

PREFACE: A TWENTY-FIRST-CENTURY CHALLENGE

Phil Hills

The twenty-first century is witnessing an aggressive attack on the credibility of Christian faith. Daniel Dennett likens people of faith to drunk drivers in that they are not only a danger to themselves and others but are doubly culpable because they have allowed religion to cloud their rationality. He asserts that religion is one of the greatest threats to scientific progress. Christopher Hitchens has written to explain how religion poisons everything and is invested with ignorance and hostile to free inquiry. Richard Dawkins in his best selling book, *The God Delusion*, makes it abundantly clear that, in his opinion, science and faith are completely incompatible. The underlying argument for all of the above is that evolution has made faith utterly redundant and anyone who tries to hold on to religious conviction in the face of scientific enlightenment is significantly lacking in reason.

For many years scientists who were Christians pursued their scientific education and research without the fear of being derided for their lack of credibility. However, the new atheists are being given a good hearing. *The God Delusion* is Dawkins' best-selling book ever, remaining for fifty-one weeks in the *New York Times*

bestseller list. There has been a call that any scientists questioning evolution should be stripped of their academic qualifications. Some are claiming victimization, others are afraid of voicing their real position. In September 2008 Professor Michael Reiss resigned as Director of Education for the Royal Society after some Nobel laureates embarked on a letter-writing campaign calling for his resignation. They believed that his role within the Royal Society was at odds with his calling as an Anglican priest because of his suggestion that questions about creation should be discussed in school. Even Dawkins admitted this to be like a witch hunt.

In the past Christians have held various views that they believed reconciled their theology with scientific understanding and were accorded respect. However, confronted by attack from the new atheists, any view that doesn't fully accept evolution is now being denigrated by evolutionary creationists. Those Christians within the scientific community who wholly embrace evolution appear to be embarrassed by those who don't. *Third Way, Christianity*, and *IDEA* have recently included calls for Christians to celebrate Darwin. The Bible Society has dedicated a whole issue of *The Bible in TransMission* to theistic evolution and distributed copies of *Rescuing Darwin* to 20,000 church leaders in England and Wales. The Theos think tank and the Faraday Institute have commissioned research entitled 'Rescuing Darwin', and though they had not yet completed their research Theos wrote to *The Times* to explain that their response to the new atheists and to those Christians unwilling to accept evolution would be 'a plague on both your houses'. The Anglican Church has recently published an official apology to Charles Darwin for the way they challenged his theory following the publication of *On the Origin of Species*, and Charles Foster has declared in *The Selfless Gene*, that 'Creationism has inoculated a whole generation against Christianity'.

This is a very important time for the Christian Church and our response to this twenty-first-century challenge is critical. It is not sufficient to come up with a response that appears intellectually credible to the scientific establishment if it is not theologically accurate. If the authority of Scripture is to be observed then any theological model must begin with an exegesis of the relevant biblical texts and not a scientific paradigm. Theological rigour must

not be sacrificed on the altar of scientific consensus, and it is high time to unravel the empirically-based scientific information from the metaphysical perspectives imposed on it. It is not enough to make vague assertions about the literary genre of Genesis without engaging in the hard and detailed questions that this gives rise to.

Some are engaging those wider questions. Professors Malcolm Jeeves and R. J. Berry sought to address them in *Science, Life and Christian Belief* (Apollos, 1998), and more recently Denis Alexander has published *Creation or Evolution: Do We Have to Choose?* (Monarch, 2008), in which he seeks to reconcile a commitment to the authority of Scripture with Darwinian evolution. J. I. Packer regards this work as the ‘clearest and most judicious’ to be found on the subject, yet this of itself should give rise to concern as Alexander explicitly states that evolution is ‘incontrovertible’ and he therefore seeks a theological model that will fit with the science. However, Alexander, although not a theologian, does seek to address the significant theological questions that arise from embracing evolution. His theology might be described as novel but it could certainly not be described as mainstream. It must not be assumed though, that there is anything easy about this exercise. Evolution, as intended by the title of this book, specifically refers to the Darwinian mechanisms of mutations and natural selection and the commitment to common ancestry that are central to the ruling scientific paradigm.

