

Darwin and “Intelligent Design”

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From the White House to the schoolhouse in America the issue of Darwinian evolution has been focused on “intelligent design,” and public school boards in several states have been fighting over it. Its advocates want to require doctrine about God included in science curricula, often to the disparagement of Darwinism, because they are convinced that Charles Darwin’s theory is irreconcilable with religious belief. The term “intelligent design” is used to avoid overtly theological terminology that the Supreme Court has ruled as not permissible for public schools.

In this context a look at Darwin’s own outlook on the relationship between religion and evolution sheds light. In researching for my book *Darwin’s Religious Odyssey*, I studied everything he had written on this subject.¹ Out of this probe I am convinced that he viewed his theory as supplementing—not supplanting—intelligent design, even though he recognized that faith-based matters were outside the province of science. Unlike the antiscientific creationists or the reductionist naturalists, he had a both/and rather than an either/or mentality on sources of truth.

To show that he had no antagonism toward religion, Darwin prefaced *The Origin of Species* with quotes from two eminent English theologians and one philosopher. The Reverend William Whewell claimed that “Divine power” is responsible for the establishment of general laws, not particular cases, in the material world. Bishop Joseph Butler commented that nature “presupposes an intelligent agent to render it so.” Francis Bacon, one of the earliest champions of empirical science, commended “the book of God’s word” and “the book of God’s

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1. William E. Phipps, *Darwin’s Religious Odyssey* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2002).

works," the latter being God's testament in nature. He warned against mingling the disciplines of biblical study with the exploration of what is tangible.

At Cambridge University, Darwin prepared to become a clergyman in the Church of England. While there, he learned from Bacon's writings that science deals with secondary causes to explain happenings and that they need to be augmented by a consideration of "the higher cause" for full comprehension. In *Origin's* conclusion, Darwin affirmed that God, the primary cause, does not interfere with nature but works through scientific causation. He wrote, "To my mind it accords better with what we know of the laws impressed on matter by the Creator, that the production and extinction of the past and present inhabitants of the world should have been due to secondary causes, like those determining the birth and death of the individual." Darwin quoted there from a letter he had received from Charles Kingsley, the first person to endorse his theory. That clergyman acknowledged that he had "learnt to see that it is just as noble a conception of the Deity to believe that He created a few original forms capable of self-development . . . as to believe that He required a fresh act of creation to supply the voids caused by the actions of His laws."

Darwin's understanding of causation can be simply stated by considering four fundamental questions: *Who? Why? When? and How?* The first two pertain to primary causes, and the last two to secondary causes. Scientific data is not relevant to answering the primary questions, and religious texts are not germane to the secondary questions.

The question *who* deals with whether it is reasonable to posit a personal Designer or designers to explain the existence of the cosmos and human life. Intelligent design theories are properly taught in congregations, not in public schools. Scientists do not look through a telescope for God or through a microscope for the soul. The question *why* explores the destiny of life, whether it is to show the goodness of God, to discover moral and aesthetic values, to progress toward better care of the earth, and so forth. Science, whose domain is investigating temporal and methodological queries, cannot affirm or deny what is not empirically testable or falsifiable.

The question *when* was a basic interest of Darwin, for his evolutionary theory was dependent upon the geologists who had recently determined that the universe was many million years old. The question *how*, in Darwin's case, deals with biological process. He presented data about species overpopulating, which results in food scarcity. Hence, survival is more likely for plants and animals whose small genetic variations make them better adapted to their environment. Affirming or denying the fossil record or organic adaptation is beyond the scope of theology.

The continual conflict between some religionists and scientists has resulted from neither being content to devote their attention to questions about which they can make authoritative judgments. When either group presumes that it can answer all four core questions, a great disservice is done to education and the pursuit of truth. For example, over the centuries some religionists have

attempted to answer the *when* question by declaring 4004 BCE as the date of the universe's origin, and the *how* question by reference to the Bible's opening chapter that tells of a one-week creation sequence for all present organisms. On the other hand, some scientists have attempted to answer the *who* question by declaring that God caused the initial cosmic "big bang," or the *why* question by affirming that the universe is purposeless. But there should be a division of labor, assigning those significant questions to those competent to answer them.

Since truth is one, the conflict is not between science and religion but between arrogant scientists and dogmatic religionists who have difficulty living within their partial knowledge. Religion and science travel together on the road to complete truth; one may from time to time outdistance the other, but they should be companions as they move toward more understanding. To think that one needs to choose between trusting faith or reliable fact displays a lack of comprehension of the purposes of religion and science.

Darwin confined his professional inquiries to discerning "laws" of evolution, yet he displayed openness to theologians who treated ultimate questions. "The existence of such laws should exalt our notion of the power of the omniscient Creator," he wrote.² He thought of himself as working in tandem with those affirming an intelligent Being who orchestrated an ecological harmony amid discords.

Theology and science are not only compatible but also complementary. Since they occupy separate spheres, there is no contradiction in claiming that humans are made both in the divine image in spiritual form and in the hominoid image in physical form. Hopefully, in this century, religious Americans will join with most educated people internationally in accepting Darwin's evolutionary theory as fully as Copernicus's heliocentric theory. These theories will continue to be modified with further experimentation, but both have a solid factual basis.

2. Quoted in Francis Darwin, ed., *The Foundations of the Origin of Species* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1909), 52.



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