

MICHAEL GIFFIN

THE GOD OF EVOLUTION



CHARLES DARWIN BELIEVED one could be a theist and an evolutionist. He disliked both ardent theological speculation and the promotion of atheism. In spite of this, Darwin has been adopted as an icon of thinking atheism by those who believe all other explanations of life and purpose and meaning—apart from his theory of evolution by natural selection—belong in the philosophical dustbin. Religious believers who turn to Darwin for succour are unlikely to find him comforting, though, and it's precisely this tension between theism and evolution that makes him such an interesting figure, since he's too subtle and thoughtful to manipulate in favour of one side of the debate. As one academic has pointed out, we need to be careful when trying to pigeonhole the man who wouldn't pigeonhole pigeons.

Little has been written about Darwin's religious journey. This short and accessible book aims to fill that gap. The online publication of Darwin's complete works at www.darwin-online.org.uk and voluminous correspondence at www.darwinproject.ac.uk now enables easy access to opinions Darwin was careful to keep out of print in his lifetime. His thinking exhibits all the qualities absent from the evolution-versus-intelligent-design debate. He was hesitant, respectful, self-critical and disarmingly self-deprecatory. He couldn't see how religion and science could be kept distinct. He didn't understand why either discipline "should attack each other with bitterness".

Darwin was born in 1809 into a wealthy and entrepreneurial Whig family. His maternal grandfather, Josiah Wedgwood, was Unitarian. His paternal

grandfather, Erasmus Darwin, was Anglican. Natural theology, the belief that nature rather than revelation or personal experience verified religious truths, was still influential at the time of his birth, and theologians such as William Paley had been translating religious arguments from physical design into biological design. Apart from natural theology, evolution was also in the air in the early nineteenth century. Many had published evolutionary ideas before Darwin developed his.

RELIGION

Darwin first studied medicine at Edinburgh, which was the home of Scotland's ecclesiastical establishment, but was also subversive, even radical, having long been a haven for dissenters barred from Oxbridge. Edinburgh didn't turn Darwin into an atheist, or a materialist, or even a sceptic, but did immerse him in a culture in which these beliefs were intellectually possible, and he became familiar with anti-clerical freethinkers whose science and scepticism scandalised the authorities. According to a notorious paper William Browne gave in 1827, mind and consciousness weren't spiritual entities, separate from the body, but were simply spin-offs from brain activity. According to Robert Grant, all life was related, having evolved from the simplest algae. Such talk was dangerous, since evolution—or transmutation as it was more commonly known—was condemned by both ecclesiastical and scientific authorities, which were the same thing back then.

Although Edinburgh nurtured Darwin's passion for science and nature, he wasn't cut out for medicine, and he went to Cambridge with a view to ordination, although his sense of vocation was never strong. He was influenced by John Pearson's *Exposition of the Creed*, John Sumner's *The Evidence of Christianity derived from its Nature and Reception* (Sumner later became Archbishop of Canterbury), and William Paley's three books: *Principles of Moral and Political Philosophy*,

Darwin and God,
by Nick Spencer;
SPCK, 2009, 128 pages, \$17.95.

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View of the Evidences of Christianity and Natural Theology. These books offer an indication of Darwin's pre-*Beagle* faith. In Spencer's words: "Not so much a personal commitment to the person and work of Christ, still less an affecting encounter with the Holy Spirit, this Christianity was a series of propositions to be accepted, a hypothesis to be satisfactorily established, an argument to be won."

Darwin was clear in his autobiography that he was "quite orthodox" while travelling on the *Beagle*. He planned to study the Greek New Testament on Sundays. He requested Holy Communion from a chaplain in Buenos Aires, before heading off for the dangers of Tierra del Fuego. He was laughed at by officers "for quoting the Bible as an unanswerable authority on some point of morality". In his account of the voyage, and his diaries, references to Christianity are primarily about its civilising influence on indigenous people. Coming from abolitionist stock, he was appalled by slavery in Brazil, and also by the Argentine war against Native Americans; however, he was impressed by the work of missionaries in Tahiti and New Zealand and South Africa. Overall, Christianity was not only something to which he intellectually assented, he believed it was a profoundly civilising power, a force for morality and decency, one of Britain's finest exports.

