How Evolution Theory Reshaped Religions

Muhammad Rizky HK
UIN Mataram
rizkyhamzar@uinmataram.ac.id

Abstract
When Charles Darwin introduced his theory of evolution in On the Origin of Species (1859), he unknowingly ignited one of the most profound challenges religions had ever faced. For centuries, sacred texts had offered clear, purposeful accounts of how life began, the stories that placed humans at the center of a divinely created world. Evolution, by contrast, told of slow, undirected change, of common ancestry shared with all living things. To many, this was not just a scientific idea, but it was a theological earthquake. This paper explores how religious belief has responded, resisted, and adapted in the age of evolution. It traces key moments of tension from the fiery debates of the 19th century to courtroom dramas like the Scopes Trial, while also examining quieter shifts in theology, doctrine, and public opinion. Drawing on examples from Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism, the study shows that religious responses have been far from monolithic. Some traditions hardened their opposition, while others embraced evolution as a tool in the hands of a Creator. The paper also considers a more recent development: the use of evolutionary theory to explain the origins of religion itself. Far from undermining faith, such studies offer new insights into why belief persists and how it helps communities flourish. Ultimately, this exploration reveals that the relationship between science and religion is not a zero-sum struggle but an evolving conversation. Evolution did not destroy religion; it forced it to grow, to ask deeper questions, and, in many cases, to reach for a broader understanding of the divine

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A. INTRODUCTION

When Charles Darwin published On the Origin of Species in 1859, he didn't just offer a new scientific theory, he extremely sparked a global conversation that would change how people viewed life, purpose, and even God. His central idea, that all living things evolved over time through a natural process called "natural selection," stood in stark contrast to what most religious traditions had long taught: that life was created by a divine being, deliberately and fully formed from the beginning.

For centuries, especially in Christian-dominated societies, the story of creation in the Book of Genesis was taken as literal history. According to this account, God created the world in six days, forming the first humans directly from dust and breath. Darwin's theory, by suggesting that humans shared common ancestry with animals, seemed to many like an attack on the very heart of religious belief. Understandably, the reaction was intense. Some

religious leaders denounced the theory as dangerous, even blasphemous[1]. Others worried that if evolution were true, it would undermine not only Scripture, but morality and meaning itself [2].

Still, not everyone responded with hostility. Some theologians began to ask a deeper question: Could evolution be part of God's plan? Could science and faith, rather than being enemies, actually complement each other? One early voice of reconciliation was Cardinal John Henry Newman, who in the 19th century wrote that evolutionary ideas didn't necessarily contradict belief in a Creator (Livingstone, 1987). This kind of thinking laid the groundwork for what later became known as theistic evolution, the belief that God used evolution as a method to bring about life.

Over time, even institutions like the Catholic Church which had initially resisted evolutionary ideas began to soften their stance. In 1950, Pope Pius XII allowed that evolution could be compatible with Christian faith, as long as believers accepted that the human soul was divinely created[3] . Later popes went further. In 1996, Pope John Paul II called evolution "more than a hypothesis" [4], and in 2014, Pope Francis affirmed that evolution and creation are not mutually exclusive[5].

Other religions have taken different paths. In the Islamic world, for instance, reactions to evolution vary widely some scholars see it as consistent with Islamic teachings, while others firmly oppose it[6]. Eastern religions like Hinduism and Buddhism tend to be more flexible. Their creation stories are often symbolic rather than literal, which has allowed for easier integration with scientific perspectives[7]. What began as a fierce confrontation has, in many places, become a conversation. Evolution didn't kill religion but it did challenge it to grow, reflect, and, in some cases, evolve. This paper explores that journey: how religious thought has been reshaped in the age of Darwin, and what it reveals about the ongoing relationship between science and belief.

B. METHODS

[1] Adrian Desmond and James Moore, *Darwin: The Life of a Tormented Evolutionist* (W. W. Norton & Company., 1991).

[2] Thomas Dixon, *Science and Religion : A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford University Press Inc., 2022).

[3] Pope Pius XII, *Humani Generis*, 1950 retrieved from https://www.vatican.va.

[4] Pope John Paul II, 'Message to the Pontifical Academy of Sciences', 1996 retrieved from https://www.vatican.va.

[5] Pope Francis, 'Address to the Pontifical Academy of Sciences', 2014 retrieved from https://www.vatican.va.

[6] Nidhal Guessoum, *Islam's Quantum Question : Reconciling Muslim Tradition and Modern Science* (I.B. Tauris, 2011).

[7] Michael Ruse, *Can a Darwinian Be a Christian? The Relationship between Science and Religion* (Cambridge University Press, 2000).

