



Charles Darwin's religious life journey

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From the time when he returned from his five year journey around the world, Darwin thought long and hard, not just about the relationships between living things, but also about life and living. He moved from relatively orthodox Anglican to an agnostic who never ceased to wonder at the world of nature and the place of humans in it. While he never identified as a Unitarian, he was exposed to multiple sources of Unitarian influence. A Unitarian fellow scientist wrote that:-

“as a Man he exemplified in his own life that true religion, which is deeper, wider, and loftier than any Theology.”

[W B Carpenter. Charles Darwin: his life and work. Modern Review 1882 3: page 523.]

Three weeks ago, we looked at the manner in which, from a very privileged position in society, Darwin was able to gain the knowledge and skills that fitted him to work as Naturalist on the British Admiralty ship the Beagle. We saw how this passionate student of Nature felt forced to the conclusion that a common evolutionary origin for all living things was needed to explain his observations.

Over the years 1831 to 1836 while he moved from place to place on the Beagle, he remained a relatively orthodox Anglican, sometimes laughed at by the sailors when he quoted the Bible as a source of authority on a point of morality. Referring to the time from October 1836 when he returned to his marriage in January 1839, he wrote in his autobiography:

During these two years I was led to think much about religion. . . . By further reflecting that the clearest evidence would be requisite to make any sane man believe in the miracles by which Christianity is supported,—that the more we know of the fixed laws of nature the more incredible do miracles become,—that the men at that time were

ignorant and credulous to a degree almost incomprehensible by us,—that the Gospels cannot be proved to have been written simultaneously with the events,—that they differ in many important details, far too important as it seemed to me to be admitted as the usual inaccuracies of eye-witnesses;—by such reflections as these, ... I gradually came to disbelieve in Christianity as a divine revelation. ... Beautiful as is the morality of the New Testament (is), it can hardly be denied that its perfection depends in part on the interpretation which we now put on metaphors and allegories.

But I was very unwilling to give up my belief;—I feel sure of this for I can well remember often and 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. ... Thus disbelief crept over me at a very slow rate, but was at last complete.

[From Darwin's Autobiography, written in 1876 or earlier, i.e. in or before his 68th year.]

As we saw last week, the Darwin and Wedgewood families maintained, from the time of Darwin's maternal and paternal grandfathers, close connections. The Wedgewoods were Unitarians. Darwin's Unitarian cousin Emma, to whom he found himself attracted after his return, was strong in her Unitarian Christian belief. Darwin proposed to her in November 1838, at the same time explaining to her that he had abandoned Christian belief. She wrote to him, in words that show a remarkable sense of feeling:

My reason tells me that honest & conscientious doubts cannot be a sin, but I feel it would be a painful void between us. I thank you from my heart for your openness with me & I should dread the feeling that you were concealing your opinions from the fear of giving me pain ... my own dear Charley we now do belong to each other & I cannot help being open with you.

[Emma's letter 21 Nov 1838]

Emma comes across as a person with a strong religious commitment, but at the same time concerned to go where her reason takes her. She had not faced the same exposure to skeptical and rationalist thinking as Darwin. Most women were at that time largely shielded from the

intellectual currents of the places where their menfolk trained and worked and met for discussion.

Emma and Darwin read together and discussed books both defending and criticising orthodoxy. While her thinking did over time move in a more freethinking direction, she continued to attend and take her children to the Anglican church in Down, 28 kilometers south-east of London's Victoria Station, where she and Charles had moved after their marriage. She, and later their children, read and critiqued everything that Darwin wrote. Darwin had continuing bouts of serious illness, from causes unknown, though there have been various guesses. The help and remarkable care that Emma gave him contributed in no small way to his work and writing. A side note is that while he comes across as thoroughly courteous to Emma and grateful for her help, he did hold the view, common among men of his time, that in matters that required great powers of mind, women were inherently inferior to men.

For the most part, Darwin kept his religious beliefs to himself. He wanted his work to be judged on its scientific merits, and not mixed up with arguments about religion and God. An 1866 response to an inquiry about his religious beliefs was typical:

My opinion is not worth more than that of any other man who has thought on such subjects ... I thank you for your Judgement & honour you for it, that theology & science should each run its own course ...
[Mary Boole letter]

In his autobiography, he wrote:

Another source of conviction in the existence of God, connected with the reason and not with the feelings, ... follows from 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. ...

... But then arises the doubt—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? ... I cannot pretend to throw the least light on such abstruse problems. The

mystery of the beginning of all things is insoluble by us; and I for one must be content to remain an Agnostic.

