

CHARLES DARWIN: FROM FAITH TO AGNOSTICISM

Nick Spencer is Director of Studies at Theos, the public theology think tank. He is the author of several books, most recently, *Darwin and God* (London: SPCK, 2009).

CHARLES DARWIN'S FIRST PUBLISHED ARTICLE WAS A DEFENCE OF MISSIONARY WORK IN THE PACIFIC.

He was a lifelong opponent of slavery, calling it a 'scandal to Christian Nations'. He had a high opinion of (some) evangelistic work, telling a local evangelist that 'your services have done more for the village in a few months than all our efforts for many years.'¹ And later in life he was offered and accepted honorary membership of the South American Missionary Society. Darwin's relationship with Christianity was very much more complex than is popularly believed.

A CHRISTIAN UPBRINGING

Darwin was a Christian by birth, although only just. His family background was theologically rather unconventional for the time. His father, Robert, was probably an atheist, his grandfather one of the most famous freethinkers of the eighteenth century, and his mother and her Wedgwood clan Unitarians. Darwin's own upbringing was more conventional, baptised in the local Anglican church that he subsequently attended, following his mother's death when he was eight.

He had intended to follow his father into medicine but two years at Edinburgh proved fruitless (at least medically). The few surviving letters from this period reveal, at best, a lukewarm religiosity. 'Dear Charles I hope you read the bible', his sister Caroline wrote to him, 'and not only because you think it wrong not to read it.'² 'I often regret myself that when I was younger & fuller of pursuits & high spirits I was not more religious', she confided.³

Robert Darwin was increasingly vexed by his son's lack of medical ambition and his love of the good life, and he all but insisted he did something worthy of his station. If that wasn't to be medicine, then it had to be the Church – a telling indication of what ordination into the established Church meant in the early nineteenth century. A serious, personal belief in God was certainly no bar to the priesthood, but nor was it a necessity.

To his credit, Darwin paused and read a few large and serious theological tomes to test his uncertain faith. The books are key to understanding what kind of 'orthodox' Christian faith he took with him on the *Beagle* three years later. Bishop John Pearson's *Exposition of the Creed* was a word-by-word analysis of the Apostles' Creed, already 150 years old. John Sumner's *The Evidence of Christianity derived from its Nature and Reception* was a less turgid but equally analytical 'proof' of Christianity's truth. William Paley, in whom Darwin immersed himself at Cambridge, was similarly rational, placing a particular emphasis on nature's order and apparent harmony. Nature, he argued, contains 'every manifestation of design ... design must have had a designer ... That designer must have been a person [and] that person is God.'⁴

Between them these books, which duly persuaded Darwin, show Darwin's pre-*Beagle* faith to be almost scientific in nature. Christianity was a theorem to be proved, the conclusion of a logical argument. Darwin's faith was a synthesis of Pearson, Sumner and Paley – objective, rationalistic, demonstrable.

It was also a profoundly civilising thing. The few mentions of Christianity in Darwin's account of the *Beagle* voyage, relate primarily to its impact on indigenous people. Darwin wrote very highly of missionaries, observing their positive effect on the manners, morals, education and piety of Pacific Islanders; defending them against accusations of impropriety; and commenting that any voyager unlucky enough to be shipwrecked on some unknown coast should 'most devoutly pray' that missionaries had got there first.⁵

This, then, was the faith he was to lose: not only objective and rational, but also civilised and civilising, ordered, moral and decent.

LOSS OF FAITH

Darwin returned to England in 1836 and spent the subsequent years writing up his voyage, analysing the notes and specimens he had collected, reading widely, and thinking deeply.

Contrary to popular beliefs, the theory of evolution did not occur to him when he had observed the differences among Galapagos finches. (Indeed, he did not notice the difference; he also failed to label the specimens accurately, causing him something of a headache when he returned.) Rather, it dawned on him during a period of extraordinary speculation between 1837 and 1839.

This was also the period when Darwin lost his Christian faith. According to his autobiography, Darwin had three main problems: doubts about the Bible ('no more to be trusted than the sacred books of the Hindoos'), moral objections (the Old Testament writers 'attribute to God the feelings of a revengeful tyrant'), and philosophical problems ('the more we know of the fixed laws of nature the more incredible do miracles become').⁶ Together they conspired to kill what was never, even by Darwin's account, a particularly deeply felt faith.

While there is no doubt that Darwin stumbled over each of these issues, it is highly unlikely they all occurred to him during this period. Biblical criticism, of the sort that was to scandalise and terrorise the Victorian mind, had hardly made a mark in Britain by 1839, for example. It is more likely Darwin fashioned his autobiography to bring together all his doubts into a single chapter and time frame, which he placed during a period of intense and destabilising intellectual activity.

