

**2009 Charles Gore Lecture
Darwin and God
Nick Spencer**

If you were an alien who happened to have been holidaying in the UK over recent years, you might be excused for thinking that the biggest threat to Christianity, or indeed any belief in God, came from Charles Darwin, whose book, *The Origin of Species* launched a crusade against naïve and harmful religious belief.

It would, therefore, come as something of a shock to you – as it does to many people today – to learn that in the last 15 years of his life Darwin made an annual subscription to the funds of an Anglican missionary society, asked to be made an honorary missionary himself, and held missionary activity in the highest possible regard.

It all started 35 years earlier.

Darwin embarked on the *Beagle* in Plymouth in 1831. In doing so, he also embarked upon a lifelong friendship with its second lieutenant Bartholomew James Sullivan who, over time, became Admiral Sir James Sullivan.

While on the *Beagle*, Sullivan had been a devout Christian and a dedicated supporter of Christian mission, a position he maintained for the rest of his life.

When they were travelling around the southern tip of the Tierra del Fuego a couple of years later Darwin was shocked by the appearance of the Fuegian Indians of whom he wrote

I shall never forget how wild and savage one group appeared...Four or five men came to the edge of an overhanging cliff; they were absolutely naked, and their long hair streamed about their faces; they held rugged staffs in their hands, and, springing from the ground, they waved their arms round their heads, and sent forth the most hideous yells.

As you are probably aware the *Beagle* was not just a surveying ship but also a missionary one.

On the *Beagle*'s first journey around Tierra del Fuego, Captain Robert FitzRoy – who had replaced the previous captain, Pringle Stokes, who had shot himself in despair – had had a small boat, used for surveying the shallows, stolen by a band of Fuegians.

In order to get it back he had taken a number of Fuegian hostages, most of whom managed to escape. Three remained, apparently unwilling to return, and FitzRoy brought them back to England, to convert, educate and civilise them.

They returned to the Tierra del Fuego a few years later to set up a mission, accompanied by Richard Matthews of the Church Mission Society, and a wealth of generously donated, but almost entirely useless, equipment – wine glasses, soup tureens, and the like.

The mission was a disaster. When the *Beagle* returned to the settlement a month later, Matthews was in state of nervous collapse. According to Darwin's diary, "from the moment of our leaving, a regular system of plunder commenced." Matthews lost nearly everything. Worse, he was continually hassled by Fuegians who surrounded his house "night & day".

Thinking they were after more of his provisions, Matthews “met them with presents”. But it wasn’t enough. The Fuegians indicated that they wanted to “strip him & pluck all the hairs out of his face & body.”

“I think we returned just in time to save his life,” Darwin observed.

This served to reinforce Darwin’s initial impression that these people were effectively beyond redemption. “A wild man is indeed a miserable animal”, he remarked to his cousin a few months later, and “I believe in this extreme part of South America man exists in a lower state of improvement than in any other part of the world”, he said elsewhere.

Not everyone shared his view.

A few years later another sailor, Captain Allen Gardiner, had caught the vision of taking the gospel to the Fuegians. Gardiner left the Royal Navy and founded what would become the South American Missionary Society in 1844. He died in Tierra del Fuego in 1851, but others continued his pioneering work.

Darwin himself stayed in touch with Bartholomew and some of Gardiner’s successors, not so much because of a burning passion for the gospel – he had long since lost his Christian faith – but partly because he had a scientific interest in learning whether such undeveloped peoples had the capacity for development, and partly because he had a very Victorian humanitarian interest in wanting to see civilisation spread. He was, therefore, both surprised and pleased when he learned that a successful mission had been established there.

Sullivan, with whom he remained in contact, later recalled (in April 1885):

Mr. Darwin had often expressed to me his conviction that it was utterly useless to send Missionaries to such a set of savages as the Fuegians, probably the very lowest of the human race.

I had always replied that I did not believe any human beings existed too low to comprehend the simple message of the Gospel of Christ.

After many years...he wrote to me that recent accounts of the Mission proved to him that he had been wrong and I right in our estimates of the native character and the possibility of doing them good through Missionaries; and he requested me to forward to the Society an enclosed cheque for £5, as a testimony of the interest he took in their good work.

