

aware of the struggle required to maintain social and political order. The Genesis creation hymn, written during the Israelites' exile in Babylonia in the 6th century BC, was a gentle polemic against Babylonian religion. Its vision of an ordered universe where everything had its place was probably consoling to a displaced people, though—as we can see in the Bible—some of the exiles preferred a more aggressive cosmology.

There can never be a definitive version of a myth, because it refers to the more imponderable aspects of life. To remain effective, it must respond to contemporary circumstance. In the 16th century, when Jews were being expelled from one region of Europe after another, the mystic Isaac Luria constructed an entirely new creation myth that bore no resemblance to the Genesis story. But instead of being reviled for contradicting the Bible, it inspired a mass-movement among Jews, because it was such a telling description of the arbitrary world they now lived in; backed up with special rituals, it also helped them face up to their pain and discover a source of strength.

Religion was not supposed to provide explanations that lay within the competence of reason but to help us live creatively with realities for which there are no easy solutions and find an interior haven of peace; today, however, many have opted for unsustainable certainty instead. But can we respond religiously to evolu-

tionary theory? Can we use it to recover a more authentic notion of God?

Darwin made it clear once again that—as Maimonides, Avicenna, Aquinas and Eckhart had already pointed out—we cannot regard God simply as a divine personality, who single-handedly created the world. This could direct our attention away from the idols of certainty and back to the “God beyond God.” The best theology is a spiritual exercise, akin to poetry. Religion is not an exact science but a kind of art form that, like music or painting, introduces us to a mode of knowledge that is different from the purely rational and which cannot easily be put into words. At its best, it holds us in an attitude of wonder, which is, perhaps, not unlike the awe that Mr. Dawkins experiences—and has helped me to appreciate—when he contemplates the marvels of natural selection.

But what of the pain and waste that Darwin unveiled? All the major traditions insist that the faithful meditate on the ubiquitous suffering that is an inescapable part of life; because, if we do not acknowledge this uncomfortable fact, the compassion that lies at the heart of faith is impossible. The almost unbearable spectacle of the myriad species passing painfully into oblivion is not unlike some classic Buddhist meditations on the First Noble Truth (“Existence is suffering”), the indispensable prerequisite for the transcendent enlightenment that some call Nirvana—and others call God.