



## Darwin's Theory and Christian Orthodoxy

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In due time the evolution theory will have to abate its vehemence, cannot be allow'd to dominate everything else, and will have to take its place as a segment of the circle, the cluster—as but one of many theories, many thoughts, of profoundest value—and readjusting and differentiating much, yet leaving the divine secrets just as inexplicable and unreachable as before—maybe more so.

—Walt Whitman: *Notes Left Over*, ca.1888.

Recent controversy over the theory of evolution may not match the heat generated a century ago, but Whitman's "due time" seems not yet to have arrived. The theory does have a very firm place in the circle of significant ideas, but just how large a segment is yet to be determined. Current research in astronomy and sociobiology seeks to extend the reach of the theory into our understanding of the entire physical universe at one level and the realm of human behavior at another. Hence the relation of the theory to divinity must also be unsettled; new consideration of possible theological and ethical implications is necessary.<sup>1</sup>

Meanwhile an old controversy has also been refired. While as once before a court case may appear to have settled the matter of evolution versus creation in our public school education, national politicians and local textbook selection committees can be counted upon to have at least one more word, if not a final one. Indeed, the controversy may actually just now be entering its decisive stage. Absence of solid history of science in most university curricula has left us uninformed about the actual course of the idea's development. After Darwin's death, rivalry between alternative proposals for the mechanism of speciation kept the viability of evolution theory in doubt until the combination of Darwinian natural selection and Mendelian genetics produced in the 1930s the synthesis which is the foundation of today's biological science. But just at that moment the reverberations of the famous "monkey trial" of John Scopes in 1925 were driving the theory out of public school textbooks. The exile lasted until the need for new science texts in the cold-war "Sputnik" era brought the dangerous idea back before the minds of students and their parents. That happened in

<sup>1</sup>See A. R. Peacocke, *Creation and the World of Science* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1979).

1963, and since then the "vehemence" of the theory and the controversy over it has steadily increased. Now rival knights wage fierce warfare on the video village green, and both camps are with each year more aggressively mobilized to carry the issue into the national political arena.<sup>2</sup>

Members of non-fundamentalist churches are quick to register surprise that their

fundamentalist brothers and sisters still have problems with the theory of evolution. Taught by their pastors and college-educated church school teachers to differentiate between creation and evolution in terms of the “who and why” over against the “how” of creation, they do not easily comprehend the others’ difficulties. To them it makes very good sense to differentiate between two rather separate realms of discourse. The Bible tells us about the *meaning* of creation; scientists give us an *explanation* of how it was in fact done, knowledge which would have been quite useless to people in biblical times. Thus persons for whom there is only one world of discourse in which the rules of scientific and religious talk must be identical seem oddly old fashioned or immature. That kind of thinking was okay for Grandpa and Grandma, maybe, or for the children, but it is obviously inappropriate for modern adults.

Whatever theoretical merit this “two realms of discourse” position might have, its practical weakness is suggested by the story of a well-meaning science teacher who carefully presented the theory of evolution to her students as an hypothesis accepted as established fact by almost all working scientists. She then respectfully observed that there were other points of view, about which the students might ask their parents or their pastor. Now any alert junior-high school student can see the implications of that contrast! There are indeed two realms of discourse, and in our culture one belongs in the public school and the other in the private realm of home and church. Public consensus is expected for the one, while the other is a matter of parental or religious authority. The two realms of discourse, scientific and religious, have very different status. The major exception to this situation is of course the fundamentalist subculture in which church members are constantly urged to stand up and be counted. For the fundamentalists, the controversy over creation and evolution must be settled in the bright daylight of demonstrable facticity; no slipping into the shade of the meaning tree for them!<sup>3</sup>

The problem with the “no problem” response to the conflict is that it short-circuits an adequate discussion of the relation between the ideas of creation and evolution, and more generally, of religion and science. It thereby reinforces the general impression that the non-fundamentalist churches have nothing to contribute to the public discussion. Non-fundamentalist Christians must talk through their understanding of these relationships if they expect to contribute significantly to the discussion concerning the place of the theory of evolution in our public life. How does the “two realms of discourse” strategy really work? How does it fit with scientists’ own understanding of their work?