This was the first of Darwin’s subscriptions. In 1870 he wrote to Sullivan, “The success of the Tierra del Fuego Mission is most wonderful, and charms me, as I had always prophesied utter failure”. He then added, “I shall feel proud if your Committee think fit to elect me an honorary member of your society”.

As far as I am aware, there is, alas, no evidence that he was ever actually made an honorary member.

Was Darwin’s positive attitude to the SAMS missionary activity unique? Apparently not.

Darwin had several encounters with missionaries in the South Pacific and their newly converted people and was, for the most part, mightily impressed.

The Beagle landed in Tahiti in November 1835, remaining there for a week and a half. Darwin found the Tahitians as decent and civilised as the Fuegians had been barbarous, and he put that transformation down to missionary work on the islands.

He was impressed by their piety. His *Voyage of the Beagle* tells of an excursion into the mountains whilst staying on the islands, led by several Tahitian guides. After a day's trekking and "before we laid ourselves down to sleep,"

the elder Tahitian fell on his knees, and with closed eyes repeated a long prayer in his native tongue. He prayed as a Christian should do, with fitting reverence, and without the fear of ridicule or any ostentation of piety.

Nor was such piety simply "religious". Darwin recognised that the missionary work had had a very significant impact on Tahitian society. "It appears to me that the morality and religion of the inhabitants is highly creditable," he wrote.

Those who attacked missionary work compared it with "the high standard of Gospel perfection" and naturally found it wanting. Instead they should have been "compar[ing] the present state with that of the island only twenty years ago."

"They expect the missionaries to effect that which the Apostles themselves failed to do," and naturally found them wanting.

The reality was that "human sacrifices...the power of an idolatrous priesthood... infanticide... [and] bloody wars, where the conquerors spared neither women nor children... have [all] been abolished" by missionary activity.

Dishonesty, intemperance, and licentiousness have been greatly reduced by the introduction of Christianity ... The march of improvement, consequent on the introduction of Christianity through the South Sea, probably stands by itself on the records of the world.

Any voyager unlucky enough to be shipwrecked on some unknown coast should "most devoutly pray" that missionaries had got there first.

It should not surprise us then to learn that Darwin's first published article was a defence of missionary activity.

Was all this merely a function of the need to civilise 'them over there'? Savages, in other words.

Again, apparently not.

Much closer to home, when James Fegan, a local evangelist, requested use of a room in Downe village in 1880 to bring his tent revival meetings indoors, Darwin not only granted permission but told him:

Your services have done more for the village in a few months than all our efforts for many years...Through your services I do not know that there is a drunkard left in the village.

So what is going on?

How is it that this supporter of Christian mission has become the patron saint of modern atheism and a figure of vilification for many Christians round the world?

What did he actually believe?

Like most people of his age and class, Darwin was brought up a Christian. He came from sceptical stock, however.

His maternal grandfather, Josiah Wedgwood, was a Unitarian, and his paternal one, Erasmus Darwin, made Josiah look positively orthodox.

Despite such radical forbears and his own father's (probable) atheism, Darwin's upbringing was more conventional. He attended the local Unitarian chapel until the age of 8 and thereafter the parish church and local boarding school.

At the aged of 16 he followed his brother, also called Erasmus, to Edinburgh where both were to study medicine, which was the family profession.

Neither took to it. Erasmus was never able to motivate himself and Charles was horrified by his experience of pre-chloroform operations.

"I attended on two occasions the operating theatre in the hospital at Edinburgh, and saw two very bad operations, one on a child, but I rushed away before they were completed," he confessed in his autobiography. "Hardly any inducement" could have persuaded him to return, "this being long before the blessed days of chloroform. The two cases fairly haunted me for many a long year."

Few letters survive from his Edinburgh days but those that do reveal, at best, a lukewarm religiosity.

"Dear Charles", his sister Caroline wrote to him in 1826, "I hope you read the bible & not only because you think it wrong not to read it, but with the wish of learning there what is necessary to feel & do to go to heaven after you die ... I often regret myself that when I was younger & fuller of pursuits & high spirits I was not more religious – but it is very difficult to be so habitually."

Darwin's father was vexed by his son's lack of medical ambition and insisted he find useful employment. If medicine didn't suit him, then it had to be the church.

Early 19th century Anglicanism was a broad church and it would be an exaggeration to say that one needed a burning commitment to the gospel to be ordained.