To understand how Darwin's theory of evolution has reshaped religious thought, this study takes a broad, qualitative look at the historical and theological landscape. Instead of running experiments or gathering statistics, the research focuses on a close reading of major historical events, religious texts, public statements, and scholarly interpretations. It's more like mapping a conversation that has unfolded over more than 150 years between science and faith, between doubt and belief. First, the study looks at historical milestones that show how religious communities initially responded to Darwin's ideas. Events like the 1860 Oxford evolution debate, where Bishop Samuel Wilberforce confronted biologist Thomas Huxley, and the 1925 Scopes "Monkey" Trial in the United States, are key to understanding the public reaction to evolution during its early years[8].

Next, it examines official religious responses over time. This includes major doctrinal documents, such as Pope Pius XII's 1950 encyclical Humani Generis, which cautiously opened the door to evolutionary thought within the Catholic Church, as well as more recent statements by Popes John Paul II and Francis, who acknowledged the scientific strength of evolution while reaffirming theological beliefs in the human soul and divine purpose[9]. In addition to Catholic views, the study surveys how other religious traditions have engaged with evolutionary theory. For Islam, it draws from thinkers like Nidhal Guessoum[10], who explores how Muslim scholars interpret science within the framework of Islamic theology. Eastern traditions like Hinduism and Buddhism are also considered, particularly in how their more symbolic and cyclical views of the universe allow for a different kind of compatibility with scientific theories[11].

The research includes perspectives from modern scholars and institutions working at the intersection of science and religion. This includes theologians like Francis Collins, who advocates for theistic evolution, the idea that God works through evolutionary processes[12], and David Sloan Wilson, who approaches religion as an evolutionary adaptation that helps human communities survive and thrive[13].

By drawing from these diverse sources such as historical events, doctrinal statements, theological arguments, and academic research, the method provides a well-rounded view of how evolution has influenced, and continues to influence, religious belief around the world.

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[8] Desmond and Moore, *Darwin: The Life of a Tormented Evolutionist*; Edward John Larson, *Summer for the Gods: The Scopes Trial and America's Continuing Debate Over Science and Religion* (Harvard University Press, 1998).
[9] Pope Pius XII, *Humani Generis*; Pope John Paul II, 'Message to the Pontifical Academy of Sciences'; Pope Francis, 'Address to the Pontifical Academy of Sciences'.
[10] Guessoum, *Islam's Quantum Question : Reconciling Muslim Tradition and Modern Science*.
[11] Ruse, *Can a Darwinian Be a Christian? The Relationship between Science and Religion*.
[12] Francis S.Collins, *The Language of God: A Scientist Presents Evidence for Belief* (Free Press, 2006), doi:10.5840/pc20079116.
[13] David Sloan Wilson, *Darwin's Cathedral : Evolution, Religion, and the Nature of Society* (University of Chicago Press, 2022).

C. RESULT

As we trace the journey of evolution's impact on religion, what becomes clear is that the relationship has not been simple. It's not a clean break or a sudden shift, it's a story of tension, resistance, gradual change, and, in many cases, unexpected reconciliation. Different religious communities reacted differently, and their responses have continued to evolve over time.

C.1 Early Reactions: Resistance and Outrage

In the decades following Darwin's publication, many religious leaders viewed evolution as a direct threat to the authority of scripture. Christian theologians across denominations condemned the theory, worried that it undermined the special status of humans in creation and called into question the literal truth of the Bible. Public debates, such as the 1860 Oxford showdown between Bishop Wilberforce and Thomas Huxley, captured the cultural anxiety of the time. Wilberforce mocked the idea of human evolution, while Huxley defended Darwin's views as consistent with scientific reasoning[14]. The confrontation continued into the 20th century, particularly in the United States. The 1925 Scopes "Monkey" Trial saw a high school teacher prosecuted for teaching evolution in Tennessee. The trial pitted modern science against biblical literalism in a national spotlight and highlighted a cultural divide that still lingers today[15].

C.2 Shifting Views and Theological Adaptation

While resistance was strong, it wasn't universal. Some religious thinkers began to reinterpret their traditions in light of evolution rather than against it. Cardinal John Henry Newman, writing in the late 1800s, suggested that evolution did not necessarily conflict with Christian doctrine if understood within a broader theological framework[16].

This paved the way for what would later be called theistic evolution, the idea that God used evolution as a method of creation. The Catholic Church gradually moved in this direction. Pope Pius XII's 1950 encyclical Humani Generis was cautious but significant. It acknowledged that evolution could be valid when applied to the human body, so long as the soul was still considered a divine creation[17]. Later popes were even more supportive. In 1996, Pope John Paul II declared that evolution was "more than a hypothesis" and recognized the growing scientific consensus[18]. In 2014, Pope Francis went further, stating that evolution does not contradict the idea of creation; rather, it requires it[19].

