

Dialogues in Science and Faith

Talk 5

Title: Mass Extinctions, Extra-Terrestrials, and Other Evolutionary Myths

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Simon Conway Morris FRS holds an ad hominem Chair (in Evolutionary Palaeobiology) in the Earth Sciences Department in Cambridge University, where he is also a Fellow of St John's College. He was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society in 1990, and has received numerous awards including, in 1998, the Lyell Medal of the Geological Society of London.

A world expert on the Cambrian Explosion, his research considers the constraints on evolution, and the historical processes that lead to the emergence of biological complexity. Such work is central to palaeobiology, but is also of significance to biologists and bioastronomers, as well as the wider community. He is developing wider research interests across the entire field of evolution, including the question of animal cognition (including numerosity) and extra-terrestrial life.

Abstract:

All sciences have fundamental assumptions that on a day to day basis need no examination. Occasionally, however, a tour of the foundations is sensible, making sure all is in order and that received wisdom is unchanged. On such a tour, however, alarming cracks may be discovered, 'myths' that need re-examination. Do mass extinctions really radically re-direct the course of evolution? Given extra-terrestrials certainly exist, why are they so shy? Dogs bark and lions growl, but why does neither asks what's in the newspaper? Simple questions, difficult answers.