Charles Darwin’s Religious Views: From Creationist to Evolutionist

by David Herbert
Kitchener, Canada: Joshua Press, 2009. 174 pages

reviewed by Marc-André Lachance

One would have hoped that David Herbert’s religious biography of Charles Darwin might be more than a variation on the slanderous themes exploited by Ray Comfort or Benjamin Wiker in recent months (Gliboff 2009; Scott 2010). At first glance, one gets the impression of a dispassionate and endearing narrative. Herbert’s agile pen would seem to paint a warm portrait of what he regards as Darwin’s religious journey. But this work is a deception, a carrier wave for a disparaging message; not entirely surprising, as Herbert is candid enough to confess his allegiance to biblical inerrancy and the resultant frame of mind.

We’re off to a particularly bad start with the foreword by one Heinz G Dschankilic, who writes: “Darwin is no longer taken seriously. Any reasonable and consistent scientist, regardless of religious stripe, is distancing himself or herself from the sheer logical folly that randomness and nothingness can explain life in any rational manner” (p x). This preposterous statement demonstrates that Dschankilic knows nothing about evolution or its place in science and sets the stage to Herbert’s presentation of Darwin’s science as if it were a religious view rather than as a scientific explanation for the diversity of life on earth.

Herbert treats evolution as a religion, but only after redefining religion as a response to the fundamental questions of our origin, our existence, and our destiny, at great variance with the definition offered by the Oxford English Dictionary: “The belief in and worship of a superhuman controlling power.” The confusion continues as Herbert addresses William Paley’s Natural Theology. Paley was an excellent naturalist and his biology was of high quality. But his theology was frail. Any biological phenomenon that could not be explained was attributed to a divine designer who ensures, as did Voltaire’s Dr Pangloss, that all is best in the best of worlds. Herbert tells us that by “the age of thirty, Darwin had rejected Paley’s supernaturalism and embraced Naturalism in which Natural Selection would be the creative genius rather than God” (p 129; note the author’s dextrous use of lower case and capitals).

Instead of evaluating Darwin’s ideas for their immensely rich content, Herbert pigeonholes them into facile “isms”. Evolution metamorphoses into “evolutionism”. John Henslow’s (and Charles Lyell’s and Charles Darwin’s) scientific thinking is reduced to a beatific fervor, the doctrine of uniformitarianism. “Darwin rejected the fixity of species, and for the same reason, denied a global flood,” all because of his “lack of faith in the biblical record” (p 54). “The deistic influence of Lyell [...] had undoubtedly taken its toll. Deism with its appeal to reason as the sole arbiter of truth regarded any type of divine revelation as suspect” (p
66). Herbert should at least contemplate the possibility that logic and evidence, and not some -ismic ganglionic reflex, led Darwin to recognize the value of Lyell's geology and the absurdity of Noah's flood.

The worst “ism” of all is “Naturalism”, a “worldview [that] answers the three eternal questions of life”—which, you may recall, constitutes Herbert's (but not the OED's) definition of religion. Naturalism (with a capital N) is the heresy of those who seek the truth from observational evidence (science). Even worse, Naturalism is, according to Herbert, a religion. In Herbert's words, the Origin is no less than “a sacred writing which propagated naturalistic theology,” an “encapsulation of Darwin's new Gospel.” Darwin, Herbert's “scientist turned evolutionist,” allegedly recruited Joseph Hooker, Thomas Huxley, and Herbert Spencer to be the “missionaries” of his new religion. Darwin's self- indictments as a naturalist (“You are a theologian, I am a naturalist”) and a “zealous disciple of Lyell” finalize his case. And by repeating incessantly that Darwin's scientific journey was a sacred crusade, Herbert apparently hopes that his fable will become fact: “In reality, when Darwin was wrestling with the problem of the origin of species, he was engaged in a religious endeavour, not a scientific one” (p 118).

And what was the divinity of Darwin's new religion, according to Herbert? Natural selection. In Darwin's own words, punctuated by Herbert's exegesis, “Natural Selection is daily and hourly scrutinizing, throughout the world, the slightest variations [omnipresence]; rejecting those that are bad, preserving and adding up all that are good [omniscience]; silently and insensibly working, whenever and wherever opportunity offers, at the improvement of each organic being in relation to its organic and inorganic conditions of life [omnipotence]” (p 115). Again, Herbert shows no interest in the evidence. On he goes: a “new theological framework [...] had been established. In reality, Darwin's research occurred within a new framework of which he was unaware. First, there was the doctrine of uniformitarianism which provided the necessary time for evolutionism to occur, and second, the principle of gradualism. Everything, he postulated, developed little by little over a long period of time” (p 115). It would seem that Herbert got lost on his way to the science library, for he concludes: “Neither of these two positions can be demonstrated scientifically but rather are faith positions” (p 116).

From Naturalism to Evolutionism, and now Deism. In Herbert's fanciful universe, James Hutton “discounted the supernatural biblical flood” because he was a Deist, as did Adam Sedgwick and Charles Lyell, also Deists (but not uniformitarians, I must add). The truth is that these pioneers of modern geology rejected the notion of the biblical deluge simply because of the utter absence of evidence. But in Herbert's words, Darwin reached his conclusion because he was “looking through Lyell's eyes.” Not so. All sensible scholars, be they deists, theists, uniformitarians, Unitarians, Trinitarians, or vegetarians, should reach the same conclusion, based on the evidence.

Having wondered whether Darwin was a Theist, a Deist, an Atheist, or an Agnostic, Herbert thought it “best to conclude that the father of modern evolutionism was a 'muddled religionist'” (p 130).

Those interested in a serious Darwin biography should read Janet Browne's magnum opus (1995, 2002). Those wishing instead for a short but scholarly account of his religious views
should peruse relevant articles in the Darwin Correspondence Project published on the Internet by a group at Cambridge University (http://www.darwinproject.ac.uk). Neal Gillespie (1982) gives a thorough analysis of the epistemology underlying Darwin's dealings with creation. But those curious to see yet another muddled religionist's attempt to conflate science and religion in a vain hope of discrediting one of our greatest thinkers will be well served by Herbert's recycled musings.

**References**


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