[Darwin, Autobiography]

To the extent that Darwin thought God in some sense a possibility, it was not the God of Christian theology. He wrote to the American botanist Asa Gray in 1860:

*... I am bewildered. I had no intention to write atheistically, but I own that I cannot see as plainly as others do, and as I should wish to do, evidence of design and beneficence on all sides of us. There seems to me too much misery in the world. I cannot persuade myself that a beneficent and omnipotent God would have designedly created the *Ichneumonidae* [a family of wasps] with the express intention of their feeding within the living bodies of caterpillars ...*

[Letter to Asa Gray, 1860]

In an 1879 letter to a John Fordyce, he wrote:

[My] judgment often fluctuates.... Whether a man deserves to be called a theist depends on the definition of the term ... 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 (and 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.

[Letter to John Fordyce, 1879]

Darwin's musings align with my own thinking. Consciousness is, in one or another way, a built-in part of our universe. Was a conscious entity the starting point for what may well be a universe of universes? Or was what we call matter the starting point? Did matter somehow just appear that carried within itself the potential to create, by the slow process of evolution, conscious human beings. I have to agree with Darwin that "*The mystery of the beginning of all things is insoluble by us ...*"

It is one thing to reject traditional Christianity. It is another to replace it as a source of guidance for life and living. In 1871 Frances Ellingham Abbot, a US Unitarian minister and leading figure in the

US Free Religious Association that had been formed a few years earlier, sent Darwin a copy of his pamphlet “Truths for the Times”.

“Truths for the Times” was in two parts, one titled “Modern Principles”, and the other titled “Fifty Affirmations”. Its flavour can be judged from the following selection:

1. Religion is the effort of Man to perfect himself.
2. The root of religion is universal human nature.
- ...
8. The unity of all religions must be sought in their universal element.
9. The peculiar character of each religion must be sought in its special element.
- ...
50. Christianity is the faith of the soul's childhood; Free Religion is the faith of the soul's manhood. In the gradual growth of mankind out of Christianity into Free Religion, lies the only hope of the spiritual perfection of the individual and the spiritual unity of the race.

The “Modern Principles” emphasize:

... the supremacy of liberty in all matters of government, the supremacy of science in all matters of belief, the supremacy of morality in all matters of conduct, and the supremacy of benevolence in all social and personal relations.

[<https://nzetc.victoria.ac.nz/tm/scholarly/tei-Stout37-t2.html>]

Darwin wrote back with words that, when he agreed for them to be printed in successive copies of the *Free Religious Association* weekly publication *The Index*, were amended to read:

I have now read 'Truths for the Times,' and I admire them from my inmost heart; and I agree to almost every word.

The Free Religious Association represented a direction in which the American Unitarian Association would move in the following century.

A side note is that I found a copy of “Truths for the Times” online, when I looked for it several years ago, in the pamphlet collection of Sir Robert Stout at Victoria University of Wellington. Stout was Premier of New Zealand from 1884 to 1887, and later Chief Justice from 1899 to 1926. He was active in the Wellington Unitarian Church from the time it started in 1904, and President for a number of years prior to his death in 1930. Stout comes across to me as a person who was much in Abbot’s line of thinking.

Darwin thought deeply about motives for life and living. In his autobiography he wrote:

A man who has no assured and ever present belief in the existence of a personal God or of a future existence with retribution and reward, can have for his rule of life, as far as I can see, only to follow those impulses and instincts which are the strongest or which seem to him the best ones. ... *If he acts for the good of others, he will receive the approbation of his fellow men and gain the love of those with whom he lives; and this latter gain undoubtedly is the highest pleasure on this earth.* ... His reason may occasionally tell him to act in opposition to the opinion of others, whose approbation he will then not receive; but he will still have the solid satisfaction of knowing that he has followed his innermost guide or conscience.

Darwin is surely overly optimistic about the direction of social influences. They push as often in malign as in socially positive directions. Darwin went on to say:

As for myself I believe that I have acted rightly in steadily following and devoting my life to science. I feel no remorse from having committed any great sin, but have often and often regretted that I have not done more direct good to my fellow creatures. My sole and poor excuse is much ill-health and my mental constitution, which makes it extremely difficult for me to turn from one subject or occupation to another. I can imagine with high satisfaction giving up my whole time to philanthropy, but not a portion of it; though this would have been a far better line of conduct.

Darwin, Autobiography

Rachel asked us last week to think about our laments and joys, both for ourselves and for the wider community. Today's questions build on Darwin's musings to ask closely related questions.

Meditation / Discussion Questions

- What do you see as your rule of life?
- Does it fit closely with the way that Darwin described it?
- Or would you see it differently?

Notes

1. Versions of Darwin's autobiography that appeared after his death omitted some of what he had to say about his religious beliefs
A complete library of Darwin's writings can be found at
<https://darwin-online.org.uk/>

Follow this link to view his Autobiography as published in 1958.

2. Robert Stout stands out as a remarkable New Zealand intellectual and public figure.

“Throughout his career Stout maintained a strong practical interest in social and educational issues. He was an influential champion of equal rights for women ... The development of the New Zealand university system probably owed more to Stout than to any other single individual.”

<https://teara.govt.nz/en/biographies/2s48/stout-robert>