It is telling that when, a few years later, Darwin's uncle, Josiah, was trying to persuade his father to allow Darwin to travel on the *Beagle*, he reasoned that not only would such a journey not be "in any degree disreputable to his character as a Clergyman", but that "the pursuit of Natural History" was in fact "very suitable to a clergyman".

A serious personal belief in God was no bar to ministry but nor was it a necessity.

To his credit, Darwin hesitated and asked for time to reflect. He read some weighty theological tomes and, duly persuaded and deeming himself “orthodox”, he agreed to ordination.

There is no reason to doubt the reality of Darwin’s “orthodoxy” at the time, but it is important to note what *kind* of orthodoxy it was.

“Orthodox” for Darwin meant being able to assent to basic Christian doctrines. It was logical, objective, rationalistic, and demonstrable. Christianity was, first and foremost, a proof to be established. Cambridge did little to change that. Indeed, it rather encouraged it. Most importantly, it immersed him in the most influential theologian of the day, William Paley.

Much of Paley was compulsory reading for Cambridge student, but it was his (optional) *Natural Theology* that most impressed Darwin.

Natural Theology transferred the arguments from physical design, which had proved so popular in the 17th and 18th centuries, into arguments from biological design. Nature, Paley argued, contains “every manifestation of design”. His book examined a vast range of these “manifestations”, and concluded that:

design must have had a designer...That designer must have been a person [and] that person is God.

Darwin was impressed and Paleyan natural theology became a cornerstone of his faith.

Despite (or perhaps because of) this, his Christianity seems to have been no more secure in Cambridge than it had been in Edinburgh. His friend JM Herbert, who was also training for the ministry, recalled “an earnest conversation” with him “about going into Holy Orders”. During the ordination service the Bishop would ask candidates, “Do you trust that you are inwardly moved by the Holy Spirit?” Herbert remembered Darwin asking him whether he could “answer in the affirmative” when thus asked. Herbert replied that he could not, to which Darwin replied, “Neither can I, and therefore I cannot take orders.”

Darwin’s heart was clearly not in ordination so when the opportunity arose of travelling the world on the *Beagle*, Darwin seized it. Between 1831 and 1836 he lived as the self-financing, gentlemanly companion of Captain Robert FitzRoy.

His experiences did not seriously challenge his ordered, propositional, Paleyan Christianity but they did disturb its foundations.

When sailing up the west coast of South America, for example, Darwin experienced an earthquake and volcanic eruption, which shocked him.

“A bad earthquake at once destroys the oldest associations,” he wrote in *The Voyage of the Beagle*:

the world, the very emblem of all that is solid, has moved beneath our feet like a crust over a fluid;—one second of time has conveyed to the mind a strange idea of insecurity, which hours of reflection would never have created.

All this seemed to suggest that the earth was indifferent *rather than* tailored to human needs. Perhaps the world was not as his benign as natural theology assumed?

When he returned to England in 1836, he embarked on an extraordinary intellectual journey that, over the next three years, carried him into wholly uncharted territory.

His autobiography, written forty years later, concentrates his loss of Christian faith into this period, and offers three broad reasons for that loss.

First, there were doubts about the Bible: “no more to be trusted than the sacred books of the Hindoos”, Darwin remarked in his autobiography.

Second, there were moral objections: the Old Testament writers “attribute to God the feelings of a revengeful tyrant” he said.

Finally, there were philosophical problems: “the more we know of the fixed laws of nature the more incredible do miracles become.”

Darwin undoubtedly stumbled over each of these issues but it is highly unlikely they all occurred to him during this period.

For example, biblical criticism of the sort that was to scandalise and terrorise the Victorian mind had hardly made a mark in Britain by 1839.

It is more probable is that Darwin fashioned his autobiography so as to bring together all his doubts into a single chapter and timeframe, which he placed during a period of intense and destabilising intellectual activity.

That activity, of course, resulted in his theory of evolution by natural selection.

Now, it is often assumed that it was this that destroyed Darwin’s Christian faith, but the truth is rather more complex than that.

His notebooks at the time are in no way triumphant, but show him wrestling with the idea of God in the light of his new thinking.

In many ways he was able to accommodate the two but you have to remember that there was no-one, even vaguely orthodox, having such thoughts at the time. Indeed, in the popular mind evolution was an atheistic, and almost revolutionary doctrine.

