment. And it argues for all the things that support life: love, loyalty, altruism, generosity.

It argues for life more abundant, not mere subsistence. All should have access to adequate food, clothing, shelter and opportunity. Acquisition of material possessions is not immoral until it exceeds sustainability and jeopardizes the needs of others.

The second rule is adaptation. Genes are constantly being assaulted by mutations. Change is the handmaiden of evolution. But the gene stays focused on the primary goal of survival. Any change that is detrimental to survival is rejected. Any change that promotes survival is retained and built upon forever. Through this simple rule, the genetic structure evolves into an evermore complex and sophisticated DNA, but never losing sight of its principle goal of enhanced survival.

The moral lesson for human behavior is self-evident. We, too, should constantly seek change -- challenging our beliefs, and replacing them with others that maximize our lives and wholeness. We, too, should find and discard our limiting beliefs. We know that sameness is the fast track to mediocrity. Only when patterns are broken do new worlds emerge. Change is the key that unlocks the doors to growth.

And the third rule is reproduction. The ultimate goal of the gene is to get as many copies of the DNA into the next generation as possible. This is not an invitation for illicit sex, adult entertainment or illegitimate children. Far from it. This is about the responsible business of producing healthy children to keep the life force moving to future generations.

From a moral point of view, it argues for having stable marriages with caring, nurturing, supportive, educational environments for raising healthy children. Sex is not immoral

and any code that suppresses it will ultimately fail. Witness the hypocrisy of the Victorian Era and the problems of the Catholic Church trying to enforce priestly celibacy.

It argues for safe communities so our offspring will endure in good health and be supported in their growing endeavors. It argues for seeking meaning within this life and maximizing our individual potentials to enrich our own enjoyment and set examples for others.

Here we have the three basic genetic driving forces: survival, adaptation and reproduction. They have passed the test of time, moving through billions of years. Personally, I think it will be hard to find a better model than these genetic rules to base human morality. They have the all-important quality of being universal. They avoid the metaphysical and intangible quagmire by being the most tangible and testable of concepts. And a morality built upon this life-force would protect us from the capricious, transient, and arbitrary cultural rules that often pass as morality today.

In closing, we need a morality with guidelines that say “yes” to life, not rules that say “no.” Human beings need to be empowered to enter into and to grasp the fullness of their humanity. They need the means to journey beyond their traditional limits. Perhaps it will be you who will explore this idea and bring to us the richness of possibilities that it offers.