Just as the *Beagle* gave Darwin material for his theory of evolution but did not witness the formulation of that theory, the voyage gave him the material for the loss of his Christian faith without witnessing that loss. This happened in two areas. The first was geological. A volcanic eruption off the coast of Chile, and a violent earthquake in a small town along that same coast, demonstrated the earth was neither benign nor designed for man, and nature was ferocious and wholly indifferent to human life. The second was human, a failed missionary attempt among the Fuegians, whose very different or perhaps non-existent religious sentiments contradicted natural theology's belief in a universal religious instinct which pointed in the direction of a monotheistic God. If the eruption and the earthquake suggested the world was not necessarily what he assumed it to be, his experiences in Tierra del Fuego said the same thing about human beings.

LOSING HIS RELIGION

ON HIS RETURN to England, Darwin courted his cousin, Emma, from the Unitarian side of the family. Although she was a devout believer, his growing religious scepticism wasn't a barrier and they married in January 1839. Their correspondence is a significant record of his slowly fading faith. Emma believed Charles was becoming obsessed with his religious doubts, giving religion insufficient

time, devaluing or simply ignoring that which might offer other perspectives on life, prejudiced as to what constituted evidence, and, whether consciously or not, demanding proof for something that didn't lend itself to proof. Her feelings, deeply felt and emotionally expressed, were never a harangue, and he received them in a similar spirit.

Darwin's growing doubts fall into three categories. First, scriptural doubts: the Old Testament was a "manifestly false history of the world"; the Gospels "cannot be proved to have been written simultaneously with the events" and differ in too many important details "to be admitted as the usual inaccuracies of eye-witnesses". Second, moral objections: the Old Testament writers "attribute to God the feelings of a revengeful tyrant", but the New Testament is no compensation, since however beautiful its morality it depends too much "on the interpretation which we now put on metaphors and allegories". Third, philosophical problems: miracles were irrational and incredible, and, the more we know of the fixed laws of nature "the more incredible do miracles become".

Through Darwin's notebooks and reading, we see an intellect questioning the orthodoxies of the time. He no longer gave credence to a special creation. Natural selection dispensed with the argument that species were created to fit certain environmental niches, since if we presume God created plants to arrest earth, as a Dutchman plants them to stop the moving sand, "we lower the creator to the standard of one of his weak creations". He attacked the idea that man was special compared with other animals. Radical as these speculations were, they didn't constitute a renunciation of Christianity or a declaration of atheism. He was exploring the effect of his theory on conceptions of God and religion in a constructive and nuanced way rather than a dismissive or derogatory way.

In September 1838, Darwin read Malthus's *Essay on the Principle of Population*, which influenced him greatly. He found the argument that the world's population would double every twenty-five years, and exceed the earth's capacity to sustain it, compelling. He also read a pamphlet by Sebright about domestic breeding, which promoted something similar to the idea of "the survival of the fittest", an idea which made its way into *The Origin of Species*. If Malthus and Sebright were right, the idea of a harmonious and beneficent creation was unsustainable, and suffering was a necessary feature of life rather than an accident resulting from an avoidable fall.

Darwin put his theory onto paper while raising his young family and trying to avoid the kind of religious controversy he knew would bring him trouble. He believed evolution was an ingenious mechanism, far better suited to any God worthy of the name, and

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evolution “should exalt our notion of the power of the omniscient creator”. His scepticism wasn’t directed at atheism but at challenging existing notions of God’s nature. If higher animals were “the highest good” we can conceive, evolution wasn’t simply compatible with the goodness of God but actively supportive of it. Everything hung on how the scales balanced between life’s grandeur and life’s suffering.

The problem of suffering loomed large in Darwin’s mind as he formulated his theory in the 1830s. It was soon to loom even larger in his life. He periodically suffered from headaches, nausea, retching, acute vomiting and total debilitation, which could last for months. His mother had died when he was eight, but the event left no lasting mark on him, and he lost no one to whom he was close until the 1840s. In 1842, he and Emma lost their third child, Mary, three weeks after her birth. Emma’s father died the following year and her mother followed him two years later. Darwin’s father died in 1848. The most traumatic death was that of Darwin’s daughter, Annie, who appears to have suffered from a debilitating illness similar to his. She died during Easter 1851, just after her tenth birthday. The last remnants of Darwin’s belief in a good, personal, just and loving God died with her.

