

A Five Fingered God?

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Most of us are familiar with the story of evolution, where living creatures come in a variety of forms, some of which do better in certain environmental niches and reproduce to fill those niches. We see evolution taking place in the span of decades as the English moth population turns from light to dark in response to industrial age pollution darkening the trunks of trees, making the lighter moths more visible to predatory birds, and darker moths better able to hide and reproduce. And we see this moth population return to the lighter colored variety as pollution is controlled and the tree bark lightens to reveal the darker moths. We see evolution acting over longer periods of time where fast cheetahs catch more gazelles and have lots of fast babies, while faster gazelles avoid more cheetahs, and so on until both cheetah and gazelle thunder across the Serengeti at breathtaking speeds. It is a marvel that the accumulation of small mutational changes over vast periods of time can result in something as complicated as the human eye.

While broad strokes of evolutionary story are easy to understand, the details can get quite complicated. Though perhaps not as complicated as navigating the waters of conflict that these topics raise for some individuals. On the one hand, there are many who attack evolution as ungodly for painting a picture of creation that is random, arbitrary, and therefore accidental, and who are insulted by the idea that we descended from a bunch of primates. On the other hand, there are the fundamentalist atheists who use science, and often use their position as scientists, to attack religion and belief in God. They claim that evolution proves that man created God, that life is "nothing more than" the result of physical and chemical processes, and who go so far as to say that belief in God is delusional.

All of these claims are baseless and easily dismissed. To those offended by the idea that we descended from primates, we need to clarify that scientists are in no way saying we descended from a bunch of primates. Scientists are saying that we are a bunch primates. We are *Homo Sapiens*, a branch of primate. Biologically, that's where we fit on the tree of life. Over 95% of our DNA is identical to that of a chimpanzee. I see this as an ego problem – those who don't want to think we descended from monkeys just need to look in a mirror and get over themselves.

I was speaking to Craig Clemow the other day about randomness in evolution, and he stated that to say God can't use randomness in creation is to place limits on God. How dare we. I'll go a step further and submit to you that uncertainty of outcome is integral to God's plan.

There is arbitrariness in evolution in that it seems we could have just as easily evolved with 4 or maybe 6 fingers. But when we believe that we were created in God's image,

we're not thinking that we have five fingers because God has five fingers. That we are created in God's image is a spiritual statement that transcends specific form.

My friend and fellow primate, Jason Wilder, is an evolutionary biologist, and I asked him if a bunch of evolutionary biologists examined the primordial earth, would they say that life was likely to emerge? He replied that all the elements were there and, unless there was some cataclysmic disaster, it would probably be just a matter of time before single-celled organisms were drifting through the oceans. To me this means that imbedded in the way the universe was put together are forces which give rise to life. That is not arbitrary. That is certainly no accident.

Did we invent God? In primitive thinking we may attribute thunder, forest fires, or our five fingered form to the moods and stylistic preferences of a nature God. But this does not mean we invented God to explain things we don't understand, nor does it define our primary relationship with divine mystery.

And for those who say belief in God is delusional – delusion meaning persistent belief in spite of evidence to the contrary – well, to me the evidence for God is subjective and overwhelming, and I imagine it is the same for you since we happen to be gathered in a church. It is right and proper, and no easy task, to embrace this inner evidence and struggle with what it means.

Saddest of all are those who say life is “nothing more than” chemical and physical processes. I'm sorry, but at one time there were no moths, cheetahs, or gazelles, and then, there were – that is a deep and profound mystery, and no amount of details and minute step-by-step explanation can belittle the majestic awe of this living earth.

We are in danger. We are in danger of having our religion hijacked by those who deny scientific observation, or squashed by those who deny God. This is important. If there is one thing I can convey to you today, please hear this: it is imperative for the sake of Christianity, perhaps for the sake of this very house of God, that we, as mainstream Christians, take a stand and say no, there is no contradiction between our Christian beliefs and scientific theories such as the story of evolution. This will involve our greater participation in the public view of science, and a careful examination of exactly what do we believe as Christians. If such an examination scares you, take comfort in the fact that truth cannot contradict truth, and have faith that we will emerge from such an exercise as stronger and more spiritual Christians.

