



TEILHARD PERSPECTIVE

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The Epic of Evolution A Report of Current Events

Connie Barlow

Within the past two years, gatherings to present and discuss the "Epic of Evolution" have blossomed. Freelance writer and astronomer Russ Genet seems to have started the trend with a small group discussion he organized at a guest ranch near Tucson in the autumn of 1995. Thomas Berry, Brian Swimme, Mary Evelyn Tucker, and John Grim were among those attending. The following summer, the Epic of Evolution was the theme of the week-long annual meeting of the Institute on Religion in an Age of Science (IRAS), co-chaired by Loyal Rue and Ursula Goodenough. John Grim reported on this IRAS meeting in the previous issue of the *Teilhard Perspective*.

The June 1997 issue of *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science* includes the text of one of the presentations at the IRAS meeting: "The Epic of Evolution as a Framework for Human Orientation in Life," by theologian Gordon Kaufman. Reiterating some of the themes presented in his 1993 book, *In Face of Mystery*, Kaufman stresses the importance of viewing the cosmic process as "serendipitous creativity." He also suggests replacing teleological or purposive views of the cosmos with "directional movements or trajectories that emerge spontaneously in the course of evolutionary and historical developments." Kaufman concludes:

"This frame of orientation or vision of reality—this more amplified conception of the biohistorical epic of evolution, in which the evolutionary unfolding is taken to be grounded in serendipitous cosmic creativity—is not in any way forced upon us: it can be appropriated only by means of our own personal and collective decisions, our own acts of faith. It has sufficient richness and specification to provide significant orientation for our time, but it can accomplish this only if we decide to commit ourselves to it, ordering our lives and building our futures in the terms it prescribes. Acceptance of this vision can help women and men in our world—not only those who think of themselves as religious in some more or less traditional sense but also modern/postmodern women and men of

other quite different persuasions—to gain some sense of identity, some sense of who we humans are and what we ought to be doing with our lives. In the hope that our biohistorical trajectory may move creatively toward a more humane and ecologically well-ordered world, we can be motivated to give ourselves in strong commitment to its continuing growth and development."

Kaufman's essay was introduced by Phil Hefner, editor of *Zygon* and one of the presenters at the IRAS meeting, with this commentary:

"Is the evolutionary narrative that emerges from contemporary scientific research capable of serving as a creation myth for our times? This is a question that is receiving a great deal of attention.... There is no consensus; in fact, there is a great dissensus. Scientists and philosophers of science who write in a popular vein, in the style of Carl Sagan, Loyal Rue, Ursula Goodenough, Richard Dawkins, and Daniel Dennett, seem to be making the claim that E. O. Wilson articulated some years ago when he wrote that the evolutionary epic is the best myth our minds will ever entertain. Other scientists, philosophers, and theologians—including Langdon Gilkey, Nancey Murphy, and George Ellis—consider such claims to be in violation of basic logic and a misunderstanding of what myth is and how it functions. *Zygon* considers this discussion to be very near the front burner of its interest, and we will be following developments in this area in the months ahead."

Another publication, *EarthLight*, made the Epic of Evolution its theme for the summer 1997 issue. I wrote a report of the IRAS meeting for that issue. Philosopher Loyal Rue contributed an essay, which includes this description, "The Epic of Evolution is the sprawling interdisciplinary narrative of evolutionary events that brought our universe from what Brian Swimme and Thomas Berry call the 'Primordial Flaring Forth' to its present state of astonishing diversity and organization. In the course of these epic events, matter was distilled out of radiant energy, segregated into galaxies, collapsed into stars, fused into atoms, swirled into planets, spliced into molecules, captured into cells, mutated into species, compromised into ecosystems, provoked into thought, and cajoled into cultures."

TEILHARD PERSPECTIVE is published by the American Teilhard Association, a non-profit organization whose goals are to explore today's philosophical, scientific, religious and social questions in the light of Teilhard's vision and to provide a context for identifying the role of the human with the emerging understanding of the cosmos. This edition edited by Connie Barlow.

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Rue titled his essay "Confessions of a Shallow Environmentalist," recounting his personal story of a blossoming environmental ethic, floating loose, unattached to a grounding cosmology. "Shallow environmentalism," he writes, "amounts to a morality in search of a cosmology." Rue concludes, "Cosmology without morality is irrelevant, morality without cosmology is shallow. This is why the most important intellectual and moral mission of the coming century is to couple the Epic of Evolution with the Ethic of Ecologism. Nothing else comes close. If we carry this mission forward we shall relish the ultimate prize: the depth of meaning inherent in a marriage of truth and goodness."

