

DARWIN AND THEOLOGY

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Abstract

This article was delivered as a lecture at the University of Queensland on Wednesday, 24 July, 2013 and published in the Aldersgate Papers vol. 11 (June 2015): 133-154. It argues that despite the campaign of the 'new atheists', Darwin's thought does not lead to atheism and cannot decide the philosophical issue of the existence of God one way or the other. While Darwinism can be assimilated into the natural theology of Deism, it does not really touch classical Christian belief in the Triune God. It is shown that Darwin's thought is logically compatible with the doctrine of creation ex nihilo, and that this was understood by a host of evangelical scientists and theologians in the nineteenth century. Darwinism was used in the propaganda war launched by Huxley and Spencer and grass-roots fundamentalism accepted their idea that it was contrary to Christian faith. Though there is no genuine theological problem associated with the acceptance Darwinism, theological conflicts remain in the doctrines of humanity and the Fall, including the question of the existence of evil. Continuing advances in theology can continue to benefit from insights from the human sciences.

Introduction

'Darwin and Theology' seems to be a hot topic owing, no doubt, to the truly magnificent publicity given to this subject by the so-called 'new atheists.'¹ Thanks to Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, Daniel C. Dennett, the late Christopher Hitchens, and others like them, 'God' is high on the current agenda, and we theologians cannot do other than express our gratitude to them! The title 'Darwin and Theology' was chosen for me perhaps because I had edited a book in 2009 (along with R.J. Berry, Professor Emeritus of Genetics in the University of London) to mark the 150th anniversary of the publication of *The Origin of the Species*. Four chapters of this book were written by theologians and four chapters by scientists, but one of the scientists was the Rev Prof David Wilkinson of Durham University, a theologian who also has a doctorate in astronomy.²

The approach I shall take then to this topic is that of the theologian. David Wilkinson, and also Alister McGrath, now of King's College, London, have the advantage over most of us that they hold doctoral degrees in both science and theology. Most of us however suffer from the gap between 'the two cultures' famously noted by C.P. Snow.³ Even within the field of theology or

¹ A newspaper item shortly before this lecture was delivered advertised a debate in August, 2013, between Prof Lawrence Krauss of the 'Global Atheist Convention' and the Christian philosopher and apologist, Dr William Lane Craig who was visiting Australia.

² R.J. Berry and T.A. Noble, eds., *Darwin, Creation and the Fall: Theological Challenges* (Nottingham: Apollos, 2009).

³ The author left science behind at grammar school, specializing in the Arts, particularly History, and then later, in Divinity, particularly Christian Dogmatics. It is true that I studied under T.F. Torrance, the Edinburgh theologian who perhaps devoted more attention than any other to the methodologies of natural science and what he insisted was 'Theological Science.' However, I approach this topic here as a theologian without any credentials of my own in science, and most

divinity, my specialisation is not in Apologetics or Philosophy of Religion but in Christian Dogmatics, the exploration of Christian faith and doctrine from the inside. However at least now we no longer need to apologize in the academy for holding a specific position, since it is now generally recognized that not one of us is neutral. One of the great myths of the era of modernity has been that the greatest experts on religion are those who claim to believe nothing. But the myth of neutrality has been exploded. We all believe something, and we all believe *in* something, whether that be the God of the Christians or some other god, or in the ultimate value of human life. That too is a belief. We all have a position. The passion and commitment with which Richard Dawkins and others have pursued what might be called their atheist ‘crusade’ are surely proof enough of that.

So as a theologian, let me begin by explaining what I mean in the title of this presentation by the word ‘theology.’ Presumably we do not have to specify that it is the thought of *Charles Darwin* we are concerned with, one of the very greatest scientists of the modern era, surely to be ranked with Newton and Einstein for the influence he has had on our thinking. But we do have to clarify and explain what we mean here by ‘theology’. And to begin with, we need to distinguish ‘theology’ from ‘religious studies’. Both are equally valid intellectual pursuits, but it is muddled thinking to confuse them. Religious Studies is the study of ‘religion’, and religion is a *human* phenomenon. In that academic discipline we study what *human* beings have written in ancient scriptures and in modern writings of faith: we study religious institutions as *human* institutions: we study religious practices which are *human* practices, and religious traditions which are *human* traditions. Religious Studies is therefore one of the social or *human* sciences: it may include sociology of religion, history of religion, and psychology of religion. We may also study religious ideas and they too are *human* ideas: such study may be done as philosophy of religion or it may be done as part of history, the history of thought. And we may engage in any of those areas of study without being personally committed to any of the doctrines, practices, ideas or traditions we are investigating.

But of course, we will have our own beliefs and commitments. No one is neutral. We cannot be human without having some practices, traditions, and ideas and without participating in some institutions which have some kind of creedal or ethical basis. And therefore it is not only valid academic research to study the religious or ethical or philosophical commitments of others. It is also valid academic research to think critically about one’s own religious, ethical and philosophical commitments. That is a valid academic pursuit whatever one’s commitments – whether we are Muslim, Buddhist, Secular Humanist, or Christian. The only requirement is that, while none of us is neutral and we are each inevitably committed to some position, if we are to pursue the study of our own belief system in an academically acceptable way, it must be done with critical, indeed with self-critical, thinking.

