

EDITORIAL

SUPPOSE YOU WANTED TO HAVE A STAB AT WRITING A CHRISTIAN BESTSELLER. WOULD SCIENCE TOP YOUR LIST OF POSSIBLE TOPICS?

Michael Pfundner is Bible & Church Development Officer at Bible Society.

I once attended a cross- denominational church gathering. The speaker asked the one hundred or so attendees how many of them had read Richard Dawkins' *The God Delusion*¹ – one-hand went up.

Intuition; emotion; experience – to the soul in search of God they are the roads much travelled, paved with insights that surpass knowledge. As for the mind, on the other hand, believers tend to be kept within the perimeter of solid, revealed truth. Describing her Alpha Course experience, Deborah Orr put it like this, and she may have a point: 'In truth, the course has made me feel a little envious of Christians ... The lure is not that they have all the answers. Instead it is that they have dispensed with the need for questions' (*The Independent* online, 13 Dec 08).

And science? Essentially, it appears to be reserved for a chosen few; and, surely, adding theology into the mix must make things even more obscure. So, when it comes to topics as complex as the theory of evolution, aren't we indeed better off leaving them to the specialists? The only question is which ones? Specialists, say, like Answers in Genesis, an organisation dedicated to proving that the Earth is several thousand years young and that antediluvian man went walking with dinosaurs? Or had we better listen to specialists who refer to probability calculations and irreducibly complex biological systems in an attempt to refute the idea of seamless and, more importantly, godless evolution? And, finally, what about specialists like David Attenborough, who recently implied on prime time TV that science had debunked the idea of a creator making all things bright and beautiful in one go, and topping it all with you and me?

So how do you find your bearings between the poles of Answers in Genesis and David Attenborough? And what if the doyen of televised pop science was right? After all, a number of eminent scientists agree with him. They take every opportunity to alert the faithful that evidence-based doubt in God has passed the point of no return; that the force of scientific argument will ultimately reduce all religious experience to a pile of subjective, psychological rubble. The gauntlet has been thrown down; if the aforementioned church gathering is of any statistical value – and I have a hunch it is – it appears that most Christians dare not take it up.

This year, 2009, touches on the very core of faith. In 1809 Charles Darwin was born; in 1859 he published *On the Origin of Species*. The double anniversary presents a 150-year-old challenge which no spiritual experience, no amount of religious fervour will cause to go away; and it affords the Church a fresh opportunity to join in the debate.

To a Christian, a good starting point would be to ask how they should read and interpret the Bible. For instance, if you want to take the introductory chapters of Genesis literally, you are up against the overwhelming majority of the world's biologists, chemists, physicists, geologists and palaeontologists, who are making steady progress in closing our gaps of knowledge. To them, the evidence of evolution as a self-governing process that has been taking place over billions of years is all but indisputable. Our contributing authors chose to explore the underlying question whether it is possible to accept the views of the scientific

majority and still remain a Christian.

In his opening article, Nick Spencer introduces us to Charles Darwin, the man, whose religious views gradually evolved from cultural Christianity to agnosticism. The father of evolutionary theory struggled with, and gradually abandoned, traditional concepts of a divinely planned, benign creation. He grew increasingly sceptical of the ability of naked apes to comprehend anything beyond the world they inhabit. That said, Darwin did not consider the choice between faith and science to be inevitable, and throughout his life he believed in maintaining a respectful dialogue between biology and theology – a principle ‘most needed today’, as Nick Spencer reminds us.

Michael Reiss tackles the issue from an educational angle, posing the question whether creationism and intelligent design should be taught alongside the theory of evolution. He argues that teaching about alternative models of origins does not mean endorsing them; therefore, in his view, discussions on creationism and intelligent design should not be banned *a priori* from the science classroom. Reiss refers to the official educational guidelines, which encourage science teachers to present evolution as the accepted scientific theory, while dealing with alternative models respectfully, should students bring them up.

Denis Alexander starts off by quoting recent research according to which evolutionary theory is contested not only among Christians; a mere third of the population appears to take Darwin at face value, while another third mistrusts or rejects their famous countryman outright. Anti-evolutionist sentiment has been fuelled by the linking of a biological theory with racist ideologies, the militancy of Darwinist atheism, and the apparent undermining of core biblical teaching. Fundamentally, however, evolution is not about religion or politics, but biology; a scientific model based on the observable processes of genetic variation and natural selection. Evolution, the author argues, can be seen as an outworking of God’s creativity, and indeed the Bible speaks of his creative work as a process. The scientific narrative of *how* it all came about can sit side by side with the biblical narrative, which poses the ‘*Why?*’ question.

Looking at the exegetical challenges posed by the opening chapters of the Bible, Ernest Lucas reminds us that Near Eastern literature a few thousand years ago was very different to ours. He goes on to show the symbolic and metaphorical use of language in the biblical creation account, suggesting that it was never intended as a scientific text. The six days of creation can be read as an extended metaphor that speaks of God as a worker who carries out a carefully planned job. The passage, he concludes, is not about science but theology; Genesis 1—3 is a polemic of the competing creation accounts that were around at the time. The God of Genesis creates a material world without any intrinsically metaphysical quality; no gods are to be found within, there is only the One who both made it and transcends it.

John Hedley Brooke reminds us that the debate between science and theology has always been more complex and multifaceted than a casual observer of today’s battles between creationist and evolutionist hardliners might assume. Not only did a number of Darwin’s Christian contemporaries subsume his theories in their thinking, but they even found them to enhance their own sense of the grandeur of God. The purpose of evolutionary theory is to explain the variety of life, not its origin. Therefore, we are by no means forced to abandon belief in a divine creator; for why should God not have provided a framework within which the evolution of species could take place? As for the Bible, the question is explored whether we can

trust it without having to establish its scientific veracity.

Mary Midgley illustrates how, historically and in our day, Darwin's theory has been prone to evolve into worldviews, whereas Darwin himself was fundamentally concerned with biology. Unlike some of his modern-day disciples, Darwin refused to preach atheism and, while riddled with doubts of his own, never peddled the pointlessness of it all as an evolutionary creed. Natural phenomena, such as the astounding fine-tuning of the universe, without which life as we know it would be impossible, or the fact that, in nature, cooperation is as real as competition, would seem to indicate that there must be more than the one, nihilist, take on nature. Hence, the question whether science and religion can be discussed in the same breath is still well worth asking.

This issue of *The Bible in Transmission* is meant to stimulate your own thinking and equip you to engage in conversation with those members of your congregation who have been following the public debate since the beginning of the Darwin Year; individuals, who, by now, may be having a raft of questions but are possibly too polite to voice them in church.

The following articles won't end the fight over Darwin's legacy. But they ought to give confidence to those who secretly fear that Church and Bible have lost the argument. Last but not least, they avoid the trap of vitriolic rhetoric, thereby modelling, in timely fashion, the type of respectful discourse between sceptic and believer which Charles Darwin himself held dear.

NOTES

1. London: Bantam Press, 2006.

All rights reserved. Permission is given for a single copy to be made for private and personal use. Beyond this, no part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying or otherwise without prior permission from Bible Society.

For permission requests, please email permissions@biblesociety.org.uk or telephone Bible Society on 01793 418100.