

Nick Spencer: Darwin and God

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Overview

Not many books sell out within 24 hours of publication, but Nick Spencer's careful study of Darwin's faith and lack of faith is one of them – and justifiably so. Written in an accessible and readable style, this book clears up a number of misunderstandings and offers a balanced discussion of this little studied aspect of Darwin's life. Tracing three distinct periods in Darwin's journey of faith, Spencer shows that whilst a committed Christian believer at university and during his voyage on the Beagle, Darwin's faith was challenged and undermined both by his experiences on board ship, and most tellingly by the death of his daughter Annie at the age of ten some years later. During the last years of his life Darwin moved from this theistic, if no longer Christian, position to one which he described as agnosticism – though he avoided religious controversy throughout his life and often remarked that he could see no reason for antagonism between science and faith.

This book is an important contribution to the often highly charged Darwin 'debate', and gives the lie to those who would claim Darwin as an atheist. Perhaps the most interesting aspect of the book is Spencer's conclusion that the kind of faith which Darwin lost was, as for many at the time, a fundamentally rational, propositional one – more a philosophy than a faith, and one which carried with it no personal experience of God and no specific commitment to Jesus. For his wife, it seems it was not so – but for most educated Englishmen it probably was. It really does matter, Spencer concludes, what you base your faith on. How are we doing, he asks, today?

Timeline

b 1809 Shrewsbury

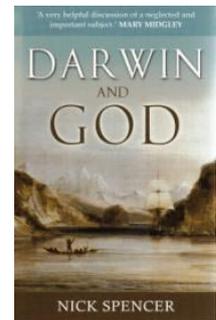
1831-36 Beagle

1839 m Emma Wedgwood, his cousin

1851 daughter Annie dies aged 10

1859 Origin of Species

d 1882 buried Westminster Abbey



Introduction

Recent years have seen Darwin adopted as the icon of thinking atheism. He had a Christian faith and lost it; but eschewed religious controversy. But it's been said we should be careful about trying to pigeonhole a man who wouldn't pigeonhole pigeons..

There are 3 stages in Darwin's journey. Spencer covers each in one chapter.

1. 1809-1836 'a sort of Christian'

Darwin was a Christian. Key event: Beagle voyage.

Darwin studied medicine at Edinburgh then went to Cambridge to prepare for ordination into the CofE. His faith at this time was a neat, rational, orthodox Christianity, not so much a personal commitment to Christ, still less an encounter with the Holy Spirit as a series of propositions to be accepted. He was impressed by Paley's vision of an ordered and happy cosmos. ON discovering that the ordination service would ask him 'Do you trust that you are inwardly moved by the Holy Spirit?' he decided he was not, and could not be ordained.

In 1831 he was appointed ship's naturalist and captain's companion on the Beagle. He kept detailed diaries. These show his faith as a decent, English, civilizing force. He was appalled by slavery and savagery in Brazil and impressed by the work of missionaries in Tahiti. BUT – reading Lyell on geology and witnessing volcanoes and earthquakes in Chile cast shadows over his neat, stable, Paleyan faith. And meeting savagery on Tierra del Fuego undermined his acceptance of man as distinct from animals, and as naturally religious. Neither the world nor human beings were as he had assumed them to be. In the years following his return he gradually lost his faith – but it was a faith of a particular type, a type that would not stand up to these challenges – faith on a false foundation. His faith was genuine, and it would be sophistry to suggest otherwise; he was a confirmed, Anglican Christian, typical of his time and class.

2. 1836-1851 'losing his religion'

Darwin was a Christian of sorts, and at least a theist. Key event: death of daughter Annie aged 10. 'Disbelief crept over me at a very slow rate'.

