

THEORY OF EVOLUTION AND RELIGION

By Francis Story

Every religion, with the exception of Buddhism, declares that the universe was created by a God, and created for a special purpose or to what is commonly called a “divine plan”. This type of theology maintains the omnipotence and creative urge of the deity and claims that the vital force of living beings is a super-natural gift of the divine power, and that the will of God is apparent in the natural laws that govern the universe, from the planets down to the smallest microscopic organism. Science, on the other hand, examining the nature of the world from a practical or materialistic point of view, finds no evidence whatever of a divine will or purpose. It demonstrates, so far as its technical resources permit (and it must be granted that these are now very expensive) that there is no need to assume anything more than a material law of cause and effect. The process of evolution, for instance, whereby living organisms arose from a primal single-cell animal floating in water, and through countless millions of years became successively fish, reptiles, flying reptiles, birds and mammals, culmination in the human species, is, considered as a working-plan of creation an extremely clumsy, wasteful and cruel method. Clumsy and wasteful, because so many species have evolved, only to become extinct because they could not further adapt themselves to changing planetary conditions, as for example the mastodon and mammoth, the brontosaurus and other enormous reptiles whose reconstructed forms are familiar to us from the fossilised remains found in various places. These are the “meaningless by-products” referred to by Sir Peter Chalmers Mitchell. Cruel, because the entire plan involves the purposeless suffering of millions of generations of creatures, born for no other object than that of living upon one another, fighting one another, the weaker being mercilessly exterminated by the stronger, and all small and large, weak and strong alike – subject to pain, disease and death. Surely, says the materialist, and all powerful and all-merciful God could have found a better way of constructing a universe of living beings, could have made their conditions of life less ignoble, and would not have made it an essential law that each should live by preying on others? And, in any case, if the God is of supreme wisdom and goodness, why could he not have revealed himself and his purpose in some absolutely undeniable fashion so that all men would submit to his laws, instead of, as now, each sect having its own idea of God and each being at enmity with the others? And again, why should God create a world at all? If God is perfect he could have no desires; from the fact that he created a world, it appears that he suffered from some unsatisfied desire which demanded the act of creation to appease it, therefore, he could not be perfect or self-sufficient.

Anthropology, which is the study of mankind as a whole, shows that, contrary to the conventional Western religious belief, human beings are not a special creation of God, but are related structurally, organically and in their neuropsychic system to other creatures; and moreover, that at some period millions of years ago they shared a common ancestry. Established religion has tried to take refuge in an absolute denial of the Darwinian theory of evolution, but this is not the way to help religion. The Darwinian theory is now more firmly established as a scientific fact than ever before. The mechanism of the actual process has been found to be different from that originally postulated by Darwin, and there is still considerable disagreement as to the actual means by which species differentiate one from another and take their own particular line of development, but the central fact, namely that man is a species of animal only differing from the others in the possession of a higher mentality and more complex nervous system, which he has acquired through the same biological evolutionary process, is now so firmly supported by all the scientific evidence that is undeniable. Just as other forms of living beings have acquired special organs and a special technique for living in their particular environment – the fish for living in water, the birds for flying in the air and other animals having specialised faculties, such as the bat with its radar apparatus which enables it to fly blind and catch its prey on the wing – so also man has developed over countless aeons the special self-protective intelligence which enabled him first to make primitive tools, clothing and houses, and later to reach the height of technical knowledge which is at once our blessing and our curse in the present century.

We now know beyond all possibility of doubt, that Darwin's theory that all living creatures are descended from a common form of life, and that human beings and the anthropoid apes are both off-shoots from the same ancestral stock, is true, and that the story of the creation of man, and his first parents, Adam and Eve, in the Garden of Eden, is simply a fabulous legend in no way differing from the primitive creation stories current among the ancient Egyptians, Babylonians and Greeks. Biology, which is the study of the different methods by which distinct forms of living creatures are propagated, like the sciences of chemistry, physics and psychology, shows no indication whatever that there is such thing as a soul or spiritual entity, or that life is possible without the physical mechanism of the nervous system. It has been shown that the consciousness of a living being, whether it be a simple form of life or a highly specialised type such as a human being, depends upon the proper functioning of the complicated network of nerve channels that extend the brains to every centre of the body. It is through these nerve conductors located all over the body, but particularly in the eye, ear, nose, tongue and body-surface, meeting in the appropriate sections of the grey matter of the brain, that we

receive our sense-impressions of the world we live in. If that system through disease or accident, is impaired, our consciousness, is likewise damaged, if the brain itself is affected, our whole outlook and what we call “character” is changed. All this goes to prove that there is no “soul” or separate entity, independent of the physical body, which carries on its own life or has any form of consciousness in its own right. Therefore, says the materialist, it is absurd superstition to believe that anything can survive after the death and dissolution of the physical organism. The motor-reflexes by which the nervous system operates are a purely mechanical set of activities, both in animals and human beings; they depend upon physical substance-flesh, nerve-cells, connecting tissues of various kinds and ultimately on the cells of the brain, which are also composed of physical substance. The brain of a human being differs from that of the lower animals only in its more complex development and the greater number and intricacy of the convolutions in its surface. It is this which gives man his greater thinking power, not any immaterial “soul” and “spirit”.