

Nick Spencer & Denis Alexander : Rescuing Darwin – God and evolution in Britain today

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There is a misconception that science and religion are somehow rival descriptions of the way the world works. 9

Darwin is caught in the crossfire of a battle between the militant godly and the militant godless who, though poles apart on so many issues, seem to agree that evolution threatens belief in God.

1. Darwin and God

‘it seems to be absurd to doubt that a man may be an ardent Theist & an evolutionist’ – Darwin, writing in 1879. ‘Dr Pusey was mistaken in imagining that I wrote the Origin with any relation whatever to Theology. I should have thought that this would have been evident to anyone who has taken the trouble to read the book.’(1878)

2. God after Darwin

There was no Church-led campaign against evolution either here or in the US.

Revd Charles Kingsley (the novelist) wrote to Darwin that it is ‘just as noble a conception of Deity to believe that He created primal forms capable of self-development.. as to believe that He required a fresh act of intervention to supply the lacunas which He Himself had made’. Prof James Dana, prof of nat hist at Yale; ‘it is not atheism to believe in a development theory, if it be admitted at the same time that Nature exists by the will and continued act of God’. David Lack actually converted to Christianity in the same year that he published his study of Darwin’s Galapagos finches.

Rejection of evolutionary theory began in the US as a reaction against those, led by Herbert Spencer, who extended it into the theory of Social Darwinism, coining the phrase ‘survival of the fittest’ and campaigning against alleviation of human suffering on the grounds that society’s ‘unhealthy, imbecile, slow, vacillating, faithless members’ need to be ‘excreted’ in order to stop ‘the purifying process’. From the earliest times evolution has been understood, and accepted/rejected, as a philosophical/social/political theory. It wasn’t. It was a biological one. 1851.

Creationism is a 20th century phenomenon. It began in the 20s as a reaction to social darwinism, but took off in the 60s in the US on the publication of a book by an engineer, Henry Morris, called *The Genesis Flood*. This was the first time anyone had proposed Young-Earth Creationism, looking to the chapters of Genesis as if they were scientific texts.

In most places evolution continued to be understood by theologians simply as God’s method for bringing biological diversity into being.

3. Darwin today

A 2005 poll suggested 42% of Americans agree that humans and other living things have existed in their present form since the beginning of time (and 70% of white evangelicals!). The debate is linked with the struggle over who decides what should be taught in US schools. In the UK 44% accepted theistic evolution and 34% accepted atheistic evolution. But many are muddled and unsure; only 25% are confident about evolution. 25% believe in either YEC or ID.

4. Darwin in the crossfire

The hostility to Darwinism is the belief advocated by some that it’s necessarily atheistic. Both they and YECreationists take the early chapters of Genesis to be a literal and scientifically accurate account of creation – which is dismissed by serious theologians and philosophers. It’s a ‘category mistake’ (Rowan Williams, in an interview with the Guardian in 2006). Genesis is not a proto-scientific text book. Darwinian evolution has become associated with a reductive agenda which claims there is nothing to existence but chance, nothing distinctively human, that the mind is an artefact and the universe without purpose.

Intelligent Design arose in the 80s as a response to Dawkins’ Blind Watchmaker book, triggered by a California law professor, Philip Johnson. He dismissed the notion that evolution is a description of the creative process whereby God

brings about biological diversity. It's based on the idea of irreducible complexity – but in fact all organisms are irreducibly complex in the sense that they function only when all the components are in place. It cannot be tested, and fails to count as science. Mostly propounded by engineers and architects.

Darwinian evolution has thus been rejected due to 2 factors: its identification with Social Darwinism, and its identification with a reductionist philosophy that reduces morality to self interest, agency to an illusion, humans to an irrelevance.

5. Rescuing Darwin

Darwin should not be caught in the crossfire of a philosophical or theological battle. 'Religion is not bad science, Genesis is not a primitive *Origin of Species*, and Darwinism does not necessitate atheism'. 46

Genesis was not from the beginning interpreted literally. Origen: *what man of intelligence, I ask, will consider that the first and second and the third day, in which there are said to be both morning and evening, existed without sun and moon and stars, while the first day was even without a heaven? And who could be found so silly as to believe that God, after the manner of a farmer, 'planted trees in a paradise eastward in Eden'.. I do not think anyone will doubt that these are figurative expressions which indicate certain mysteries through a semblance of history.*

Augustine got very annoyed with those who presumed to speak of the motion and orbit of the stars, the eclipses of sun and moon, the cycles of the years, the kinds of animals, shrubs, stones and so forth. *It is a disgraceful and dangerous thing for an infidel to hear a Christian, presumably giving the meaning of Holy Scripture, talking nonsense on these topics... [Such] reckless and incompetent expounders of Holy Scripture bring untold trouble and sorrow on their wiser brethren when they are caught in one of their mischievous false opinions and are taken to task by those who are not bound by the authority of our sacred books.*

Jewish interpretations had not been literalistic either. In the C1st Philo explained the opening chaps of Genesis were 'intended symbolically rather than literally', being 'no mythical fictions.. but modes of making ideas visible.' Figurative reading continued into the Middle Ages. The Reformers, reacting against the over-allegorisation of scripture, downplayed the moral, allegorical and anagogical explanations in favour of a literal reading alone.

Scholars today understand Genesis by means of close textual analysis conducted in the light of the contemporary ancient Near Eastern culture and literature. It is a text not interested in explaining how the universe came into being so much as how we should understand it. It deals with meaning not fact. Those who believe otherwise impose a modernist mind-set alien to the world of the original authors.

The creationist position rests on a misconception of what Genesis is and what it is telling the reader. The atheistic interpretation of evolution is based on a fundamental misunderstanding about the aims and scope of science.

Denis Alexander defines modern science as 'an organised endeavour to explain the properties of the physical world by means of empirically testable theories constructed by a research community trained in specialised techniques'.

Reductionism is an essential as a methodological approach in science. If you want to understand something, you take it to bits. But extreme reductionism claims that is the bits themselves that represent the 'real' story, not the bits functioning together as a whole.

Crick: *The Astonishing Hypothesis is that 'You', your joys and your sorrows, your memories and your ambitions, your sense of personal identity and free will, are in fact no more than the behaviour of a vast assembly of nerve cells and their associated molecules.* This ultra reductionist view of science sees the scientific story as the only story worth telling. It's a rather flat view of our world, when all we know of our lives suggests they are multidimensional. Questions of purpose, meaning, ethics, beauty, history, literature, and love are equally important.

Stephen Jay Gould: *Science simply cannot .. adjudicate the issue of God's possible superintendence o nature. We neither affirm nor deny it; we simply can't comment on it as scientists.* Stephen Hawking asks: *what breathes fire into the equations?* [that define the fine-tuning of the universe]. We need both scientific and non-scientific maps of reality.