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A Buddhist Explanation for Extinction
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In April, the Smithsonian Institution hosted a major conference on science and religion. One key topic was whether nature and the universe contained evidence of having been created by divine purpose. Irven DeVore of Harvard, a professor of biological anthropology, argued that since nearly all species that have ever lived on the earth have become extinct, God's plan "isn't working very well."

Professor DeVore's comment makes clear the difficulties when representatives of science and religion have a dialogue. The problem is that however learned a person may be in their own area of expertise, their knowledge of the "other side" is usually quite small and is often limited to caricature rather than understanding. This is usually obvious when theologians talk about science, but is less clear when scientists discuss theology. Professor DeVore's comment provides the opportunity to bring out this point.

The idea that God's plan is not working requires the presupposition that God had one and only one plan. The extinction of so many forms of life indicates that this "one plan" is failing. Thus, if there is a God who planned, He does not plan very well. Since the notion that God can fail so completely argues against the idea that God is "all powerful," this must mean that there is no God.

Traditional Christian theology, by contrast, would certainly disagree with the idea that God had just one plan. Most Christian churches posit at least two plans: one before the "fall" of humanity in Adam and Eve, and one afterwards. The failure of the first plan does not make God any less God than He was before.

Although this point overcomes DeVore's

argument about "one plan," it does not eliminate the notion of failure. Instead, it argues that God is God even when He fails. But if we look at the extinctions in Buddhist terms rather than Christian terms, we can even get rid of the notion that the extinctions indicate failure. In Buddhist teaching, life is represented as a journey across rivers, over mountains, and through deserts. At each stage, one uses only the assistance they need for that stage. Thus a person crosses a river with a boat, but once across does not put the boat on his back and carry it into the mountains. One may need a warm coat for the high mountains, but does not then wear that coat into the desert.

Using this Buddhist analogy, the series of extinctions are not the failure of one plan, but the use of alternative means in succeeding situations. In the life of the planet, one group of species was needed at one stage, but these were then "left behind" (to become extinct) at the next stage because they were no longer needed. These responses to professor DeVore's comment suggest the discussion between religion and science will continue for a long time to come.