That is how we should understand the discipline of Christian theology within the academic world.⁴ However, it is worth noting that while other academic disciplines in the curriculum today

of us suffer from the same disadvantage in this inter-disciplinary area, namely that our expertise is one-sided

⁴ For introductions to Christian Theology (as distinct from Religious Studies) by major academics, see Daniel Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991); David Ford, *Theology: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: OUP, 1999); Colin Gunton, *The Christian Faith*

had their birth within the academic institution of the university, it was the ancient discipline of Christian theology which gave birth to the institution of the university. It was Christian theology which conveyed ancient philosophy to the modern world - Plato and Aristotle and the greatest thinkers of ancient Greece. And Christian theology itself has been pursued as a disciplined study by some of the greatest luminaries of Western thought – Augustine, Anselm and Aquinas, Luther, Calvin, Schleiermacher and Barth. Additionally, some of the greatest philosophers - Descartes, Kant, Hegel, and Kierkegaard, to name only four - have done their thinking within the tradition of Christian civilization.

Of course, today, we must take into account a wider range of thinkers and of civilizations, but the point is that it was this Christian, Western civilization which eventually gave birth to the institution of the university where free research may be pursued and where (within certain limits) all may argue for their varied position and be treated with respect. I say ‘within certain limits’ since those who advocate disrespect and even persecution of others, such as racists, are generally not given that freedom. But there of course, lies the catch-22: how academic tolerance is to draw limits without becoming intolerant and the advocacy of a particular world-view, whether that be a Christian world-view or one which belongs to Secular Humanism.

So in addressing ‘Darwin and Theology’, we are thinking of the 2,000 year-old discipline of Christian theology. Further, it is ‘classical’ Christian theology we have in mind, namely what C.S. Lewis called ‘Mere Christianity’. This is the Christianity of the Christian Scriptures as interpreted by the creeds, particularly the Nicene Creed, to which the Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic traditions are committed along with the tradition of the Protestant Reformation represented today by the broad and global Evangelical tradition. All of these major traditions of the Church are committed to belief in the Triune God, to the Incarnation, the true deity and true humanity of Jesus Christ, his death for our sins, his rising again, his sending of the Holy Spirit to preach the gospel to all nations and the hope of his coming kingdom and of the new heavens and the new earth. Certain strands of what is misleadingly called ‘liberal theology’ cannot be included in that Nicene faith, but we are concerned here with what we may call *classical* theology, represented in the Roman, Eastern Orthodox and Reformation or Evangelical traditions of the Church catholic.

In addressing ‘Darwin and Theology’ therefore, the focus of the lecture is on *the implications of the thought of Darwin and his successors for Christian theology*. We will not therefore be examining the contemporary sciences of biology or geology or palaeontology, genetics or any other area of science as it has been shaped by the thought of Darwin. Indeed I do not have the expertise to do that. Rather, as a theologian, what I propose to examine is the implications for Christian theology of what we call the ‘theory of evolution’ broadly considered, as it has been articulated by Darwin and his successors.

(Oxford: Blackwell, 2002); and Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith* (New York: Crossroad, 2004).

I. Darwin and Belief in God

Let us begin then with the widest question: *Darwin and belief in God*. Has the ‘Theory of Evolution’ as articulated by Darwin and his successors invalidated belief in God? Has Darwin demolished Christianity? Has ‘religion’ been outmoded and destroyed by Darwin’s science and indeed by modern science as a whole? Undoubtedly there are some who think so, notably the new atheists, Dawkins, Dennett, Hitchens and others, and indeed, there is a widespread popular impression that that is so. Undoubtedly many people from the Victorians down to the present day stopped believing in the existence of ‘God’ because they came or have come to think, or at least, they have been persuaded to think, that modern science – Darwin in particular – has ruled out belief in what they call ‘the supernatural’ and in particular, belief in ‘God.’

But we need to examine this word, ‘God’. What do we mean by this three-letter word? And in particular, does everyone who uses the word mean the same thing? We are not concerned at this point with *reference*: we are not asking whether there is a real Being in existence to which this word refers. Rather, we are talking about *meaning*. What *meaning* do we attribute to this word? What is the *idea* of God, the *concept* of God which we employ when we use the word? We need to ask that, because we do not all mean the same thing.

It will help to clarify the point if we begin by asking specifically: what did Darwin mean by ‘God’?⁵ What was his concept of God? And right away of course we must take note that Darwin belonged to a family of Unitarians. His redoubtable grandfather, Erasmus Darwin, a doctor in Lichfield, and his father, a doctor in Shrewsbury, were Unitarians, as was his mother’s family, the famous family of Wedgwood potters. Charles was a grandson of Josiah Wedgwood and married his cousin, Emma Wedgwood, whose sincere faith caused her husband some heartache.

Unitarianism was an outgrowth of Deism which in the eighteenth century, as a consequence of the so-called ‘Enlightenment’ – the thought of Newton, Locke, Hume and Kant – had become the belief-system of many who were counted as part of the institutional Christian church. But it was not *classical* Christianity. It tended to at least ignore or deny outright the doctrine of the Trinity, the deity of Christ, and the atonement, and it had little or no place for the Holy Spirit. It was in fact another gospel, another belief system. With the Enlightenment, great value was placed on those elements of ‘religion’ that were thought to be common notions across the world religions and cultures: that there was one supreme deity, that to be religious was a matter of morality, that human wrong-doing can be dealt with by sincere repentance, and that future rewards and punishments will be based on merit. People of the Enlightenment claimed that these were universal truths. All ‘reasonable’ people could agree on those points, and of course the bit about rewards and punishments helped to keep the lower orders in their place! But the distinctive features of Christianity - the Trinity, the deity of Christ and the atonement - were at best marginalized or even totally discounted. Belief in the Supreme Being was largely an intellectual conviction based on cosmology. The reasonable men of the Enlightenment (using the word ‘men’ intentionally) believed that there was a Supreme Being because the existence and order of the universe seemed to demand it, and because it was socially and politically useful.

⁵ See William Phipps, *Darwin’s Religious Odyssey* (Harrisburg: Trinity International, 2002).