<sup>2</sup>Gerald Skoog, “The Topic of Evolution in Secondary School Textbooks: 1900-1977,” *Evolution Versus Creationism: The Public Education Controversy*, ed. J. Peter Zetterberg (Phoenix: The Oryx Press, 1983) 65-89.

<sup>3</sup>For a survey of recent literature, see James C. Livingston, “Darwin, Darwinism, and Theology: Recent Studies,” *Religious Studies Review* 8 (1982) 105-115.

Will its use encourage the scientific community to invite the church back into the conversation? And how well does it address the deep and not unfounded fears of the creationists that all alternatives to their fixed platform are on the slippery slope of relativism and practical atheism?<sup>4</sup>

This essay is an attempt to model the kind of conversation which our situation seems to require. Some recent historical work on the Darwinian controversies of the nineteenth century provides a context within which such reconsideration might profitably be done. James R. Moore and others have shown that the response of Christian theologians to Darwin’s ideas produced as

much disagreement about the meaning and value of those ideas *as science* as to their significance for the church's theology. It is striking that in the midst of this confusion, which sometimes looks more like a family brawl than real war between science and religion, the most accurate reading of Darwin came in Moore's view from a few highly orthodox theologians.<sup>5</sup> If this is so, might it not be the case that Christian orthodoxy is not merely neutrally compatible with modern evolutionary theory, but in some ways actually consonant with it and supportive of it? A brief review of the post-Darwinian controversies will help bring this possibility into focus.

## I. DARWIN'S SCIENCE AND THE THEOLOGIAN

As is well known, Darwin's theory of evolution by variation and natural selection was not the only form of evolutionary thought contending for allegiance in the last third of the nineteenth century. Its primary rival was Lamarckian transmutation theory, according to which an innate power conferred upon nature by God produced the series of plants and animals. In orderly progression toward greater complexity and perfection, an inner disposition produced animal behavior well-adapted to changing environments. These actions became habitual and instinctive, and thus led to changes in organic structure which are passed on to offspring.

Lamarckians did not share a united view of evolutionary development, however. The chief proponent of Lamarckianism in Britain was Herbert Spencer. In his *System of Synthetic Philosophy* (1860-96), he developed the metaphysical potential of Lamarckian transformationism into an explanation of the cosmos on the basis of a physical law which governs the "continuous redistribution of matter and motion." Spencer believed that Darwin's views on natural selection were in accord with his own position. American Lamarckians, on the other hand, led by Edward Drinker Cope of the University of Pennsylvania, tended to stress the teleological aspect of transformationism, and so opposed Darwin as a mechanist.<sup>6</sup>

Darwin himself appears to have stepped aside from this conflict as much as his colleagues would allow him. He consistently resisted metaphysical specu-

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<sup>4</sup>An insightful interpretation of creationism is found in Lenn E. Goodman and Madeleine J. Goodman, "Creation and Evolution: Another Round in an Ancient Struggle," *Zygon* 18 (1983) 3-43.

<sup>5</sup>James R. Moore, *The Post-Darwinian Controversies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1979) 252-298.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, 142-54.

lation on the basis of his understanding of the evolutionary process. Particularly problematic in his view was the application of the idea of evolution to the new science of sociology, the very element of Spencer's thought which was to make his views so popular as a legitimation of the American way of life.<sup>7</sup> And although Darwin's position seems to have shifted gradually to incorporate some Lamarckian elements, with remarkably few lapses he rigorously rejected both metaphysical and religious interpretations of his results, including notions of theistic or providential evolution held by some of his closest colleagues and supporters.<sup>8</sup> Throughout his life Darwin attempted to practice strictly "positive" science, that complex activity of fact-gathering and theory-building which seeks to explain nature as a system of secondary causes, and which in that period had to be distinguished from both the strictly inductive method of the Baconian tradition, on the one hand, and the deductive speculation of a Spencer on the other.<sup>9</sup>

The theological responses to Darwin relating to these points are extremely interesting.