The summer issue of *EarthLight*, a publication initiated by a Quaker group on the West Coast, also contains an interview with Brian Swimme. The interview was conducted by Kurt Lauren de Boer, editor of the magazine. Here is a snippet:

Kurt: A part of the narrative for me that's one of the most exciting is the notion that we as a species are the Earth actually reflecting on her own stunning beauty. Somehow through that crucible of the evolutionary story, the universe came to 'taste itself' through the human, I think is how you've phrased it. It's a part of the story that really grabs me on a deep level.

Brian: Me too. And this goes back to your first question—why was I just not happy teaching in a regular university? Looking back on it now, what I can say is, I am just so profoundly happy serving out the role of the human as the realm in which the universe and the Earth reflects upon and tastes its beauty. I mean it's just so satisfying, it's just so complete. It's almost as if we've been given this great gift and we're not quite capable of believing that this really is what we're to do. We're really to bask in beauty.

Brian Swimme drew upon "The Epic of Evolution" as the title for several of his talks and workshops this summer. Among them was a three-day workshop at the Holy Cross Centre for Ecology and Spirituality in Port Burwell, Ontario. (Steve Dunn, C.P., is director of the Centre, where Thomas Berry is a frequent guest.) Participant Dennis Patrick O'Hara reports that Brian presented some substantially new and expanded ideas at this workshop, which we hope to present in a future issue of the *Teilhard Perspective*. As well, Brian connected the Epic to the legacy of Teilhard, recalling that Teilhard had described humanity's growing awareness of cosmic evolution as the greatest discovery of the past two million years. Drawing upon a spatial metaphor, Brian noted that this new sensibility was similar to that of a child moving from an initial two-dimensional sense of the world into three-dimensionality, and that such transformations are not without growing pains.

The Epic of Evolution has also made an appearance in *Wild Earth* magazine. The Fall 1996 and Spring 1997 issues include two extracts of my forthcoming book, which is centered on the Epic. (*Green Space, Green Time: The Way of Science* will be available in bookstores October 1997.) More, the editor told me that the magazine is likely to do a theme issue on the Epic within the next two years, hoping to generate new ideas on linkages between the Epic and protection of biodiversity.

I took the Epic on the road this summer, in discussion sessions I organized at two academic conferences. In Tucson, at the annual meeting of the Human Behavior and Evolution Society (HBES, which attracts researchers from many disciplines working in the transdisciplinary fields of sociobiology and evolutionary psychology), I joined with Loyal Rue, Ursula Goodenough, and Tyler Volk to conduct a discussion spinning off this question: "If evolution explains religious capacities, can the evolutionary epic fulfill them?" About twenty participants—anthropologists, linguists, neurobiologists, psychologists, and literary theorists among them—batted around this question over the course of more than an hour. Discussion was so lively that the four of us charged to lead the discussion mostly sat back and just listened!

Several points I found of particular interest. First (and surprisingly), there was no argument over what the Epic of Evolution entailed or its validity; the participants came to the session with preexisting understandings, which surely differed in detail within the group but never sparked a call for definition of terms. Second (and, in my view, unfortunately) those who spoke seemed to assume that the Epic of Evolution demanded a nontheistic worldview, and there was no sign of a theist in the audience to push for greater inclusivity. Third, those who spoke tied their passion for the Epic to a vision of the role it can serve in promoting ecological values; the only argument was between the optimists who viewed that awareness of the evolutionary story could spread quickly enough to prevent ecological catastrophe and the pessimists who thought otherwise. Fourth, we leaders were reminded by one participant that the psychological benefits we receive through our involvement in creating and promoting the Epic may not be available to those inclined to remain in a recipient mode. For those people, different psychological attractions will have to be available. "Toasters" was the apt and playful metaphor offered as a label for these psychological benefits, as in the draw that banks sometimes use to attract new customers.

In Seattle, at the biennial meeting of the International Society for the History, Philosophy, and Social Studies of Biology (ISHPSSB), I was one of four lead discussants at a session on "Evolutionary Narratives." In my own half-hour section of the program, titled "The Evolutionary Epic: Past and Future," I attempted to generate discussion among the 25 participants by using this abstract: "Julian Huxley, Alister Hardy, Theodosius Dobzhansky, and Pierre Teilhard de Chardin were early promoters of organic evolution as a religious worldview. Have their visions survived their deaths? What about today's visionaries? E. O. Wilson coined the term 'evolutionary epic' but the impetus today is coming more from the physical sciences, notably, Eric Chaisson and Brian Swimme. Where are the biologists? What are the dangers and what are the opportunities in extending science into the realm of meaning?"

