

Theistic Evolution: A Christian Alternative to Atheism, Creationism, and Intelligent Design

By **Ted Peters** and **Martinez Hewlett**

The evolution controversy is rife with alternatives. Like a giant buffet dinner, we have sitting before us a feast of alternative explanations for [the origin of species](#). Depending on your tastes, one can dine on atheism, creationism, intelligent design, or theistic evolution.

What makes selection less than enjoyable, however, is the stern frown on the faces of the *maitre d'* and waiters, who are self-appointed food critics. They tell us that Christians dare not eat anything flavored with Darwinism! They tell us that only creationism or intelligent design fits the Christian diet, that everything else is poisoned with [natural selection](#). Despite the large size of the buffet table, our choices become limited. That takes some of the fun out of our grazing and tasting just for the experience of it.

Worse, the *maitre d'* has secretly removed from the buffet some of the most delectable choices. Quite specifically, theistic evolution has been removed and hidden. The Christians coming for dinner are hardly even aware that theistic evolution is available, and that it might even be to their liking.

We, Marty and Ted, the authors writing this *Theological Brief*, have deliberately tasted every item on the menu. We talked with the cooks who prepared each dish. We've carefully examined the recipes.

What tastes best, in our judgment, is theistic evolution. We recommend that Christians reading this theological brief do the following: pile your plate with a large serving of theistic evolution and experiment to see if it might fit your taste. If it does, frown back at the *maitre d'*.

Why do we get a bad taste from Atheism, Creationism, and Intelligent Design?

What is the problem with Atheism?

Atheism is more than just a problem for faith. It fails to qualify as science. A good science pursues naturalistic explanations of natural phenomena. The tradition of biology begun with [Charles Darwin](#) in 1859 and running down to the present time is good science. Darwinism provides the most adequate natural explanations for the evolution of one species out of a previous species. As good science, it avoids saying anything about God's action in the world. Because science tells us how creatures act with regard to one another, we do not expect science to say anything directly about the creator. For a scientist to conclude that there is no God - which is the conclusion of the atheist - is simply unwarranted by the science. Atheism fails to be scientific, because science deals with the world of creatures, not the realm of the creator.

Charles Darwin, who gave us the concept of evolution as “descent with modification,” was no atheist. He belonged to the Church of England; and he entertained agnostic ideas. Darwin has drawn followers who are atheists, however. [Thomas Huxley](#) in the late 19th century used evolutionary theory to argue for naturalism without belief in God. In our own era, [Richard Dawkins](#) of Oxford writes in his book, *The Blind Watchmaker* (Norton 1987)R, “Darwin made it possible to be an intellectually fulfilled atheist” (p.6). We believe this is a colossal error in logic. Darwin’s model of evolution is good science; but good science does not require atheism. There is no step in the scientific method that says “at this point, abandon belief in God.”

What is the problem with Creationism?

Creationism fails to qualify as good science or as good theology. Creationists deny evolution over time - that is, they deny the development of one species from a previous species, a process known as “macroevolution.” Creationists insist that all species were created at the beginning of the world, and the lines between species have been inviolate ever since. To support this claim, creationists provide scientific arguments such as the alleged non-existence of transitional forms, specifically, winged reptiles to mark the transition from sea and land creatures to birds. However, fossils for such transitional forms have been found in abundance. The evidence supporting evolutionary theory is overwhelming on nearly every count. The creationist position fails when measured by scientific evidence.

Creationists sometimes provide a theological argument to support their position. Principally, they argue that the Bible’s depiction of creation in Genesis 1:1-2:4a describes God fixing reality at the point of origin. When God creates the different “kinds” of creatures and asks them to multiply according to their own kinds, he denies the possibility of modification through descent. Creationist interpreters find ten “kinds” in Genesis: (1) grass; (2) herbs; (3) fruit trees; (4) sea monsters; (5) other marine animals; (6) birds; (7) beasts of the earth; (8) cattle; (9) crawling animals; and, finally, (10) the human race. Creationists identify the biblical word “kind” with the scientific word “species.” Then they argue that God intends for each kind to remain within its own particular structure. One species should not transform itself into another species. Many different varieties can emerge within the basic framework of each kind or species, but at the same time such variations can never extend beyond that framework. The creationist conclusion is that God permits no descent with modification, no overlap between species.