In a series of notebooks, Darwin traced not only the evolution of his theory but also his attempts to reconcile it with some kind of belief in God. Evolution by natural selection did away with special creation, the idea that God had made every species individually as it current existed. However, was that such a great idea? Darwin did not think so.

How 'limited [was the] view', he remarked, that 'since the time of the Silurian [God] has made a long succession of vile molluscous animals ... How beneath the dignity of him, who is supposed to have said let there be light & there was light'?⁷ In his own, fragmentary notes, Darwin was struggling to articulate the same view that Revd Charles Kingsley would one day express more eloquently in a letter praising *On the Origin of Species*, parts of which were incorporated into the second edition of the book: 'I have gradually learnt to see that it is just as noble a conception of Deity, to believe that he created primal forms capable of self development ... as to believe that He required a fresh act of intervention to supply the lacunas [or 'gaps'] which he himself had made.'⁸

If special creation wasn't the issue, then, what was? Perhaps it was that evolution damaged humanity's pride. 'It is absurd to talk of one animal being higher than another', Darwin noted. 'We consider those, when the intellectual faculties ... [and] most developed, as highest.' But such a view was arrogant and anthropocentric. 'A bee doubtless would [consider differently].'⁹ 'Man – wonderful man ... with divine face turned towards heaven ... he is not a deity, his end under present form will come ... he is no exception', he wrote in Notebook C, sounding almost like an Old Testament prophet. 'He possesses some of the same general instincts & feelings as animals.'¹⁰

This was indeed a blow, but it was more of a blow to the early Victorian sense of human propriety, than it was to Christianity proper. A different engagement with biblical texts might have paid more attention to the *createdness* of human beings. In the words of Chris Wright, time and again 'the Bible tells us that we have more in common with the rest of the animate creation than in distinction from it ... createdness is glory, not shame.'¹¹

For Darwin, however, the Bible had been read through the lens of his particular social and cultural milieu. Although there is no shame in this (it is, after all, difficult to do otherwise), that particular milieu was very concerned to discern and maintain a certain kind of decorum and respectability in humanity. Evolution challenged this notion.

There was, however, worse to come. William Paley's vision was of 'happy world ... [of] delighted existence'. 'In a spring noon, or a summer evening,' he had written, 'on whichever side I turn my eyes, myriads of happy beings crowd upon my view.'¹²

The evolutionary penny dropped for Darwin when he read the work of another Anglican clergyman, Thomas Malthus, whose ideas directly undermined Paley's happy picture. In his influential *Essay on the Principle of Population* Malthus had argued that population growth was 'indefinitely greater than the power in the earth to produce subsistence for [it]'.¹³ The result was a ceaseless competition for resources in which those less able to secure food or a mate died out faster.

This, Darwin recognised, was the engine driving natural selection. But it was also an altogether dimmer view of creation than Paley's. Gone was obvious design, order and benignity. In its place stood a 'dreadful but quiet war of organic beings, going on in the peaceful woods & smiling fields'.¹⁴

In the end, it was the oldest problem in the book – suffering – albeit newly in focus under the evolutionary lens that killed Darwin's Christianity.

FAMILY BEREAVEMENT

That death was not immediate, however. Darwin's writings of this period do not show a man triumphantly killing and then burying his faith. Rather they reveal a man who was actively struggling to integrate an intellectually sustainable idea of God with a newly formed and (at the time) highly unorthodox theory about the development of life.

At first, he appeared to succeed. At the end of his first sketch of what was to become *On the Origin of Species* Darwin balanced the extraordinary grandeur of life with the pain that was involved in evolving: 'From death, famine, rapine, and the concealed war of nature we can see that the highest good, which we can conceive, the creation of the higher animals has directly come.'¹⁵

It was a fine balance and clearly not a knock-down argument either way. But from comments made elsewhere Darwin was clearly a theist, with a Christian flavour, at the time. Suffering could be accommodated – at least in theory.

Over the next decade, however, theory became reality. Charles Darwin and his wife, Emma, lost their third child, aged three weeks, in 1843. Emma's parents died soon afterwards, followed by Darwin's father, to whom he had been as close as two men of their age and class could.

Most significantly, Darwin's favourite child, Annie, fell ill in 1851. He took her to Great Malvern for water-treatment, a mid-Victorian craze, but she soon caught a fever. Darwin, who had returned home to be with his pregnant wife, rushed back and sat at Annie's bedside as she repeatedly rallied and then relapsed. It was the worst week of his life. He held her hand, mopped her brow and fed her tea by the spoonful. On 23 April she died, aged 10.

