

CHRISTIAN RESPONSES TO DARWIN: SOME NECESSARY DISTINCTIONS

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THIS YEAR IT IS APPROPRIATE TO RECALL THE HEADY CONTROVERSIES OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY TO WHICH HIS CHALLENGING ACCOUNT OF HUMAN EVOLUTION SO FAMOUSLY CONTRIBUTED.

In the minds of many today the mid-Victorian conflict between science and religion epitomises a general polarisation between scientific authority and religious tradition, exemplified in recurring legal battles in the United States over the teaching of evolution, creationism and intelligent design in schools. Reference to 'creationism', however, immediately alerts us to the need for distinctions. There is a difference, for example, between a young-earth creationism that defies reputable science in insisting on a recent origin of the Earth and an old-earth creationism that was prevalent at the time of the Scopes Monkey Trial in the 1920s. Crucially, it is necessary to distinguish between the doctrine of Creation understood as a thesis about the separate creation of each living species and its classical Christian formulation in which it was assumed to refer to the dependence of the entire universe, and the processes within it, on a transcendent Creator. This last distinction is vital for an understanding of Christian responses to Darwin because there was no obvious reason in principle why a creative evolutionary process should not at the same time be the vehicle of divine creativity. Darwin's theory of evolution by natural selection immediately challenged the belief that each new species in the fossil record was the result of a separate miraculous act, but it did not contest the deeper theological presupposition that the postulation of a Creator was necessary to understand why anything (including evolutionary processes) should exist at all.

In this brief essay, I suggest that other distinctions are necessary for a balanced view of the Darwinian impact. Darwin himself distinguished between independent acts of creation and creation 'by laws'. This reflected his belief, firmly held at the time he wrote the *Origin*, that the laws of nature were the legislation of a deity who had 'impressed laws upon matter'. Although Darwin had rejected the Christian faith by the 1850s, he was still insisting that an explanation for the origin of species that referred to the effects of natural laws was compatible with belief in a Creator who had foreseen the consequences of a primordial configuration of the universe. Accordingly, he wrote in the second edition of the *Origin* that he could not see why his theory should shock the religious beliefs of anyone.

Later Darwin became more agnostic about theological and metaphysical claims; but here another distinction becomes important. He categorically denied ever having been an atheist in the sense of denying the existence of a transcendent power. Indeed, his theory of the gradual evolution of the human mind had the consequence that it would be arrogant to claim definitive knowledge of either the nature or the non-existence of God. Christian commentators were aware that, irrespective of the merits of his theory, Darwin never presumed to explain the origins of the first living forms, the origin of the Earth, or, still less, the origins of the

universe. While recourse to a god-of-the-gaps was not the most sophisticated religious response, it should not be surprising that some Christian apologists chose to emphasise what science had yet to explain. For Darwin's American disciple Asa Gray, this included the cause of the variations on which natural selection worked, and which Gray assigned to a guiding providence.

Christian opponents of Darwin have often appealed to the authority of the Bible to justify their resistance. When, in 1860, the Bishop of Oxford, Samuel Wilberforce, criticised *On the Origin of Species*, he was careful to avoid citing proof texts against Darwin's scientific hypothesis, but nevertheless maintained that the whole tenor of Scripture was against the undignified notion that humans had been derived from animals. Some Christian thinkers, scientists among them, did worry about the exegesis of particular biblical verses. An early example comes from a clerical naturalist, Darwin's friend Leonard Jenyns: 'I am not one of those in the habit of mixing up questions of science and Scripture, but I can hardly see what sense or meaning is to be attached to Gen: 2.7 & yet more to vv. 21,22, of the same chapter, giving an account of the creation of woman, if the human species at least has not been created independently of other animals.'

While it would be wrong to pretend that such concerns were of minor moment, another distinction must be made – between literalistic and more symbolic interpretations of the Genesis narratives. By the time Darwin published in 1859, a Christian intelligentsia was already used to the idea that to treat the Bible as if it were a source book of science was to miss the point. The Church Fathers, including Augustine and Origen, had warned against interpreting the six 'days' of creation literally and, since the time of the Reformation, Christian scholars had repeated Calvin's precept that the Bible was not the place to look in order to learn astronomy or other sciences. As a greater recognition was achieved during the nineteenth century that the Bible contains many different literary genres, it became possible to embrace both evolution and an understanding of the Creation narratives that focused on their existential meanings. It was not difficult to reinterpret Adam's 'fall' and concepts of original sin in the light of a vestigial animality shared by all humans. New understandings of biblical authority were not, of course, shaped by science alone. Darwin published just when new historical approaches were seeping into public consciousness, as in *Essays and Reviews* (1860), a controversial book authored by liberal divines seeking to inform their audience that the inspiration of Scripture was not to be equated with verbal inerrancy but with the progressive refinement of an understanding of God discernible in its inspired authors. The idea that human understanding of God had evolved even resonated with accounts of human evolution that stressed the importance of cultural as well as natural forces. Commitment to a belief in progress on all fronts was almost a surrogate religion for many Victorians.