We do not believe this is a proper way to interpret the Bible. What the creationists read is certainly not literal. To identify “kind” with “species” is arbitrary. Certainly, more than ten species exist in nature. In addition, a more literal reading of the Bible’s creation account suggests what looks like an evolution from sea creatures to birds. ^{NRS} **Genesis 1:20** And God said, "Let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the dome of the sky."

More importantly, creationists fail to acknowledge the kind of God that is responsible for the creation. The God of the Bible is a promising God. God promises to do new things. ^{NRS} **Isaiah 43:19** “I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth.” Or ^{NRS} **Jeremiah 31:22** “For the LORD has created a new

thing on the earth.” Or, ^{NRS}**Galatians 6:15** “a new creation is everything!” Essential here is that God did not fix everything at the beginning. Nor, did God stop creating. What is vital to the message of the gospel in the Bible is the promise of redemption, the renewal of creation. The Bible gives us a vision of a divine future that will take us beyond the world order we have inherited. By trying to squeeze all of created reality into some sort of already completed and unchanging origin, creationists prevent the ongoing creativity and redeeming promise of God to shine through. So, for this reason, we believe the creationist position fails theologically as well as scientifically.

What is the problem with Intelligent Design?

Intelligent Design (ID) theory fails both scientifically and theologically. Unlike the creationists, ID advocates permit belief in evolution as descent with modification over time. Unlike research scientists, however, ID advocates are not satisfied with naturalistic explanations. They claim that Darwinian principles such as random variation combined with natural selection do not suffice as explanations for development of one species from a previous species. They refute gradual change in evolution, claiming that nature is incapable of self-organization, incapable of gradually developing new and more complex organisms. What is required, says Intelligent Design, is the intervention of a [transcendent](#) designer. Punctuated into the process of gradual change are leaps in complexity caused by a supernatural intelligence. Intelligent interventions into nature are virtual miracles, not subject to naturalistic explanation. Robbed from restricting itself to naturalistic explanations, Intelligent Design theory would prevent scientists from pursuing science as they know it.

What ID actually does is provide a philosophical reflection on enigmas or gaps in evolutionary history, reflection that suggests the existence of a transcendent designer. Such analysis or speculation functions as proof for the existence of God. This is a legitimate enterprise for a philosophical theologian. If it would turn out that ID provides a valid argument for God’s existence, ID advocates should be congratulated. But, in the meantime, we need to call this what it is, namely, philosophical speculation. It is not research science into biology, nor does it contribute to laboratory science.

Intelligent Design theory falls short on theological grounds too. Although ID does not claim to be a full theological scheme, it leaves us with a misleading picture of God. The intelligent designer who intervenes falls far short of the intelligent and compassionate God of the Christian faith. The alleged “intelligence” of the intelligent designer borders on the laughable. According to ID, God would need to intervene in evolution for nature to produce complex systems such as the eye, which is designed for seeing. Now, if God designed the eye, then why do so many of us need to wear glasses? If God actually designed the human eye, why could God not have done a better job? Inadvertently, ID describes a God of only modest intelligence engaged in rather marginal tasks. This is a trivial picture of God.

What is missing is not only divine intelligence but also divine compassion. The God Christians read about in the Bible is a redeeming God. ^{NRS}**John 3:16** "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life." If this passage describes the God in whom Christians place their faith, then one might ask of the intelligent designer:

why did you not design the world so that we could see without glasses? Why did you fail to design a world so that we could avoid being victims of predators, diseases, stupidity, sin, and death? If God intervened at various stages in evolutionary history, then why did God sidestep taking redemptive action? Why did God design a natural world in which predators eat prey every day, and where 90% of species have gone extinct? Why believe in a God who could design nature better but willed not to do so? The theological failing of ID is that its intelligent designer becomes a trivial God so lacking in compassion that the nature we inherit is blood “red in tooth and claw,” as the poet Alfred Lord Tennyson once wrote.

Theistic Evolution: The Ignored Alternative

Christians should consider two reasons for investigating Theistic Evolution. First, inherent to the Christian faith is a bias toward good science. The Christian faith seeks understanding, said St. Anselm; and the seeds of science were sown and fertilized in the garden of Christian intellectual history. The pursuit of science has for centuries been a noble Christian vocation.