By the end of the eighteenth century, that Deist belief-system was beginning to sag. It was somewhat fortified by Kant, but in England it was the writings of William Paley, the Archdeacon of Carlisle, which were more influential. Paley prolonged the influence of the Enlightenment belief in the Supreme Being who was required as an explanation for the order of the cosmos. His famous analogy of the watch found on a heath helped to prolong the concept of the universe as a great machine - the popular view in the age of Newton. The teleological argument or ‘argument from design’, and not the revelation of God in Jesus Christ, was the foundation of the belief of educated people that there must be a Supreme Being. But their belief system was therefore *not* the *classical* Christian faith: it was Deism.

At the same time it is worth noting that the leading evangelical thinkers of the day accepted ‘natural theology’ as a supplement to a biblically-based faith. In Scotland we may note the great Thomas Chalmers, mathematician and outstanding preacher, social reformer and founding father of the Free Kirk, and Hugh Miller, editor, poet, essayist, stonemason, geologist and palaeontologist. In America, Edward Hitchcock, geologist-theologian, and Benjamin Silliman, Professor of Chemistry and Natural History at Yale, were also working at the issues of relating their faith to contemporary science.⁶ For this whole generation of scientists who also held to classical Christian faith and doctrine, the generation preceding Darwin, the idea of a ‘young earth’ created in six days according to Archbishop Ussher’s seventeenth-century calculations had long since been rejected. To read Genesis 1 as referring to seven literal twenty-four-hour days was no more acceptable to them than it had been to St Augustine.

Even though Darwin considered becoming a clergyman after he abandoned his medical studies in Edinburgh and became a student at Cambridge, and even though, once married, he settled down as the squire of Down House in Kent, that delightful family house which is well worth a visit, and even though he attended the parish church at first and supported the rector in his charity work, it appears that Darwin never shared in the classical Christian faith of these leading evangelicals. His belief-system was not a trust *in* the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, but was rather a Deistic belief *that* there must be a Supreme Being. Phil Dowe tells us that as a student at Cambridge, Darwin had to read Paley and was impressed by his argument,⁷ and belief in the god of Deism seems to have been Darwin’s faith until his voyage in the *Beagle* sowed the seeds of doubt. The ‘god’ who was merely a philosophical explanation for the existence and design of the universe was beginning to totter in his temple like Dagon of old.

But what really challenged Darwin’s deistic faith was the problem of suffering. Darrel Falk of Point Loma Nazarene University argues that it was the problem of suffering rather than Darwin’s scientific thinking which led to his loss of faith, such as it was.⁸ There was first of all his own suffering with the mysterious illness which repeatedly laid him low throughout his adult life after his five-year voyage on the *Beagle*. But much more devastating was the death of his ten-year old child, Annie. And when it came to the origin of the species and the ascent of humanity, it was not the explanatory power of the theory of evolution which challenged his faith so much as the

⁶ For each of these, see David N. Livingstone, *Darwin’s Forgotten Defenders* (Eerdmans and Scottish Academic Press, 1987), 1-27.

⁷ Phil Dowe, *Galileo, Darwin, and Hawking: The Interplay of Science, Reason and Religion* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 109, 113.

⁸ Darrel R. Falk, ‘Theological Challenges Faced by Darwin,’ in Berry and Noble, eds., 75-85.

cruelty and suffering which he saw in creation – famously, the Ichneumonidae feeding within the bodies of live caterpillars. It has also been suggested that Darwin was part of a widespread Victorian reaction against the teaching that God would condemn to an eternal hell every person who had not come to conscious faith in Christ.

So, to sum up these points, Darwin was never an orthodox Christian with a firm grasp of the gospel and a ‘sure trust *in Christ*’: rather he was a Deist who believed *that* God existed largely on the basis of the design argument. Secondly his loss of faith was merely loss of intellectual assent to the existence of a god who was a mere demiurge. And thirdly, his loss of faith was as much because of the serious offences against perfection in the design – the problem of suffering which Darwin felt so keenly.

The fourth point to make before we leave this section is that his loss of faith in the Deistic demiurge did not result in atheism. Unlike Dawkins and company, Darwin did not draw the conclusion that the Theory of Evolution constituted a proof that God did not exist. He ended up not in atheism, but in a confused agnosticism. He wrote:

My judgment often *fluctuates*... In my most extreme fluctuations I have never been an atheist in the sense of denying God. I think that generally (and more and more as I grow older) *but not always*, that an agnostic would be the more correct description of my state of mind.⁹

But Darwin certainly did not think that evolution and belief in God were incompatible.¹⁰ And although Dawkins and company have been dubbed ‘the new atheists’, in fact of course, as the analysis of Alister McGrath,¹¹ Terry Eagleton,¹² and others has shown, their arguments for atheism fail in logic and show a lamentable ignorance of philosophy. One of the latest devastating critiques has come in Conor Cunningham’s book, *Darwin’s Pious Idea*.¹³ The truth is that neither biology nor any other science can lead logically to any conclusion one way or the other on the question of the existence of God. Only rhetoric and the blowing up of biology into a metaphysic can lead them there, a line of thought which cannot withstand philosophical scrutiny.¹⁴ The natural sciences can neither prove nor disprove the existence of ‘God’.

⁹ Quoted in Alister McGrath, *Dawkins’ God: Genes, Memes and the Meaning of Life* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 76.

¹⁰ Dowe, 126.

¹¹ McGrath, *Dawkins’ God*: (Oxford, Blackwell, 2005); *The Dawkins Delusion* (London: SPCK, 2007).

¹² Terry Eagleton, *Reason, Faith and Revolution: Reflections on the God Debate* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009).

