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Professor celebrates Darwin's 'gift to religion

By Emily Hoferitza

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Biologist and philosopher Francisco J. Ayala gave a lecture in the Eccles Science Learning Center yesterday. The lecture, presented by the Utah Humanities Council, was part of USU's 2009 Year of Darwin celebration, marking the 150th anniversary of Charles Darwin's keystone work, "On the Origin of Species."

Ayala, biology and philosophy professor at the University of California-Irvine, recently published a book, "Darwin's Gift to Science and Religion," about evolution. The book breaks down the theory of evolution and how it adds to the theory of intelligent design.

"Darwin was able to supply a scientific explanation for the design of organisms," Ayala said.

He said this explanation came through the theory of natural selection.

Ayala said Darwin's question was, "What is the purpose for finding more and more cases of evolution if we can't explain it?"

Through natural selection, Ayala said more individuals are produced than are able to survive.

Ayala said through natural selection comes artificial selection.

He said, "If such does occur, can we doubt that individuals having any advantage, however slight, over others would have the best chance of surviving and of procreating their kind?"

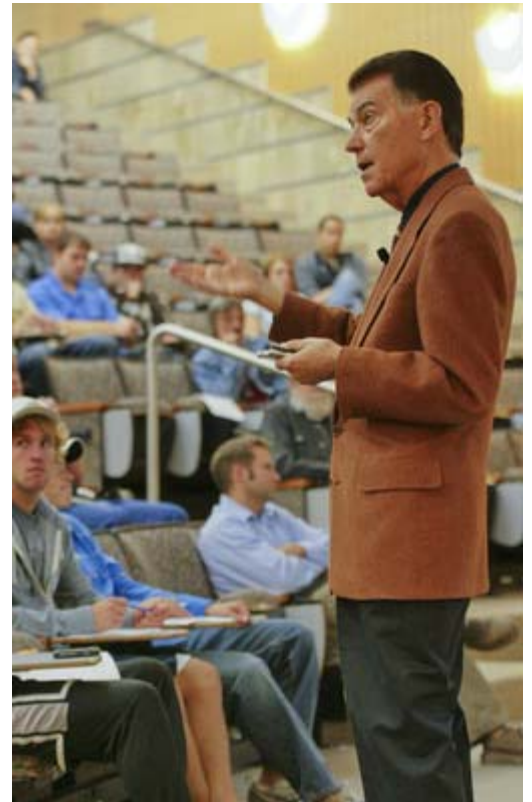
Artificial selection, he said, presents evidence of evolution in organisms.

Ayala said evolution is best studied on islands like Hawaii and the Galapagos Islands because they are isolated from much change and are also safe from threats that would give reason for species to adapt, such as predators.

The Galapagos Islands were a good place for Darwin to study mutations within a species, Ayala said. He said while there was only one species of finch on the Galapagos Islands, there were many different varieties of that species, which proved the existence of artificial selection. Each variety had a different diet or lifestyle from the others.

Cami Lowder, junior in liberal arts, said she enjoyed the lecture, primarily Ayala's description of the Galapagos Islands. She said she intends to go to the islands one day because they are the "mecca for biologists."

Ayala also spoke on the theory of intelligent design. He said Michael J. Behe, author of "Darwin's Black Box: The Biochemical Challenge to Evolution," defined design as "the purposeful arrangement of parts."



Bryson Bellacomo, sophomore in biology, said he enjoyed the way Ayala showed how evolution and theology work together within the theory of intelligent design.

“I liked how Dr. Ayala first brought in ideas of philosophy and how they pertain to our interpretation of life in general,” he said.

Ayala said the theory of intelligent design is not science. He said it cannot be tested. Judge John E. Jones III, a jurist for the United States District Court for the middle district of Pennsylvania, made the first federal court decision against teaching intelligent design in schools and asked in the 139-page ruling, “How do we know what the intentions of the designer were?”

As a result of this ruling, intelligent design is now considered religious theory and cannot be taught in schools, Ayala said.

Ayala said intelligent design is contrary to religion. He said it is incompatible with an “omnipotent, wise and benevolent creator,” using examples of predator cruelty, natural oddities of the praying mantis and parasitic sadism.

“Evolution is Darwin’s gift to religion,” Ayala said.

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