Darwin meets God at church

Faithful can accept both, pastors say

By NIRAJ WARIKOO
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Praise Darwin.

That notion may seem sacrilegious to traditional churchgoers, but dozens of clergy across metro Detroit plan to today to celebrate the virtues and ideas of Charles Darwin, the English naturalist whose theory of evolution is being remembered this month on the 200th anniversary of his birth.

Charles Darwin in 1875

Their efforts are part of a growing movement to help congregations both believe in God and accept evolution at the same time.

Some fear the United States will lose ground as a world leader in education and technology if the public rejects the basics of science. So to them, it makes moral sense to honor Darwin, who laid the foundation of modern biology and parts of other sciences.

"It's important for people of faith to go on record as saying we have no conflict with science," said the Rev. James Rhodenhiser, rector of St. Clare of Assisi Episcopal Church in Ann Arbor. "Otherwise, people may get an impression that religious people are dumb, ignorant and hostile to science."

St. Clare is one of about 25 Michigan congregations that are participating in Evolution Weekend, a project started in 2005 at Butler University in Indiana to encourage pastors to discuss Darwin annually around his Feb. 12 birthday.

Rhodenhiser plans to talk about evolution in church Sunday and show a movie about the religious beliefs of Darwin, who once studied to be an Anglican clergyman. Other area clergy have similar plans, part of a wide range of events in Michigan this month honoring Darwin in local churches and universities.

The events come at a time of increasing reluctance by Americans to accept evolution because of religious fundamentalism, said Ken D. Miller, a Michigan State University professor. From cancer research to DNA evidence, Darwin's ideas have led to many benefits, but Miller's research shows that Americans are half as likely to accept evolution compared with other countries such as Sweden.

Elder Levon Yuille of the Bible Church in Ypsilanti is among area clergy concerned by the Darwin events.

"I don't understand why Christians would celebrate his birthday when it is contradictory to the Christian position, the creationist view," Yuille said. "I think that would be troubling to celebrate that type of thing in church."

But the Rev. Marshall Dunlap of Redeemer United Methodist Church in Harper Woods said he plans to defend Darwin today in church against the views of a pro-creationist parishioner.

The efforts by Michigan clergy to recognize Darwin's work has support among scientists.

"There is room for God in my understanding of how the universe works," said Dunita Brandt, a professor of geological sciences at Michigan State University who studies evolutionary patterns in invertebrates and is co-organizing several Darwin birthday events this month at MSU. "Science and religion are both important."

Scientists like Brandt are concerned that Darwin's ideas have increasingly come under attack by some evangelicals, Southern Baptists, and others with a more literal view of the Bible. Most recently, evolution opponents have touted the idea of intelligent design, urging schools across the United States to teach it in classrooms.

In 2004, evolution opponents tried unsuccessfully in Dover, Pa., to assert their ideas in a notable court battle over evolution that featured the expert testimony of Rob Pennock, an MSU professor of philosophy and science who spoke against creationism and intelligent design.

On the other extreme is the new crop of vocal atheists, most notably British scientist Richard Dawkins, who scoff at any religious belief in their praises of Darwin. In between are Brandt and a lot of other scientists and clergy.

"We're the silent majority," Brandt said.

Still, Brandt and others said they recognize the limits of reconciling the worlds of religion and science. For them, the two exist in separate spheres, both of which should be respected.

"Religious belief gives me comfort in areas of my life that have nothing to do with science," she said. "When a loved one dies, I do not get solace in my scientific understanding of what is happening."

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Photos by MARIO BRIGHT/Detroit Free Press

Today, pastors throughout the Detroit area are to talk about believing God and accepting evolution. Last week, young people learned about biologist Charles Darwin at Darwin Discovery Day at the MSU Museum. Julion Azar, 7 of East Lansing makes a face while checking out a bulldog skull.

Charles Darwin's 200th birthday was Feb. 12. He was a part of Ceylo Scott's birthday: The 13-year-old from Lansing, center, celebrated at Discovery Day with her friend Kyla Buzzo, 12, of Lansing, and a legless lizard.

Views on evolution by religion

In the United States, Buddhists, Hindus and Jews are the most likely among religious groups to accept evolution, while Christian evangelicals, Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses are least likely, according to a Pew Forum survey.

PERCENT WHO AGREE THAT EVOLUTION IS THE BEST EXPLANATION FOR ORIGINS OF HUMAN LIFE:

Buddhist	81
Hindu	80
Jewish	77
Catholic	69
Eastern Orthodox	54
Mainline Protestant	51
Muslim	45
Historically Black Protestant	38
Christian Evangelical	24
Mormon	22
Jehovah's Witness	8

Source: 2008 Pew Forum U.S. Religious Landscape Survey

Charles Darwin

1809: Is born Feb. 12 in England, the fifth of six children into a wealthy family; mother dies when he is 8.

1825: Goes to Edinburgh University to study medicine; later studies Christianity and marine animals. Isn't a model student, but is a passionate naturalist, collecting beetles.

1831: Begins a five-year trip around the world known as the Voyage of the Beagle. Observes diverse range of life that will help form his ideas.

1839: Marries cousin Emma Wedgwood; they would have 10 children together.

1859: Publishes "On the Origin of Species by means of Natural Selection."

1882: Dies at 73. Buried in Westminster Abbey.

Source: The Complete Work Of Charles Darwin Online

World view

A 2006 study showed that people in the United States ranked next to last among 34 select countries in the percentage of people who accepted evolution. Only people in Turkey were less likely to accept it.

Among the findings:

40% of Americans accept the theory of evolution, compared with 80% in Iceland, Denmark, Sweden and France, and 78% in Japan.

Over the past 20 years, the percentage of Americans who accept evolution dropped from 45% to 40%.

42% of Americans say they believe that God created humans as whole persons without any evolutionary development.

Source: Prof. Ken D. Miller, Science Magazine

Events on Darwin and evolution

Harper Woods: 12:30 a.m. today, Redeemer United Methodist Church, 20571 Vernier Road. Lectures and discussions about pro-evolution and pro-creationist views.

Ann Arbor: 4 p.m. today, St. Clare of Assisi Episcopal Church, 2309 Packard Road. Discussion and film on Darwin's religious life.

Michigan State University: 4 p.m. Thursday, lecture entitled "Randomness, Purpose, God and Evolution: Can they go together?" Room 204, Natural Science Building, 7 p.m. Feb. 25, debate on Darwin's "On the Origin of Species by means of Natural Selection." C106 Holmes Hall.

Michigan State University Museum: Darwin-related exhibits this month, including a letter Darwin wrote to the university, open 9 a.m.-5 p.m. Monday-Friday, 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Saturday, 1-5 p.m. Sunday. West Circle Drive, East Lansing.

University of Michigan at Dearborn: Marsha Richmond, associate professor of history at Wayne State University, will discuss "Darwin and Genetics, 1909 and 2009," 4:30-6 p.m. Feb. 25 at 1030 Science Learning and Research Center, 4901 Evergreen Road.

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