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We commissioned Karen Armstrong and Richard Dawkins to respond independently to the question "Where does evolution leave God?" Neither knew what the other would say. Here are the results.

Karen Armstrong says we need God to grasp the wonder of our existence

Richard Dawkins has been right all along, of course—at least in one important respect. Evolution has indeed dealt a blow to the idea of a benign creator, literally conceived. It tells us that there is no Intelligence controlling the cosmos, and that life itself is the result of a blind process of natural selection, in which innumerable species failed to survive. The fossil record reveals a natural history of pain, death and racial extinction, so if there was a divine plan, it was cruel, callously prodigal and wasteful. Human beings were not the pinnacle of a purposeful creation; like everything else, they evolved by trial and error and God had no direct hand in their making. No wonder so many fundamentalist Christians find their faith shaken to the core.

But Darwin may have done religion—and God—a favor by revealing a flaw in modern Western faith. Despite our scientific and technological brilliance, our understanding of God is often remarkably undeveloped—even primitive. In the past, many of the most influential Jewish, Christian and Muslim thinkers understood that what we call "God" is merely a symbol that points beyond itself to an indescribable transcendence, whose existence cannot be proved but is only intuited by means of spiritual exercises and a compassionate lifestyle that enable us to cultivate new capacities of mind and heart.

But by the end of the 17th century, instead of looking through the symbol to "the God beyond God," Christians were transforming it into hard fact. Sir Isaac Newton had claimed that his cosmic system proved beyond doubt the existence of an intelligent, omniscient and omnipotent creator, who was obviously "very well skilled in Mechanics and Geometry." Enthralled by the prospect of such cast-iron certainty, churchmen started to develop a scientifically-based theology that eventually made Newton's Mechanick and, later, William Paley's Intelligent Designer essential to Western Christianity. But the Great Mechanick was little more than an idol, the kind of human projection that theology, at its best, was supposed to avoid. God had been essential to Newtonian physics but it was not long before other scientists were able to dispense with the God-hypothesis and, finally, Darwin showed that there could be no proof for God's existence. This would not have been a disaster had not Christians become so dependent upon their scientific religion that they had lost the older habits of thought and were left without other resource.

Symbolism was essential to premodern religion, because it was only possible to speak about the ultimate reality—God, Tao, Brahman or Nirvana—alogically, since it lay beyond the reach of words. Jews and Christians both developed audaciously innovative and figurative methods of reading the Bible, and every statement of the Quran is called an ayah ("parable"). St Augustine (354-430), a major authority for both Catholics and Protestants, insisted that if a biblical text contradicted reputable science, it must be interpreted allegorically. This remained standard practice in the West until the 17th century, when in an effort to emulate the exact scientific method, Christians began to read scripture with a literalness that is without parallel in religious history.

ST. ANDREW'S STITTSVILLE
CUTTING EDGE DISCUSSION GROUP – JUNE 2010 - The New Atheism

Most cultures believed that there were two recognized ways of arriving at truth. The Greeks called them *mythos* and *logos*. Both were essential and neither was superior to the other; they were not in conflict but complementary, each with its own sphere of competence. *Logos* ("reason") was the pragmatic mode of thought that enabled us to function effectively in the world and had, therefore, to correspond accurately to external reality. But it could not assuage human grief or find ultimate meaning in life's struggle. For that people turned to *mythos*, stories that made no pretensions to historical accuracy but should rather be seen as an early form of psychology; if translated into ritual or ethical action, a good myth showed you how to cope with mortality, discover an inner source of strength, and endure pain and sorrow with serenity.

In the ancient world, a cosmology was not regarded as factual but was primarily therapeutic; it was recited when people needed an infusion of that mysterious power that had—somehow—brought something out of primal nothingness: at a sickbed, a coronation or during a political crisis. Some cosmologies taught people how to unlock their own creativity, others made them aware of the struggle required to maintain social and political order. The Genesis creation hymn, written during the Israelites' exile in Babylonia in the 6th century BC, was a gentle polemic against Babylonian religion. Its vision of an ordered universe where everything had its place was probably consoling to a displaced people, though—as we can see in the Bible—some of the exiles preferred a more aggressive cosmology.

