

roundtable: SCIENCE AND FAITH

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For many people of various faiths, support for the scientific theory of evolution has not supplanted their religious belief. And throughout the modern Judeo-Christian tradition, leaders have asserted that evolutionary science offers a valid perspective on the natural world. They say that evolution is consistent with religious doctrine and complements, rather than conflicts with, religion.

There are, however, some Christians -- in particular, fundamentalists and some evangelicals -- who perceive a conflict between evolution and their literal interpretation of the Bible.

In this panel, we hear personal perspectives from scientists and a historian of science -- religious people who represent a range of faiths.

How can you reconcile the conflict between evolution and religion?



Panelist Statements:

- [Francisco Ayala](#)
- [Mark Noll](#)
- [Arthur Peacocke](#)
- [Robert Pollack](#)

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Robert Pollack is professor of biological sciences, lecturer in psychiatry at the Center for Psychoanalytic Training and Research, and director of the Center for the Study of Science and Religion at Columbia University. His latest book is *The Faith of Biology and the Biology of Faith* (2000).

Evolution is interesting to me because natural selection explains certain facts of life that touch on matters of meaning and purpose, and because the vision of the natural world these explanations produce is simply too terrifying and depressing to me to be borne without the emotional buffer of my own religion.

This buffer is simple to describe: a Jewish understanding of our appearance by evolution through natural selection introduces an irrational certainty of meaning and purpose to a set of data that otherwise show no sign of supporting any meaning to our lives on Earth, beyond that of being numbers in a cosmic lottery with no paymaster.

I acknowledge there is a wholly consistent alternative description of the natural world and our place in it, which can lead one to exactly the actions I may wish to take or encourage others to take, all without any belief in God. Nothing is wrong with that position. It used to be my own, but as I have gotten older, I find I no longer can honestly hold to it. When I asked my teacher Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz how to respond to this criticism of my position by non-believing friends, he said, "If you know someone who says the Throne of God is empty, and lives with that, then you should cling to that person as a good, strong friend. But be careful: Almost everyone who says that, has already placed something or someone else on that Throne, usually themselves."

I find myself accepting the God of my ancestors in part because it is my way of discovering meaning and purpose without denying or distorting the data of science, and in part because otherwise I might put some person, some ideology, some dream of completed science in God's place.

(Baldface added.)