

Why Are Christians Passionate Darwinians?

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A few months ago I had the privilege of being shown round the Darwin papers in the archives room at the Cambridge University Library. One of the great projects in progress there is to publish Darwin's Correspondence in a series of wonderful volumes with an estimated 15 more to go. Darwin exchanged letters with nearly 2000 correspondents in the course of his life, of whom around 200 were clergymen, some personal friends, many of whom provided Darwin with biological data for his publications.

And so it was that I found myself in the CUL holding in my hands the original copy of a letter written by the Revd Charles Kingsley, to Darwin, dated 18 Nov 1859, in which Kingsley was thanking Darwin for his kind gift of an advance copy of the *Origin of Species*. This was the Kingsley who was then vicar of Eversley, but soon to become the Regius Professor of Modern History in this University. In thanking Darwin for his kind gift, Kingsley writes that "All I have seen of it *awes* me", going on to remark that he didn't believe in the fixity of species anyway, and then making a comment that Darwin liked so much that he quoted from it in the Second Edition of the *Origin*: "I have gradually learnt to see", writes Kingsley, "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 (or ‘gaps’) which he himself had made”.

Another great Victorian clerical enthusiast for Darwinism was Aubrey Moore, a Fellow of St. John’s College, Oxford, and Curator of the Oxford Botanical Gardens. Moore maintained that Darwinism had done the Church a great service in helping to get rid of the more extreme forms of natural theology and claimed that there was a special affinity between Darwinism and Christian faith, remarking that “Darwinism appeared, and, under the guise of a foe, did the work of a friend”. The reason for this attraction, claimed Moore, was based on the intimate involvement of God in His creation for, as he put it:

‘There are not, and cannot be, any Divine interpositions in nature, for God cannot interfere with Himself. His creative activity is present everywhere. There is no division of labour between God and nature....For the Christian theologian the facts of nature are the acts of God'....a theological emphasis which perhaps the more recent so-called Intelligent Design movement should take to heart. As another 19th century cleric, John Henry Newman, expressed the point: ‘I believe in design because I believe in God, not in God because I believe in design’.

Meanwhile in the United States Asa Gray, Professor of Natural History at Harvard and a committed Christian, was Darwin’s long-term

correspondent and confidante who helped organise the publication of the *Origin of Species* in America.

As the historian James Moore has commented when writing about the early reception of Darwinism: ‘With but few exceptions the leading Christian thinkers in Great Britain and America came to terms quite readily with Darwinism and evolution’. So from the time of Darwin himself there always has been a lineage of Christians enthusiastic about Darwinian evolution.

A few weeks ago I was mentioning the title of my sermon today – ‘Why Are Christians Passionate Darwinians?’ – to a medical student. In that polite quizzical tone used by Cambridge undergraduates when you know that they don’t really believe a word of it, she responded : “Are they?”. Good question. From the noise of sound and fury emanating from the contemporary American culture wars, which routinely spill over into the media in this country, one could not blame anyone from obtaining the impression that the answer might be “no”. When 42% of the population of the country that currently leads the world in science and technology routinely declares their disbelief in evolution, then you can be quite sure that there is more going on here than simply the assessment of scientific data. Happily that disbelief, so characteristic of contemporary popular culture in America, does not extend at all widely into their own scientific community itself. And whilst on this side of the big pond we do not share the American passion for polling each other on every conceivable opinion, so hard data are

lacking, I can certainly report from a lifetime experience within my own scientific community, where there is a strong Christian presence, that the Christian passion for Darwinian explanations for the origins of biological diversity remains undiminished.

So, accepting this fact, why, today, do Christians remain passionate Darwinians, and if they are not, then why should they be? I will briefly outline just four reasons:

The first reason is because Christians, of all people, should have a passion for truth, and it is a fact that Darwinian evolution provides us with the best explanation that we have for the origins of biological diversity. It is a true theory, not in the sense that it's exhaustively true, but in the sense that 'descent with modification', to use Darwin's own phrase, has been established beyond any reasonable doubt. The biblical literature places a huge emphasis on truth. God reveals himself to us as the God of truth. "Kings take pleasure in honest lips", says Proverbs (16:13) "they value a man who speaks the truth". The apostle John was extremely concerned to tell the truth in his Gospel as he recounts the events of the crucifixion in John 19:35: "The man who saw it has given testimony, and his testimony is true. He knows that he tells the truth, and he testifies so that you also may believe".

The historian Steven Shapin has highlighted in his book *A Social History of Truth: Civility and Science in Seventeenth-Century England* the way in which truth-telling played a critical role in the emergence of modern

science. When Robert Boyle wrote his *Sceptical Chymist* he was careful to invoke witnesses of unimpeachable reputation to testify to what they had seen. His experiments on mercury, published in 1675, were witnessed by Henry Oldenburg and by ‘the noble and judicious’ Lord Brouncker. Today the testimony is recorded in laboratory note-books that should be signed off by the head of laboratory, but the principle remains the same.

So Christians who are scientists are called to tell the truth about God’s created order, to be faithful witnesses of what they see and observe, to the best of their ability. Darwinian theory has itself evolved today into a much more accurate and powerful map of the biological world than the one generated by Darwin himself, one that continues to be hugely successful, doing what all good theories do, which is to render an ever-growing body of data coherent.

There is therefore no justification at all, in my opinion, for the teaching of anti-Darwinian ideas such as creationism or Intelligent Design in the school science classroom. To give school-children even an impression that these ideas are in any sense at all held to be rival theories to evolution within the biological research community would be irresponsible. Christians are called to truth-telling.

