Nothing in Biology Makes Sense
Except in the Light of Evolution

THEODOSIUS DOBZHANSKY

As recently as 1966, sheikh Abd el Aziz bin Baz asked the king of Saudi Arabia to suppress a heresy that was spreading in his land. Wrote the sheik:

"The Holy Koran, the Prophet’s teachings, the majority of Islamic scientists, and the actual facts all prove that the sun is running in its orbit . . . and that the earth is fixed and stable, spread out by God for his mankind. . . . Anyone who professed otherwise would utter a charge of falsehood toward God, the Koran, and the Prophet."

The good sheik evidently holds the Copernican theory to be a "mere theory," not a "fact." In this he is technically correct. A theory can be verified by a mass of facts, but it becomes a proven theory, not a fact. The sheik was perhaps unaware that the Space Age had begun before he asked the king to suppress the Copernican heresy. The sphericity of the earth had been seen by astronauts, and even by many earth-bound people on their television screens. Perhaps the sheik could retort that those who venture beyond the confines of God’s earth suffer hallucinations, and that the earth is really flat.

Parts of the Copernican world model, such as the contention that the earth rotates around the sun, and not vice versa, have not been verified by direct observations even to the extent the sphericity of the earth has been. Yet scientists accept the model as an accurate representation of reality. Why? Because it makes sense of a multitude of facts which are otherwise meaningless or extravagant. To nonspecialists most of these facts are unfamiliar. Why then do we accept the “mere theory” that the earth is a sphere revolving around a spherical sun? Are we simply submitting to authority? Not quite: we know that those who took time to study the evidence found it convincing.

The good sheik is probably ignorant of the evidence. Even more likely, he is so hopelessly biased that no amount of evidence would impress him. Anyway, it would be sheer waste of time to attempt to convince him. The Koran and the Bible do not contradict Copernicus, nor does Copernicus contradict them. It is ludicrous to mistake the Bible and the Koran for primers of natural science. They treat of matters even more important: the meaning of man and his relations to God. They are written in poetic symbols that were understandable to people of the age when they were written, as well as to peoples of all other ages. The king of Arabia did not comply with the sheik’s demand. He knew that some people fear enlightenment, because enlightenment threatens their vested interests. Education is not to be used to promote obscurantism.

The earth is not the geometric center of the universe, although it may be its spiritual center. It is a mere speck of dust in cosmic spaces. Contrary to Bishop Ussher’s calculations, the world did not appear in approximately its present state in 4004 B.C. The estimates of the age of the universe given by modern cosmologists are still only rough approximations, which are revised (usually upward) as the methods of estimation are refined. Some cosmologists take the universe to be about 10 billion years old; others suppose that it may have existed, and will continue to exist, eternally. The origin of life on earth is dated tentatively between 3 and 5 billion years ago; manlike beings appeared relatively quite recently, between 2 and 4 million years ago. The estimates of the age of the earth, of the duration of the geologic and paleontologic eras, and of the antiquity of man’s ancestors are now based mainly on radiometric evidence—the proportions of isotopes of certain chemical elements in rocks suitable for such studies.

One of the world’s leading geneticists, Theodosius Dobzhansky is professor emeritus, Rockefeller University, and adjunct professor of genetics, University of California, Davis 95616. Born in Russia, in 1900, he is a graduate of the University of Kiev and taught (with J. Philippenko) at the University of Leningrad before coming to the U.S., in 1927; thereafter he taught at Columbia University and the California Institute of Technology before joining the Rockefeller faculty, in 1962. He has been president of the Genetics Society of America, the American Society of Naturalists, the Society for the Study of Evolution, the American Society of Zoologists, and the American Teilhard de Chardin Association. Among his many honors are the National Medal of Science (1964) and the Gold Medal Award for Distinguished Achievement in Science (1969). He holds 18 honorary doctorates from universities in this country and abroad. Among his well-known books are The Biological Basis of Human Freedom (1956) and Mankind Evolving (1963). The present paper was presented at the 1972 NABT convention.