As recently as summer 2007 the Faraday Institute (of which Alexander is the Director) invited Professor Michael Ruse to address the question, ‘Can a Christian be a Darwinian?’ Ruse concludes there are two major obstacles in providing a positive answer. First, the special nature that Christian theology ascribes to humanity is in direct contradiction to a Darwinian understanding that makes no distinction between any organisms, each one being necessarily best adapted for their particular environment. The second obstacle is reconciling the concept of a benevolent God with one who purposefully chooses to use suffering and death as the means of evolving life. These are not inconsequential questions and any Christian who embraces evolution must be able to posit intelligent answers if their position is to be considered credible. It is not acceptable to say, ‘Evolution is true, we just haven’t

got a theology that fits with it yet', because that would demonstrate that commitment to the authority of Scripture is secondary!

In the face of the new atheists' claim that evolution has rendered faith utterly redundant there is a flood tide arising that demands that Christians must embrace evolution or acknowledge that they are opposed to science. This book believes that this is a false premise. It is written to set out a clear theological framework on the relevant issues and to confront the questions that arise from it. It is written with a compelling conviction that science and faith are not in opposition. It is written by theologians who are committed to the authority of Scripture and to the exercise of careful exegesis. It is written by scientists who are fully persuaded of the importance of rigorous scientific investigation but who are dissatisfied with the arbitrary exclusion of possible conclusions and the failure to follow the evidence wherever it leads. This is not written for a select readership that already has expert knowledge of the subjects. It is written for ordinary men and women, who have the capacity to weigh the information, seek further clarification and draw their own conclusions.

1. EVOLUTION AND THE CHURCH

Alistair Donald

The relationship between Darwin's theory and the Church has been by no means straightforward, nor, despite claims to the contrary, is the matter finally settled. Given that the scientific evidence is in significant ways at variance with Darwinism, as outlined elsewhere in this book, Christians need certainly not feel compelled to subsume their theology to the theory of evolution. The implications of doing so are considerable, as will be made clear later in this chapter, but first it will be helpful to look at the historical context.

The relationship between evolution and the Church

Since first publication of *On the Origin of Species* in 1859 the Church has been divided in its view of Darwin's evolutionary theory. It is true that Rev. Charles Kingsley gave a fulsome endorsement some days before publication, having received an advance copy. As an Anglican clergyman he is often referred to in an attempt to demonstrate that the Church of England had no difficulty

accepting Darwin's thesis. However, when Rev. Dr Malcolm Brown, Director of Mission and Public Affairs for the Church of England recently wrote, 'the Church of England owes you an apology for misunderstanding you and, by getting our first reaction wrong, encouraging others to misunderstand you still', then it is clear that Kingsley's enthusiasm was not universally shared.

Even those whom Darwin counted among his friends and mentors did not wholly support his views, due to their Christian convictions. Charles Lyell struggled to accept natural selection as the primary mechanism driving evolution and could not agree that man was descended from brute beasts. When he eventually accepted natural selection it was in an equivocal way. At the same time Asa Gray, described by Darwin as his best advocate, was challenging the utter randomness he saw in the theory and could not accept the absence of divine purpose and design in the process. He corresponded at length with Darwin while also writing articles and essays to persuade others of Darwin's essential thesis. In 1876 Gray, aware of growing religious opposition to evolution, published *Darwiniana*, to try to reconcile it with Protestant Christianity.