So, for example, there was the problem of special creation. Evolution wrecked the idea that God had made each species separately. But then, was that such a great idea?

Was it not “grander” to see all life emerging through a continuous process of law-governed evolution? How much more appealing was evolution than the idea “that since the time of the Silurian [God] has made a long succession of vile molluscous animals”?

Special creation was nothing to boast about.

How beneath the dignity of him, who is supposed to have said let there be light & there was light.

There was the idea that humans may not, in fact, be that different from other species.

“Man – wonderful man...with divine face turned towards heaven...he is not a deity, his end under present form will come...he is no exception”, he wrote in Notebook C, sounding like an Old Testament prophet.

Again, however, what this upset primarily was Victorian pride and propriety. Darwin came from a culture in which the emphasis on human createdness that we read, say, in the opening chapters of Genesis, was massively downplayed.

The evangelical OT theologian Chris Wright has written on this recently saying:

point after point the Bible tells us that we have more in common with the rest of the animate creation than in distinction from it...createdness is glory, not shame.

Unfortunately, it was deemed more of a shame than a glory for Darwin’s culture.

Perhaps most seriously, there was the problem of suffering. This was not a new problem, as Darwin acknowledged, but it was newly significant.

Evolution replaced William Paley’s “happy world... [of] delighted existence” with the brutal one of Thomas Malthus, in which a “dreadful but quiet war of organic beings [was] going on in the peaceful woods & smiling fields.”

Suffering, for Darwin, was a serious problem – although not a deal breaker.

Many years later he wrote in his autobiography:

Some writers indeed are so much impressed with the amount of suffering in the world, that they doubt, if we look to all sentient beings, whether there is more of misery or of happiness;—whether the world as a whole is a good or a bad one. According to my judgment happiness decidedly prevails.

It is not simply the case that suffering exists, end of story. There are questions about how much suffering, for what ends, and what kind of God we envisage.

Darwin’s musings on the subject were more subtle than people give him credit for and they alert us to the fact that somewhere along the line, biology turns into theology and fundamental value judgements are involved.

Such thoughts were unorthodox (to put it mildly) for the time and they were compounded by the fact that Darwin had never given much credence to *feeling* within religious faith.

1839 was a busy year for Darwin. He was elected to the Royal Society and saw his first book published. Most importantly, he also married.

Emma Wedgwood was his cousin, whom he had known for a number of years. They began courting in 1838 and were married in January the following year. She was also a devout Christian, although never a bombastic one.

In 1838, Darwin, whose religious doubts were mounting, spoke to his father, who knew something of his son’s growing scepticism. His father counselled caution.

“Before I was engaged to be married, my father advised me to conceal carefully my doubts, for he said that he had known extreme misery thus caused with married persons,” Darwin recalled in his autobiography.

Darwin was nothing if not an honest man, however, and on a visit to Emma in July 1838 he confided all to her.

There is no record of what Darwin told her or what her immediate reaction was but it did occasion a series of letters and notes from Emma to him over the next few months.

These are fascinating as not only do they provide the only good contemporary account of Darwin’s loss of faith, but they are psychologically very acute.

In essence, Emma believed that Darwin was not giving the evidence for Christianity a fair hearing. Firstly, he simply didn’t give it sufficient time.

Your mind & time are full of the most interesting subjects & thoughts of the most absorbing kind, viz following up yr own discoveries — but which make it very difficult for you to avoid casting out as interruptions other sorts of thoughts which have no relation to what you are pursuing or to make it possible for [you] to be able to give your whole attention to both sides of the question.

He was becoming so obsessed with his subject that he was devaluing or simply ignoring that which might offer other perspectives on life.

Second, he was prejudiced as to what constituted legitimate evidence.

It seems to me also that the line of your pursuits may have led you to view chiefly the difficulties on one side, & that you have not had time to consider & study the chain of difficulties on the other...I should say...that there is a danger in giving up revelation.

Third, consciously or not, he was demanding proof for a subject that did not lend itself to proof. Evidence was one thing; proof quite another.

May not the habit in scientific pursuits of believing nothing till it is proved, influence your mind too much in other things which cannot be proved in the same way, & which if true are likely to be above our comprehension.

