

THE POSITION OF THE SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION  
IN REGARD TO EVOLUTION

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The Smithsonian Institution early established a cabinet of specimens which has developed into the United States National Museum under its administration. Among its other branches are the Bureau of American Ethnology and the National Zoological Park. In these three departments there have been collected many things adapted to increase the knowledge of the public along many lines. This is in accordance with the will of James Smithson, who left his estate to the United States of America to establish in Washington an institution for the increase and diffusion of knowledge among men.

The Institution makes no preference between rival religions or rival theories in its collections and exhibitions of objects illustrating facts. It is content to exhibit these concrete evidences to the public, leaving the public to become enlightened by study of them. Its collections include many of the objects which have given rise to the theory of organic evolution and to the study of comparative religions. The Institution does not engage in propaganda for any particular interpretation of evidence or theory based on these objects, but it would regard as a public calamity a movement to suppress the evidence thus far discovered, or to cut off the pursuit of new evidence relating to any department of truth. For it is only by the increase of knowledge that our present high state of civilization has developed, and there is no occupation more worthy than the pursuit and acquirement of truth.

Members of the staff, like members of the public generally, doubtless have formed their opinions individually on scientific and religious questions. The Institution has confidence in the members of its staff that they are actuated by the true scientific spirit of hunger for truth, fairness and honesty of interpretation, and caution in conclusion. It, therefore, does not seek

to exercise censorship, over their opinions or to prevent them from proper expression of them in conversation, lecture or writing.

In its official publications the Institution aims to give only well-considered and adequately supported statements. To this end the advice of committees, not only of its own staff, but of outside authorities, eminent in the lines under consideration, is taken in regard to proposed publications.

A very large number of letters of inquiry on all sorts of subjects from persons in every walk of life, and in every part of the country, and even beyond its borders, are answered here. We go to much trouble to give such inquirers the most accurate information available. When questions of inference arise, we give the gist of the conclusions of the most eminent students of such subjects.

Hence, if an inquirer asked of the probability of the truth of the theory of human evolution, the Institution would undoubtedly reply that the opinions of those best qualified to judge unanimously support that theory, and would accompany such answer with a brief summary of the most telling evidence pointing in that way.

These are: 1. The unquestioned fact that every human individual passes through a wide-ranging change in growth from the embryonic cell to the adult. 2. That at various stages of such development the human being is equipped with organs, more or less rudimentary, which are similar to functional ones of other animals. 3. A study of man's culture in all parts of the world shows a development in his capacity from the savage to the highest civilization. 4. Prehistoric remains indicate that this progress started even further down in the scale than is expressed in the activities of existing savage tribes. 5. Anthropological measurements show a progress in man's brain capacity, which, measured from the earliest human fossils, is almost as great as from the highest apes to man. 6. Not only the brain capacity but other skeletal features show closely related changes of structure between the earliest fossil human remains and

the present, equally suggestive of development from a lower order of being; and the skeleton of man is similar, bone for bone, to the skeletons of the higher mammals. 7. Not only man, but every order of life shows similar evidences of development both of the individual and of the race. 8. The fossil evidence in plants and animals is recovered from strata of upturned rocks which correspond with depths of many miles. When laid in orderly succession from the lowest to the highest strata, a progressive change from the simple to the complex, and from the lowest to the highest orders is on the whole apparent. In this orderly fossil array, man, the highest creature of all, occurs in the highest, and therefore the most recent strata. 9. The enormously thick depositions of sedimentary rocks involved in this orderly array, must correspond, according to average rates of action of natural forces, to immensely long periods. These appear to be reckoned in hundreds of millions of years. This evidence allows of adequate time for the action of organic evolution. 10. This time scale is reinforced by the recent discovery of radio-activity, which is a process neither to be accelerated nor retarded by any means at command, so that degradation products of radio-activity in rocks give us a clock which apparently has ticked off approximately a billion years since the earth was fit for life. 11. The evidences of evolution in organic life are paralleled by evidences of evolution in the stars, so that we must regard evolution as a universal process to which man is no exception.

If our correspondent asked the further question whether a belief in organic evolution, including that of man, is not exclusive and destructive of religious belief, the Institution would reply that a very large number of eminent scientific men in all departments sincerely and logically profess both, and that this number includes many in the Smithsonian Institution.

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