From a Catholic perspective, St George Mivart was endeavouring to demonstrate that there was no conflict between evolution and the teaching of the Church. In 1871, he wrote *On the Genesis of Species* and addressed, in chapter 12, the perceived theological objections. In spite of his own view that these could be reconciled, he acknowledged that there were others, such as atheists Carl Vogt and Ludwig Büchner, who did not agree. Mivart eventually lost his friendship with Darwin and Huxley and was later excommunicated from the Roman Catholic Church. However, in 1950 a papal encyclical from Pope Pious XII stated that biological evolution was compatible with Christian faith, though declaring that divine intervention was necessary for the creation of the human soul.

In 1865, the Victoria Institute was founded in recognition that Darwin's theory impinged on matters well beyond science. Its stated first object is telling: 'To investigate fully and impartially the most important questions of Philosophy and Science, but more especially those that bear upon the great truths revealed in Holy Scripture, with the view of defending these truths against

the oppositions of Science, falsely so called.’ The Institute was not officially opposed to evolution but perusing their *Journal of Transactions* illustrates the fact that many were challenging it. These challenges were often scientific but the objects make it clear that the motive of these challenges was the defence of Scripture.

Among Presbyterians on both sides of the Atlantic there was an ambivalent approach to Darwinism. Hugh Miller, the highly influential naturalist and Scottish Free Churchman, was no friend to young-earth views of geology, arguing against the ‘anti-geologists of the Church of England’, but although he died three years before Darwin’s *Origins* was published we know that he was opposed to existing theories of transmutation in biology and would surely have been sceptical of Darwin. In due course many Scottish churchmen did embrace the new theory with enthusiasm. By the early twentieth century B. B. Warfield, Principal of Princeton Seminary, did so as well, although the ‘Darwinism’ that was endorsed by him emphatically ruled out the purely chance element that is arguably intrinsic to the theory. Warfield’s predecessor at Princeton, Charles Hodge, had written specifically on the issue in 1874, bluntly branding Darwinism as ‘atheism’. Arnold Guyot, a Swiss-American geologist and evangelical Presbyterian, also challenged the theory, most notably in his 1884 work *Creation, or the Biblical Cosmogony in the Light of Modern Science*. In 1886, Augustus H. Strong of the American Baptists weighed into the fray. In his *Systematics* he argued that evolution could have been the mechanism that God used to create. Philip Gosse of the Plymouth Brethren was opposed to Darwin.

The Baptist Union in Great Britain was to feel the impact of the controversy in 1887. Charles Haddon Spurgeon was their best known minister and regarded as ‘the Prince of Preachers’. In the Surrey Music Hall he commanded crowds of 10,000 and at the Crystal Palace he preached to 23,654 people. In 1861, his congregation had moved to the Metropolitan Tabernacle, which seated 5,000 with room for a further 1,000 standing. He published a monthly magazine, *The Sword and the Trowel*, and in 1887 this was used to highlight the *Down Grade Controversy*. This was concerned with higher criticism, the authority of Scripture and the impact of Darwinism. Initially, two articles were published anonymously in

March and April. These were actually written by Robert Shindler, Spurgeon's friend. In the first one he spoke of the *Down Grade* being responsible for spawning the theory of evolution.

The response to these articles was enormous and Spurgeon himself wrote further on this perceived malaise, citing Darwin's theory as part of the problem. The consequences were far-reaching, with many lining up on either side of the divide. Spurgeon withdrew from the Baptist Union and the Union censured Spurgeon. Baptist Associations from various parts of Canada and America sent resolutions unanimously supporting the stand that Spurgeon had taken. Just one of those, the Baptist Association of the State of Kentucky, represented 960 ministers. It is evident from this that, at that time, there were thousands of ministers who had problems with evolution.

In response to the liberal theology of the latter part of the nineteenth century, *The Fundamentals* were written between 1910 and 1915. This was a series of ninety essays intended to set out essential Christian doctrine. These included an attack on evolution by George F. Wright, a geologist and Congregational minister. As a friend of Asa Gray he had been at one time something of a leader among Christian Darwinists, but in later life he revised his position completely, asserting that special creation was wholly responsible for biological variation. Many believe *The Fundamentals* gave rise to the fundamentalist movement within Christianity. This is interesting because some of those who wrote *The Fundamentals*, like B. B. Warfield, in fact subscribed to a form of theistic evolution.

