

A new creation story

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Let's start at the very beginning. A very good place to start. – Maria, The sound of music.

Creation stories appear in most religious traditions on Earth. They play a very important role in any meaning system as they usually set the groundwork for the rest of the narrative. They also form a premise upon which later theological propositions are developed, set up a tension that is to be resolved and suggest an orientation of humanity to the physical and spiritual world.

Not surprisingly, this is also true of Christianity. Christians adopted the Israelite account of creation, found in the book of Genesis, as an explanatory backdrop to understanding the life, purpose and teachings of Jesus. However, because the Genesis stories contain outdated understandings of the physical universe, some of the theological arguments based on them are likely to need updating. It is important to remember that the authors of Genesis were not in fact there at the time and, unless we subscribe to the divine dictation view of scripture, what we have is speculation. In contrast, science has in fact given us ways of looking back to the beginning of the earth and even to the beginning of our universe.

Although most mainstream churches have largely accepted evolution as a scientific truth, they have not yet subsequently changed the theology which was based on these stories. Change the creation story and you change the spiritual narrative.

Some of the changes that might need to be made in light of the truth of evolution:

- Creation is not complete; it is ongoing and God never rested
- There never was a time of perfection and innocence for human beings to fall from.
- We have never been separated from God nor cast out from his presence; he has continued his loving, creative, evolutionary work in us.
- Evolution is part of the character and nature of God and he is therefore not “unchanging”, he is “becoming”.
- Human beings are not a separate and unique creation but are built upon the collective physical, biological and psychological advances of prior evolution.

Evolution has largely been adopted by Western culture as its creation story and not surprisingly most people refuse to go back to a world-view based on pre-scientific understandings. Therefore the church is doomed to face an evolutionary dead-end if we cannot adapt.

Jesus the Evolutionary

What happens to our understanding of the mission and person of Jesus when evolution is established as our creation story and Genesis is placed in its 5th Century BC context? The changes in our Christology are significant but also liberating and have the potential to renew our faith.

Spirituality is the dimension of life that experiences the unfolding universe (including the self) as sacred. Although going beyond morality this way of being in the world has ethical implications as it calls us to acknowledge the holiness of other people and of nature and to

act accordingly. When thinking about evolution and Christology, we therefore need to ask, "What is the role of Jesus in the evolution of human spirituality?"

Firstly, we can note that Jesus modelled a kind of evolutionary approach to faith. Evolution works by a process of "include and transcend", where each new step is built on previous evolutionary stages. In declaring, "I have come not to do away with the law and the prophets but to fulfill them" Jesus was instinctively doing the same thing. Furthermore, Jesus adopted an evolutionary, future orientation; his first and central message centred around the coming of the 'Kingdom of God'. This kingdom was a coming set of attitudes and ways of behaving which honoured God and the sacredness of others. Like all evolving states it was both here in its immature form and yet still to come to fruition in the future. Jesus' interaction with people who crossed his path was similar - he called them to a personal spiritual evolution which included treating others and themselves as deeply sacred. He also did not spare himself from this calling and you see an evolution within Jesus of his understanding of his own mission in the world and a push towards fulfilling it. It is clear that Jesus developed an evolutionary understanding even of his own death, teaching that unless a grain of wheat dies it cannot bear fruit. Jesus can therefore be described as an "**Evolutionary**", one who embodied the processes of evolution in himself and was a catalyst for the evolution of others around him and his own religious tradition.

As his disciples came to terms with Jesus' death they gradually came to understand that his teaching, ministry and death represented an evolutionary step-change which built upon the past but transcended it. A new religion was birthed as his both his followers and other Jews who rejected him recognised that his movement was something significantly different. Evolutionary theory talks about the process of emergence, where the new state is greater than the sum of the parts that constitute it, and here we have a clear case of emergence. Christianity as a whole becomes a new phenomena beyond the Judaism and Greek thought which was its seed bed.

But this is really only the start of understanding how evolutionary theory affects our Christology. For not only does it name Jesus as fulfilling the archetype of "Evolutionary" it also helps us to re-interpret other archetypes that Jesus embodied. So Jesus the "Saviour" is not so much about bridging our separation from God, as suggested by some readings of Genesis but about saving us from old attitudes which keep us in the past and condemn us to an evolutionary dead end. In fact, as we read the gospels this is the way Jesus' salvific power mostly works; he is most concerned with saving people from the bad theology of the religious leaders of the day. Surely this is the Saviour we need now, one who will save us from a moribund, dying church, so stuck in the ideas of the past that it is becoming extinct in the West.

Of course, Jesus would not have used the word, "Evolutionary" but we should not be restricted to the language of the first Century; it is quite fitting that in an evolutionary world view we would expect our understanding of Jesus to evolve. And this seems to fit into his own thoughts outline in the gospel of John, where Jesus indicates the work of the Spirit will lead to a deeper, evolved understanding in his disciples. The question is more whether Jesus fulfills the meaning of the role of the evolutionary and I think he clearly does.