

THE AGNOSTIC IN THE ABBEY

a Sermon by the Reverend Charles Stephen, Jr.
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Later this church year, the scientific community, and, I trust, the Unitarian Universalist community, will hold major celebrations at the 200th anniversary of the birth of Charles Darwin and the 150th anniversary of the publication of “The Origin of Species.” Christian conservatives will no doubt use these anniversaries as ways to affirm their belief in the primacy of ancient Scriptures over scientific truths and they might haul out that old canard that on his deathbed, Darwin was regularly reading the Bible and talking of Jesus and his salvation. A few years ago a letter to the editor of my hometown paper made that claim, and it was quickly denounced as phony by responding letters. Several pointed out that the source for that assertion was a woman evangelist who claimed to have visited Darwin when he was dying. She never did, wrote Darwin’s daughter, Henrietta. The claim was a total fabrication.

Darwin’s two grandfathers were both religious non-conformists. Erasmus Darwin was more than a typical nonconformist, however. Outspoken, always, he loathed the idea of meddling gods and he even ridiculed the Unitarian faith of Darwin’s other grandfather, Josiah Wedgwood, by calling it “a featherbed to catch a fallen Christian.”

Josiah Wedgwood’s Christianity was stripped of its supernatural trappings. He fit well into the British Unitarianism of his age. Erasmus, on the other hand, saw little need for even the most liberal interpretation of religion. Who needed it, anyway, when one can sup “the milk of science?”

For Erasmus, science explained all, and he even wrote poetry on the theme:

Nurs’d by warm sunbeams in primeval caves
organic Life began beneath the waves. . .
Hence without parent by spontaneous birth
rise the first specks of animated earth.

Well, he was not apt to be appointed poet laureate. Long before his grandson would startle the Victorian peace of British society with his book on the mutability of species, Erasmus Darwin was an evolutionist. One of his poems was even made into a hymn that made it into a Unitarian Universalist hymnal.

Erasmus was not an atheist. Atheists were not numerous in the 18th century, but neither was he a believer in the Biblical deity. He believed in a distant God, and another piece of verse of his includes these lines:

Teach me, Creation, teach me how
t’adore the vast unknown.

Charles Darwin, late in his life, would write a sketch about his grandfather, Erasmus, whom he never knew, and that sketch would relate some of Erasmus’s more radical views of religion.

Darwin sent proofs of the essay to his daughter, Henrietta, sort of a family watchdog, and she saw that the sketch needed pruning, and dropped the lines about “the vast unknown” as being, perhaps, too agnostic.

The authors of a 1991 biography of Darwin declare that Darwin’s sketch of his grandfather and Henrietta’s deletions “held hard evidences of heredity.” (DARWIN, by Desmond and Moore). The assertions and deletions, they said, spoke for the two sides of the family. Henrietta was a Wedgwood, influenced mostly by her mother, and was concerned with social position and appearances. Her father, at age 70, had already fought his battles with the Anglican establishment and had triumphed. As with his pursuit of scientific truth, he had wanted to tell the truth about his grandfather, but, always cautious, he bowed to his daughter’s suggestions and cleaned up old Erasmus’s act.

But, of course, the grandeur of evolution he could not change. All he could do, and what he did for nearly 20 years, was to conceal it. At first glance, it was not what one might expect from a religious liberal. We harbor the belief, I think, that we are people who can seek openly for the truth and declare it when we have found it. And yet, some truths hurt; they can hurt us and they can hurt the people we love and care about. And as Darwin saw it, both in the issue about his grandfather and his earlier hesitation to publicize his ideas about evolution, they could hurt the society and neighborhood where he and his family lived.

His reticence to publicize his conclusions about the evolution of species was the reticence of English dissenters within an Anglican establishment. He came well by it. If Darwin’s Grandfather Erasmus chose to be outspoken about his own religious heresies, that attitude did not necessarily much influence Darwin’s father, Robert, a physician. When Charles was born, his family had him baptized in the local Anglican Church. Darwin’s father was a “closet free thinker”, but it paid to be prudent in public.

But Darwin’s mother, a daughter of Josiah Wedgwood, stood by her heritage and took the children to the local Unitarian chapel. It was not an auspicious building; indeed, the Anglican-inspired British law had forbidden any church building, other than Anglican ones, to even look like a church, or from being on a main street. Nor could they be called churches.