Moore distinguishes between Christian anti-Darwinist, Darwinist, and Darwinian readings of Darwin. Christian anti-Darwinists, who might be regarded as the forerunners of today's creationists, pounced on what they saw as the fatal flaw in Darwin's method. Darwin had forsaken the demonstration of certain fact for the dubious assertion of more or less probable hypotheses. Science, whether of nature or of God, produces certain truth, they thought. Hence Darwin's "arbitrary arrangement of facts in accordance with a number of unproved hypotheses" was a "system destitute of any shadow or proof, and supported merely by vague analogies and figures of speech," as John William Dawson, a distinguished anti-Darwinist naturalist and an unflinching defender of the "scientific and scriptural doctrine of the immutability of species," put it. On this ground, anti-Darwinists followed Charles Hodge of Princeton Theological Seminary in rejecting Darwin's "atheism."

But was the anti-Darwinist expectation of certain truth justifiable? As James Moore has pointed out, Darwin "submitted his theory as a probable explanation of organic diversity because its material basis was the unlimited variation of plants and animals. Anti-Darwinists could demand that the theory be made absolutely certain because they believed in the fixity of biological species." Underlying the differences between the two positions was the opposition between an essentialist world of fixed forms and the fluid conceptualization of phenomenological description.<sup>10</sup>

A second theological response had less problem with the method Darwin employed than with his refusal to develop what seemed to them the thoroughly natural theological implications of his theory. Open to the view of nature as process, those like Henry Ward Beecher whom Moore labels Christian Darwinists sought to reconcile this view with belief in God as creator. If God's purposes are manifest in his creation, so ran their thinking, then Darwin's views

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., 166-73.

<sup>8</sup>Neal C. Gillespie, *Charles Darwin and the Problem of Creation* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1979) 82-108.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., 41-66.

<sup>10</sup>J. Moore, *The Post-Darwinian Controversies*, 193-216.

must be corrected to bring evolutionary theory into conformity with an understanding of divine power and justice. With a bewildering variety of stratagems, mostly dependent on the Lamarckian doctrine of the inheritance of acquired characteristics, these theologians reinserted a spiritual or teleological dynamic into the Darwinian evolutionary mechanism. Thus Darwin's natural selection was modified by various notions of direct divine agency, immanent divine power, or the divine immanence itself. In this new form, Darwinism was assimilated to a system of universal evolution. Successful adaptation was seen as proof of the beneficent design of the creator, of the divinely guided process which finally conferred upon humans the power to rise above nature and bring the process to its intended conclusion.<sup>11</sup>

If anti-Darwinists found fault with Darwin's science, and the Darwinists with his ethics and metaphysics, or lack thereof, a third group of respondents found no need to object to either of these aspects of his work. A small minority which included James Iverach and Audrey Moore in Great Britain and Asa Gray and George Frederick Wright in the United States, these Christian Darwinians believed that Darwin's theory, properly understood, posed no problems for Christian

theology. Coupling respect for the integrity of scientific investigation with a demand for a conception of God adequate for the confrontation with the new science, they altered neither the theory of natural selection nor their trinitarian orthodoxy in order to rescue purpose and human dignity from a hostile, mechanist world view. In continuity with the natural theology of William Paley and Thomas Malthus, from whom Darwin drew key insights in the development of his theory, these theologians held characteristically orthodox beliefs in the free and perpetual providence of God, the radical contingency of nature, and the necessity of empirical methods in science. These beliefs were highly consonant with, if not identical to, Darwin's explicit science and his implicit theology. As James Moore sees it, the teleology of these men "chastened and enlarged" the teleology of Paley. "Their theodicy, like that of Malthus, recognized the subordination of dysteleologies to larger ends. And their doctrine of creation involved that biblical conception of God and nature which had been held by orthodox naturalists and natural theologians since the dawn of modern science."<sup>12</sup>

