

Discussion Questions for

The Whole World Kin: Darwin and the Spirit of Liberal Religion

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Introduction

2009 was a banner year for Charles Darwin commemorations with the 200th anniversary of his birth and the 150th anniversary of the publication of *On the Origin of Species*.

Around the world people paid tribute to the profound ways in which Darwin changed the course of modern life. Though these dates have receded, passion about Darwin endures.

And of course there are the ongoing debates and controversial decisions in churches, courtrooms, and school board meetings. Fascination about Darwin will fuel reading and discussion about Darwin for decades to come.

The Whole World Kin: Darwin and the Spirit of Liberal Religion joins this growing volume of research and reflection. The book occupies a special niche in our faith for several reasons.

We can claim Darwin as one of those who lived our faith values. He grew up in a family of religious freethinkers. His mother and wife were Unitarians, albeit “Anglican Unitarians,” and during his lifetime and after he had wide acceptance in Unitarian circles. He had spiritual and intellectual ties to our community.

The concept of evolution gives added richness to our Seventh Principle, “We affirm and promote respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a

part.” Darwin’s research and writing documented interdependency and developed the theory in ways that helped spread a spiritual message in Western culture: that all living things are bound to one another.

Finally, while Darwin tried hard to keep his work free of political and ethical context, we now know that worth and dignity, equity and compassion were uppermost in his mind. His family were outspoken supporters of the abolition of American slavery and his correspondence unequivocally shows how his research gave support to this cause. In addition, though the phrase *environmental justice* would not have been part of his vocabulary, the concept and its implications are articulated throughout his work. The value of diversity and difference instead of hierarchy and speciesism are justice-shaping insights and themes that inform conversations, debate, and policy today.

This online companion piece to *The Whole World Kin* encourages the reflection and discussion to continue. The questions further illuminate the stimulating work of the essayists who contributed to the book. It is our hope that this guide will be a valuable resource to any individual or group seeking further study and conversation.

“The Whole World Is God’s Temple” by Minot Judson Savage

1. What practical value do you see in having a theory of the world? Are you conscious of your theory? In what way do the Unitarian Universalist Principles serve as a theory of the world?
2. At different periods of life and in a variety of ways, we have all been exposed to what Savage calls “the Mosaic Cosmogony.” When did this happen for you? What kind of family/peer support was there for it? What do you make of it today?

3. How much does scriptural story get away with, simply because it is religious and therefore demands respect? How do you reconcile “the inherent worth and dignity of every person” and the diversity of our faith with the contradictions that theology and scripture present (especially through the views of family members, friends, or neighbors)?

4. Savage writes that evolution “will turn out to be the most theistic of all theisms. It will give us the grandest conception of God that the world has ever known.” Are you convinced?

5. Savage writes, “How unutterably grander is the thought that the world-wide banyan-tree of life, with all its million-times-multiplied variety of form and function, and beauty and power, standing with its roots in the dust, and with its top ‘commercing with the skies,’ and bearing on its upper boughs the eternal light of God’s spiritual glory, is all the godlike growth of one little seed in which the divine finger planted such fructifying force!” Is this sacred or secular language and does it describe sacred or secular experience? Can you see it another way?

6. This essay was published seventeen years after the publication of *On the Origin of Species* and six years before Charles Darwin’s death. Minot Savage was on the cutting edge of liberal religious reflection. How would you rank him today?

“A Story Big Enough to Hold Us All” by Michael Dowd

1. For some religious liberals, the idea that the science-based story of how everything came to be is “big enough to hold us all” may seem to conflict with respect for diversity of spiritual viewpoint. What do you think?

2. *Public revelation* is based on acquiring the foundational knowledge from which diverse meanings can be drawn. *Private revelation* entails claims about reality that arise primarily from personal experiences. Charles Darwin arrived at the theory of natural selection through public revelation, whereas Alfred Russel Wallace arrived at it through private revelation. In the sciences, public revelation trumps private revelation. Do you find these arguments convincing, and do you agree that the distinction between public revelation and private revelation is important?

3. Dowd explains that there are two kinds of language. *Day language* describes that which is publicly and measurably true. *Night language* uses metaphor, poetry, and vibrant images to evoke meaning. Might this distinction become important for religious liberals? Might it offer a middle way between the extreme voices of scriptural literalists on one side and the provocations of the New Atheists on the other?

