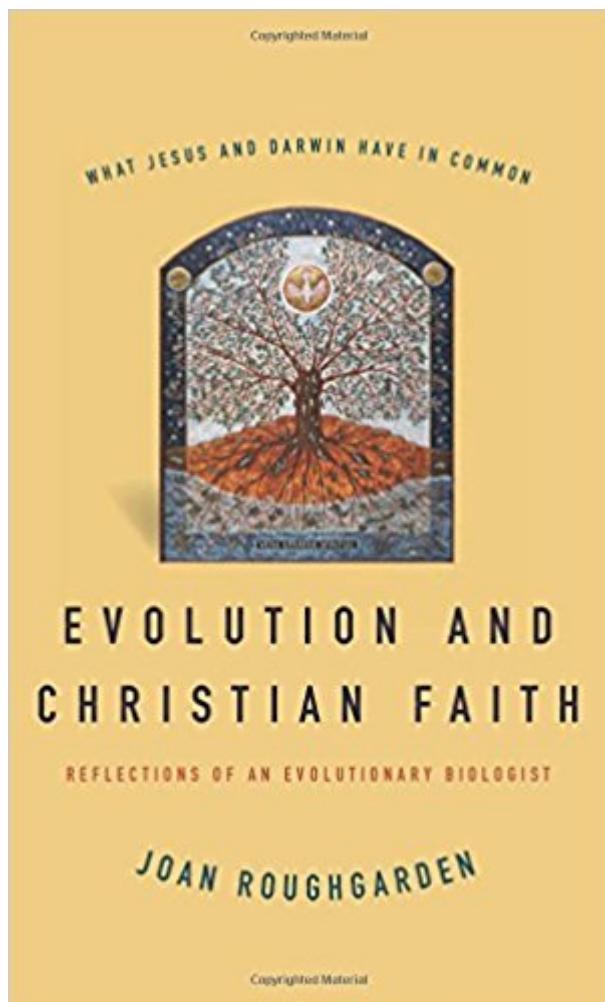


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Evolution And Christian Faith: Reflections Of An Evolutionary Biologist



Synopsis

Click here to visit evolutionandchristianfaith.org "I'm an evolutionary biologist and a Christian," states Stanford professor Joan Roughgarden at the outset of her groundbreaking new book, Evolution and Christian Faith: Reflections of an Evolutionary Biologist. From that perspective, she offers an elegant, deeply satisfying reconciliation of the theory of evolution and the wisdom of the Bible.Â Perhaps only someone with Roughgarden's unique academic standing could examine so well controversial issues such as the teaching of intelligent design in public schools, or the potential flaws in Darwin's theory of evolution. Certainly Roughgarden is uniquely suited to reference both the minutiae of scientific processes and the implication of Biblical verses. Whether the topic is mutation rates and lizards or the hidden meanings behind St. Paul's letters, Evolution and Christian Faith distils complex arguments into everyday understanding. Roughgarden has scoured the Bible and scanned the natural world, finding examples time and again, not of conflict, but of harmony.Â The result is an accessible and intelligent context for a Christian vision of the world that embraces science. In the ongoing debates over creationism and evolution, Evolution and Christian Faith will be seen as a work of major significance, written for contemporary readers who wonder how-or if-they can embrace scientific advances while maintaining their traditional values.

Book Information

Hardcover: 168 pages

Publisher: Island Press (August 1, 2006)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 1597260983

ISBN-13: 978-1597260985

Product Dimensions: 4.5 x 0.7 x 7.2 inches

Shipping Weight: 8.8 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.0 out of 5 starsÂ See all reviewsÂ (26 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #1,129,414 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #101 inÂ Books > Christian Books & Bibles > Christian Denominations & Sects > Christian Science #1717 inÂ Books > Religion & Spirituality > Religious Studies > Science & Religion #3302 inÂ Books > Textbooks > Humanities > Religious Studies > Christianity

Customer Reviews

Like the author of this book, I am both a Christian and an evolutionary biologist. As such, I welcome any contribution to the too-few voices calling for an end to the creationism/evolution controversy.