Now when Jesus was caught between people coming at him from different directions, his personal style was to say something deeply profound, like “Render unto Caesar that which is Caesars, and render unto God that which is God's.” He said this in response to a question on taxation and after showing the image of Caesar on a coin. The coin we owe to Caesar. God's image in us we owe to God.

I suggest we apply this to the current conflict: render unto science all that is “sciency”, and strive to more deeply understand God's image in us, and render that unto God.

There is precedent for this division in Martin Luther's doctrine of the Kingdoms of Heaven and Earth, which states that God rules over all, and rules over the Kingdom of Earth by immutable law. If you do A you get B, and there are no exceptions. That's cause and effect, that's physics, that's science. And secondly God rules over the Kingdom of Heaven by grace.

This is echoed by Steven J. Gould, a well known evolutionary biologist, in his concept of magisteria. He defines a magisterium as "a domain where one form of teaching holds the appropriate tools for meaningful discourse and resolution." The magisterium of science covers the empirical realm: what the universe is made of and how it works. The magisterium of religion extends over questions of ultimate meaning and the "why" of creation. These two magisteria are separate and do not overlap.

We need to be cautious. Separating things into two pieces is a sciency thing to do. We need to understand that the Kingdom of Heaven is both immanent in and transcendent to the Kingdom of Earth. This is hard to keep straight, as human nature wants to combine the two. When John and James witnessed the transcendent Christ, their first response was to try and capture what they saw in huts made of sticks and mud, and maybe a lovely cheetah skin on the floor. But when they were truly hit with the full transcendent glory, all they could do was fall down and tremble in fear. Be careful what you ask for.

That God transcends cause and effect is part of our Christian doctrine in that there is nothing we can do to cause our own salvation. We can pray, worship, and follow all the rules until we are blue in the face and this will not bring us salvation. We receive salvation by God's grace and by God's grace alone.

I want to witness for you what I believe. I am a scientist—a mathematician, the most exact of sciences. Though my beloved wife Mary may disagree, I am a rational thinker. Well, at least when it comes to science.

I am a Christian. I believe in God as a transcendent presence and universal creative force. I believe our conscious awareness is the reflected image of God. I believe we each have a personal relationship with God and this relationship is the deepest and most personal aspect of our being.

I believe in Jesus, and that God was embodied in this man. Yes, we are all God's children, and yes, God is embodied in everything — as Gandhi said, "take a rock and split it open, and there is God, inside the rock." But I believe Jesus was in some way a level beyond this, was in some way a perfect embodiment of God, to the glory of which we all fall short.

I believe Jesus had a message for us. Critical information for our well being, and that we are better people for hearing this message and trying to live up to it.

I believe that Jesus conveyed to us a salvation, a forgiveness if you will, that only a perfect embodiment could give.

What is my basis for believing these things? In the scientific realm, there are well defined criteria for believing or rejecting something. But you can't define spiritual truth – defining things is part of science – but, by God, you know a spiritual truth when you hear it. In the Epistle reading of second Peter, it was not by some clever story that apostles came to believe in Christ, but because of what they saw for themselves.

I believe that when you hear a spiritual truth, your heart leaps up in joy, your spirit is struck in awe, and sometimes we tremble in fear. I am a Christian because I believe that when you hear a spiritual truth, you simply become conscious of it being the Truth. With that in mind, let me conclude with a reading from Mathew chapter 5:

Blessed are the poor in spirit,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
Blessed are those who mourn,
for they will be comforted.
Blessed are the meek,
for they will inherit the earth.
Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,
for they will be filled.
Blessed are the merciful,
for they will be shown mercy.
Blessed are the pure in heart,
for they will see God.

Amen.