I once served a Unitarian congregation in the English midlands, in a six month exchange with an English minister. The church, which was called Great Meeting, was hidden among a rabbit warren of city centre streets and could be reached only by those who had been given a password or at least a city map.

The chapel to which Darwin’s mother took her children was in the village of Shrewsbury and stood on the site of Shrewsbury’s first meeting house for religious dissenters, which had been burned to the ground by an Anglican mob a century earlier.

The next generation of Wedgwoods, however, like Robert Darwin, considered the advantages of social respectability. Darwin’s 1991 biographers write:

Religion was a serious matter for the Wedgwoods, but since the 1790s the family had become more conformist. Like so many second and third-generation Unitarians, cosseted in wealth, secure in business, they were adopting Anglican respectability...It made sense for Emma to stay on the safe side and be confirmed as an Anglican. Certainly her mother was for respectability, or at least for covering her options. It was “better to conform to the ceremonies” of the Church, she said, “for one can never be quite sure that in omitting them we are not liable to sin.”

And so Emma Wedgwood was confirmed at St. Peter’s Anglican Church in the Staffordshire village of Maer when she was 16. Fourteen years later she and Charles Darwin were married in the same church. The traditional Anglican service was altered somewhat so as not to offend the fading Unitarian sensibilities of the Wedgwood family or the dissenting tradition of the Darwins.

Earlier, when he was in college and had decided not to follow his father’s footsteps into medicine his family and some friends bade him consider a career as an Anglican parson and find a cozy, rural parish with few parochial demands and a lot of time to follow his interests in botany. Some of the best science of the age was done by Anglican parsons studying the natural world.

Fortunately for science, however, an invitation came to him shortly after his college days were over from a Captain Robert Fitzroy. Fitzroy needed a naturalist on his scientifically-equipped ship which was soon to set sail on a two-year mapping survey of the coasts of South America. Despite some misgivings by his family, Darwin happily accepted, and it was on this voyage, that lasted nearly five years, that Darwin’s real life began.

His research and study and reflection during these years moved him gradually away from the easy acceptance of the established religious pieties of his age, and toward a much more independent and critical way. But it did not make him a religious radical like grandfather Erasmus had been. Darwin didn’t want to be any kind of radical. He preferred a quiet life, studying his beetles and finches; but in the years that followed his trip on “The Beagle”, his studies led him further and further away from the absurd idea that God had individually crafted every slug and snail. Such an idea, he thought, was degrading to the idea of God itself. He wanted to give God back his omnipotence, his consistency, even his mystery.

His world was a place of natural law; the wide sweep of natural law controlled the climate, the landscape, changes in animals, in plants, in everything. Along with Unitarians and other dissenters of the time, Darwin found no reason to believe in miracles; a miracle, after all, was a disruption of the supreme laws of deity; and God did not need to tinker with his own plan. That would be like warring with himself.

And yet Darwin worried about his heresies. He worried not because he doubted his own theories about the origin of species, but because he did not want to be considered just another one of those radicals denouncing the church and the royal family. He thought religious faith was necessary to morality and social stability. He himself, in the words of a biographer, was becoming “destitute of faith, yet terrified of skepticism.”

Religion had been used – all acknowledged it – to keep the lower classes in check. Without Christianity, it was widely believed, chaos would reign. But here he was, seeing that species of beetles and finches and just about everything else had changed, had adapted through the ages. If living atoms had the power of such change and development, the divine influence of the God who watched over everything was waning. And if that God faded, what would become of the social order? The end of civilization?

Darwin knew what he knew, and he feared the implications of what he knew. So he composed his scientific papers and kept the larger implications of what he knew to himself. Could he ever even come close to proclaiming that apes and human beings were somehow “netted” together? Or that God’s creation did not happen as the Genesis myth had it?

In 1844 he set forth his views on natural selection in a long essay, but he did not publish it. Instead, he gave it to his wife, Emma, and asked that she have it published after his death. He did not want to offend people; after all, some of his best friends were country parsons, some of whom did their own dabbling in botany and geology. Nor did he want to be known as a religious non-believer. He lived in Anglican-dominated Britain, and not many years earlier a law making the holding of Unitarian views a criminal offense was still on the books.