C.3 A Range of Responses Across Religions

[14] Desmond and Moore, *Darwin: The Life of a Tormented Evolutionist*.
[15] Larson, *Summer for the Gods: The Scopes Trial and America's Continuing Debate Over Science and Religion*.
[16] David N. Livingstone, *Darwin's Forgotten Defenders : The Encounter between Evangelical Theology and Evolutionary Thought* (Edinburgh, 1987).
[17] Pope Pius XII, *Humani Generis*.
[18] Pope John Paul II, 'Message to the Pontifical Academy of Sciences'.
[19] Pope Francis, 'Address to the Pontifical Academy of Sciences'.

Beyond the Catholic Church, the responses from other faiths varied widely. Among Protestant Christians, especially in evangelical communities, literal interpretations of Genesis remain dominant. Many continue to reject evolution, particularly human evolution, arguing that it undermines biblical authority and human uniqueness[20]. However, some mainline denominations from Protestant groups have accepted evolutionary science and integrated it into their theology.

In the Muslim world, the picture is mixed. Some Muslim scientists and scholars, such as astrophysicist Nidhal Guessoum, have argued that evolution is not incompatible with Islamic belief, especially when the Qur'an is read non-literally. Yet conservative voices continue to resist evolutionary theory, especially when it challenges the special creation of humans[21].

Eastern religions have generally been more adaptable. Hinduism and Buddhism, for instance, tend to treat creation stories as symbolic rather than historical. Their cyclic, non-linear view of time and emphasis on continuous transformation makes it easier to accommodate scientific concepts like evolution[22].

C.4 A New Way to See Religion: Through the Lens of Evolution

Interestingly, the conversation didn't just go one way. While religious traditions were adapting to evolution, some scientists began to study religion itself through evolutionary theory. Biologist David Sloan Wilson proposed that religious belief systems may have evolved because they helped communities cooperate and survive. From this perspective, religion is not just about divine truth, it's also a social adaptation[23].

D. DISCUSSIONS

The journey of how evolution has reshaped religion isn't a story of defeat or surrender, it's a story of transformation. What began as a fierce clash between scientific discovery and religious doctrine has, over time, led to more nuanced understandings on both sides. Evolution challenged religious communities to rethink long-held beliefs, and in doing so, encouraged some to develop richer, more flexible theological frameworks.

For many religious groups, especially those with a strong tradition of scriptural literalism, Darwin's theory struck at the heart of their worldview. The idea that life emerged through a blind, natural process seemed to strip humanity of divine purpose and moral grounding. This fear was not unfounded: evolutionary theory did remove the need for a supernatural explanation for the diversity of life. But what many missed early on was that evolution didn't necessarily negate purpose for it simply changed how purpose could be understood[24].

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[20] S.Collins, *The Language of God: A Scientist Presents Evidence for Belief*.
[21] Guessoum, *Islam's Quantum Question : Reconciling Muslim Tradition and Modern Science*.
[22] Ruse, *Can a Darwinian Be a Christian? The Relationship between Science and Religion*.
[23] Wilson, *Darwin's Cathedral : Evolution, Religion, and the Nature of Society*.
[24] Francisco J. Ayala, *Darwin's Gift to Science and Religion* (Joseph Henry Press, 2007).

Gradually, theologians and scientists began to find ways to bridge the gap. For example, biologist and devout Christian Francis Collins[25], argued that accepting evolution does not mean abandoning faith. Instead, he suggested that the elegance and complexity of evolutionary processes can be seen as expressions of divine creativity. The Bio Logos Foundation, which Collins helped found, has since worked to promote dialogue between science and evangelical Christianity, offering resources that help believers accept evolution without feeling they must abandon their beliefs.

Similarly, the Catholic Church's approach evolved from cautious engagement to a more confident integration of evolutionary science. While Pope Pius XII allowed for the possibility of evolution, Pope John Paul II embraced it more openly, and Pope Francis took it a step further by framing evolution as part of God's creative plan[26]. These developments show how religious doctrine can adapt not only by discarding core beliefs, but by reinterpreting them in light of new knowledge.

However, not all traditions or communities have followed this path. In the United States, for example, surveys continue to show that a significant portion of the population, especially among conservative Protestant groups rejects human evolution. A 2021 Gallup poll found that 40% of Americans still believe in creationism: the idea that God created humans in their present form within the last 10,000 years[27]. This indicates that the science–religion divide remains very real in certain cultural contexts.