¹³ Conor Cunningham, *Darwin’s Pious Idea: Why Ultra-Darwinists and Creationists Both Get It Wrong* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010).

¹⁴ See Alister McGrath’s differentiation between ‘Darwinism’ as a scientific theory, and ‘Darwinism’ as a ‘meta-narrative’ or worldview offering a total vision of reality in his *Surprised by Meaning: Science, Faith, and How We Make Sense of Things* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 74f.

II. Darwin and the Doctrine of Creation

Having looked at Darwin and belief in God, we move on to our second topic, Darwin and the doctrine of creation.

a. *Creation out of Nothing*

Here the first thing we must do is clarify just exactly what the Christian doctrine of creation is. We find it of course in the words of the Nicene Creed: ‘We believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth and of all things visible and invisible.’ That last phrase is very important; it echoes Col. 1:16, and it encapsulates the doctrine that God created the universe *ex nihilo*. Let us be clear that that does not mean that he created the universe out of something called ‘nothing’, but that he did not create the universe *out of anything*. This deliberately paradoxical statement is not intended to be an explanation, but a denial ruling out the idea that either visible matter or invisible spirit pre-existed the universe. God alone is eternal.

Creatio ex nihilo is not stated explicitly in Genesis 1 nor elsewhere in Holy Scripture. There is a text in II Maccabees 7:8 which seems to state creation *ex nihilo*, and it also seems to be the implication of Paul’s reference in Romans 4:17 to the God ‘who calls into existence things that do not exist (*to mē onta hōs onta*)’ (NRSV). David Wilkinson sees it as implied in John 1:1, Col. 1:15 and Heb. 1:3.¹⁵ But early Christian theologians such as the second-century Justin Martyr accepted the Platonist idea that the Creator created the universe out of pre-existing matter. It was Justin’s younger contemporaries, Theophilus, bishop of Antioch, and Irenaeus, bishop of Lyons, who first articulated the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* as a doctrine of the Church.¹⁶ And in later centuries it was to become crucial in the articulation of the doctrine of the Trinity in that it broke up the continuous hierarchy of being from various levels of divinity down to humanity which characterized late Hellenistic religion. The doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* meant that there was what Kierkegaard later called ‘the infinite qualitative distance’ between Creator and creation. The Triune God was on one side of the ontological gulf as Creator and all created reality – spirits as well as the material – was on the other side of the gulf as the created order.

If that is the Christian doctrine of creation, then it is immediately evident that there is no logical conflict whatsoever between that and a theory of the evolution of the species. The evolution of the species as a biological thesis assumes that the universe already exists: it is not in itself a theory about the origin of the universe. The Christian doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* is not a scientific theory at all, but a doctrine of the faith. It is therefore on a different level of understanding. It has nothing to do with the origin of particular species, nor is it even a scientific theory about how the universe came into existence. Rather it is a statement of faith that the God of Israel, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is alone the Eternal God. It is a statement of Christian monotheism. If there is a conflict, it lies elsewhere.

¹⁵ David Wilkinson, ‘Worshipping the Creator God: the Christian Doctrine of Creation,’ in Berry and Noble, 15-29, cf. p. 23

¹⁶ See Gerhard May, *Creatio ex Nihilo: The Doctrine of ‘Creation out of Nothing’ in Early Christian Thought* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1994).

b. Evangelical Scientists and Theologians

But before we turn to those areas of apparent conflict, it is worth reflecting briefly on the positive reception Darwin's theory was given by those of his contemporaries who held to classical Christianity, both scientists and theologians. For them, there was clearly no conflict between Darwin's theory of the evolution of the species and the Christian doctrine of creation. Some scientists criticized or rejected Darwin's views on scientific grounds. One may cite the great physicist, Lord Kelvin of the author's own original *alma mater*, the University of Glasgow, reckoned to be the pre-eminent scientist of his day, who calculated that there had not been enough time for the evolution of the species which Darwin proposed.¹⁷ This perhaps represented a general suspicion among physicists that biology was not really an exact science at all. Then Louis Agassiz, the Swiss professor at Harvard, whose geological and palaeontological studies had established the occurrence of the Ice Age, strongly defended the fixity of the species.¹⁸ But in contrast with these and other scientists, there were numerous evangelical Christians who embraced Darwin's theory, both scientists and theologians.

Asa Gray, the Harvard professor of botany, who argued that Darwinism was compatible with the argument from design, was an evangelical who corresponded with Darwin and became his foremost champion in America.¹⁹ George Frederick Wright, the New England Puritan Congregationalist, both theologian and geologist, saw parallels between Darwinism and Calvinism. James Dwight Dana, professor at Yale and America's foremost geologist, another evangelical, saw that there was no conflict between Darwin's theory of evolution and Christian faith in the Creator.²⁰ Professor Arnold Henry Guyot of Princeton never accepted the specific Darwinian idea of natural selection, but he did come to accept evolution within the framework of Hugh Miller's harmonising of the 'book of Nature' and the 'book of Scripture' by interpreting the seven days of Genesis chapter 1 as geological ages.²¹ Sir John William Dawson, president of McGill University for over fifty years, was another evangelical who had hesitations about evolution since he thought it contrary to the notion of design, but also eventually came to accept it.

When we turn from the scientists who were evangelicals to the evangelical theologians, the story is the same, and the succession at Presbyterian Princeton is particularly interesting. Charles Hodge, who became a professor at Princeton Seminary as early as 1822, reluctantly accepted evolution and natural selection, but opposed the rejection of design which he saw as inherent in Darwinism. James McCosh, president of the College of New Jersey (later named 'Princeton University') was a Scot who stood in the tradition of Chalmers and Hugh Miller. Before he immigrated to America, he was appointed a professor at the newly established Queen's College in Belfast, and there he threw himself into 'the '59 revival' and conducted Bible classes for mill workers. He saw Darwin's theory as compatible with design, as did A.A. Hodge, Charles Hodge's son and successor as professor at Princeton Seminary. Most committed of all to the theory of evolution was none other than the younger Hodge's successor, B.B. Warfield, the

¹⁷ Dowe, 124.