And it was only 15 years earlier that the so-called Sacramental Test had been abolished. It had been a law requiring that one take the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper according to the rites and usage of the Church of England as a qualification for public office.

But Darwin gradually grew more bold. He read some books defending traditional Christianity, one by the lapsed radical, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, who proclaimed that hellfire awaited all unbelievers. Darwin realized that would apply to his grandfather, his father, and, now, to himself. “This was a monstrous doctrine,” he said. He could not believe it. He looked at the biological world and saw transmutation, change, evolution. Why couldn’t the religious instinct evolve too?

He was offended by the primitive deity of the Hebrew Bible, whose atrocities, as he wrote, “had lit up hellfires in Christendom.” Such a God was nothing but a barbaric tyrant. And the New Testament? Full of myths and inconsistencies.

In the spring of 1851 the Darwin’s ten-year old daughter, Annie, died. She was, wrote Darwin to a friend, who had also lost a child, “my favorite. Her cordiality, openness, buoyant joyousness & strong affection made her most lovable. Poor dear little soul.” Darwin remained outwardly calm, but inwardly tormented. His most recent biographer, Janet Browne, writes that he exorcised some of his grief by writing of Annie and at one point called her “a little angel”.

Browne writes:

There lay the real pain. Darwin did not believe in angels. He could not draw any solace from the idea of an afterlife or salvation. Emma at least believed Annie had gone to heaven. (CHARLES DARWIN, VOYAGING, p 502)

Annie's death ended forever any warm thoughts Darwin might have retained for Christian theology. Prior to his daughter's death he seemed willing to go along with the customs of the day, and he learned to keep his religious opinions to himself. But with Annie's death he knew that he could no longer believe as his wife believed. For him, Christian faith was futile, irrational. As Browne writes:

This death was the formal beginning of Darwin's conscious dissociation from believing in the traditional figure of God. The doctrines of the Bible that Emma took comfort in were hurdles he could not jump, not even . . . with an overwhelming desire to believe in an afterlife for Annie, or his affection for Emma . . . Over the following months, Darwin became more certain, more fixed in his skepticism. Little by little, his theological doubts turned into convictions.
(p 503)

This did not make him a Unitarian. Indeed, he was moving rapidly beyond the staid, Christian Unitarianism of his age and land, and was coming to agree with old Erasmus that Unitarianism was just "a featherbed to catch a falling Christian."

So Darwin mostly kept his religious heresies to himself as, to be sure, he had kept his scientific views to himself. But there were others who were looking deeply into the natural world: Darwin's future friend and defender, Thomas Henry Huxley, for instance, and the Unitarian Harriet Martineau. Huxley's biographer would write that these folks, and others were "making the world safe for Darwin, who was still sitting in silent agitation on his theory of evolution." (Desmond, HUXLEY, p 188)

As far back as 1844, Darwin had written to his friend, Joseph Hooker, about the transmutation of life, and had said: "I am almost convinced that species are not (it is like confessing a murder) immutable."

But by the late 1850s, Darwin was ready; he knew that true science could owe no allegiance to theology, to religious dogma. So he settled down and wrote what he knew about natural selection and in 1859 took it to his publishers, 25 years after his voyage on the Beagle had ended. *THE ORIGIN OF SPECIES* garnered great immediate support: from his friends and fellow scientists like Huxley, and John Stuart Mill, and the Harvard biologist, Asa Gray. Huxley wanted him to take on the protesting clergy directly, saying "theology and parsondom are the irreconcilable enemies of Science." He wanted no compromise with the clergy; Darwin was more temperate.

He had his detractors, to be sure. The absence of a role for deity in his argument concerned many. God had not been disposed of completely by Darwin, but certainly the idea had been pushed into a back corner. Natural causes, he wrote, did not suggest "the continuous operation of God's will."

As Newton, two centuries earlier, Darwin believed, at first, in a God who had laid out a general plan, but who thereafter did not interfere in the workings of the world. There was no support in Darwin's thinking for the Anglican view "that the creator designs and updates each dragonfly personally."