The significance of this analysis of the post-Darwinian controversies is clear. In place of the usual picture of conflict between conservative theology on the one side and Darwinism, aided by a liberal theology, on the other—a picture which is widely held today<sup>13</sup>—Moore draws the battle lines between orthodox theology and genuine Darwinism on the one side, and on the other the mutually hostile forces of a covert philosophical essentialism and a liberal progressivism, both disguised in Christian dress. One is indeed surprised to find among Darwinians such ardent defenders of Calvinist orthodoxy as Wright and Benjamin Warfield, both contributors to *The Fundamentals*, that series of publications which in the early decades of our century gave its name to the movement which stands in bitter opposition to evolutionary theory today. But it must be noted

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., 217-241.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., 331-332. Cf. N. Gillespie, *Charles Darwin*, 142.

<sup>13</sup>See, e.g., Edward O. Wilson, "The Relation of Science to Theology," *Zygon* 15 (1980) 425-434.

that the key issues along this division of the field are not those of the authority of Scripture and the sufficiency of the evidence for evolution, but have rather to do with the nature of scientific method, the question of purpose in nature, the dignity of human being, and the understanding of the agency of God in the world. The possible consonance of Christian theology with Darwinian evolution depends, it would appear, on how the theologian deals with these issues. And when consonance occurs, it will be at a level deeper than the facts and the explanation of the facts. The consonance is between different realms of discourse which share common presuppositions even though they cannot produce entirely identical affirmations.

## II. CONSONANCE BETWEEN DARWIN AND BARTH

Moore's analysis suggests that the best friends of Darwin may be found in unexpected theological quarters, namely, among the orthodox. A good test of this suggestion would be to examine the theology of Karl Barth, especially in view of the fact that perhaps more than any other contemporary theologian, Barth has seen theology as a realm of discourse independent of all others. Indeed, Barth's reputation for antagonism to natural theology leads one to expect very little response to evolutionary thought from him, and at one level of reading, this expectation is

confirmed. References to Darwin in his *Church Dogmatics* are strikingly few, for example, and are colored by Barth's perennial polemic against the immanentism of nineteenth century theology. Darwin, argues Barth, was what the century deserved. Unable to see what distinguished the human from the animal even though the human capacities for intelligence and culture were far plainer than ever before—this “age of progress” had to have its Darwin. “Darwin and his followers had the advantage that the voice of this century spoke through them, and no anti-Darwinian theory could prevail against it.” Theologians who bowed to the spirit of the time could make their protest only within the framework of Darwinian dogma, and were then defeated if they did not know the nature of the human from another source. The knowledge of the human, Barth insists, “has roots in a very different soil.”<sup>14</sup>

Barth's comments are not based on intimate knowledge of the English and American post-Darwinian controversies—his “Darwinists” are exclusively German and stridently materialistic—and he treats all forms of Darwinian thought as one kind of “dogma.” Yet his interpretation at least partially agrees with Moore's analysis of the nineteenth century debates. Where it concerns Darwinist *dogma*—that is, evolutionary theory rendered as a world-view—as a source of the knowledge of human being, the theologian is fairly warned to turn to a properly theological source. According to Barth, all one can derive from the study of the relation of humans to animals and the rest of natural phenomena is “limited, conditioned and relative knowledge.” But since this is in fact all Darwin himself actually claimed for his science, there is much more potential for accord here than Barth himself is aware. Genuine science, writes Barth, “does not carry with it any world-view. It is content to observe, classify, investigate,

<sup>14</sup>Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics: III, The Doctrine of Creation, Part 2* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1960) 89-90.