The response was altogether different from what I had experienced at the HBES discussion session in Tucson. Rather, here a prominent evolutionary biologist began the discussion with an attack on the extensionist program of using science to foster meaning and worldviews. Others in atten-

dance objected to the Epic because they believed a “neodarwinian” (read, “competitive” and “hegemonic progress-oriented”) view of evolution had already reached too far into the economic structure and ethos of our culture. I tried to explain that purveyors of the Epic tend to emphasize the narrative story, the sequence of events, rather than interpreting the underlying mechanisms—save for a powerful “creativity” inherent in the cosmos—but to no avail. By the end of the session, most of the vocal participants remained skeptical, if not overtly hostile, to the Epic endeavor, but a few passionate voices of support were beginning to enter the conversation.

All this activity may reach a crescendo in an event happening soon in Chicago. The American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS, their new Program of Dialogue Between Science and Religion) has joined with the Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago to sponsor an “Epic of Evolution Conference,” November 12–14. The conference will present ways in which an evolutionary perspective informs investigations of the origins and development of the cosmos, life, humankind, consciousness, and human culture. It will also demonstrate that there are a variety of critical and constructive theological responses to the findings of these scientific investigations. The draft schedule and list of speakers is printed in this issue. Note that several of our members and friends are on the roster, notably, Brian Swimme, Mary Evelyn

Tucker, and Thomas Berry. This could well be a watershed event. See you there!

Connie Barlow is a freelance science writer and editor. Her books include Evolution Extended: Biological Debates on the Meaning of Life (MIT Press, 1994) and the forthcoming Green Space, Green Time: The Way of Science (Copernicus, 1997).

Resources

- The quarterly magazine *EarthLight* is published at 111 Fairmount Ave., Oakland, CA 94611. Subscriptions are \$18/yr; query for back issues. See also <http://www.earthlight.org>.
- The quarterly journal *Wild Earth* offers subscriptions at \$25/yr, available through POB 455, Richmond, VT 05477.
- The quarterly journal *Zygon* offers subscriptions for \$45/yr, available through the Journals Fulfillment Manager at Blackwell Publishers, 350 Main Street, Malden MA 02148. Full membership in IRAS, including a subscription to *Zygon*, costs \$60; request application from Nancy Anschuetz, 26 Turning Mill Road, Lexington, MA 02173.
- The Holy Cross Centre for Ecology and Spirituality publishes *The Sextant*, which includes news of their upcoming programs; write to the editor, Anne Lonergan, at the Centre, RR#1, Port Burwell, Ontario, N0J 1T0.
- The ecospiritual aspects of the Epic are also central themes of the Spiritearth Center for Spirituality in an Ecological Age along the Hudson River in the state of New York; for their newsletter and list of upcoming workshops and retreats, write to the director John Surrence, S.J., 43 Spaulding Lane, Saugerties, NY 12477-2399.

Editor's Note: This Resources announcement will be updated in future issues of this publication. Please send notices to associate editor Connie Barlow.

AMERICAN ASSOCIATION FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF SCIENCE Epic of Evolution Conference with the Field Museum of Natural History, Chicago

November 12–14, 1997

Editor's Note: For more information and registration materials, contact Jim Miller at the Program of Dialogue Between Religion and Science, AAAS, 1200 New York Ave. NW, Washington, D.C. 20005, jmiller@aaas.org, 202-326-7044. Website is www.aaas.org/spp/dspp/dbsr/evol.htm#conference AND [/dbsr/Epic.htm](http://dbsr/Epic.htm)

Session I - Introduction: The Importance of Understanding Evolution

Importance of the science and religion dialogue, of evolution as a grand paradigm in science and a factor in the religious assessment of humanity's place in the universe, of the need for greater scientific literacy, and of the significance of the science and religion relationship in science education.

Audrey Chapman, Director, Program of Dialogue Between Science and Religion, American Association for the Advancement of Science

Session II - Cosmic Origins: Evolution on the Grand Scale

Contemporary cosmogonies and their religious significance.

“Contemporary Cosmogonies”

Joel Primack, Physics, UC-Santa Cruz

“The Cultural Significance of the Story of the Universe”
Brian Swimme, California Institute for Integral Studies

Session III - Matter to Mammals: The Evolution of Life on Earth

Stages of the evolution of life and historical perspectives on the religious reception of evolutionary theory.

“The Evolution of Life”

Niles Eldredge, American Museum of Natural History

“Historical Perspectives on Evolution and Religion”

Ronald Numbers, History of Medicine, University of Wisconsin-Madison

Session IV - Darwin and Neo-Darwinism: Natural Selection as the Mechanism of Evolution

Natural selection and other evolutionary mechanisms, and contemporary theological responses to Darwinism.

“The Mechanism of Evolution”

Ursula Goodenough, Biology, Washington University, St. Louis

“Neo-Darwinism in Theological Perspective”