With this in mind, it is a grave disappointment to hear religious voices trumpeting that Christians today need to be anti-Darwinian, perhaps even anti-science. Unfortunately, young people of deep faith are entering our universities and detouring around the sciences. They avoid science, fearing that it will contaminate if not destroy their faith. Who told them that? How tragic? What a violation of Christian stewardship? Our best young minds should be invested in physics, biology, [genetics](#), and medical research. Our most talented youth should be training themselves in sophisticated disciplines so they will be prepared to make this world a better place. We need to be stewards of science. It is a shame that our religious leaders have frightened young people into believing their faith requires opposition to Darwinism and even opposition to the world of nature studied by science.

The second reason for investigating Theistic Evolution is to engage in the hard mental work of trying to piece together the fragments of understanding our world into a coherent picture. St. [Thomas Aquinas](#) once described “theology” as the attempt to explain all things in reality in relation to God. This is a pretty good definition, we think. One implication is this: the Darwinian model of evolution--along with its updated version, the neo-Darwinian synthesis, which combines genetic variation with natural selection - is part of the very world we need to understand in relation to God. Somehow, God has used the long history of evolution to accomplish divine purposes, one of which is to place the human race in its present position of responsibility in and to nature.

We need to face reality with honesty. The denial of evolution by the creationists and the denial of naturalistic explanations by ID leave us with a loss of intellectual integrity. They leave us with inferior science. The Darwinian model has proven itself for more than a century to generate progressive research in both the history of biology and in developing medical therapies.

Darwinism provides a fertile theory that leads to new knowledge. Neither creationism nor ID give us fertile theories for further research. This is crucial. We absolutely require a background of Darwinian

[evolutionary biology](#) if contemporary virologists are to understand Avian Flu, for example. Unless virologists understand random variation through [genetic mutation](#) and how the principle of natural selection works, they cannot predict what might happen. And they cannot head off or prevent a global pandemic. No one would want to put a creationist or ID scientist in charge of world health in the face of such a threat. Christians, along with everyone else who relies upon modern medicine, should demand only the best science. The Darwinian model provides the best science.

The Two books

Today's theologians should seek a coherent way to integrate what we are learning about the natural world through the best science with what the Holy Scriptures tell us about the God of creation and redemption. Perhaps we could revive the Renaissance concept of the *Two Books*. According to the concept of the Two Books, nature is a book of revelation. Nature reveals to us something about the mind of God the creator. St. Paul alludes to the book of nature. ^{NRS} **Romans 1:20** "Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made." The second book, of course, is the Bible. In this book we learn of God the redeemer. Nature gives us general revelation, whereas the Bible gives us special revelation. The two books together provide the resources for understanding reality in relationship to God, the creator and redeemer.

We, Ted and Marty, co-authored a book, *Evolution from Creation to New Creation* (Abingdon 2003) in which we presented the ingredients for a tasty meal of Theistic Evolution. We'll share our not very secret recipe here.

Ted and Marty's Recipe for Theistic Evolution

Let's get back to that buffet table, where alternatives to Darwinian science present themselves for our selection. Ted and Marty have a recipe for Theistic Evolution. The ingredients include standards for quality science, Darwinian evolutionary biology, a biblical understanding of God as creator and redeemer, and the relationship between the present creation and God's promised new creation. Mixing these together, letting them simmer for a while in one's mind, leads us to serve up a view of God's world that better fits our taste than atheism, creationism, or intelligent design. We offer it to you for tasting. Here's our recipe:

Step 1: Trim away the idea of purpose within nature. Add in the idea of purpose for nature.

One of the compulsions of the ID movement is to find divine purpose within nature. To find a design manifesting purpose within nature--such as a leap in complexity---appears to ID eyes as finding God's mind at work within a natural structure. Unfortunately, as we said earlier, ID examples of divine design show something less than admirable intelligence, and seem even to lack redemptive compassion.

Yet, the book of nature is revelatory of God. St. Paul says that the power of God as creator is manifest in the creation, though somewhat difficult to see clearly. To perceive the way nature is currently designed does not give us reason to think we understand the mind of God.