¹⁸ Livingstone, 52, 57-60.

¹⁹ Dowe, 127-131.

²⁰ Livingstone, 57-77.

²¹ Livingstone, 78.

conservative Calvinist and champion of biblical inerrancy who was to have such an influence on the conservative wing of twentieth-century evangelicalism. He described himself as ‘Darwinian of the purest order,’ and although he wanted to insist on the hand of God immanent in the whole development of the species, he said that he would ‘raise no question as to the compatibility of the Darwinian form of the hypothesis of evolution with Christianity.’²² Within the Wesleyan tradition, William Burt Pope of Didsbury College, Manchester, awarded a DD by the University of Edinburgh, similarly adopted the theory of evolution, while holding that it had not provided an explanation of the emergence of life or the emergence of intelligence.²³ Finally among this group we must mention James Orr of the Free Church College in Glasgow, who must be reckoned along with his fellow-Scot, P.T. Forsyth, as the foremost evangelical theologian in the British Empire. In his publications at the end of the century, when Darwin’s theories were in eclipse and other views of evolution were on the table, Orr did not doubt that evolution of the species had occurred, but objected to any anti-teleological version.

In this section then, under the heading ‘Darwin and the Doctrine of Creation’, we have argued that logically there is no contradiction between the theory of the evolution of the species and the Christian doctrine of creation, and we have noted the array of Christian theologians and scientists in Darwin’s day who saw the two as compatible. Why then the apparent conflict? Where did the idea come from that Darwin’s thought was in conflict with Christian faith? We can begin to explore that question as we move into our next section on ‘Darwin and Darwinism’.

III. Darwin and Darwinism

The notion of a fundamental conflict between the theory of evolution and Christian faith was launched into the public domain by the infamous meeting of the British Association for the Advancement of Science at Oxford in 1860, the year following the publication of Darwin’s *Origin of the Species*. There were a number of speakers, but among them were the Bishop of Oxford, Samuel Wilberforce (son of the great abolitionist), and Thomas Henry Huxley, later to be dubbed ‘Darwin’s bulldog’. Darwin himself, a semi-invalid, detested appearing in public and remained at his country seat down in Kent. There is some doubt about what actually was said, but it was alleged by some that Bishop Wilberforce foolishly attempted some humour, ridiculing Huxley by asking whether he was descended from an ape on his father’s side or on his mother’s. Whatever the truth of that, he apparently left the meeting confident that he had triumphed, having been told that Huxley had been largely inaudible. What was important therefore was not so much who triumphed at the meeting, but the later public perception of who had been triumphant at the meeting. And that question brings us to the role of Huxley and what can be justly described as his propaganda.

a. Huxley and Spencer

Huxley was the leading figure in a remarkable movement among Victorian scientists which turned away from the mechanistic view of the universe popular in the previous century towards a view of nature strongly shaped by the Romantic movement. He was deeply influenced by the writing of Goethe, saying that for him ‘living nature is not a mechanism but a poem.’ He

²² Quotations taken from Livingstone, 115.

²³ Livingstone, 135,

personalized and feminized the concept of nature as ‘Dame Nature’ and was the leading figure in what can justly be described as a new religion of science. The word ‘scientist’ was only invented in 1834 and scientists developed in the mid-century a new professionalism and what may be described as an effective pressure group to promote science. In an age when theology and the classics still dominated the universities, the aim was to gain for science a place in the sun.

Nine scientists led by Huxley formed the X-Club (as it was called) in 1864 to promote what has been called ‘Victorian scientific naturalism’. It was (in the words of Colin Russell), ‘a concerted attempt to replace conventional religion [which was thought to deal with supernaturalism] by a world-view that involves nature and nature only.’²⁴ They had a twofold strategy, according to Russell, first to discredit the Church, and secondly to imitate the Church by promoting what to all intents and purposes was a new religion. The Church was attacked by the development of what has become known as the ‘conflict thesis’ – the historical claim that science and ‘religion’ had always been in conflict. As Russell puts it, ‘Three centuries of alliance between Christianity and science were quickly forgotten and a new mythology engineered...A whole new literature emerged as “history” was re-written.’²⁵ Among the most influential of these works of propaganda were books by two Americans, J.W. Draper’s *History of the Conflict between Religion and Science*, published in 1875, and A.D. White’s *A History of the Warfare of Science with Theology in Christendom*, published in 1895. Although worthless as history, these works and numerous smaller publications were enormously successful propaganda, shaping the popular perception which lasts down to the present day of a fundamental conflict between outmoded ‘religion’ and modern science. But in Peter Harrison’s words, ‘The myth of a perennial conflict between science and religion is one to which no historian of science would subscribe.’²⁶

The second part of the strategy, imitating the Church, was similarly a public relations exercise. Huxley spoke of a ‘new Reformation’, he preached lay sermons on scientific subjects, and spoke of his colleagues as ‘the church scientific’ and of himself as its ‘bishop’. Mass meetings were held and, at popular lectures by Huxley and his associate, John Tyndall, hymns were sung to creation. Sunday Lecture Societies were formed on the model of Sunday Schools. Even the architecture of the new Natural History Museum in London, built between 1873 and 1881 has been called ‘Nature’s Cathedral.’²⁷ Science had become a new religion. All of this was one of the key developments contributing to the rise of what became known in the twentieth century as Secular Humanism.