4. What comes up for you when biblical literalists and people like the New Atheists point to scripture readings that are most morally offensive to the modern ear? What do you make of passages that tell us that God intentionally drowned billions of animals and tens of millions of human beings in Noah's flood and instructed Moses to kill millions of men, women, and innocent children?

5. Have you been left with a meaningless picture of reality based on what science has taught about the history of the universe and our place in it? Has this essay made a difference for you?

6. Dowd writes, "Any God that can be believed in or not believed in is a trivialized notion of the divine." What does this provocative statement mean, and do you see value in it?

“Grandeur in This View” by William R. Murry

1. If believing in evolution leads to agnosticism or atheism, as it did for Darwin, why is it that people seem hard-wired to be religious?
2. Evolution by natural selection has changed the ways we think about ourselves, God, and nature. In what ways has it changed your thinking?
3. Evolution makes believing in a supernatural deity difficult, but leaves open the possibility of faith in a "naturalistic God." What is the value of believing in such a God, or is such a belief simply a desperate attempt to hold on to a dying theism?
4. Murry believes the epic of cosmic and biological evolution offers a meaningful religious story. Do you find evolution meaningful for your life and faith? Discuss its pros and cons as a religious story.
5. If cooperation, altruism, empathy, and other moral behaviors are products of evolution, what about negative or immoral behaviors such as selfishness and aggression? If both types of behavior originate in evolution, how do human beings decide which are moral and which are not?
6. We can be "good without God" because our ethical principles do not stem from supernatural religion. Do you think most people need a higher moral authority like God to live a moral life?

“Making God’s Work Our Own” by John Gibbons

1. Most religions present both a story of the world’s origins—a creation myth—and a moral code of behavior. The creation myth often gives the religion the authority to create

and enforce the moral code, and the moral code is sometimes even foreshadowed in the creation myth. If evolution by natural selection is accepted as the origin of all biological species, and other scientific explanations are accepted for the origin of the universe and physical matter, then what role can religion play in creating a moral code and advocating for it?

2. A person's relationship with and attitude toward the natural world may be heavily influenced by their religion. A religion that assumes dominion over nature will create a different set of assumptions about how the natural environment should be treated than one that advocates stewardship, or one that affirms the interdependent web of all being, or one that believes in end times. How does accepting evolution by natural selection inform our attitude and behavior toward the natural environment?

3. How does accepting evolution by natural selection affect our ideas about justice? If we accept evolution, how do we ascertain what is just?

4. If human beings are simply another kind of animal, then do human beings have natural rights? Do other animals have rights?

5. If natural selection has been operating for millions of years and death is an integral part of how it works, should we have antibiotics, vaccinations against disease, and other treatments that enable people to live when they might otherwise have died?

6. Why do human parents expend a great deal of time and energy raising their children, while other species do little or nothing for their offspring?

7. If we accept evolution by natural selection, then how do we explain altruistic behavior, and why should we engage in it?

“Holding Hands with Eve” by Gary Kowalski

1. Human beings descend from a common mother, a “Mitochondrial Eve,” who lived approximately 200,000 years ago. Are there moments when you experience this family connection as a spiritual fact, while also acknowledging it as a scientific fact?
2. If chimpanzees have a genetic sequence 99.4 percent similar to that of human beings, does this mean these creatures possess an “inherent worth and dignity” as people do?
3. Darwin confessed that the practice of experimentation on living organisms made him “sick with horror.” Should primates (or other animals) be used in biomedical research? What restrictions, if any, should govern their treatment in the lab?
4. Monkeys appear to have an instinctive sense of fair play, equal reward for equal performance. Do human beings also have an inborn sense of justice? What evidence would you give, one way or the other?
5. If other species are capable of using language and making tools and possess self-conscious awareness, what differentiates *Homo sapiens* from other living beings?
6. Humans have inhabited the planet for about five million years, living most of that time in simple, pre-technological cultures. How has human nature adapted, or failed to adapt, to complex civilized society?

“An Imperfect Legacy” by Naomi King

1. When has your yearning for approval and acceptance lead you to justify actions you would not normally take?

2. What were the social mores and standards that drew Darwin to write *The Descent of Man*?
3. How did Darwin connect social reform and social evolution?
4. Where have you encountered the assumptions of spiritual selection in religious liberalism? What's comforting about it? Disturbing?
5. Darwin employs five approaches that we can pursue as spiritual practices: 1) pay attention to tiny details, 2) be caught up in the wonder and mystery of the moment, 3) edit observations into a coherent whole through the use of reason, 4) stay in relationship with an esteemed community while looking beyond its boundaries, and 5) recognize that humans can do great things but still make terrible mistakes. How can you engage these practices personally? In small groups? As a congregation that is part of larger society?

