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## Evolution myths: Religion and evolution are incompatible



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By Michael Le Page

*There are various ways in which the known facts about evolution can be reconciled with theistic religions. Some of these ways might be illogical and irrational, but they are no more illogical and irrational than other aspects of religions.*

The biologist Stephen Jay Gould argued that there is **no conflict between science and religion**: “Science tries to document the factual character of the natural world, and to develop theories that coordinate and explain those facts. Religion, on the other hand, operates in the equally important, but utterly different, realm of human purposes, meanings, and values.”

This line **is popular with those** who wish to avoid confrontation. **Most people**, however, see both science and religion as making **factual claims about the natural world**, and no scientific facts are **harder to reconcile with religious claims** than those of evolution. Almost all the **major religions** are **divided on the issue**, with some sects, priests or scholars **accepting it as reality** and others rejecting it.

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[Needless to say](#), evolution is incompatible with a literal interpretation of the creation myths that form part of many [religious texts](#), such as Genesis (see [Evolution is wrong because the Bible is inerrant](#)). Of the major religions, only Buddhism escapes this fundamental conflict: its founder is said to have refused to answer questions about the origin of life.

## God steps in

[Polls suggest](#) many people in western countries who believe in a supernatural being accept that evolution happened but believe its course was somehow influenced by that being.

In the absence of a time machine that would allow us to observe every step in the evolution of humans, the possibility that some deity or alien intervened in the process cannot be ruled out.

However, this “god of the gaps” argument is the logical equivalent of standing on a beach pointing to missing sections in a trail of footprints and claiming the creator must have flown between the gaps – even as incoming waves create more gaps in the trail, and even as the ordinary-looking person who made the footprints can be seen walking along in the distance.

Even without that time machine, we are starting to identify many of the mutations that [made us human](#), such as ones related to [learning, speech](#) and [brain size](#), and there is nothing supernatural about them. As more and more genomes are sequenced, and [more fossils](#) unearthed, we will be able to fill in ever more of the details.

## In the beginning

What about a being who set evolution in motion but didn’t interfere in the process? This is how the geneticist [Francis Collins sees it](#): “At the moment of the creation of the universe, God could also have activated evolution, with full knowledge of how it would turn out.” Others take this further, suggesting that while the universe was designed to ensure some kind of intelligent life evolved, the results of evolution were not entirely predestined.

The “deity who set evolution in motion but didn’t interfere” interpretation avoids any conflict with the established facts of evolution, but it also raises some tricky questions. For instance, why would a caring deity choose to “create” through [such a cruel process](#)? If animals don’t have “souls”, at what point did early humans acquire them?

Finally, some people regard “God” not as a conscious being who stands outside the universe and intervenes in it, but more as the divine present in all things. In this view, God is nature. Such [pantheistic ideas](#) have been suggested by adherents of all the major religions over the ages.

So are religion and evolution [incompatible](#)? It depends who’s judging. The idea that many religious people find most satisfactory – that a deity intervened in and directed the evolutionary process – cannot be disproved but [is not supported](#) by any evidence. The interpretations that are most compatible with what we know – that God did not intervene in evolution after creating the universe, or God is nature – are ones that many believers find unpalatable.

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Of course, some biologists such as [Richard Dawkins](#) and [PZ Myers](#) are well known for dismissing all theistic religions. However, the question of whether religion and evolution are compatible is not the same as the bigger question of whether any theistic religion is compatible with reason and rationality.

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