DOUBTS THAT REMAINED

THE LAST THREE decades of Darwin’s life would see him rise to international prominence and publish some of the most influential scientific books of all time. They also saw him caught in a maelstrom of public debate, albeit at a distance, much of which was about an issue on which he had not published a single word. He wrote more, and more frankly, about that issue, albeit in private, than he had at any time before Annie’s death. This was partly because of society’s gradual opening up to the possibility of doubt and partly because of the publication of his theory of evolution in 1859. He could speak more openly on the subject because it no longer mattered so much to him. He wasn’t sure about what he believed, and became less sure as the years went on, but he was sure about what he didn’t believe.

In spite of Darwin’s meticulous circumspection, when *The Origin of Species* was published it provoked a range of strong reactions which couldn’t be divided into religious hostility and scientific acceptance. Some leading churchmen were hostile; others, like Frederick Temple, were wholly encouraging. Some prominent scientists, including Darwin’s leading advocates, were

critically supportive, some were lukewarm, others were severely critical. It was obviously hard for many to accept that Darwin intended to open the subject not of atheism but of the relationship between creator and creation. He believed God’s word and God’s works were both legitimate but separate disciplines. He believed it was as possible to see God in natural processes as supernatural processes. As biblically orthodox as this view is, it was deemed unorthodox or unusual at the time.

While he was sure religious faith could be accommodated within his theory, he recognised the tensions involved. While some theists accepted an evolution actively guided by God, where variation was led along certain beneficial lines, Darwin could not accept this. On the surface it was about suffering and happiness.

He believed, as a general rule, sentient beings were formed for happiness in spite of their suffering, but there was an irony here, for although he was sensitive to suffering he felt it was justifiable if a higher good was involved. For example, he hated slavery but was prepared to see a million horrid deaths to abolish it.

If Darwin was prepared to allow suffering to achieve a higher good, he felt it revolted human understanding to ascribe the same sentiment to God. It was one thing to believe happiness outweighed suffering in the natural world. It was quite another to say this balance, or indeed any suffering, could be reconciled with any God worthy of the name.

This was a theological rather than a biological debate—how God acts in evolution—which hinges on what concept of God one held and how far it was credible. Does God preordain? Can he foresee? What do his omnipotence and omniscience entail? These were not questions he felt comfortable with. He knew his thinking was muddled, and that he wasn’t a theologian, but he was certain of one thing: We can’t have it both ways. We can’t ascribe some variations of natural selection to God and not others. God’s role has to be all or nothing, and, since all was absurd, it has to be nothing. It isn’t that God doesn’t exist. It’s that, as far as natural selection is concerned, God doesn’t have anything to do.

As far as Darwin was concerned, what’s good for science is also good for theology, since both are legitimate disciplines. This doesn’t mean religion should be beyond scientific examination, it’s more that theological inquiry shouldn’t be bullied by scientific authority. The same goes for ecclesiastical authority. Shortly after *The Origin* was published, an even more controversial book hit the shops. *Essays and Reviews*

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was the work of seven Anglican scholars; a manifesto for a more liberal and broadminded understanding of the Christian faith. The essays were thoughtful, nuanced and scandalous to the orthodox, but were written by eminent and respected authors, one of whom, Frederick Temple, would become Archbishop of Canterbury. The ecclesiastical authorities were deeply unhappy, formally reprimanding all of them and defrocking two of them. Darwin felt strongly about this infringement of intellectual activity and, uncharacteristically, he signed a public letter expressing his “surprise and regret” that the ecclesiastical authorities had censured the book.

WHAT WE CAN LEARN

WHAT DOES AN exploration of Darwin’s religious journey—from the “sort of” Christian he was in his pre-theory days, through the personal struggles of his middle years, to the muddled and hesitant fluctuations of his old age—have to teach us today? The faith Darwin lost, based as it was on natural theology, was a particular religious expression in a particular Enlightenment context. There were other theologies about—including the teleological and the deontological—but he hadn’t grown up with any of them. It was no surprise, then, that when the natural world didn’t behave the way natural theology felt it should, the religious structure that towered over this foundation should topple.