“We Are Stardust” by Connie Barlow

1. Before reading this essay, did you know that you were made of stardust? If you knew, do you recall where and how you acquired the awareness, and whether it happened in a way that was meaningful for you? If not, did the essay help you deepen a sense of kinship with the cosmos?
2. Barlow argues that we should give children in religiously liberal contexts the science-based story of an evolving cosmos, not just as one story among many creation stories but as *the one creation story* to make their own. Do you find this argument convincing? If so, would it undermine the cherished liberal principle of respect for diversity?

3. Joseph Campbell said religion is “that which puts one in accord with the universe.” The essay takes this thought one step further: “So if religious liberals do not make a priority of guiding our children and youth into an intimate, empowering relationship with the universe, we fail to provide them with religion.” What does this statement bring up for you?

4. In his “coming of age” statement in church, a boy concluded that he was “not really spiritual,” since he didn’t have any beliefs about what happens to us after death. Barlow asserts, “Religious advisors and mentors had failed this boy. Beliefs, particularly about supernatural claims, are not, after all, the core of what religion means in liberal religious circles.” What thoughts and feelings come up for you when you reflect on this passage?

4. This essay draws on anecdotal evidence based on Barlow’s experience teaching the Epic of Evolution in religious education contexts. How do you regard the rhetorical use of such stories, as opposed to relying exclusively on the logical integrity of an argument, perhaps supplemented with peer-reviewed sociological data?

5. Barlow offers suggestions, within this new paradigm of the Epic of Evolution, for how religious liberals can authentically and helpfully answer children’s fundamental questions about the toughest spiritual topics, death and God. Did any of these suggestions strike a chord with you?

“Paradise Is Here” by Linda Olson Peebles

1. What creation story can Unitarian Universalists offer their children that is simple, understandable, and worth loving?

2. Rachel Carson says that to awaken a sense of wonder in the universe, a child needs "the companionship of at least one adult who can share it." Did you ever have one adult to awaken a sense of wonder in yourself as a child? And as an adult, are you that person for some child?
3. In what ways can grown-ups help themselves and children develop a "sense of awe" in the natural world?
4. How skilled are you and your congregation at practicing the art of adaptation rather than domination? How do you encourage adaptation in children?
5. Some children are told that science and religion do not agree. How can we respond as Unitarian Universalists?
6. How should Unitarian Universalists engage in the public arena to advocate for the teaching of evolution?
7. Peebles says, "Our story is not of disbelief." What "I Believe" statement can you offer, based on your own experience and deep faith in ongoing creation?

“A Saving Message” by Fredric Muir

1. Consider this statement by Oliver Sacks: “Evolutionary theory provided, for many of us, a sense of deep meaning and satisfaction that belief in a Divine Plan had never achieved. The world that presented itself to us became a transparent surface, through which one could see the whole history of life.... It made life seem all the more precious, and a wonderful, ongoing adventure.” Would you characterize this statement as religious or secular? Why?

2. Thomas Jefferson believed that one day all young men would be Unitarian.
Charles Darwin echoed Jefferson's hopes, but about natural selection. He wrote in a letter, "We shall live to see all the *younger* men converts." What has prevented their predictions from coming true?
3. Do you think that Darwin's message is a "saving" one? How would you substantiate this claim?
4. Darwin's research removed *Homo sapiens* from the center of the world. Why have the Abrahamic faiths resisted this idea? What are the implications in all arenas of life?
5. Darwin didn't affirm a hierarchy of living things, but found diversity. No living thing is better than another, he said, just different. What are the religious and political implications of this worldview?
6. Darwin's adult life was driven by research and writing. While he did take some time for family and friends, he lamented not fully engaging in and enjoying life: "If I had to live my life again I would have made a rule to read some poetry and listen to some music at least once every week," he wrote. What lessons might we learn from Darwin's lament?

What is your congregation doing to honor Charles Darwin's contribution to liberal religion? Would you like other resources to help your congregation engage with the ideas in *The Whole World Kin*? Share your ideas by emailing editorialdirector@uua.org.