

THE DISGUISED FRIEND - DARWINISM AND DIVINITY

It would come as a surprise to many of the biologically-cultured 'despisers of the Christian religion', to learn that historians are now showing that the nineteenth-century reaction to Darwin in theological and ecclesiastical circles was much more positive and welcoming than the popular legends have recounted up till now. Furthermore, the scientific reaction was also, in fact, much more negative than is usually depicted. Those sceptical of Darwin's ideas included initially the leading comparative anatomist of his day, Richard Owen and the leading geologist, Charles Lyell. Many theologians deferred judgement, but the proponents of at least one strand in theology in nineteenth-century England chose to intertwine their insights closely with those of Darwin. More of the nineteenth-century religious reaction to Darwin was constructive and reconciling in temper than practically any biological popularisers today will allow.

The constructive approaches of those Christian thinkers who wished to be reconcilers, rather than 'irreconcilers', between the new science and Christian beliefs were not based on any mood of defeatism or any sense of flabby compromise of Christian insights with new truths. They were based on the conviction that, if the Christian faith is to be intelligible and believable at all to each new generation, it must express itself in ways that are consonant with such understandings as that generation has of the world around it.

One could cite especially some of those in the 'high' church tradition, with its emphasis on God working in the world and in persons (technically, 'incarnation'). Thus we have Aubrey Moore (1889):

'Darwinism appeared, and, under the disguise of a foe, did the work of a friend. It has conferred upon philosophy and religion an inestimable benefit, by showing us that we must choose between two alternatives. Either God is everywhere present in nature, or He is nowhere.'

In reflecting today on evolution, we recognise now, more than ever before, that new modes of existence, new activities and new kinds of behaviour come into existence through the course of evolutionary time -- and that we need new concepts and ways of investigating them. New kinds of realities appear: increasing complexity, information-processing, consciousness and finally, in humanity, self-consciousness. So, the believer in God can affirm, with even greater conviction than before, that God is the Continuous Creator. He is all the time creating -- through the processes of nature which the biologist uncovers. God makes things make themselves. The splendid panorama of both cosmic and biological evolution should be a stimulus to worship and awe.

Nevertheless some (and it worried Darwin) have found it difficult to reconcile belief in God as Creator with the undoubted role of chance in the evolutionary process (mutations in the genetic carrier, DNA, are random with respect to the organism's environment, interaction with which 'naturally' selects the best procreators). But we now know, through key developments in theoretical biology and physical biochemistry, that it is the interplay of chance and law that allows the matter of the Universe to be self-creative of new forms of organization. God, whom the theist believes gives existence to the whole process, can now be conceived as creating through this interplay.

The results of this interplay display features that arise because they help survival: becoming more complex; gaining ability to process information about the environment (e.g., nerves) and to store it (e.g., brains) - so providing the basis for consciousness and self-consciousness, and for language needed in cooperation. Moreover, since new forms can only arise through the death of old ones, and because sensitivity is essential for survival, pain and death now appear as inevitable features of a biological world that is going to be creative of new forms, some of which can become conscious

and self-conscious. Modern Christian thinkers conceive of God as suffering in, with and under this process.

Within the continuities of these processes there arises homo sapiens, a being who is undoubtedly a product of the natural process, and yet has the mental capacity to know the process, and know that he or she knows - thereby evidencing an extraordinary distance from even the most intelligent primate or porpoise.

This panorama gives a new perspective for discussions of the traditional trio of 'nature, humanity and God' - an expansion of horizons for us all, especially believers in God. Moreover insights of the religious, and indeed general, experience of humanity cannot be lightly set aside. For homo sapiens is that creature which uniquely needs to come to terms with its awareness of death, with its finitude - needs to bear suffering, to realise its potentialities and to determine its path through life. It is to such needs that the religions of the world respond. Today that response must continue to be illuminated by the evolutionary perspective that Darwin so brilliantly began to unveil for humanity. We can now have through his insights into the history of the living world, and those of countless biological scientists subsequently, a new exhilarating vision of an ever-working Creator. He operates in, with, and under the dynamic processes of nature to bring forth the new until it culminates in human persons capable of self-offering love -- persons open to values and to a harmonious relationship with the divine. For Christians, the vindication and warranty that their hope can be consummated, is in the life, death and resurrection of the one human being fully exemplifying the culmination of the divine creative activity: Jesus the Christ.

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