Most Victorian families lost children – Darwin himself lost two others in infancy – but Annie was his favourite and he had witnessed every last, degrading moment of her short life. The experience destroyed what little was left of his Christian faith.

DARWIN THE AGNOSTIC

Darwin remained what he called a 'theist' for years, although properly speaking he was more of a deist, believing in a God of first causes. His scientific work won him professional respect and his publications earned him public notoriety, but he remained a fiercely private man, rarely leaving the family home in Downe, and virtually never being drawn into public debate or controversy.

He did discuss his beliefs and, in particular, his attitude to the linked questions of purpose, design, suffering and God with close friends, not least Asa Gray and Charles Lyell, committed Christians, leading scientists of the day and early advocates of evolution. Their correspondence makes fascinating reading and reveals a confusion in Darwin's thinking that he took to the grave.

On the one hand, as he wrote to Gray, 'I cannot ... be contented to view this wonderful universe & especially the nature of man, & to conclude that everything is the result of brute force.' On the other, 'I see no necessity in the belief that the eye [or any other biological feature] was expressly designed.'¹⁶

This was the problem. 'One cannot look at this Universe with all living productions & man without believing that all has been intelligently designed; yet when I look to each individual organism, I can see no evidence of this', he wrote to the scientist, John Herschel.¹⁷ 'I am driven to two opposite conclusions', he admitted to Henry Acland, Regius Professor of Medicine at Oxford, a few years later.¹⁸

This was also the source of the agnosticism of his final years, although not the only source. In his last decade, he began to doubt whether the human mind, being evolved, *could* ascertain truth in such matters. 'When thus reflecting [on the universe],' he wrote in his Autobiography, 'I feel compelled to look to a First Cause having an intelligent mind in some degree analogous to that of man; and I deserve to be called a Theist.' But, then came the 'horrid doubt': 'Can the mind of man, which has, as I fully believe, been developed from a mind as low as that possessed by the lowest animal, be trusted when it draws such grand conclusions?'¹⁹

Interestingly, Darwin never applied the same logic to science, once writing to a

friend that '[I] feel within me, an instinct for truth, or knowledge or discovery.'²⁰ Only metaphysical questions, around which Darwin never felt comfortable, were cast into doubt.

Darwin thus died an agnostic, in the fullest sense of the word. He did not know about God, but neither did he think you could know about God. He had lost his Christian faith, formed as it was by a natural theology that rested on the benignity of nature, but as he told a correspondent a few years before his death, 'in my most extreme fluctuations I have never been an atheist in the sense of denying the existence of a God'.²¹

In the same letter, Darwin insisted that it was 'absurd to doubt that a man may be an ardent Theist & an evolutionist'.²² He was unable to reconcile those beliefs himself, unsure about the instincts that oriented him towards the belief in God, but he refused to denigrate those who thought otherwise, treating them, like everyone else, with courtesy and respect.

And it is perhaps this example of civility that is most needed to day. 'I hardly see how religion & science can be kept ... distinct', he once told J Brodie Innes, vicar of Downe and a lifelong friend, 'But I most wholly agree with you that there is no reason why the disciples of either school should attack each other with bitterness.'

NOTES

1. Letter to James Fegan, between December 1880 and February 1881.
2. Caroline Darwin to Charles Darwin, 22 March 1826.
3. Caroline Darwin to Charles Darwin, 11 April 1826.
4. William Paley, *Natural Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).
5. Charles Darwin *Voyage of the Beagle* (London: Henry Colburn, 1839), pp. 493–4.
6. Charles Darwin, *The Autobiography of Charles Darwin 1809–1882* (London: Collins, 1958; repr. Penguin, 2002), pp. 85–96.
7. Notebook D.
8. Charles Kingsley to Charles Darwin, 18 November 1859.
9. Notebook B.
10. Notebook C.
11. Chris Wright, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 2004), pp.117–8.
12. Paley, *Natural Theology*, p. 456.
13. Thomas Robert Malthus, *An Essay on the Principle of Population* (Oxford World Classics, 1999), chapter 1.
14. Notebook E.

15. Francis Darwin (ed.), *The Foundations of The Origin of Species: Two essays written in 1842 and 1844* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1909), p. 51 [emphases added].

16. Both in his Letter to Asa Gray, 22 May 1860.

17. Letter to John Herschel, 23 May 1861.

18. Letter to Henry Acland, 8 December 1865.

19. Darwin, *Autobiography*, p. 93.

20. Letter to John Henslow, 1 April 1848.

21. Letter to John Fordyce, 7 May 1879.

22. Ibid.

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