Process and Providence: 
The Evolution Question at Princeton, 1845–1929

by Bradley J Gundlach
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reviewed by Matthew Morris

Every now and then a book gets published that causes a re-evaluation of iconic historic characters. *Process and Providence*, by Bradley J Gundlach, is one such book. Gundlach, an evangelical Christian and historian at Trinity International University, provides a richly detailed history of Presbyterian responses to the “evolution question” as it developed at the College of New Jersey (today Princeton University) and the related but separate Princeton Theological Seminary. The book begins in 1845 with a Princetonian review of the early evolutionary book *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation*, and ends in 1929 after the fallout of the Scopes trial.

This is a deeply personal story, and I mean that in its full sense. It provides insights into the people who lived and breathed the evolution question when the question was still fresh. The reader may expect a set of dusty historical facts, but they find instead a challenge to critically examine their own inner convictions about reality as those Princetonians did of old. Whereas many science–religion texts generalize across a broad spectrum of viewpoints shaped by disparate worldviews and locales, Gundlach's focus on (mostly) Presbyterian Christians at Princeton gives the historical personalities space to breathe. They are not pigeonholed into particular categories for want of space, but are permitted to speak for themselves. And what they have to say is often far more complex than the common science-versus-religion thesis would imply.

The title establishes the main focus of the work: that Princetonians were by and large open to the idea that God's creation was not static, but was in a state of continual development or process. As Gundlach shows, they did not come to this idea simply through the establishment of scientific facts but from careful theological work in the area of providence. For instance, the theologian BB Warfield, commenting on the works of Calvin, declared creation and evolution to be opposites. By this he did not mean that they were opposed to one another, but were rather distinct categories of divine activity. God created (miraculous activities) and God operated on his creations (providential activities). Process was merely a form of providence, and was not incompatible with a creator. Because of this, Princetonians could intriguingly hold to evolution, scriptural inerrancy, and reasoned theism as their main academic commitments.

The book is divided into four sections. The first section outlines Princeton’s “battle plan” regarding evolution. Such language borrowed from the Civil War seems to support a model of conflict between science and religion, but the truth, argues Gundlach, is much more
complex. For the Princetonians, there could not possibly be conflict between science and religion, as they are the “twin daughters of heaven.” If the scientific facts have been established, truth cannot contradict truth. Contradictions only arise if the science is wrong, the scriptural interpretation is wrong, or the philosophical interpretation of the science is wrong. It was this third possibility that particularly interested Princetonians. “Coupled with a theistic metaphysic, evolution was benign; but apart from a theistic metaphysic, evolution was malignant indeed. One’s philosophical foundation made all the difference in the world” (page 198). Princeton needed a battle plan, not to combat science, but to combat those who would “twist” science to disprove Christianity. They employed conflict language to describe their two-pronged offensive: to search out and publicly expose materialistic philosophies (which they called “reconnaissance”), and to “seize and master” science by doing scientific work and relating its discoveries to revelation. This battle plan, implemented into the 1910s, was meant to create harmony between science and religion. Unfortunately, argues Gundlach, it has instead served to hide the pursuit of harmony from conflict-obsessed historians.

The second section provides intriguing case studies of the evolution question at Princeton. Its greatest value is in re-interpreting the conflict between two iconic religious figures. In 1874, Charles Hodge, the president of Princeton Theological Seminary, published *What is Darwinism?* His answer, “atheism,” has gone down in history as the example of Christian anti-evolutionary rhetoric. His book was seemingly at odds with the pro-evolution public lectures given by the College of New Jersey’s president, theologian–philosopher James McCosh. Indeed, how else could Hodge’s book be read if not as a corrective of his colleague? The story of the fundamentalist Hodge against the “open-minded” liberal McCosh shapes the reading of their respective texts. When McCosh is called a “sneaking heretic” by a school trustee, one can detect Hodge’s influence. When McCosh meets with resistance over the hiring of new staff, Hodge’s presence is lurking in the background. And so it is thrilling to see Gundlach expertly and convincingly weave a different narrative, by placing McCosh and Hodge in the larger context of Princeton’s battle plan.

Hodge’s book, argues Gundlach, was meant to clarify, rather than vilify, McCosh’s theistic form of evolution. “Darwinism,” for Hodge, was a particular brand of atheism that needed to be exposed (as per the “reconnaissance” part of the battle plan) so that evolution “properly limited and explained,” that is, tamed by providence, could be seized and mastered at Princeton. Far from opposing one another, McCosh and Hodge were employing Princeton’s battle plan! Gundlach supports this interpretation with facts that are more than puzzling under the conflict model. For instance, McCosh was elected to Princeton Theological Seminary’s board of directors after his views on evolution became public knowledge (so much for Hodge trying to destroy McCosh), while McCosh earnestly sought the anti-evolutionist Sir William Dawson to take over Princeton’s School of Science (so much for McCosh’s liberal open-mindedness). Gundlach changes the conversation by defining Darwinism on Hodge’s and McCosh’s terms, rather than our own.

The third section examines Princeton’s application of evolution outside of biology. Although some were still undecided about the factuality of evolution, this did not stop many from applying it to such areas as the unfolding of revelation through scripture. This is an important chapter for those interested in how scientific ideas shape theological reflection. The final section shows how both fundamentalism and extreme liberalism found their way
into Princeton after McCosh, and the lack of unity in purpose this brought to Princeton. When there was a single battle plan to follow, and a single vision of truth, disparate perspectives on evolution could be held at Princeton without conflict. But when the philosophical underpinnings were questioned, the center could no longer hold.

Gundlach’s book is an important contribution to the field, but it is not flawless. It is easy for the reader to miss the forest for the trees among the dense historical details that are provided. Chapter summaries and reminders of the main themes would have been helpful. Curiously, however, certain details are missing. For instance, a book entitled *Process and Providence* would, one would think, have a more explicit discussion on the development of providential theology at Princeton. I particularly missed a discussion on McCosh’s philosophy of causation, and why he felt providence was insufficient to explain uniquely human attributes. There was also the occasional mistake, such as when Gundlach calls Baldwin’s theory of organic selection “Lamarckism.” Organic selection was a far cry from Lamarckism, as Baldwin demonstrates in his 1902 book on the subject, and the citation provided offers no evidence for Gundlach’s assertion. But such mistakes were few, and did not detract from the message.

What lessons are we to take from this geographically rooted account of a subset of Presbyterian thinkers? First, we should recognize that iconic stories are often no more than myths used to support particular ideological agendas; the reality is often more complex than we would like to believe. Second, we do a disservice to our children when we teach the atheistic scientist versus fundamentalist Christian dichotomy. This dichotomy simply does not exist, and is more telling about our worldview than about reality. The fact is that Princeton had a vibrant community of academics who included evolution among their conservative Christian beliefs. Third, there is no one-size-fits-all set of religious beliefs, even within a single denomination. There has historically been more room for disagreement within a community than is often recognized. Fourth, and in my opinion most importantly, we see the damage that is done to truth and to relationships when philosophical interpretations of science are presented as scientific facts by those with particular agendas. This is a lesson that today’s creationist and New Atheist leaders would be wise to emulate. Although perhaps too advanced in detail for a casual audience, I would recommend this book to anyone who would like a nuanced historical approach to science–faith interactions, and is not afraid to explore its implications for their preconceived beliefs.

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