It was during the nineteenth century that the sciences became professionalised in their academic standards and organisation. The same was true of the study of theology, leading to a further important distinction – between popular and more sophisticated accounts of biblical texts and their sources. Opposition to Darwin today is particularly marked in constituencies that have been described as 'lightly educated'. The importance of a distinction here was fully recognised during Darwin's lifetime, one of his correspondents, the Unitarian Francis Ellingwood Abbot, writing to him in 1871: 'If I rightly understand your great theory of the origin of species, it contains nothing *inconsistent* with the most deep and tender religious feeling. It certainly conflicts with the popular notion of God, but it seems to me to

harmonize thoroughly with the enlightened ideas concerning him held by all highly cultured minds of today ... and for one I feel that you have done a vast service to true religion by your labours.'

We shall see shortly how more orthodox Christian thinkers understood this vast service. But it is first necessary to introduce a distinction between two concepts of design and purpose, the first of which was imperilled by Darwin's theory, while the second was more resilient and provided scope for a general rapprochement between Darwinian science and what TH Huxley called a 'higher teleology'. Richard Dawkins has made much of the way in which Darwin's theory provided an explanation for the appearance of design in the structures of living things. He is correct to insist that the argument for design as presented in William Paley's classic *Natural Theology* (1802) was undermined by Darwin's demonstration that the perfecting process of natural selection could counterfeit design. Where Paley could celebrate such contrivances as the woodpecker's beak, the camel's hump, the human eye and even the human epiglottis (so wonderfully contrived that no alderman had ever choked at a feast!), Darwin showed how, in principle, such structures could develop by the gradual accumulation of advantageous variations, as the best adapted organisms survived and reproduced in a severe struggle for existence. As the Anglican-turned-Catholic John Henry Newman pointed out, however, the case for the Christian religion did not depend on inferences to a cosmic clockmaker and contriver. And even if it did, all was not lost because, as Paley himself had recognised, it was possible to discern design in the laws and unity of nature. While Darwin recognised that his theory undermined Paley's argument from contrivance to Contriver, he did not completely evacuate conceptions of design. Though he was never really satisfied with the formula, he was inclined, in his own words, to see things in nature as the 'result of designed laws with the details left to chance'. This was a formulation on which Christian writers could build if they wished, seeing, as Darwin had seen, the emergence of the higher animals as one of the greatest goods we can conceive. Reviewing the early reception of Darwin's theory, TH Huxley felt that too much had been made of its supposed threat to providence and design. With reference to the possibility of a primordial design, he went even further, declaring that Darwin's theory had no more to do with theism than had the first book of Euclid – meaning nothing at all.

Most shocking to Victorian sensibilities was the continuity Darwin proposed between humans and their animal progenitors. It was this that Samuel Wilberforce could not stomach, appealing both to the doctrine that humans were made in the image of God and to the doctrine of Incarnation in dignifying humankind beyond compromise. Once again, however, there is the danger of missing a distinction. To say that apes and humans have a common ancestor is not to say that humans are nothing but apes. A vast literature exists today on supposedly unique features of human beings corresponding to respects in which, as a species, we have transcended the attributes of our primate cousins. Nor is this literature necessarily Christian in inspiration. For Richard Dawkins, humans are unique in that we alone have the capacity to overcome the tyranny of our genes. To be sure, there were problems for Christian apologists. Could one specify at precisely what point in proto-human evolution a critical threshold was passed, beyond which a self-conscious personhood with the capacity for a relationship with a transcendent 'other' became possible? Nevertheless, in constructive Christian responses there was much more to be said than in the gut reactions of the offended.

An additional problem faced by Christians who wished to welcome what they
THE BIBLE IN TRANSMISSION – SPRING 2009

correctly saw as a major scientific contribution was one that still exists today. This was the uncomfortable fact that Darwin's science was immediately appropriated to support materialistic and atheistic philosophies of nature, especially in Germany where a movement of popular Darwinism deliberately challenged ecclesiastical authority. In Britain, too, Darwin's science was a useful instrument for a young generation of scientists eager to marginalise clerical amateurs. The critical distinction here is between Darwin's theory understood simply as a technical biological explanation for how new species can emerge from their antecedents and evolution as a naturalistic worldview in which the word 'nature' encapsulates all that is. Unfortunately this inflation of science into an anti-religious ideology can, for some, still act as a sufficient deterrent to the acceptance of the science itself. Extreme positions continue to feed off each other.