A second key figure in the development of the conflict was Herbert Spencer. Briefly, Spencer was a member of the X-Club (the only one who was not a Fellow of the Royal Society). He was the one who coined the slogan ‘the survival of the fittest’ and who developed ‘Darwinism’ into a

²⁴ Colin Russell, *Cross-currents: Interaction between Science and Faith* (Leicester: IVP, 1985), 192.

²⁵ Russell, 193.

²⁶ Peter Harrison, ‘Christianity and the Rise of Western Science,’ *Case 32* (2012): 18. See also Peter Harrison, *The Bible, Protestantism and the Rise of Natural Science* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998) and *The Fall of Man and the Foundation of Science* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

²⁷ See Russell, 189-192.

metaphysic. The ‘social Darwinism’ which resulted largely from Spencer has been blamed for the pervading racism around the turn of the twentieth century, a poisonous stream which was to feed into the cesspit of Nazi mythology.

b. Fundamentalism

It was in reaction to all that, particularly perhaps Huxley’s propaganda, that the movement known as ‘Fundamentalism’ developed. From 1912, a series of pamphlets were published entitled *The Fundamentals*, and it was from them that the word ‘fundamentalism’ was coined. But we must correct the careless mistake of thinking that all the authors who contributed to those pamphlets were themselves ‘fundamentalists’ in the later meaning of the word. B.B. Warfield of Princeton and James Orr of Glasgow who contributed chapters were among the leading theologians of their day and they accepted the theory of evolution. So it was not the pamphlets themselves that were the problem. The problem was the grass-roots movement which developed later, particularly in America, which rejected the theory of evolution lock, stock and barrel because they thought it was in conflict with the Christian faith. They were the ones who took their name from these pamphlets written to defend the ‘fundamentals’ of the faith.

There are two things to note about the rise of these ‘fundamentalists’. The first is the irony that they had swallowed Huxley’s propaganda. The leading evangelical thinkers of the day had accepted that there was no conflict between Darwin’s theory and the Christian doctrine of creation. But these ordinary believers, Christian people largely without much education, thought that there was, and in accepting that idea, they were in fact swallowing the propaganda. They were duped by the conflict thesis of Huxley, Draper and White and dozens of other books and pamphlets of the day. Accepting the myth that ‘religion’ (as they called it) and ‘science’ were in conflict, they took up the fight to defend the Christian faith. We do not need to recount here the farce of the Scopes trial in rural Tennessee, the merciless mockery of H.L. Mencken, and the later revival of fundamentalism with *The Genesis Flood*, published in 1961 by Henry Morris and John C. Whitcomb. Whitcomb and Morris persuaded many to move from ‘old-earth’ creationism to ‘young-earth’ creationism, leading eventually to the Institute for Creation Research and to the advent of ‘creationism’ with its claims to be scientific.²⁸

The second thing to notice about the rise of fundamentalism was that, while there was in fact no conflict between the theory of evolution and the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*, what disturbed these sincere Christians was their perception of a conflict between the theory of evolution and their interpretation of chapter 1 of Genesis. So it was not actually a matter of the Church’s *doctrine* of creation: it was really a matter of hermeneutics. How do we read Genesis 1? It is true that up to the time of Bishop Ussher in the seventeenth century, there were those who read that magnificent passage of ancient priestly writing in a simplistic way which led them to think that they could date the creation of the world to 23 October, 4404 BC. But that naive interpretation of the passage had been rejected by the Christian Fathers. In reference to Christians who are ignorant of cosmology – the earth and stars, the plants and animals – Augustine wrote:

Now it is a disgraceful and dangerous thing for an infidel to hear a Christian, presumably giving the meaning of Holy Scripture, talking nonsense on these topics...The shame is not so much that an

²⁸ See Karl W. Giberson, *Saving Darwin* (New York: HarperOne, 2008), 122-144.

ignorant individual is derided, but that people outside the household of faith think that our sacred writers held such opinions...²⁹

Where does that bring us then? If Darwin's thought is not in conflict with the Christian doctrine of God, and does not even logically conflict with the Deist concept of God and a teleological view of the world; if it is not in conflict with the Christian doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* nor with Genesis 1 once we have an appropriate hermeneutical approach to that great passage; where then is the conflict? Is there any conflict at all between the thought of Darwin and Christian theology?

Two Christian doctrines may be mentioned which may seem to be in conflict with Darwin's thought. The first is the doctrine of humanity. Does the evolution of the human race from the common stock of animal evolution not conflict with the Christian doctrine of humanity made in the image of God? That may be true if we assume the traditional and largely Platonist view of the human being as essentially an eternal soul dwelling in a disposable mortal body. That dualistic view of the human being comes right into the thought of modern philosophy with the similar Cartesian dualism of mind and body, *res cogitans* and *res extensa*, a dualism characterized by Gilbert Ryle as 'the ghost in the machine.' In the first place, it could be said that that dualistic view may not be in conflict with Darwin since it obviously holds that the body is somewhat incidental. It follows from that that there may be no reason to reject the evolution of the human body since that would not affect the part that really matters – the eternal soul.

But equally, if we take the more biblical view particularly of the Old Testament, that the human being is a psychosomatic unity, even if that is slightly modified in the New Testament, then we will arguably be closer to Darwin. We can say that God fashioned the human body out of the dust of the ground – mud, if you like – doing so by means of the evolution of the species, and then chose to breathe the breath of life into these creatures so that they became living souls, reflecting now the image of God. That compatibility with Darwinian science will be further strengthened if, instead of conceiving of the soul in a Hellenistic or Hindu way, we adopt the 'non-reductive physicalism' proposed by the philosopher Nancey Murphy.³⁰ Instead of devoting space to that issue therefore, we will turn instead to another area where there might appear to be a conflict.

