

## [Swiftly Evolving Faith](#)

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EDITORIAL

## Swiftly Evolving Faith

Used to be that religion remained static from year to year, but all that's changing

the Editor

When Mark Twain visited our island in 1895 he wryly observed, "If you don't like the weather, just wait ten minutes." He was right; it changes often, with rain one minute and rainbows the next. While the American humorist was speaking of matters meteorological, he could well have said the same about things theological.

Case in point: October 23rd's stunningly understated announcement from the Vatican that the Pope has officially, albeit tentatively, accepted the Darwinian theory of evolution! It's true. At the 1996 Pontifical Academy of Sciences, a group of scientists advising the Church on scientific matters, John Paul II said: "[The] doctrine of 'evolutionism' [is] a serious hypothesis, worthy of investigation and in-depth study equal to that of the opposing hypothesis." In proclaiming the century-old theory as no longer incompatible with Christian faith, John Paul II made a lot of people happy (one 75-year-old follower cheered, "It's very encouraging for me to see the

Church coming into the 20th century instead of backing into the 19th") and scientists are chortling "it's about time." Others find the proclamation worrisome. Atheists may agree with the Pope, but they are warning the faithful (OK, the unfaithful) not to celebrate. American Atheists News (at <http://www.atheists.org>) announced: "...atheists and secularists should avoid the trap of false optimism, believing that...religious faith is somehow crumbling before some inexorable juggernaut of scientific enlightenment." They even suggested that the Church would win big PR points for the move, and that this was its intent in making the announcement on the eve of more proof published in the journal Science that life on Earth goes back a billion years old, twice the accepted history. The atheists skeptically said: "If anything, John Paul has adroitly turned a potential disadvantage and embarrassment into a remarkable success. He has avoided the pitfalls made by biblical literalists and creationist-fundamentalists who increasingly find themselves at odds with scientific finding and the secular world." To him, the Catholics and Protestants are locked in a battle for souls, and the Pope's move takes his Church to the higher ground, permitting his flock's faith to agree with what most people believe.

Now you'd think that was enough of a shift in world religion for one month. But you'd be wrong. On October 28 Time magazine gave its cover story to Genesis, a new, ten-part television series in which Bill Moyers gathers dozens of key religious thinkers (including one Hindu) to discuss the Bible's first book. Instead of somniferous Sunday School sermonizing, this eclectic group courageously heralded their contradictory and sometimes radical views to millions. Wrote Time, "As we approach the third millennium, a new generation of

theologians and lay readers confront the lust, greed, betrayals and wonton destruction in Genesis and declare, 'Let there be light.'" A story of dysfunctional families and their all-too-human idiosyncrasies? From Christians, Jews and Muslims? One British author and former nun, Karen Armstrong, epitomized the reassessment when she noted that God is "not some nice, cozy daddy in the sky." Speaking of Noah and the Flood, she offered that God is "behaving in an evil way," effectively introducing mankind to the idea of justifiable genocide. She calls Noah a "damaged survivor" who says nary a word about all those drowning around him, much less trying to offer them a ride.

Of a sudden, religion is fashionable, and even good for business. Publisher's Weekly was so impressed with the sales of spiritual books in North America that it started "Religion Book Line," a twice-monthly color listing of religious titles and reviews. In Hollywood faith is red hot on the 1997 big screen, with dozens of major movies being released on the subject that has not been popular since the 1950s. Religion, like just about everything else, is evolving at a new pace, requiring our greater effort to keep up. Used to be you could count on creeds staying much the same, and, like a Remington typewriter, once you learned them, it was done. Now it's a computer era, and just when you master Mavis Beacon's typing software, a 2.0 upgrade with fifty new-fangled features arrives.

This accelerated advancement in religion is just a more obvious part of unseen tectonic religious movements around the world in recent years. Some are menacing to conservative religionists, as with the growing phenomenon of fundamentalism in all faiths, including our own. Others hold

high promise, among which we count four here: the already-mentioned unofficial treaty being drafted between science and religion; the powerful movement toward pluralism (with an equally potent protectionist backlash); the renewal of indigenous and pagan paths (strongest now in Europe); and the return to complex, inclusive views of Divinity.

You may have noticed these are all movements away from one toward many, away from dissidence toward cooperation. They reflect, it seems, the kind of thing taking place in many nations--whether in music, food or biology--where diversity and its merits are being rediscovered. What does this all mean for Hindus? Well, for one thing, it means that we won't be hearing as much nonsense about pagan practices. For another, there will be fewer and fewer who approach Sanatana Dharma with ill-intended arrogance and disdain. It also means that we have more friends among other faiths who understand our long-cherished inclusive values and seek to build bridges rather than burn them. Just today Hinduism Today's editorial staff received a first-ever Divali greeting from the Catholic Bishop in Washington, DC.

Don't get too giddy about all this. Mark Twain was right about the weather, but he neglected to mention that it works both ways. If it's blue-sky sunny in Hawaii, that too can change quickly and visitors can end up on the beach, rain-drenched and miserable, having spent their life's savings on a trip to paradise gone awry. So if you do like the theological climate these days, wait a while. It's changing all the time.