One final distinction is helpful before noting the more receptive Christian responses. This is the distinction between the fact of evolution and the mechanism by which it allegedly occurred. The case Darwin built for the real occurrence of evolution was so strong compared with the case made by his scientific predecessors that it took only 15 years or so for scientific elites to be won over. By contrast, his mechanism of natural selection, and particularly its supposed sufficiency, remained controversial until well into the twentieth century. Even Darwin himself gave it less prominence in later editions of the *Origin* and in his *Descent of Man* (1871). The distinction is crucial because there were undoubtedly Christian commentators untroubled by the idea of evolution but disconcerted by the image of a blind nature in which random variations appeared, seemingly disconnected from any prospective advantages they might by chance confer. In his book *What is Darwinism?* (1874) the Princeton theologian Charles Hodge was willing to embrace evolution, deeming it compatible with the Bible, but was unwilling to embrace the mechanism of natural selection, which he considered effectively atheistic. As a rough generalisation, Christian writers receptive to biological evolution tended to focus on ancillary mechanisms, such as an inherent drive towards greater complexity, rather than on natural selection alone. Until the neo-Darwinian synthesis of the 1930s, it was not difficult to do so because the sufficiency of natural selection was an issue within scientific communities themselves.

What advantages did Christian converts to evolution see in their new scientific perspectives? What service had Darwin done to what Francis Abbot called 'true religion'? For Asa Gray, who pleased Darwin with his grasp of natural selection, the idea that all living things were ultimately interconnected through a common ancestry, spoke more eloquently of the unity of creation, and even more importantly of the unity of the human race, than polygenetic theories of separate creation. Gray even suggested that Darwin had performed a service to Christian theology by showing how the existence of pain and suffering, so long seen as a problem for belief in a beneficent God, was actually germane to a creative process without which human beings would not have come into being at all. For the Christian socialist Charles Kingsley, one of Darwin's earliest clerical sympathisers, Darwin's view of the history of life was one of unexpected and unsurpassed grandeur. Kingsley told Darwin that he saw greater nobility in the idea of a deity working through natural laws than in the idea of repeated intervention. Darwin had liberated Christianity from the antiquated notion of God as a kind of magician, conjuring new species into existence. A similar point was made by Frederick Temple, already sympathetic to Darwin as early as 1860 and later to become Archbishop of Canterbury. Temple saw evidence of progress in evolution, warned against the

exploitation of scientific ignorance by Christian apologists and insisted that the extension of natural laws in the natural sciences strengthened rather than weakened the case for asserting the provenance of moral laws in human society. Both Kingsley and Temple liked to assert that a God who could make things *make themselves* was more to be admired than one who simply made things. According to the Oxford theologian Aubrey Moore, Darwin had done Christianity a service by expelling a false deity – one who, like a *deus ex machine*, was inactive except when intervening. Moore declared that under the guise of a foe Darwin had done the work of a friend, rescuing Christianity from a semi-deistic travesty. The image of Darwin as a friend is certainly not found among his fundamentalist detractors but it is interesting that he himself toyed with the idea that his theory might contribute to theological reflection. If all species had been separately created then the deity must bear direct responsibility for those, such as the ichneumon wasp that lays its eggs in the bodies of caterpillars, that one might regard as devilish. But if such creatures were simply possible outcomes of a process indispensable for the production of human beings there was perhaps a sense in which the deity might be exonerated.

I have been arguing for a series of distinctions, indispensable if Christian responses to Darwin are to be understood. I have also tried to expose something of the diversity of those responses. It would be seriously erroneous to imagine that the Christian churches were united in opposition, just as it would be to imagine that all scientists immediately flocked to Darwin's side. In the vigorous debates that ensued, there was undoubtedly a stimulus to search for deeper meanings of biblical texts than those associated with a surface reading of the creation narratives. J Estlin Carpenter, a distinguished Oxford historian of religion, who offered this early twentieth-century retrospect, nicely captured the consequences: 'Theories [about the Bible] once ardently cherished have been overthrown. Conceptions that had exerted immense influence for centuries, can no longer be maintained. On the other hand, the true value of the Bible has been enhanced. We have ceased to ask of it what it cannot give us; we cherish all the more highly what it can.'

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