Dealing with Darwin: Place, Politics, and Rhetoric in Religious Engagements with Evolution

by David N Livingstone
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reviewed by J David Hoeveler

Dealing with Darwin: Place, Politics, and Rhetoric in Religious Engagements with Evolution is a study in the reception of Darwinian theory, and marks the most recent contribution to the historic Gifford Lectures. Begun in 1888, the lectures have provided outlets for some of the great names in philosophy, religion, and science, including Josiah Royce, William James, Henri Bergson, Alfred North Whitehead, John Dewey, Karl Barth, and Reinhold Niebuhr—all before 1950. Since then, the names of Paul Tillich, Rudolph Bultmann, Hannah Arendt, Jürgen Moltmann, Paul Ricoeur, Alasdair MacIntyre, Jaroslav Pelikan, and Charles Taylor have been added to the roll. (Readers will find an informative study of the Gifford Lectures in the recent publication by Larry Witham, The Measure of God [2005]). Previously, Livingstone authored the illuminating study Adam’s Ancestors: Race, Religion and the Politics of Human Origins (2008).

Livingstone has the title Professor of Geography and Intellectual History at Queen’s University in Belfast. That title is certainly fitting for the author of a book that purports to offer “a geographical perspective” on the clash of ideas provoked by Darwin’s famous publication of 1859. Livingston believes that the controversies surrounding Darwinism always reflected the special circumstances of the place where they occurred. Thus, his “geographies of reading” take us to five locations in the British Isles and North America and his narrative includes references to “rhetorical space” and “cognitive zones,” terms he uses in explaining the different receptions of Darwinism.

Livingstone makes much of place, but he does take care to avoid determinism; intellectual history is not the mere “epiphenomena of cultural politics.” Local particulars notwithstanding, commonalities prevail in this study. Livingstone restricts all his treatment of Darwinian reception to five Presbyterian communities—Edinburgh; Belfast; Toronto; Columbia, South Carolina; and Princeton, New Jersey—where those discussing Darwinism had an education in Calvinist theology and in the academic program of Scottish Common Sense philosophy. The thinkers in this study who worked diligently to win a fair hearing for evolution did so within a precise intellectual tradition that they shared.

From the efforts of those who sought accommodation of religion and evolution came a liberal theological Protestantism. Herein certain notions stood out, transcending the local dynamics of Darwinian exchanges. These reconcilers advanced common ideas. They believed that the Bible does not inform science and they left it to scientists to explain nature. They defended a progressive revelation, not one fixed in literal readings of Scripture. They
carefully exempted the human species from direct descent from lower animals; however much common ancestry prevails in natural history, they cautioned, God made a special intervention in creating humans, above all humans’ moral and spiritual powers. Also, the liberals accepted derivation of species within strict boundaries. They held that nature does not operate in chaos and confusion; equilibrium in the natural order shows the care and wisdom of the creator. Thus ultimately the accommodating religionists insisted on design and teleology. Evolution showed the great work of God on a grand and vast scale.

The first study in contrast that Livingston explores is between Edinburgh and Belfast. In Edinburgh, Henry Drummond, of Scottish Free Church affiliation, popularized reconciling ideas about religion and evolution. Matters played out differently in Belfast, where the 1874 address by John Tyndall as president of the British Association for the Advancement of Science shocked many listeners and ignited fiery responses owing to its express agnosticism. As a result, Tyndall generated a negative view toward Darwin in Belfast that was absent in Edinburgh.

Attention then shifts across the Atlantic to Toronto, where Darwinism had a much easier way of it, especially at Knox College. Here Livingstone gives useful attention to the Baconian standards of scientific knowledge, which, by their deprecation of theorizing, had kept some religious thinkers (and some secular ones, too) away from the putatively speculative excesses of Darwin. The Knox personnel broke from these strictures or otherwise used Baconian measures against biblical literalism.

In Princeton, Livingstone describes the contrasting views of James McCosh at the College of New Jersey (now Princeton University) and Charles Hodge at Princeton Theological Seminary, just across the street from each other. In Hodge, America’s foremost Calvinist theologian, we have a dogmatic rejection of Darwinism; in McCosh we see a very careful effort to show correspondences between evolution and Christianity. Livingstone continues his study of the Princeton situation by examining the views of Benjamin Warfield and others who later served at the college and seminary.

The chapter that I believe best makes Livingstone’s case for the importance of locale concerns the events at Columbia Seminary in South Carolina. In 1884, James Woodrow, the great southern voice of accommodation, and uncle of Woodrow Wilson, addressed the Alumni Association of the theological seminary. Referencing none other than Calvin himself, Woodrow stated that the Bible “does not speak with philosophical acuteness on occult mysteries” (page 117); it does not teach science, and to appropriate its language for that kind of instruction perverts its intention. Immediately the dogs were at Woodrow’s heels. John Girardeau, who held the chair of didactic and polemical theology, led the charge. Southern Presbyterianism, he urged, should not permit any teaching “contrary to the Church’s interpretation of the Bible” (page 124). But more, he also said that this exclusion should apply even if the science were proven true. One is not surprised to learn that Girardeau held to the six-day notion of Earth’s creation. He called for Woodrow’s resignation, as did some southern Presbyterian synods. A new seminary board in 1886 voted overwhelmingly to remove Woodrow.

But there’s more. Many southern Presbyterians in the anti-Woodrow group, and especially Robert Dabney, added another ingredient to the case—the issue of the unity of the human
race. Prominent anti-Darwin scientist Louis Agassiz had spoken for polygenism. Josiah Nott and George Glidden (*Types of Mankind*, 1854) used Agassiz to make their case for Negro inferiority, based on the separate creation of human races. Readers might wonder why Dabney, an explicit champion of black inferiority, would not go along with Nott. But instead Dabney vilified Nott and denounced polygenism. Here Livingstone excels in showing what was really at stake for Dabney and his co-religionists.

Dabney wanted more than to fault Darwinism. In a book he wrote on nineteenth-century philosophy, Dabney excoriated materialism; positivism, he said, had prepared the way for the French Revolution, atheism, and the case for free love. All stood as threats to the precious Christian civilization of the South, the idea of the “Lost Cause of the Confederacy.” And that civilization stood on a biblical basis, Dabney avowed. Abolitionism had represented a recent expression of false philosophy and un-Christian thinking. And now evolution threatened to do the same again. So, as George Howe, professor of biblical literature at the seminary, insisted, the recourse to an unbiblical polygenism as defense of the race hierarchy represented the wrong defense. It opened up to other non-scriptural devices and thus severely threatened the very identity of the biblicist southern civilization and its superiority to the materialistic and un-Christian North. Writes Livingstone: “No wonder polygenism was ‘impolitic to the South.’ It would wreck the building blocks from which southern civilization had been raised” (page 149).

I believe that *RNCSE* readers will find this book an informing and suggestive examination of the Darwinian episode. There are good guys and bad guys aplenty here and I have no doubt which labels this readership will apply to the cast of characters they will meet.

**References**


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