It is our conjecture that God's overall purpose for the creation is not discernable within the creation. Yes, complex design can be found. Yes, the parts of the eye are coordinated for the purpose of seeing. Yet, God's purpose for the history of evolution is not discernable within biological structures or processes.

This means an inner *telos* or purpose or design does not stand up and advertise itself. So, we, Ted and Marty, will not attempt to locate purpose or direction or even value *within nature*. Instead, as Christians, we affirm a divine purpose *for nature*. We plan to look for this divine purpose where it belongs, namely, in God. The purpose for the long history of nature over deep time is not a built in design or direction. Rather we prophetically contend that it will be retroactively imparted by God in the [eschatological](#) new creation. Now, what do we mean by this?

Let's start with an analogy. What is the purpose of a breadboard, a common wooden cutting board found in most every kitchen? It provides a base for slicing bread with a serrated knife. Now, the breadboard came from a tree. When we look at a tree, the goal of slicing bread is not immediately visible. The tree does not look designed for bread slicing. This particular purpose comes from the logger who fells the tree, the lumber yard which turns part of the tree into a board, and the carpenter who shapes it for kitchen use. Finally, it's the cook who wants to serve a tasty meal that retroactively imparts purpose to the tree as the origin of the breadboard. By analogy, we believe God similarly imparts purpose to the long development of life forms within the creation. What God makes of the creation will determine its purpose, what it has been designed for. To discern just what that purpose is, we must turn to special revelation.

There is more to say here. We don't find such a purpose at the beginning. Rather, we find it at the end, looking backwards. Purpose comes from what is final looking backward, not from a potentiality lying in wait at the beginning. In fact, the Greek word for end, *telos*, means end both as final state and as purpose or goal. God has a *telos* for nature, even if we can't see it within nature. It is the future act of redemption that determines what previous creation will have meant, and this can be discerned only eschatologically. It is [omega](#) that determines [alpha](#).

Step 2: Stir and bake until the world comes to its end

We would like to spice our recipe with ingredients from three passages in the Bible. The first is Genesis 1:31, "God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good." The second is Revelation 21:1, "Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth." Now, we're not absolutely sure how to interpret these, even though we have some good ideas. We're cautious. So we add a third: 1 Corinthians 13:12, "now we see in a mirror dimly."

We believe that God creates from the future, not the past. God starts with redemption and then draws all of creation toward it. Or, perhaps better said, God's ongoing creative work is also God's redeeming work. Only a redeemed creation will be worthy of the stamp of approval we read in Genesis, "very good."

As we look backward in time, we suggest that the first thing God did for the creation at the moment just prior to the [Big Bang](#) was to give the world a future. God gave the world a future in two senses. The first sense of the future is openness. The gift of a future builds into physical reality its dynamism, openness, contingency, self-organization, and freedom. The future God built into the initial conditions of the Big Bang included sufficient openness to make possible the evolution from inanimate matter to life and eventually to conscious life. The bestowal of this kind of future is the bestowal to reality of the possibility of becoming something it had never been before. God provided the condition that made and still makes ongoing change possible. And, what God did at the beginning to make the Big Bang possible is what God is doing every moment, every second. At the very moment you are reading this, God is dispensing to our world a future that is open for variation. God unlocks the present from past causation; and this frees the present for newness in the future. God is unceasing in serving the world in this manner.

By God imparting the quality of openness to the future, God makes room for the distinction between primary and secondary causality. God's direct act is the primary cause. God establishes the world. God gives the world being, and preserves it from falling into nonbeing. God also imparts openness toward a future that can be different from the past. This permits the creaturely world to take action. This permits what we call secondary causation within evolutionary history, leading to unpredictable patterns of variation and self-organization.

The second sense of the future is fulfillment. God gave the world a promise that, in the end, everything would be "very good." God provides the final cause, so to speak, at least in a qualified sense. Anticipating fulfillment, we want to say that future-giving is the way God both creates and redeems the world.

Like a cake in the oven, we and all of reality in the universe are not done yet. Not ready. But, we will be. The world in which we live is still being created. And when it is finally created, it will be redeemed. It'll be ready for a divine feast.

It should be obvious that we do not limit the concept of creation to a single act back at the beginning, back at the Big Bang or back in Genesis 1. We do not hold a deist view, according to which God creates the world and then goes on vacation to let the world run on its own. Instead, we say that God's creative act of imparting an open future is an ongoing one. We certainly affirm creation from nothing, *creatio ex nihilo*. Yet, we also affirm that the creative power by which God brought being out of nonbeing continues to sustain the world today.