There can never be a definitive version of a myth, because it refers to the more imponderable aspects of life. To remain effective, it must respond to contemporary circumstance. In the 16th century, when Jews were being expelled from one region of Europe after another, the mystic Isaac Luria constructed an entirely new creation myth that bore no resemblance to the Genesis story. But instead of being reviled for contradicting the Bible, it inspired a mass-movement among Jews, because it was such a telling description of the arbitrary world they now lived in; backed up with special rituals, it also helped them face up to their pain and discover a source of strength. Religion was not supposed to provide explanations that lay within the competence of reason but to help us live creatively with realities for which there are no easy solutions and find an interior haven of peace; today, however, many have opted for unsustainable certainty instead. But can we respond religiously to evolutionary theory? Can we use it to recover a more authentic notion of God? Darwin made it clear once again that—as Maimonides, Avicenna, Aquinas and Eckhart had already pointed out—we cannot regard God simply as a divine personality, who single-handedly created the world. This could direct our attention away from the idols of certainty and back to the "God beyond God." The best theology is a spiritual exercise, akin to poetry. Religion is not an exact science but a kind of art form that, like music or painting, introduces us to a mode of knowledge that is different from the purely rational and which cannot easily be put into words. At its best, it holds us in an attitude of wonder, which is, perhaps, not unlike the awe that Mr. Dawkins experiences—and has helped me to appreciate—when he contemplates the marvels of natural selection.

But what of the pain and waste that Darwin unveiled? All the major traditions insist that the faithful meditate on the ubiquitous suffering that is an inescapable part of life; because, if we do not acknowledge this uncomfortable fact, the compassion that lies at the heart of faith is impossible. The almost unbearable spectacle of the myriad species passing painfully into oblivion is not unlike some classic Buddhist meditations on the First Noble Truth ("Existence is suffering"), the indispensable prerequisite for the transcendent enlightenment that some call Nirvana—and others call God.

—Ms. Armstrong is the author of numerous books on theology and religious affairs.

Richard Dawkins argues that evolution leaves God with nothing to do.

Before 1859 it would have seemed natural to agree with the Reverend William Paley, in "Natural Theology," that the creation of life was God's greatest work. Especially (vanity might add) human life. Today we'd amend the statement: Evolution is the universe's greatest work. Evolution is the creator of life, and life is arguably the most surprising and most beautiful production that the laws of physics have ever generated. Evolution, to quote a T-shirt sent me by an anonymous well-wisher, is the greatest show on earth, the only game in town.

Indeed, evolution is probably the greatest show in the entire universe. Most scientists' hunch is that there are independently evolved life forms dotted around planetary islands throughout the universe—though sadly too thinly scattered to encounter one another. And if there is life elsewhere, it is something stronger than a hunch to say that it will turn out to be Darwinian life. The argument in favor of alien life's existing at all is weaker than the argument that—if it exists at all—it will be Darwinian life. But it is also possible that we really are alone in the universe, in which case Earth, with its greatest show, is the most remarkable planet in the universe.

What is so special about life? It never violates the laws of physics. Nothing does (if anything did, physicists would just have to formulate new laws—it's happened often enough in the history of science). But although life never violates the laws of physics, it pushes them into unexpected avenues that stagger the imagination. If we didn't know about life we wouldn't believe it was possible—except, of course, that there'd then be nobody around to do the disbelieving!

The laws of physics, before Darwinian evolution bursts out from their midst, can make rocks and sand, gas clouds and stars, whirlpools and waves, whirlpool-shaped galaxies and light that travels as waves while behaving like particles. It is an interesting, fascinating and, in many ways, deeply mysterious universe. But now, enter life. Look, through the eyes of a physicist, at a bounding kangaroo, a swooping bat, a leaping dolphin, a soaring Coast Redwood. There never was a rock that bounded like a kangaroo, never a pebble that crawled like a beetle seeking a mate, never a sand grain that swam like a water flea. Not once do any of these creatures disobey one jot or tittle of the laws of physics. Far from violating the laws of thermodynamics (as is often ignorantly alleged) they are relentlessly driven by them. Far from violating the laws of motion, animals exploit them to their advantage as they walk, run, dodge and jink, leap and fly, pounce on prey or spring to safety.

