

# Science v religion at the Charles Darwin Symposium

Some 150 years after its publication, Charles Darwin's theory of natural selection continues to cause controversy.

**text**  
Row Booker

A fierce science versus religion debate was sparked back in 1859 by the publication of Darwin's infamous work "On the Origin of Species" where he explained in depth his theory that all living organisms evolved by natural selection over millions of years.

**photograph**  
Peter Eve

The point of contention was and still is that Darwin's theory goes directly against the Bible's account of creation in Genesis. Consequently, the topic of evolution has now become as much a religious issue as a scientific one.

This topic will form the basis of one of the most eagerly anticipated discussions at the Charles Darwin Symposium, "Charles Darwin: Shaping our Science, Society and Future" which will take place at the Darwin Convention Centre from 22 – 24 September 2009.

**left**  
Keith Christian

In a theme entitled "Understanding the controversy between Darwinian Science and Religion", a panel of experts drawn from across the globe will discuss the intersection between science and religion from their own unique perspectives.

Charles Darwin University's Professor of Zoology Keith Christian will lead the theme at the symposium and said he hoped it would fuel discussion that went "way beyond the century-and-a-half old creationism debate".

"The implications of evolutionary theory for the concept of divine design in nature (ie the Genesis account of creation) is an intersection between science and religion that on one hand fuels controversy but on the other, also provides a starting point for scholarly endeavours and philosophical debate. It's the latter that I hope our symposium theme will explore," Professor Christian said.

And he has certainly sourced the right people for the task.

A Pulitzer Prize winning historian from the University of Georgia, USA, Professor Ed Larson, will open the theme with a presentation entitled "Darwinism and the Victorian soul".

He will discuss the immediate aftermath triggered by the publication of "On the Origin of Species" and raise key questions of scientific materialism and human purpose.



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Professor Larson will offer up for discussion the idea that it is not so much that Darwinism undermined the Genesis account of creation, but rather that "On the Origin of Species" and Darwin's later work "Descent of Man" suggested that there was a naturalistic explanation for everything that could be said to make humans distinctive: morality, belief in god, love and the perception of a soul.

A molecular virologist from the University of Arizona, Emeritus Professor Martinez Hewlett, will present "Drilling for Darwin's science beneath layers of ideology", this time focusing on the contemporary and exploring the bounds of science and religion and whether there can be a nexus between science and faith.

Professor of Systematic Theology at Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary and Theologian, Ted Peters will be the final speaker within this controversial theme.

His presentation, entitled "The battle over creationism, intelligent design and theistic evolution", will describe the worldwide controversy over evolution and religion and will cover the views expressed by a wide variety of religions and sects, including an Islamic perspective.

Through this carefully selected panel of speakers, Professor Christian said he hoped to create "a whole new understanding on the various positions taken on this worldwide controversy".

The theme will chart the rise of anti-Darwin forms of religion, anti-religious forms of Darwinism and religious forms of Darwinism, ultimately seeking to answer the question "can the bounds of science and religion really be so clearly defined?"

"I'm hoping that through our themed discussion, we can explore the scope for compatibility between science and religion, taking into account historical contexts as well as social and political contexts within the modern world," Professor Christian said.



#### web byte

To learn more about the Charles Darwin Symposium go to [W: cdu.edu.au/cdss2009](http://W: cdu.edu.au/cdss2009).

## CDU to celebrate its namesake

This year marks two landmark anniversaries for eminent naturalist and father of modern day evolutionary theory Charles Darwin.

Not only is 2009 the 200th anniversary of his birth, but it is also 150 years since his revolutionary work "On the Origin of Species" was published.

This publication explains in depth his theory that all living organisms evolve by natural selection over millions of years, dictating only those most suited to their environment will survive and reproduce to pass on their "advantages" to their offspring.

This theory of natural selection will form the basis of the Charles Darwin Symposium, "Charles Darwin: Shaping our Science, Society and Future" taking place at the Darwin Convention Centre from 22 - 24 September 2009. The event is a joint venture of Charles Darwin University and the Northern Territory Government.

It's a forum designed to stimulate appreciation, debate and challenge Darwin's findings by bringing together an impressive range of specialists from around the globe.

The symposium will be divided thematically across the three days and will begin with an introduction to Darwin.

Day two will include presentations on Darwin's legacy and how it has influenced modern medicine and technology. The theme will begin by focusing on the human and will discuss topics such as how we have adapted and evolved in order to survive modern-day disease. Later in the day, the topic will turn to genetics and in particular phylogenetics (the evolutionary development and diversification of organisms) as a framework upon which to test the hypotheses of evolutionary mechanisms. The theme will close with a panel discussion on the ethics and future for Darwinian-based science.

The final day will herald discussion on the ethical repercussions of Darwin's evolutionary theory, particularly focussing upon the controversy between Darwinian science and religion. This theme will further discuss the rise of anti-Darwin forms of religion, anti-religious forms of Darwinism and religious forms of Darwinism, ultimately seeking to answer the question: is there scope for compatibility between science and religion?

The symposium will close with a panel discussion about Darwin and society including how social Darwinism (ie, survival of the fittest) has impacted on Indigenous Australians in the past and present.

The symposium is free, but prior online registration is required for catering. Visit [W: cdu.edu.au/cdss2009](http://W: cdu.edu.au/cdss2009).