The second reason why Christians should rejoice over Darwinian theory is because of the huge biomedical research programme that it has spawned in its wake, with an impact on the healing of millions of people. Follow the historical lineage from our present day research labs and Biotech

companies, back through contemporary genomics to the early discoveries of the genetic code and the double helix, back to the neo-Darwinian synthesis of the 1920's and the rediscovery of genes as the units of inheritance in the early 20th century, and you realize that it's evolutionary theory which has provided the consistent framework for the biological revolution, which in turn has led to countless applications in the medical field.

Christians perhaps too often have engaged in worried hand-wringing as their instinctive response to new biological technologies with medical application, when a more appropriate reaction might be to see first how the new technology might be used for the healing of sick people or the feeding of a hungry world. Of course we should not be naïve about the potential for evil applications, and clearly there have to be ethical boundaries, but unless we see first how the new science might be used for the prevention or healing of disease, then we have missed one of the central messages of the Gospels, that Jesus' proclamation of the coming of the kingdom is linked so closely with his healing ministry.

The third reason why Christians should be positive towards Darwinian theory, as the best explanation that we have for the origins of biological diversity, is because of the intrinsic limitations of its scope. Darwin himself was always suspicious of those who wanted to hijack his theory and extrapolate it into all kinds of realms beyond biology. He was not at all impressed by the efforts of those like Herbert Spencer who, in his best-selling popular books, tried to make evolution into a theory of almost

everything. Yet the temptation for people with various ideological axes to grind to utilize the prestige of evolutionary theory in support of their own pet ideology has been extraordinarily powerful, whether it be Karl Marx and the early socialists, Rockefeller and American big business, the Kaiser's justification of German expansionism, 1920's eugenics, or Hitler reminding his dinner-guests that "The law of selection justifies this incessant struggle by allowing the survival of the fittest". Today the ideological abuse of Darwinism continues, whether it be Daniel Dennett's notion of evolution as a 'universal acid' (in *Darwin's Dangerous Idea*), or Richard Dawkin's claim that evolution supports atheism, or the equally absurd claim of the creationists that evolutionary theory in some way subverts Christian morality. One cannot help thinking that the polar opposites in these murky debates need each other for their own sustenance, and it seems to me very likely that the recent vigorous public campaign by a tiny subset of biologists to associate evolution with atheism has actually stimulated a rise in creationism.

So Christians are passionate Darwinians to the extent that evolution represents a highly successful scientific theory to explain the origins of biological diversity - but no more. Biological evolutionary theory is simply not up to the Herculean task of providing support for so many competing ideologies.

The fourth and final reason why Christians are Darwinian enthusiasts is because the evolutionary narrative is consistent with the narrative provided

by Christian creation theology. Providing scientific and theological accounts of the same events is like looking out of two different windows at the identical scene, both providing their particular perspective. The scientific account is one of mechanism; the theological account is one of meaning. As Dawkins looks at the evolutionary account, he sees “no design, no purpose, no evil and no good, nothing but blind pitiless indifference”. But how could it be otherwise? If you only look through a single window, the one provided by mechanism rather than meaning, then what do you expect? But as we look, in addition, through the window provided by Christian theology, we see a God who has intentions and purposes for his created order, who is intimately involved in its coming into being and in its continuing process, who makes humankind in His image and gives to humankind particular responsibilities to care for His earth, a humankind that can also look forward to a new heavens and a new earth. Without this larger narrative, the tiny drama being played out on this insignificant planet in a vast universe, really doesn't make much sense.

It was the late Stephen Jay Gould who was fond of saying that if you replayed the tape of life again, then it would come out quite different, the outcome was completely random. It's interesting to see more recent biological data beginning to point quite strongly to the opposite conclusion: the fact of evolutionary convergence, the elegant use of a highly restricted repertoire of genomes to achieve phenotypic variation, the fact that two-thirds of all genomes sequenced so far can be assigned to just 1400 protein

domain 'families' – these and many other recent biological insights are consistent with a highly ordered world in which, if the tape of life were replayed again, it now appears more likely that things would turn out looking remarkably the same. I do not wish to overstate the case, for our knowledge of life is based precisely on $n = 1$, a risky sample number from which to make grandiose conclusions, but the late Ernst Mayr was surely correct in his claim that biology was just “a bewildering chaos of facts until given meaning by the evolutionary theory.” And now with our rapidly increasing understanding of the molecular detail of the order and coherence of living matter, we can appreciate Mayr’s comment more fully. No biologist can deny that the evolution of the most complex known organ in the universe - that organ which sits between our ears this morning - from its humble chemical beginnings - is a remarkable fact that demands an explanation that lies both within science, but also beyond science as we ponder our very existence.

I am not at all suggesting that we can derive any kind of ultimate meaning from the evolutionary process itself, only that as we look through the scientific window, the landscape that we observe is broadly consistent with the theological window, for after all we are looking at the same reality. Of course, as we look through the theological window, we should also keep in mind that we are not in a very strong position to tell God how he should have created the world of biological diversity, although that does not, and indeed should not, stop us from asking questions.

Earlier we read a passage from John Chapter 8 which is about truth and about what we in cell biology call 'lineage commitment'. Jesus tells his listeners that true freedom comes from knowing the truth, pointing to himself, a statement that if not true is unbearably arrogant, but if true is profoundly unsettling. Jesus goes on to say that only he, the truth, can deliver us from our slavery to sin. Sin refers not to our biological instincts, but to our broken relationship with God. Our spiritual 'lineage commitment' begins when we put that relationship right by coming to know God through Christ, and as a result start reflecting in our lives the character appropriate to our new lineage in God's family, a family to which, as Jesus says, we then 'belong for ever' (John 8:35). And so the good news is that as we look through the window of the Christian Gospel, we see beyond biology, beyond transience, beyond pain and death, to the new heavens and new earth in which God's creative process will finally reach its culmination.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.