understand and describe phenomena. It does not unfold any ontology of the cosmos.” Such science is “pure knowledge: pure in its differentiation from all pseudo-theology; pure in the fact that it confines itself to the study of phenomena but does not lose itself in the construction of world systems.” Good science, like good theology, knows that it views the cosmos only from “the standpoint of human observation and inference, of which it clearly recognizes the limits.”<sup>15</sup>

Thus Barth and Darwin clearly share a common concern for the proper delimitation of science, however different their orientations might otherwise be. Barth also insists, of course, that good science acknowledges alongside the sphere in which it is active the reality of another sphere “which is inaccessible to man, which as exact science it cannot deny, which it must at least accept to the extent that it forms the border of the first sphere, but before which it will halt, not attempting to trespass, but able only, as exact science, to maintain a respectful silence.” Since this statement appears to restrict the field in which science is allowed to operate, it is important to understand Barth's intention correctly. His version of the “two realms of discourse” comes into view here. Alongside the realm of exact science is the realm of dogmatic theology, which also for its part must observe a boundary line. As interpretation of the Word of God, dogmatic theology cannot present any knowledge about the independent being or nature of the cosmos. Theology is indeed concerned with the creation in its indissoluble connection with the covenant between God and humanity. The world surrounding the human being must be taken into account as it is illuminated by the Word and made known “as the sphere in which God's glory dwells and

in which He concerns Himself with man.” But the cosmos as such is beyond the limits of theology. When Christian theology has associated itself with various cosmologies in the course of its history, the association has always borne the “marks of contradiction between the underlying confession and the principles of the system with which it is conjoined.” Only where the Word of God is no longer heard does the cosmos become the object of concern and attention for the theologian, a “third force” between God and the human.<sup>16</sup>

Barth’s differentiation between the sciences as investigation of the phenomena of the cosmos and theology as concerned with the relationship between the human and God serves to keep either or both from becoming something alien and self-contradictory, namely, cosmology or world-view. And especially important for Barth is the need to prevent theological anthropology from being transformed into cosmology. We cannot assert, Barth argues, that the human “is the cosmos *in nuce*, that the essence of the cosmos is contained within the life of man, as though the cosmos could not exist over and above its special relation to man.” Although we do not know of the existence of the cosmos apart from the human, we cannot suppose “that its life is necessarily exhausted in this relation.”<sup>17</sup> The proper concern of theological anthropology does include an understanding of the *purpose* of the cosmos, since this is disclosed through the human. For all its limitation, the human is nonetheless “something which

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., 12-13.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., 10-11.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., 15-16.

heaven with all its secrets and earth with all its disclosures are not.” The human is “the object of God’s purpose for the cosmos, in which this purpose is revealed.” Again, not the human only, but all things in heaven and earth are the objects of the divine purpose, but “this purpose is not disclosed in all things; it is disclosed only in man.”<sup>18</sup>

Hence for Barth the mutual delimitation of science and theology is linked to a particular understanding of the place of the human being in the cosmos. The human being is that part of the creation in which the purpose of the cosmos which transcends the human is made known, “the point in the cosmos where the thoughts of its Creator are disclosed, illuminating man in his totality and also shedding light on the deepest and ultimate force which moves the cosmos.”

Here again Barth would seem to take sides with the Darwinians against Lamarckian Darwinists. The human is not in itself the goal or purpose of the creation, but merely the agent of the divine disclosure of that purpose. For Barth no more than for Darwin does God’s creative work need to culminate in the evolution and perfection of the human species. Particularly significant in this connection is that while for Barth (as for Darwin) both the animal body and animating soul of the human are determinations within the manifold of the natural creation, the human also has spirit, meaning that God is there for the human, making possible the being of the human as a whole in which soul animates the body. The spirit is “the nearest, most intimate and most indispensable factor” for an understanding of human existence, and yet is not identical with or even part of the human. On this basis, Barth is free to part company with all dualistic conceptions, Christian or otherwise, of the relationship between the body and the soul, and all monisms of either matter or spirit as well. With attention upon the whole person in its “life-act” in which both body and soul are present, each in its own way but also in relationship with the

other, Barth's interpretation of the facts of human behavior are if anything more boldly organic than most Darwinists.<sup>19</sup> In this instance, his theological presuppositions contribute materially to better science.