Neither could he blame God for evil, for tragedy, for the many sorrows of existence. “I cannot persuade myself,” he wrote to a friend, “that a beneficent and omnipotent God would have designedly created the parasitic wasps with the express intention of their feeding within the living bodies of caterpillars.” That was an accident of nature. Thus was God spared any responsibility.

Religious folk wrote and talked about God’s harmony, and Darwin called it an illusion. This was hard for ordinary persons to take. As Janet Browne has written in her biography: “(Darwin) was inviting people to believe in a world run by irregular, unpredictable contingencies....” (56)

Darwin did not want to upset people’s religious understanding and comfort, even as he grew more skeptical as he grew older. So skeptical, indeed, that he did not even write about a Creator as the origin of human beings – and only in the closing paragraphs of *THE ORIGIN* did he note: “light will be thrown on the origin of man and his history.” He did not want to get bogged down in a battle about Creation.

But his friend Huxley did. Any intellectual battle pleased him. He had written: “Extinguished theologians lie about the cradle of every science as the strangled snakes beside that of Hercules.” But Darwin took a gentler approach. Nonbeliever as he gradually became, he still maintained that he did not want to write “atheistically.” When a fellow scientist, Asa Gray, wrote him about the “obvious presence of design” in the universe, as in the human eye. Darwin responded that he could see no evidence of design and beneficence. He wrote:

There seems too much misery in the world. I cannot persuade myself that a beneficent & omnipotent God would have designedly created . . . a cat so it could play with mice. Not believing this, I see no necessity in the belief that the eye was expressly designed. (Browne, Charles Darwin, *The Power of Place*, p 176)

But in the end, he told Gray, the whole subject was “too profound for the human intellect. A dog might as well speculate on the mind of Newton.” As he aged he became more skeptical. The God of Christianity was cruel, he wrote.

I can indeed hardly see how anyone ought to wish Christianity to be true; for if so, the plain language of the text seems to show that the men who do not believe, and this would include my father, brother, and almost all my best friends, will be everlastingly punished. And this is a damnable doctrine. (Browne, p 432)

In the end, in his posthumously published autobiography he wrote that religious belief was little more than inherited instinct, “akin to a monkey’s fear of a snake.” His family, following a long family tradition, omitted that remark from the first edition of the autobiography.

With the passage of time, and with the publication of several other books, Darwin became the “grand old man of science.” Even some of those who didn’t understand evolution or who opposed it as the work of the devil, came to admire his quiet persistence. Indeed, one of Darwin’s closest friends in those later years was the pastor of the local Anglican Church. But when he was enticed away to another parish in Scotland, his successor, who came from the more “sanctimonious” end of

church doctrine, barely acknowledged Darwin, and wrote years later that Darwin “never came to church.”

Darwin was content in his rural home, into which came sermons, biblical tracts, and theological questions from a host of correspondents. He answered letters, and in one he wrote: “as one with no assured and ever present belief in the existence of a personal God or of a future existence with retribution and reward” he had not lived in fear of divine wrath. No, he told another letter writer, he was not an atheist, but “I think more generally (and more and more as I grow older) but not always, that an agnostic would be the most correct description of my state of mind.”

Darwin died in 1882. His friends made hurried arrangements to have his body interred in that great shrine of the established church, Westminster Abbey. A decade and more earlier it might have seemed blasphemous, but by 1882 even a gentle agnosticism was becoming acceptable. Even the Church Times, the house organ of the Church of England, wrote warmly of him, but as his biographers, Desmond and Moore have written:

... the most tireless supporters were the Unitarians and free religionists, proud that Darwin had been brought up in their rational, dissenting tradition and always appreciative of his naturalistic views. His trusted friend, William Carpenter, carried the entire British and Foreign Unitarian Association with his resolution applauding Darwin for unraveling “the immutable laws of the Divine government. (Desmond and Moore, p 675)

Darwin had naturalized Creation and from his day until our own no biological enterprise could exist without acknowledging that its foundation rested on what Charles Darwin had learned and transmitted, however haltingly, to the world.

SOURCES: HUXLEY by Adrian Desmond
CHARLES DARWIN, VOYAGING V. 1
CHARLES DARWIN, THE POWER OF PLACE V. 2 by Janet Browne
DARWIN by Adrian Desmond and James Moore