²⁹ Augustine, *Literal Meaning of Genesis* 1.19, quoted in Cunningham, 297. On the interpretation of Genesis 1-3, see Richard S. Hess, 'God and Origins: Interpreting the Early Chapters of Genesis,' in Berry and Noble, 86-98.

³⁰ See Nancey Murphy, *Bodies and Souls, or Spirited Bodies* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006). 'My central thesis first is that we are our bodies – there is no additional metaphysical element such as a mind or soul or spirit. But second this 'physicalist position need not deny that we are intelligent, moral, and spiritual. We are, at our best, complex physical organisms, imbued with the legacy of thousands of years of culture and, most importantly, blown with the Breath of God's Spirit; we are *Spirited bodies*.' Murphy, ix.

IV. Darwin and the Problem of Evil

Perhaps ‘conflict’ is not the right word, but the area where there appears to be a mystery to be considered is in the matter of the problem of evil. *Unde malum?* Whence evil? That is an ancient debate in the Christian church at least since the young Augustine was attracted to a sect with origins in Persian religion, the Manicheans. They believed that the world was a battle ground between two ultimate, eternal powers or principles or gods, Good and Evil and in this cosmic dualism, humankind was the battle ground. We were either controlled by the ultimate god of the Good or the ultimate god of Evil. It was against this determinism that Augustine reacted, finding a different perspective in Platonism, that evil had no ultimate existence, but was to be considered metaphysically as *privatio boni*, the privation or absence of good. But once the mature Augustine had become a bishop, he had to wrestle against another heresy, Pelagianism, the view that humanity was morally capable of such virtue as to heal the breach with God and win its own salvation. It was against this doctrine, that he developed his version of the already established doctrine of the Fall.

The Greek Fathers had invented that term, *to ptoma*, the Fall, to refer to the narrative in Genesis 3. They taught, following Paul in chapter 5 of Romans, that as a consequence of the breaking of the relationship between humankind and their Creator – the Source of their life – humanity had become subject to death, or at least, that humanity had disqualified itself for the gift of immortality. Augustine developed the notion of *concupiscentia*, self-centred desire. This was his interpretation of Paul’s phrase in Romans 8, the *phronema sarkos*, which the NRSV translates as ‘the mind set on the flesh’, and which we might interpret as ‘the mind set on human goals and values’, the self-centred mind-set. Our share in the corporate guilt of Adam’s sin was washed away at baptism, according to Augustine, but our inheritance of the sinful condition remained in us as long as we lived in this fallen body.

This doctrine of original sin, despite some aspects of Augustine’s formulation which we may find unacceptable, has been claimed to be the most realistic picture of the human condition imaginable. Humanity may be godlike (as Christians and Secular Humanists might agree) – created in the image of God, we would say – but there is a deep flaw in us which not only means that none of us is sinless or perfect, but which makes ordinary human beings capable of the most appalling and foul crimes. This is horribly true, both on a mass scale in the Holocaust and under Stalin, or in the private and personal scale of the abuse of little children even within the family which ought to be protecting them. Iniquity appears to be endemic in human society and results, as we have recently found out in the UK, in deceit and corruption in politics (the scandal of MPs’ expenses) and in banking (the Libor scandal), in the press (the phone hacking scandal) and in the police (the apparent cover-up over the deaths in the Hillsborough football stadium), in the entertainment industry (Jimmy Saville and others) and in the National Health Service (the scandal of appalling standards of neglect leading to least 1300 needless deaths). It has been said that no doctrine of the Christian faith is more obviously demonstrated by the evidence before our eyes than the doctrine of original sin.

But the ancient problem for Christian theology is this: given the doctrine of creation, that everything which exists comes from the hand of God and that it was ‘very good’ (Gen. 1:31), how can there be evil in the world? The Christian response to the problem historically has been the doctrine of the Fall. But it is very important to see that the doctrine of the Fall was never an

explanation for ‘the mystery of iniquity’, but made some clarifications essential to Christian theology. First, it denied that God was the source of evil. It denied the monism which is part of some religious metaphysical thought - that the God who created the world was a mixture of good and evil. Secondly it denied dualism, the view of Manichaeism and other Persian religions, that there were two ultimate principles or gods, one good and one evil. It also denied that there was something inherently evil in matter (the position of the Gnostics). It was not humanity’s flesh which had corrupted the human spirit; it was the spirit – intentional free choice – which had led to the corruption of the flesh. In other words, the doctrine of the Fall is not an explanation for the existence of evil in the world, but the assertion that the metaphysically consistent explanations, monism and dualism, were unacceptable. Christian faith is in the one God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ who is the Creator of all that is, but who is Holy Love, ‘the Father of light without shadow of turning.’

The conundrum of the existence of evil is then a conundrum as old as the Christian faith and indeed, as the book of Job witnesses, of the faith of ancient Israel before it. The historic Christian response is the doctrine of the Fall – *not* an explanation of evil, but the deliberately paradoxical assertion that the answer does not lie in the eternal or uncreated realm, but within creation itself. Once we reject monism and dualism, this paradoxical story is the only option we have left.