In contrast, Islamic responses to evolution have been more varied and complex. While some Islamic scholars have accepted aspects of evolutionary theory, especially in biology they often draw the line at human evolution, arguing that the Qur'an affirms a special, divinely guided creation of humankind. Yet voices like astrophysicist Nidhal Guessoum have argued that Islam can accommodate evolution if interpreted through a non-literal, rationalist approach[28]. The challenge, as in Christianity, lies in reconciling deeply held scriptural interpretations with scientific findings.

Eastern religions, including Hinduism and Buddhism, offer a contrasting example of how cosmological flexibility can lead to smoother integration. In Hinduism, for instance, the idea of cyclical time and multiple creations is already embedded in ancient texts, making it easier to align with evolutionary timelines[29]. Similarly, Buddhism's emphasis on impermanence

[25] S.Collins, *The Language of God: A Scientist Presents Evidence for Belief*.
[26] Pope Francis, 'Address to the Pontifical Academy of Sciences'; Pope John Paul II, 'Message to the Pontifical Academy of Sciences'.
[27] Megan Brenan, 'In U.S., Belief in Creationist View of Humans at New Low', 2021 retrieved from: https://news.gallup.com/poll/210956/belief-creationist-view-humans-new-low.aspx.
[28] Guessoum, *Islam's Quantum Question : Reconciling Muslim Tradition and Modern Science*.
[29] Swami Agehananda Bharati, *The Tantric Tradition* (Doubleday, 1970).

and constant change harmonizes well with the evolutionary idea of gradual transformation over time[30].

Meanwhile, a growing field of scholarship has flipped the conversation: instead of asking how religion responds to evolution, researchers are exploring how religion itself may have evolved. Scholars like David Sloan Wilson and Pascal Boyer argue that religion offers adaptive advantages on helping groups form cohesive moral communities, encouraging cooperation, and reducing internal conflict. In this view, religious belief is not only compatible with evolution but may itself be a product of it.

Of course, this idea isn't without controversy. Some critics worry that reducing religion to a mere evolutionary function strips it of meaning and transcendence. But others see it as an opportunity to better understand why religion persists, what it offers, and how it changes in response to new environments and ideas[31].

In the end, what Darwin's theory did was force a confrontation, not only between science and faith, but within religion itself. It pushed believers to ask difficult questions: What does it mean to be human? Can purpose coexist with natural processes? Is divine creation a one-time act or an ongoing process? While not all communities have reached the same conclusions, one thing is clear: evolution has not erased religion. If anything, it has challenged it to grow.

E. CONCLUSION

Looking back over the complex dialogue between evolution and religion, it's clear that Darwin's theory did more than just change biology, it also continuously reshaped religious thought in profound ways. Far from spelling the end of faith, evolution challenged believers to reconsider the meaning of creation, purpose, and humanity's place in the universe.

The initial shock and resistance which marked by public debates, trials, and doctrinal disputes, gave way in many traditions to a more reflective engagement. Some religious communities reinterpreted their sacred texts, finding new ways to embrace scientific insights without abandoning core beliefs. The Catholic Church's journey from cautious acceptance to enthusiastic endorsement of evolution illustrates this well, showing how faith and science can coexist in a complementary relationship[32].

Yet, the story is not uniform. Different faiths and denominations continue to wrestle with the challenges posed by evolution. While some have found harmony between scripture and science, others hold firmly to literalist interpretations. This ongoing diversity highlights how

[30] Donald S. Lopez, *Buddhism and Science : A Guide for the Perplexed*, *Sustainability (Switzerland)* (The University of Chicago Press, 2019), XI.
[31] Daniel Clement Dennet, *Breaking the Spell : Religion as a Natural Phenomenon* (Penguin Books, 2007).
[32] Pope John Paul II, 'Message to the Pontifical Academy of Sciences'; Pope Francis, 'Address to the Pontifical Academy of Sciences'.

religious identity, cultural context, and interpretative traditions shape responses to scientific theories [33].

Beyond theology, evolution has also opened new ways to understand religion itself as a human phenomenon shaped by natural selection, social cooperation, and cultural evolution[34]. This perspective doesn't diminish religion's significance but invites a deeper inquiry into why faith persists and evolves alongside humanity.

In essence, evolution has invited religion to grow for not away from its roots, but into a broader, richer dialogue with science and modernity. It challenges believers and skeptics alike to think deeply about questions that have defined human existence for millennia: How did we come to be? What does it mean to be human? And how do we find meaning in a world shaped by both chance and design?

The reshaping of religion through evolution is not a closed chapter but an ongoing conversation and one that continues to evolve with each generation's search for understanding. It is possible to add sections as needed. A section may consist of several sub-sections, typed in bold-italic and numbered list style, like the following example.

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