To his credit, Darwin recognised some of these criticisms.

He was prepared, theoretically, to admit that reliable truth might be communicated through instinct or intuition. Many years later he told his young disciple George Romanes that “reason may not be the only instrument for ascertaining [theism’s] truth.”

But that was simply a theoretical admission and it had little purchase on his own life. “I cannot put much or any faith in the so-called intuitions of the human mind,” he wrote to his lifelong friend, Charles Lyell, in 1874.

“I do not think that the religious sentiment was ever strongly developed in me,” he admitted in his autobiography.

Similarly he recognised that he was demanding the same kind and level of proof from his religion as he did from the species that he examined every day and, as such, was inevitably going to be disappointed.

Many years later, in his autobiography, he recalled

often inventing day-dreams of old letters between distinguished Romans and manuscripts being discovered at Pompeii or elsewhere which confirmed in the most striking manner all that was written in the Gospels.

“But,” he continued, “I found it more and more difficult, with free scope given to my imagination, to invent evidence which would suffice to convince me.”

No evidence was enough for a mind that he latterly described as “a kind of machine for grinding general laws out of large collections of facts.”

Darwin’s Christian faith didn’t die in the 1830s but it showed few signs of life subsequently.

He made two sketches of his “species theory”, in 1842 and 1844, and then shelved the manuscripts and turned to a monumental study of barnacles which lasted until 1854.

During this period his persistent stomach-problems got worse and in desperation he tried hydropathy or water-therapy. This was a mid-Victorian fad and Darwin had recommended to him a particular therapist in Malvern.

His eldest daughter, Annie, had also long suffered from ill-health and, in 1851, he took her to Malvern for some similar treatment before returning to Emma who was eight months pregnant.

Two weeks later he received an urgent message. Annie had contracted a fever. Darwin returned instantly, to be faced with a changed child.

“You would not in the least recognize her,” he told Emma, “with her poor hard, sharp pinched features; I could only bear to look at her by forgetting our former dear Annie.”

The following week was the worst of his life. Annie rallied, then sank. She showed signs of recovery and then of fading fast. Unable to eat, she slowly wasted away. The doctors remained quietly confident. Darwin sat, holding her hand, alternately overjoyed and distraught. Eventually, she died, aged ten.

Most Victorian families lost children – Darwin himself lost two others in infancy – but Annie was his favourite and he had witnessed every last, degrading moment of her short life. The experience nearly destroyed him. It certainly destroyed what was left of his faith. He wrote a short, painfully moving account of her life, and then never spoke about her again.

His *theory* of evolution had alerted him to the reality and apparent ubiquity of suffering but he could – or, at least, could try to – rationalise and cope with that.

“From death, famine, rapine, and the concealed war of nature we can see that the highest good, which we can conceive, the creation of the higher animals has directly come,” he wrote at the end of his 1842 species sketch.

The key question was did that “highest good” justify “the concealed war of nature”?

Darwin’s tentative theoretical answer, at least in 1842, was ‘yes’. But with Annie’s death, suffering moved from being a theory to being horribly, painfully real. Whatever faith he had in the loving, just God of Christianity, it died with his daughter in Malvern.

Darwin was thus an atheist with regard to the Christian God but he was never, however, an atheist in the full sense of the word.

He remained a “theist” throughout the 1850s and ‘60s and only slipped into agnosticism in the last years of his life.

He was, in essence, pulled in two directions.

“One cannot look at this Universe with all living productions & man without believing that all has been intelligently designed,” he told John Herschel.

And yet, he continued

“when I look to each individual organism, I can see no evidence of this [design].”

“Where one would most expect design,” he told his cousin Francis Wedgewood, “viz. in the structure of a sentient being, the more I think on the subject, the less I can see proof of design,”

“I am driven to two opposite conclusions,” he admitted to Henry Acland.

“My theology is a simple muddle”, he told Joseph Hooker. “I cannot look at the Universe as the result of blind chance, yet I can see no evidence of beneficent Design,”

In the last year of his life he read a book which much impressed him: William Graham’s *Creed of Science*.

Unusually for Darwin, he wrote to the author, cold, to thank him for it.

“It is a very long time since any other book has interested me so much”, he said.

Much as he liked the book, however, he did not agree with everything Graham had to say. For the last time in his life Darwin outlined his “muddled” opinions on the matter of design.