And Roughgarden's book makes a good many valid and important points that I wish more people would notice. However, the book is undermined by its flaws. Roughgarden's approach to the Bible seems to be "read it absolutely literally except the bits you find evidence against, and reject those bits completely." Such an inconsistent hermeneutic is hardly likely to impress many believers. It is possible to find, through sincere faith and careful scholarship, a consistent approach to Biblical interpretation that avoids both the narrow Bibliolatry of the literalists and the casual dismissal of theological liberals. Roughgarden's presentation of evolutionary theory is strangely flawed. She does an excellent job of presenting the basic claims of evolutionary biology in her early chapters (her choice of "natural breeding" to replace the more familiar "natural selection" is a particularly excellent idea), and her critique of Intelligent Design is spot on (I only wish it were longer, there are even more problems with ID than she mentions-- but then, this is a short book so the brevity is appropriate). However she stumbles when she discusses the "problems" that social behavior creates for evolutionary biology, seeming to be entirely unaware of the substantial literature dealing with it and of principles such as inclusive fitness that address it. Roughgarden may disagree with inclusive fitness, but that's no reason to pretend that biologists are utterly at sea without even a suggestion to make. Following that, her chapter on sexual selection not merely stumbles but falls flat on its face.

Joan Roughgarden's book on evolutionary science and Christian faith is nothing short of delightful. The "priest theologian" who trashed this book in his review missed the point of this work entirely. It is brief, written in a folksy, conversational tone, as though one were sitting down with a fellow parishoner who happens to be a brilliant evolutionary biologist. I was stunned by the simplicity and clarity of Roughgarden's explanation of evolutionary thought stripped of the language of scientific privilege. Excellent science writers like Richard Dawkins and John Gribben can't approach the elegance of her descriptions of the core evolutionary principles: all life is related, through natural breeding, populations tend to become like the members who breed the most, etc. These descriptions are designed to be accessible to those who are unfamiliar with the language of evolutionary biology and whose sensibilities are shaped by a biblical vocabulary. Given Roughgarden's stature as a scientist, this is a wonder indeed. In the process Roughgarden shows the unsustainability of Stephen Jay Gould's sterile "seperate magesterium" approach and Richard Dawkins proclivity to bash religion by taking the name of science in vain. But all of this is done with characteristic gentleness. In fact, the prevailing tone of this little volume is love. If it's true that we can only understand what we love, Roughgarden is on a path to deep understanding here at the

intersection of science and faith. This book is, in the best sense of the term, an exercise in devotion: to science and to faith.

Joan Roughgarden, an evolutionary biologist at Stanford since 1972 and an active Christian in her Episcopal church, wrote this book, she says, to provide a succinct statement of exactly what evolutionary biology does and does not know, and how the Bible relates to that scientific knowledge. The book is short enough to read in a few sittings, has no footnotes at all, avoids bogging down in secondary literature on the subject, and is written at a level for people with limited knowledge of science. I especially appreciated her irenic spirit. At its simplest level evolution teaches that all of life is related in one big family tree, and that species change over space and time through "natural breeding" (as opposed to artificial breeding, for example, that farmers and others do today). Because of random mutations in the genes that are passed on from the "original" to the "copies," changes occur, some of which are favorable and some of which are deleterious. These mutations are random, but whether the overall evolutionary process has any "direction" good or bad is hotly debated among evolutionary biologists, says Roughgarden. Finally, she thinks Darwin is badly wrong about universal sex roles in which aggressive males seek passive females in a competition of perpetual conflict. She believes that cooperation and interdependence (eg, an ant colony) are as important in nature as conflict. Roughgarden insists that there need not be any conflict between science and religion, or that they need to be relegated to separate spheres (but see pp. 56, and 83 where she seems to qualify this). "Intelligent design," she believes, invents problems that don't exist, is hard to take seriously, and so is a "non-starter" for mainstream science.

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