He married (having drawn up the pros and cons in his notebook). She was a Christian, and deeply concerned that he didn't give his faith enough time, that he looked for the wrong kind of evidence for it, and that he was inclined to demand scientific proof for subjects too big for our comprehension. But Darwin charted his own doubts: scriptural (reliable?), philosophical (miracles??), moral (God of the OT; hell). His biblical knowledge was not great – he only realised in 1861 that the marginal notation in standard Bible editions claiming the world began in 4004 BC was derived from the 17th century biblical chronology of James Ussher, and not from the Bible itself. As he tells of his loss of faith, it's clear how factual the faith he lost actually was; a series of arguments rather than an experience of God. Emma had been correct – if he disqualified personal experience as evidence, disallowed the concept of revelation, and demanded of texts the same kind of proof as he did of biological specimens, it was inevitable. It was also true that 'transmutation', a popular idea at the time, was seen as atheistic and anti-religious. The received religious teaching was that the world was immutable, and all things fixed in their ordained positions, including races and stations of men. To suggest otherwise was to undermine the recognised social order. When Darwin published his theory, prominent Christian thinkers such as Charles Kingsley and Frederick Temple were able to recognise it as compatible with Christian conviction; but when Darwin was speculating on these issues nobody orthodox had even considered them. Hence his reluctance to publish. When he did, he insisted that an evolutionary view of life exalted, not diminished, our view of God as Creator. In 1851 Annie died, age 10, Darwin beside her. She was his favourite daughter; he never recovered. With her died his faith in a good, personal, just, loving God of Christianity.

3. 1851-1882 'the problem insoluble'

Darwin gradually moved from theism to agnosticism.

Darwin was working on barnacles in the meantime, until Alfred Russell Wallace sent him a paper outlining a theory of evolution. Darwin was pushed into publication – they presented joint papers in 1858 at a meeting of the Linnaean Society. Reactions were complex, and did not fall along the lines of religious hostility and scientific acceptance. Both OT and NT depict divine communication/disclosure as taking place within nature, mediated through natural processes, events, entities. Some saw no difficulty in accepting that God created through the outworking of natural laws rather than one thing at a time. Darwin acknowledged this in the second edition: 'there is grandeur in this view of life, with its several powers, having been originally breathed by the Creator into a few forms or into one'. He insisted in a letter, 'I had no intention to write atheistically'. He also wrote, in the second and subsequent editions, 'I see no good reason why the views given in this volume should shock the religious feelings of any one'. At this time he found it possible to accept both God and evolution by natural selection. Asa Gray at Harvard, and geologist Lyell saw natural selection as a process both initiated and guided by God. Darwin had difficulty with the second part of this; but he did insist that although his theory did not point him in the direction of God, the universe in which it occurs did. 'I cannot persuade myself that electricity acts, that the tree grows, that man aspires to loftiest conceptions all from blind, brute force'. He wrote to John Fordyce 'I have never been an atheist in the sense of denying the existence of a God'. His theism was still in place, sustained by the argument from cosmic, rather than biological design; he looked for a First Cause and wrote that he deserved to be called a Theist. But eventually, in his autobiography, he concluded 'I cannot pretend to throw the least light on such abstruse problems. The mystery of the beginning of all things is insoluble by us; and I for one must be content to remain an Agnostic'.

And so he lost his faith: a civilized, Paleyan faith based more on the expectations of his social class and upbringing, and on the evidence of natural theology, than on any deep scriptural convictions or personal experience.

4. What we can learn

Darwin is a modern icon. He revolutionized humanity's perception of itself, challenging orthodoxies that were in truth already fraying at the edges. He did not claim to be a serious religious thinker, and repeatedly insisted the issues were beyond his capabilities and left him muddled. But his loss of faith has a great deal to teach us. It was orthodox, in a particular 19th century socially secure Anglican kind of way. Personal experience of the Holy Spirit was peripheral. Scripture was primarily a source of raw material for arguments that proved Christian truths. Reason was paramount. There was no personal commitment to or moving experience of Jesus Christ; no space for Wesley's 'heart strangely warmed'. We must take care not to build theology on cultural assumptions and transient scientific theories. Secondly, what finally extinguished his faith was his inability to cope with suffering, through Annie's death. A Christianity not based solidly on the cross has nothing to say on suffering; as soon as it moves away from the cross it becomes defenceless against accusations of suffering and injustice.

The last word to Darwin: 'I hardly see how religion and science can be kept.. distinct. But.. there is no reason why the disciples of either school should attack the other with bitterness.'

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