Never once are the laws of physics violated, yet life emerges into uncharted territory. And how is the trick done? The answer is a process that, although variable in its wondrous detail, is sufficiently uniform to deserve one single name: Darwinian evolution, the nonrandom survival of randomly varying coded information. We know, as certainly as we know anything in science, that this is the process that has generated life on our own planet. And my bet, as I said, is that the same process is in operation wherever life may be found, anywhere in the universe.

What if the greatest show on earth is not the greatest show in the universe? What if there are life forms on other planets that have evolved so far beyond our level of intelligence and creativity that we should regard them as gods, were we ever so fortunate (or unfortunate?) as to meet them? Would they indeed be gods? Wouldn't we be tempted to fall on our knees and worship them, as a medieval peasant might if suddenly confronted with such miracles as a Boeing 747, a mobile telephone or Google Earth? But,

ST. ANDREW'S STITTSVILLE
CUTTING EDGE DISCUSSION GROUP – JUNE 2010 - The New Atheism

however god-like the aliens might seem, they would not be gods, and for one very important reason. They did not create the universe; it created them, just as it created us. Making the universe is the one thing no intelligence, however superhuman, could do, because an intelligence is complex—statistically improbable—and therefore had to emerge, by gradual degrees, from simpler beginnings: from a lifeless universe—the miracle-free zone that is physics.

To midwife such emergence is the singular achievement of Darwinian evolution. It starts with primeval simplicity and fosters, by slow, explicable degrees, the emergence of complexity: seemingly limitless complexity—certainly up to our human level of complexity and very probably way beyond. There may be worlds on which superhuman life thrives, superhuman to a level that our imaginations cannot grasp. But superhuman does not mean supernatural. Darwinian evolution is the only process we know that is ultimately capable of generating anything as complicated as creative intelligences. Once it has done so, of course, those intelligences can create other complex things: works of art and music, advanced technology, computers, the Internet and who knows what in the future? Darwinian evolution may not be the only such generative process in the universe. There may be other "cranes" (Daniel Dennett's term, which he opposes to "skyhooks") that we have not yet discovered or imagined. But, however wonderful and however different from Darwinian evolution those putative cranes may be, they cannot be magic. They will share with Darwinian evolution the facility to raise up complexity, as an emergent property, out of simplicity, while never violating natural law.

Where does that leave God? The kindest thing to say is that it leaves him with nothing to do, and no achievements that might attract our praise, our worship or our fear. Evolution is God's redundancy notice, his pink slip. But we have to go further. A complex creative intelligence with nothing to do is not just redundant. A divine designer is all but ruled out by the consideration that he must at least as complex as the entities he was wheeled out to explain. God is not dead. He was never alive in the first place.

Now, there is a certain class of sophisticated modern theologian who will say something like this: "Good heavens, of course we are not so naive or simplistic as to care whether God exists. Existence is such a 19th-century preoccupation! It doesn't matter whether God exists in a scientific sense. What matters is whether he exists for you or for me. If God is real for you, who cares whether science has made him redundant? Such arrogance! Such elitism."

Well, if that's what floats your canoe, you'll be paddling it up a very lonely creek. The mainstream belief of the world's peoples is very clear. They believe in God, and that means they believe he exists in objective reality, just as surely as the Rock of Gibraltar exists. If sophisticated theologians or postmodern relativists think they are rescuing God from the redundancy scrap-heap by downplaying the importance of existence, they should think again. Tell the congregation of a church or mosque that existence is too vulgar an attribute to fasten onto their God, and they will brand you an atheist. They'll be right.

—Mr. Dawkins is the author of *"The Selfish Gene," "The Ancestor's Tale," "The God Delusion."*