The question then posed by Darwin’s thought to Christian theology is this: what implications does the theory of the evolution of the species have for the Christian doctrine of the Fall? The story told by the theory of evolution seems to conflict with the notion of the Fall as an event, but can Christian theology dispense with the view that the Fall was an event within time? To say (as some theologians said before Darwin) that God created the world simultaneously good and fallen as an environment which would train his human creatures and produce character capable of resisting evil is no answer at all. For it still leaves God as the source of evil. Christian faith cannot accept the notion of evil in the *uncreated* realm, in the very nature and character of God. But if evil has its origin within the *created* realm, then it has its origin within time, for time as we know it is a dimension of God’s created universe. God the Father Almighty is the Creator of all things visible *and invisible*, and that includes time. N.P Williams put the point succinctly in his Bampton Lectures of 1924. ‘It is impossible to lift the Fall out of the time series without falling either into Manichaeism or unmoral monism...The Fall, whatever else it may have been, must have been an event in time.’³¹ That is a view immeasurably strengthened after Einstein, when we can no longer look at time and space (as Aristotle and Newton did) as the eternal absolute ‘receptacle’ within which the universe exists. Time and space are rather relativized as the co-ordinates we use to measure the universe, and no more pre-exist the universe than the lines of longitude and latitude pre-exist the globe. To reject monism or dualism therefore in the doctrine of God, Christian theology requires a doctrine of the Fall *within* the created order, *within* the creation and therefore *within* time – that is to say, an integral part of Christian theology is a temporal Fall, the Fall as an event.

To that point, it appears that we have an unanswerable theological argument and a clear theological conclusion here. Christian theology requires the doctrine of the Fall as an event in time. That does not require however that this event is accessible to historical inquiry, nor does it require that we have to take a naively literal view of the early chapters of Genesis. Denis

³¹ N.P. Williams, *Ideas of the Fall and Original Sin* (London: Longmans, 1927), xxxiii.

Alexander, the biochemist who is director of the Faraday Institute for Science and Religion and Fellow of St Edmund's College, Cambridge, suggests a range of five options in the way these chapters are interpreted ranging from, at one end, the fundamentalist option of a naive literal reading to an interpretation at the other end of these chapters as purely myth expressing eternal truths. The option which appears to be theologically most appropriate is that these chapters are (as he expresses it) 'a mythological representation of a historical reality.'³² We would have to add however that the event of the Fall is inaccessible to secular historical inquiry and is known only as the Old Testament (particularly Genesis) is interpreted in the light of what Christians hold to be the definitive revelation of God in Jesus Christ. Also, in place of the slippery language of 'myth', Barth's language of 'saga' may be preferable in order to reject the implication that the story is totally and purely fictional.

Given then the theological necessity of the doctrine of the Fall as an event within time, the problem is that there is no clear explanation of how that is to be related to Darwin's story of upward progress. It is tempting to speculate and come up with a resolution of this apparent conflict, but perhaps it is best at present to note this apparent conflict as an area for further thought.

Three tentative suggestions for further thought appear in *Darwin, Creation and the Fall*. R.J. Berry floats the suggestion (shared with the prominent evangelical Anglican, the late John Stott) that God selected from the race of *homo sapiens*, some Neolithic farmers with whom he entered into relationship thus constituting them in the 'image of God'. Humankind we know today is thus not merely *homo sapiens* but that group, selected to be *homo divinus*.³³ The second proposal presented by A.N.S. Lane is that we should develop a more Irenaean understanding of the Fall. Others have advocated that of course, notably the late John Hick, but Lane criticizes their tendency to overemphasize the difference between Irenaeus and Augustine, and to read their own theology into Irenaeus. Lane suggests that the Patristic terminology of 'Fall' is inappropriate and that it should be thought of rather as a premature attempt to grasp moral responsibility which led to banishment from the special environment of Eden into a world which was 'good', but not by any means free from suffering or struggle, the world described by the natural sciences. The consequence of that was a failure to attain to the immortality which was God's intention.³⁴ My own proposal presented in the book for consideration is that we view the beginning ('protology') from an eschatological perspective.³⁵ Bearing in mind the regeneration of the created order which will come after the *parousia* at the end of 'this present evil age', we should see the Fall as that cosmic catastrophe which initiated 'this present evil age' but which is not accessible to natural human investigation. Since history and science must methodologically assume that the present conditions have always existed and will always exist, the 'Fall' into sin and death is therefore not accessible to these disciplines of natural human thought. It is only accessible as the necessary corollary of the revelation centred in the redemption and recreation achieved in the

³² Denis Alexander, *Creation and Evolution: Do We Have to Choose?* (Oxford and Grand Rapids, MI: Monarch, 2008), 254-6.

³³ See R.J. Berry, 'Did Darwin Dethrone Humankind,' in Berry and Noble, 30-74.

³⁴ A.N.S. Lane, 'Irenaeus on the Fall and original sin,' in Berry and Noble, 130-148.

³⁵ T.A. Noble, 'Original Sin and the Fall: Definitions and a Proposal,' in Berry and Noble, 99-129.

death and resurrection of the Son of God. Already he is risen, but the full inauguration of the kingdom is ‘not yet.’

Conclusion

To summarize in conclusion: we have addressed the question, ‘what are the implications of Darwinian science for Christian theology?’ We noted that, despite the campaign of the ‘new atheists’, Darwin’s thought does not lead to atheism. It has been used to argue for agnosticism, but cannot actually decide the philosophical issue of the existence of God one way or the other. It can indeed be assimilated into the natural theology of Deism, but does not really touch classical Christian belief in the Triune God. It is logically compatible with the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*, and that was understood by a host of evangelical scientists and theologians right from the start of the controversy. Darwinism was used in the propaganda war launched by Huxley and Spencer and grass-roots fundamentalism swallowed their idea that it was contrary to Christian faith. That resulted in problems for the Christian church in its mission to the Western world, but not in genuine theological problems. Theological conflicts may appear in two remaining areas, the doctrine of humanity and the doctrine of the Fall, including the question of the existence of evil. But these are areas where continuing advance in theology can benefit from the insights from biology and indeed from all of the human sciences.