There’s a lesson in this today, because scientific discoveries are tempting the resurrection of the kind of natural theology from which Darwin emerged, to the extent that the respected Australian physicist Paul Davies has written: “science offers a surer path to God than religion”. The most famous is the anthropic principle, which recognises that not only did the universe come into existence at some point in the past—rather than existing eternally—but the mathematical constants underpinning the universe are fine-tuned to an almost inconceivable degree. Another is the ubiquity of convergence, the recurrent tendency of biological organisation to arrive at the same solution to a particular need. Such ideas are giving rise to talk about the “deep structure” of evolution. The temptation, therefore, is to again see intelligence lurking somewhere behind evolution, or believing evolution has a purpose and a direction. This is what Darwin himself noticed during his travels on the *Beagle*, after all, but his story reminds us, forcefully, that to base faith on such observations is a serious mistake, inviting collapse when the next scientific revolution comes. It’s one thing to investigate such phenomena as objectively as one can, and then explore how consonant they are with a religious understanding of creation. It’s quite another thing to treat them as a

foundation stone for faith.

Darwin died doubting whether it was possible to trust one’s own mind on questions of metaphysics. This ended up being the firmest foundation, as it were, of his agnosticism. Not only did he not know, but he didn’t know whether it was possible to know. The question remains a live one today. If it’s true the human brain, like the rest of the body, has been selected throughout its evolutionary history in order to improve the organism’s ability to survive and reproduce, why should we presume it has reliable cognitive faculties? Evolution is only interested in adaptive behaviour, not in belief. Natural selection doesn’t care what you believe; it’s only interested in how you behave. Insofar as belief enables successful behaviour—meaning behaviour that helps the organism survive and reproduce—that belief would be selected for. But who knows how far that is?

If this is so—and it’s a big if—the debate is a live one. Darwin was right to doubt his mental ability to determine metaphysical truths but should have gone even further, doubting his mental ability to navigate physical as well as metaphysical disciplines. He never did. Indeed, it’s interesting to note the restricted and selective way he deployed his scepticism. He was prepared to trust some instincts, the exertions of his sixth sense, when they helped him detect the truth in scientific achievements. He wasn’t prepared to trust other instincts, the exertions of that same sixth sense, when he experienced the sublime or received an inward conviction of God’s existence. The danger here, as Cardinal Newman once remarked, is that any one study, exclusively pursued, deadens in the mind the interest in, or the perception of, any other study. That certainly seems to be the case for Darwin, by his own admission: “My mind seems to have become a kind of machine for grinding general laws out of large collections of facts, but why this should have caused the atrophy of that part of the brain alone, on which higher tastes depend, I cannot conceive.” The idea that reliable truth could be communicated through such instincts, intuitions or experiences—as well as through the patient interrogation of tangible evidence—was something Darwin never could accept.

Spencer concludes his immensely useful book with the following reflection:

The reasons for Darwin’s loss of faith are interesting and relevant to believers and non-believers today. Questions over what constitutes legitimate and sufficient evidence for religious beliefs, or how one understands and accommodates suffering within a religious, or indeed an irreligious, framework are unlikely to disappear in the near future. Darwin’s “muddled” but penetrating

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engagement with such questions remains of great value.

Much could be said for the *way* in which he engaged with those questions, indeed for the way in which he conducted himself throughout his life.

Darwin was a diligent collector and a meticulous observer, but he also recognized the need for speculation ... He managed to combine a fierce commitment to his life's work with a genuine and disarming openness about its weaknesses. *The Origin of Species* contains an entire chapter dedicated to difficulties with the theory, which began: "Long before having arrived at this part of my work, a crowd of difficulties will have occurred to the reader. Some of them are so grave that to this day I can never reflect on them

without being staggered."

But perhaps most tellingly, in spite of his loss of faith ... he remained as courteous and respectful to those who retained religious beliefs as he was to fellow agnostics ... he never regretted his courtesy. Family members, colleagues, friends, acquaintances, critics, even the general public, honoured and respected him for it.

In an age where such courtesy and grace are notable for their absence from debates about evolution and religious belief, that is the lesson, above any other, we need to hear from Charles Darwin.

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A LETDOWN

Venerable city, he called it,
and though he went far from Teviot Row
it would always be home—
the heart remembered by a lad of parts.

His northern circumstance, in all its flux.
Disembodied land of the mind,
it broke like a cloudburst on his plans
to walk the earth's low curves.

Why should it be difficult to get back?
Hadn't his father given him a map
so that arriving from the past
he might step into the living moment?

There were nettles at the gate
and in the great house a boy rehearsing
reasons for his lifelong trip
across the trapdoor of the mind.

Home was the House of Shaws,
a place of Gothic design and catastrophic
letdown. "To set a stranger mounting
was to send him straight to his death."

Night lengthens on his prospects
and those figures standing in the garden.
He has gone to live his calling
where only the irretrievable can be saved.

Iain Bamforth