We have observed consonance between Darwinian science and Barth's theology with respect to the method of science, the question of purpose in the universe, and the dignity of the human being. If Barth were to have participated in the post-Darwinian controversies of the nineteenth century, or were his theology to be used in the creationist controversy today, on these issues we have a rather clear indication where he would stand. But the most important question remains. Given Barth's emphasis on the transcendence of God, is it possible for him to conceive of God's creative work in an evolutionary mode? Having shut the door on any cosmological speculation, from either science or theology, what can Barth say on this crucial point? The answer from Barth is elegantly simple: God's transcendence is his freedom in relationship with the creation.

God is free to be present with the creature by giving Himself and revealing Himself to it or by concealing Himself and withdrawing Himself from it. God is free to be and operate in the created world either as unconditioned or as conditioned. God is free to perform His work either within the framework

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., 16-17.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., 380-92, 431-32.

of what we call the laws of nature or outside it in the shape of miracle. God is free either to grant His immanence to nature by working at its heart or by exerting His sway at an infinite height above it....If only the Word of God breaks through the walls of our self-will, our worship of the freedom of God exercised in His immanence can have no bounds.<sup>20</sup>

Whatever exact science describes as the way God's creation works, God is free to do! For Barth as for the post-Darwinian orthodox, belief in the "free and perpetual providence of God", and the radical contingency of nature allows for an open conversation with natural science.

### III. RECONNOITERING THE PUBLIC DEBATE

We have attempted to show how the "two realms of discourse" strategy for relating science and theology, evolution and creation works in Barth's instance, using a well-documented but highly structured interpretation of the post-Darwinian controversies as context for our demonstration. Other theologians might have been used; Paul Tillich's discussion of the dimensions of human existence and Karl Rahner's mediation between Catholic tradition and evolutionary thought suggest themselves as similar resources. Alternative readings of the public context are also possible of course, which might render the outcome differently or more ambiguously, as the case may be. And finally, the general approach to the present debate by means of "the two realms" strategy may be rejected in favor of more complex conceptualizations of the relation between science and theology—those of Ian Barbour or Stephen Toulmin, for example.



With respect to these alternative choices, however, practical effectiveness with particular audiences in public debate has to be a primary concern. Because the debate will be conducted via the public media and in legislative halls, simplicity and clarity will be important factors, as well as the capacity to build alliances between different cultural groups. Our Moore/Barth coalition presents certain solid strengths. Moore's revisionist analysis focuses on a few key issues with admirable clarity. Barth's biblical grounding could be immensely influential among American Protestants. And there are at least a few influential scientists who see the issues along similar lines. Stephen Jay Gould, for example, eminent biologist and widely read science commentator, finds in strict Darwinian views the corrective for the "progressionism," "gradualism," "determinism," and "adaptationism" which corrupt evolutionary theory by making it serve as hope-bearing world-view. For Gould there are "no direct answers in nature to our hopes and to our moral dilemmas" nor are we supposed to look to the facts of nature for such answers. To find answers to moral dilemmas is "a job for all of us as human beings, not the job of scientists to find it in nature."<sup>21</sup> Would he object if the human being happened to be an orthodox Christian? Probably not, if that person recognized the integrity of science and the proper limits of theological reflection. With such partners for the conversation, one might reasonably expect evolutionary theory to find its rightful place in the circle of truth.

<sup>20</sup>Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics: II, The Doctrine of God, Part 1* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1957) 314-15.

<sup>21</sup>"Stephen Jay Gould's Extemporaneous Comments on Evolutionary Hope and Realities," *Darwin's Legacy*, ed. Charles L. Hamrum (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1983) 102-03.