We want to add something more. Each moment God imparts openness to the future that releases the present from bondage to past determinations. God's creative activity is never ceasing. Each moment the

entire physical universe is given its existence in such a way that it is open toward what comes next. This ceaseless future giving by God explains why the laws of nature cannot grip nature in a rigid [determinism](#). It explains why each moment has the freedom to transcend the previous moment. What we see as contingency or chance or self-organization is the result of God's liberating gift of an open future. We call this continuing creation, *creatio continua*.

Step 3: What emerges well done is the new creation

How will we handle perhaps the biggest challenge of the Darwinian model, chance? Chance and unpredictability belong to both random genetic mutation and natural selection. As we just said, we affirm both openness and purpose, but the purpose comes from God's future. It's not built in. It's imparted.

How do we mix this together? We have two thoughts we need to hold together. On the one hand, God's gift of futurity to the physical world makes room for evolution by providing openness to change and self-organization. On the other hand, God's eschatological future embodies an aim, namely, the harmony and benefit of all God's creatures. Neither alpha nor omega belong to chance, even if much of what happens in between does.

In the meantime, we share a concern with ID, namely, the emergence of complex wholes. We are holists. According to [holistic](#) or emergentist thinking, the whole is greater than the sum of the parts. Evolutionary history has witnessed the emergence of living creatures, which as organisms constitute wholes that reorganize and give new meaning to the chemical parts that make them up. No organism can be reduced to its chemical components and retain its identity as a living creature.

We observe that new wholes transform past parts. Integration into new, more comprehensive unities preserve while renewing what came before. This holistic complexification process is nonlinear. Adding a new whole changes an entire situation in a significant way. The degree of transformative effect renders redemption possible. Can we learn something theologically here? By analogy, might we apply what we have observed as emergent holism to God's eschatological promises? Might emergentist thinking cast new light on how we interpret the Bible?

Shall we eat desert first? Revelation before Genesis?

The last book of the Bible, Revelation, promises a new heaven and a new earth. This new reality will transform, yet preserve, the entire history of cosmic creation. What God did at the beginning to draw the physical world from nonbeing into being, along with God's continuous sustaining of the natural order during its period of self-organization, will be taken up into the consummate new creation. God's creative activity within nature and within human history is derivative from his eschatological act of redeeming the whole of the [cosmos](#). Where we find ourselves today is looking back to alpha, to *creatio ex nihilo*, and looking forward to omega, the new creation *ex vetere*, out of what has come before. The new creation will emerge from what God's Spirit does to the present creation.

We believe the new creation will be a physical creation, even if it is pervaded by the divine Spirit. Think about what passages such as this could mean. “Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away” (Revelation 21:4). Is the Bible for real? If it is, then what does this mean? That’s what we’re trying to picture here.

The violence, suffering, and death so inescapable in Darwin’s world will become only a past memory. This is the component of redemption in the new creation. What we have accepted as the laws of nature to date will have to undergo modification. Exactly how the laws of nature could be modified to eliminate the suffering of sentient beings is difficult for our scientifically informed imaginations to conceive, because now we only see through a mirror dimly. Yet, nothing short of this is the divine promise. Figuring out how to accomplish it will be up to God’s imagination.

Can we serve Theistic Evolution in court?

What Marty and Ted are doing here is the work of the theologian. The task is to interpret the ancient Bible in light of modern science. It is to paint a mental picture of reality in which all things are oriented toward the God of grace and salvation.

When reading news accounts of the controversy over evolution in the public schools and in religious life, one gets the impression that sincere Christians are lined up in opposition to the Darwinian tradition for treating biology. We believe this is a mistake. Christians of deep faith need not take a stand against science, not even against Darwinian science. To take a stand against atheism is laudable, to be sure; but it would be a tragedy if opposition to atheism means we have to jettison the benefits that a fertile theory such as Darwinian evolution can offer.

Christians should fight for the best science to be taught in our schools. Our churches should support integrity in science. Further, our churches should engage in the hard mental work of constructing a picture of reality - inclusive of evolutionary reality - that depicts a creation loved by God.