George McCready Price, a Seventh-Day Adventist and avowed creationist, regularly attended the meetings of the Victoria Institute held between 1924 and 1928. He produced numerous anti-evolutionary works, including *The New Geology*. During this time Sir Ambrose Fleming was appointed President of the Institute (1927), but the influence of those sceptical of Darwinism was waning and some were looking for an opportunity more effectively to gather and organize opponents of evolution. In 1932, Sir Ambrose Fleming, Douglas Dewar and Captain Bernard Acworth, all leading members of the Victoria Institute, founded the Evolution Protest Movement. At its first public meeting in 1935, with 600 in attendance, the scientific credibility of evolution was challenged

and some religious implications identified. Since that time it has changed its name to the Creation Science Movement and continues to pursue its original objectives.

In 1946 Henry Morris wrote a short book seeking to attack evolution. In 1961 he co-authored *The Genesis Flood* with John Whitcomb and cited George McCready Price as a key influence. This book went through thirty-nine reprints and sold over 200,000 copies, making a significant impact on American evangelicals. It sought to interpret geology in light of a global flood. Morris subsequently was involved in founding the *Creation Research Society* and then the *Institute for Creation Research*. He is regarded by some as responsible for the rise of the modern creation science movement. The Presbyterian Church of the United States (now the PCUSA) revisited its own position in 1969. They officially declared that there is no contradiction between the theory of evolution and the Bible and overturned their previous statements of 1886, 1888, 1889 and 1924.

In the early 1990s the Intelligent Design (ID) movement emerged, from roots in the previous decade. It is often incorrectly maintained that ID was an offshoot of biblical creationism, but in fact the movement originated among scientists who were formerly Darwinists but had come to be sceptical of the theory because recent advances in science, particularly biochemistry and information science, seemed to be incompatible with Darwinism.

This short overview demonstrates two primary points. First, the Church has been divided over its view on Darwinism since 1859 to the present time. Secondly, the division over evolutionary theory has not come from one particular wing of the Church but from a wide variety of denominational perspectives.

The implications of embracing evolution

As highlighted in the Preface, there is currently a call for the Church to embrace evolution, and it is asserted that there is no contradiction between Christian faith and Darwinism. In order to consider this claim carefully we need to identify the implications for the Church of embracing evolutionary theory. There are obviously many who believe that evolution is the mechanism that God

used to create the variety of life on this planet. However, for those who are serious about the supremacy of Scripture, it is essential that any apparent theological tensions that arise from this are rigorously reviewed. It would be premature to say the least to commit to a scientific position without having a clearly worked out theology that accords with it, particularly when so much of the scientific evidence does not necessitate a Darwinian explanation.

One significant difficulty in trying to reconcile evolution and the Bible is that Darwinian evolution does not allow that there is a hierarchy of life within the natural world. Natural selection ensures that each species is best adapted to survive and thrive within its own environment but it cannot ascribe a special significance to humanity. The Bible on the other hand describes man and woman as the pinnacle of God's creative work. Humankind is seen as both special and different to the other life forms and is given dominion over them. The greatest demonstration of this special nature is seen in Christ taking on himself human flesh and laying down his life at Calvary as Redeemer.

Humankind is identified in the Scriptures as being created in the image of God. Theologians wrestle with this concept, attempting to understand exactly what this means, and there are several different views normally posited. However, there is no dissent from the view that the Bible declares humanity as unique within creation. This was not the position of Charles Darwin. His friend and mentor, Charles Lyell, debated the issue with him. Lyell could not accept that humans were descended from beasts in the same way that other organisms had evolved, though he supported much of Darwin's theory.

