

Darwin, Evolution and Religious Belief

Graham Nicholson*

With the 200th anniversary of the birth of Charles Darwin, it is a good time to reflect on his contribution to human thought. There is no doubt as to the greatness of his contribution to science, through his theory of evolution on earth from lower forms of life to higher forms of life over an extremely long period of time. But a major effect of this contribution has almost certainly been to consolidate and accelerate the decline of religious belief, at least in Western societies, in the last century and a half. The decline in the theistic belief in the existence of a higher power, however that may be called or described, is evident.

Both sides of the resultant debate between science and religion have asserted that the two became incompatible largely as a result of such scientific discoveries. Many people have consequently cast off what they consider to be obsolete systems of religious belief, superstition and dogma in favour of scientific materialism. Some religionists cling to literal Biblical interpretations in defiance of the scientific evidence.

That there should have been such a religious decline is to a large extent understandable, given the continuing examples of the abuse of religion around the world and the persistence of irrational or patently false teachings in many religions. But it seems that Darwin himself did not intend this result. And while he was perhaps not the most religious of men and tended towards agnosticism, he never totally repudiated all religious belief. He did not use his theory of evolution to promote atheism and materialism.

On the contrary, he recognized the role and permissible bounds of science, including that it could not resolve the question of the existence or character of a higher power, the ultimate meaning of life, the proper foundations of morality or any other spiritual question. According to Gould, he never argued that the scientific evidence of evolution implied the non-existence of a deity or of spiritual forces. He was not content to view the remarkable universe, and especially the nature of man, and conclude that everything was the result of brute force. Rather, he was inclined to look at everything as resulting from designed laws. But this did not give him an insight into the nature of that deity.

So the question now arises as to whether the debate sparked by Darwin's theory between the credibility of apparently competing scientific and spiritual teachings has entirely missed the mark. Darwin himself did not approve of the conflict between the two views. It has to be asked whether the conflict has in effect been a waste of time, or worse, whether it has condemned genuine and rational religious belief, as originally taught by the enlightened founders of each great religion free of later man-made distortions and abuses, to a fate that it did not deserve?

More and more people are coming to accept that there is no competition between science and religion at all, and that they are in fact complimentary, different perspectives of the same thing, like different sides of the same coin. That the universe is the subject of some complex, magnificent, integrated design, operating according to specific natural laws, seems difficult to contest. That there is very strong evidence that life on earth evolved by some process over an extremely long time in accordance with that design and those laws, seems difficult to deny. Only a very literal interpretation of old religious teachings can provide a contrary view. Many religious people no longer accept such an interpretation, but it does not cause them any loss of religious belief. To them, the belief in a higher power consistent with proven science helps to affirm their beliefs, and not to detract from them. They accept the idea of an ongoing creation, one that, together with the natural laws upon which it is based, are sustained by such an all-powerful higher power.

Perhaps it is time to seek a reconciliation between proven science and true religion rather than to continue the conflict. One feels that Darwin would strongly approve of this approach.