There are some points in your book which I cannot digest. The chief one is that the existence of so-called natural laws implies purpose. I cannot see this...[assuming] the laws as we now know them...the law of gravitation...of the conservation of energy, of the atomic theory, &c. &c. hold good,...I cannot see that there is then necessarily any purpose [to them].

Having said that, he went on to tell Graham,

you have expressed my inward conviction, though far more vividly and clearly than I could have done, that the Universe is not the result of chance.

This was a serious agnosticism, and it was compounded by a typically Darwinian concern. Darwin was not simply agnostic in the sense of not knowing whether or not there was a God. He came to doubt whether the human mind, being evolved from that of a “lower” animal, *could* know such things.

His autobiography explains how he was impressed by

The extreme difficulty or rather impossibility of conceiving this immense and wonderful universe, including man with his capacity of looking far backwards and far into futurity, as the result of blind chance or necessity.

This was the argument from cosmic as opposed to biological design that sustained his fluctuating theism for the last twenty years.

When thus reflecting I feel compelled to look to a First Cause having an intelligent mind in some degree analogous to that of man; and I deserve to be called a Theist.

But, then came the monkey puzzle.

Can the mind of man, which has, as I fully believe, been developed from a mind as low as that possessed by the lowest animal, be trusted when it draws such grand conclusions? May not these be the result of the connection between cause and effect which strikes us as a necessary one, but probably depends merely on inherited experience?

Not only did Darwin now know about God. He didn't know whether he *could* know.

Despite that he did, however, passionately believe that you could do both.

In the last two decades of his life, following the publication of *The Origin of Species*, Darwin became something of a national and international celebrity.

He avoided public controversy like the plague, preferring to stay at home in Downe, in Kent, with his wife and by now complete family.

But he couldn't avoid the post.

The postal service that allowed him to keep in contact with hundreds of correspondents around the globe, from whom he was perpetually asking favours, was the same postal service that brought letters and pamphlets praising and abusing both him and his work.

"If you were to read a little pamphlet which I received a couple of days ago by a clergyman," he wrote to Brodie Innes, who was once Downe's vicar but had since left the parish:

you would laugh & admit that I had some excuse for bitterness; after abusing me for 2 or 3 pages in language sufficiently plain & emphatic to have satisfied any reasonable man, he sums up by saying that he has vainly searched the English language to find terms to express his contempt of me & all Darwinians.

It wasn't all abuse, however. People, often complete strangers, wrote to Darwin asking him for his opinion on a wide range of subjects, not least God. One of those letters was from the author, John Fordyce.

Darwin responded on 7 May 1879.

It seems to me absurd to doubt that a man may be an ardent Theist & an evolutionist.— You are right about Kingsley. Asa Gray, the eminent botanist, is another case in point—

What my own views may be is a question of no consequence to any one except myself.— But as you ask, I may state that my judgment often fluctuates.

Moreover whether a man deserves to be called a theist depends on the definition of the term: which is much too large a subject for a note.

In my most extreme fluctuations I have never been an atheist in the sense of denying the existence of a God.— I think that generally (& more and more so as I grow older) but not always, that an agnostic would be the most correct description of my state of mind.

Darwin was thus an atheist with regard to the Christian God. But he was never, even in his wildest fluctuations, an atheist full stop.

He ended his life torn in different directions – between the big picture and the small – but he was clear, nevertheless, that it was perfectly feasible to do both God and natural selection.

The fact that he supported missionary work throughout his life was as simply down to the fact that he had experienced, first hand, and heard, second hand, what a positive impact such work had on “uncivilised” people.

Thus Darwin was an atheist but also was not an atheist.

He was unbeliever who spoke and gave generously to Christian mission.

He was a man who had a life-long loathing of slavery and racism yet one whose thinking, in particular the way he assumed that biology meant destiny, would be used after his death to justify the very worse kind of racist policies.

He was a man who has been hijacked for the cause of modern atheism in a way that he would have been profoundly uncomfortable with.

Indeed, he was a man who had the bad luck to please anyone with an axe to grind.

He was, in other words, a complex man.

As the historian John Hedley Brooke once observed, we should be careful not to pigeon-hole the man who wouldn't pigeon-hole pigeons.

Nick Spencer
2009