If Christians are to embrace evolution they must have an evolutionary theory that ascribes a special significance to humanity and recognizes the primacy of humankind within the evolutionary framework or else they must impose this special nature onto humanity apart from evolution. In his recent book, Denis Alexander, Director of the Faraday Institute for Science and Religion, St Edmund's College Cambridge, finds the special nature of humanity not in the evolutionary process but in the intervention of God. He argues that the image of God is not imparted to *Homo sapiens* through evolution but by a special revelation to a

particular couple, Adam and Eve, and this revelation makes them *Homo divinus*.¹

In his suggested model, Adam and Eve were living among up to 10,000,000 other *Homo sapiens*, so how was the image of God imparted to them or their progeny? Obviously, the vast majority of the earth's future population would not be descended from Adam and Eve. How then, are they created in the image of God? If one's reading of the biblical text allows a global flood that destroys all the living, then it could be argued that those who followed the flood were direct descendants of Adam, through Noah, and they could be said to bear the image of God in that way. However, if one's reading of the biblical text excludes a global flood, there must be some other explanation for how humanity as a whole is created in the image of God. As mentioned earlier, the Catholic Church adopted a position that necessitates divine intervention for the creation of the human soul and in this way God's direct intervention sets man apart as unique.

The issue of humanity's special position before God also requires that those embracing evolution explain why humans will not evolve into a different species. The alternative is to explain how this new species fits into the eternal purposes of God that are identified in the Bible. While there are wide-ranging eschatological interpretations, they all concern themselves with the eternity of humanity not its extinction.

When Christians embrace evolution it is usually with a conviction that this is the vehicle God has used to bring about the variety of life on our planet. It seems perfectly plausible to them that God set natural laws in place and chose this process for the development of life. However, this scenario raises numerous problems. Darwinian evolution does not allow any external direction. Natural selection working on random mutations is what gives force to the evolutionary process. Although the mutation mechanism was not known in Darwin's day, the chance element was clearly emphasized and it was this that Asa Gray found so objectionable about

1. Denis Alexander, *Creation or Evolution: Do We Have to Choose?* (Oxford: Monarch Books, 2008), p. 237.

Darwin's position. He urged Darwin to acknowledge design and refuted the randomness that Darwin championed.

If God is immanent in his creation then to what degree is he directing the process of evolution? Darwin withstood any notion of divine direction, not least because of the pain and death in nature he had observed. He could not attribute such activity or design to a benevolent God. Theists believe in the immanence of God. They do not subscribe to the concept of a deity who started a process of creation that he is now uninvolved in. This is a concept that Darwin would not dismiss, but he totally refused to accept the immanence of God in the process of evolution. This was his great idea – natural selection not God explained the development of all life on earth!

Alexander repeatedly asserts the immanence of God in every aspect of life and this, of course, is in line with orthodox evangelical theology but it is in direct contradiction to Darwin's theory of evolution. To embrace evolution and Christianity one must reconcile natural selection with the immanence of God. It is not sufficient to simply assert that both are true. The originator of natural selection believed them to be mutually exclusive. Stephen Jay Gould held to the view (widely supported by the scientific community) that if the whole process of evolution was to start again it is highly improbable that it would result in the same endpoint. Alexander is challenging that view because it cannot be reconciled to his theology. Any theology that embraces evolution must explain, at some level, how God is directing the process of natural selection and this explanation must make clear how natural selection can then still be considered to be natural selection.

Those who believe that God has indeed chosen evolution must address the issue of pain, suffering and death that evolution necessitates in order for life to develop. Often the debate focuses on whether it is more or less glorious that God should create instantly or design an intricate process that creates different species over billions of years. However, that seems entirely secondary to explaining how God is glorified by a process that demands agony, disease, death and extinction as necessary to the evolution of life. To conclude that God deliberately designed this process makes God directly responsible for suffering and death and runs completely counter to the view of God's goodness expressed in the