Intelligent Faith: 
A Celebration of 150 Years of Darwinian Evolution

edited by John Quenby and John MacDonald Smith

reviewed by Robert J Schneider

The editors of Intelligent Faith have gathered together lectures and essays by eighteen British scholars working in various areas of religion and science. As the titles of their essays suggest, the contributors include scientists in the fields of evolutionary biology, astrophysics and cosmology, and climate studies; other writers are knowledgeable in the history of science, theology and biblical hermeneutics. Several are Anglican priests. Some essays evidently were written for this collection; others, such as Simon Conway Morris’s Boyle Lecture, have a previous venue. All the contributors are influenced by Darwin’s work and honor it in these papers.

The purpose of this collection is to offer an “intelligent faith” from a Christian perspective that is built upon a sound, contemporary theology in dialogue with the modern scientific paradigm of cosmic and biotic evolution. Such a faith offers a fruitful alternative to the invalid claims of biblical creationists and “intelligent design” (ID) advocates. As John MacDonald Smith notes in the introduction, the publication was launched in part out of a concern that ID has been making its way into the British educational system, creating confusion among students as to the nature of sound science and also sowing among believers misunderstandings of the nature of God as creator. “The real harm done by ID,” Smith trenchantly asserts, “is that it is an item in a market place of shoddy ideas sold off to the easily fooled at knock-down prices” (p 5). Nearly every contributor offers a critique of ID, though most tend to be brief and pretty much standard fare. However, Denis Alexander criticizes in detail the ID concept of “design,” and Andrew Robinson and Christopher Southgate present a more extensive, probing review of the arguments of Michael Behe, William Dembski, and Stephen C Meyer. One also finds in several essays an ongoing concern over the inroads made in Great Britain by young-earth creationism.

It is difficult in a brief review to do justice to the entire work, so I will focus on just two topics that converge in this collection. One is the idea, set forth in particular by Alexander and RI Vane-Wright, that there is design in nature, but design that is internal to and emerges within the cosmos and within organisms, not imposed from without. Living organisms exhibit a kind of purposefulness that is not teleological but teleonomic (to borrow a thought from Jacques Monod). The notion is thoroughly developed by Vane-Wright. He uses the remarkable intergenerational journeys of the Monarch butterfly as an example. Rather than merely the passive recipients of random mutation and selection, organisms are involved in a complex interplay of organic selection and environment(s) in which learned
behavior in one generation becomes instinctual in later generations. “Once life has begun, there need be no telos, final cause, or external designer—just the inexorable internal workings of intelligent, self-organizing, autonomous yet coherent populations of organisms as they live, develop, reproduce and die in their ever-changing world” (p 43).

This concept, added to such notions as cosmic fine-tuning and convergent evolution, among others, also allow for a theological model of a non-interventionist God who is present throughout the whole creation from the Big Bang to the latest stage of its evolution. God has made a creation exhibiting the possibility of possibilities, not predetermined or designed in the ID sense, but an emergent world that, in Archbishop Frederick Temple’s oft-quoted phrase, is able to make itself, yet a world that, believers can assert, reveals God’s purposeful presence.

Let me also single out a few essays in history of science and biblical interpretation for special mention. RJ Berry offers an especially informative essay on the reception of Darwin since the publication of the *Origin*, focusing on responses from Christian individuals and communities up to the present time. Paul Badham presents an excellent review of Christian interpretations of Genesis 1 and 2 prior to the eighteenth century. He points out that treatment of the Bible as a source of scientific information, including chronology, does not become established until the late seventeenth century, and that biblical literalism is a modernist concept. Anthony Phillips offers some interesting insights into the sources and initial purposes of the Genesis narratives.

On the whole, the writers have sought to make their topics accessible to an educated reading public, and presumably in particular those who teach science or religion courses in British secondary schools. The expositions are for the most part marked by clarity and good organization. A few or portions thereof may be a bit hard to follow; for example, readers may find John Quenby’s dense, technical reconstruction of our current understanding of the early universe tough going.

The aim of the collection as a whole is not to break new ground, but to pull together for the reader’s education and enlightenment the most recent work in the evolutionary sciences, theology and biblical studies, offering *in toto* a model of an intelligent faith while honoring Darwin’s revolutionary work. In that respect I think they have largely succeeded. And I hope, along with Smith, that their efforts will help to stem the tide of creationist assaults on the teaching of evolution in Britain.

**About the Author**

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