

“HAPPY DARWIN DAY”

A sermon given at the First Parish in Wayland, Mass.

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by the Rev. Ken Sawyer

I don't know what plans you have for this coming week, what with the holidays and all. For all I know, you don't get either Tuesday or Wednesday off, even though Tuesday is the 201st anniversary of Lydia Maria Child's birth, and Wednesday, well Wednesday is Darwin Day, commemorating his birth, seven years after that of Ms. Child. As far as we know, the two never met. Any scandalous rumors about a relationship between them should be greeted with the greatest skepticism.

(By the way, for those of you who harbor a fascination with Maria Child, a distinguished author and ardent abolitionist who attended worship in this room in the 1850s, this afternoon there will be presentation about her by Jane Sciacca at the Sudbury Town Hall, co-sponsored by the Wayland Historical Society.)

But today I want to talk not about her, as I may have done too often already from this pulpit, but about Mr. Darwin, who, while not a Unitarian, had an even greater impact on our religion, as indeed he had on Western religion in general, and may in time on the religious life of all humans. He ranks among those few scientists who have historically and hugely influenced religious thought, like Copernicus, Galileo, and Newton.

The twentieth century brought us Einstein, Bohr, Heisenberg, Godel, and others whose ideas may end up altering religious perceptions in major and enduring ways. But so far, the nature of those possible alterations is unclear, though much discussed. I have been tempted to use our time here some Sunday morning to ponder the religious ramifications of quantum theory, and I have already talked about chaos theory and other aspects of contemporary science that seem to bear upon religious concerns. I do have my

own thoughts, though whenever I offer them, it is with deference to the real scientists among us.

Less murky by far by now is the role to be given with honor to Charles Darwin and his views. He remains the last person whose brilliance described the world that we live in so convincingly that religion itself, the way that thoughtful people understand reality, was unalterably changed. I don't think even Einstein achieved the same, not in making people rethink their religions.

Of course, not everyone accepted the changes Darwin's observations would seem to require. If those changes were smaller and easier, his place in history would not be so important. It is because his observations were of such enormous import that, like Copernicus, Galileo, and Newton before him, he still remains the source of considerable upset in some religious circles. It is for the same reason, we need to do him honor and homage, even if not a one of us, not even I, will get this coming Wednesday off from work for Darwin Day.

Darwin Day is a notion of fairly recent vintage. It has a bunch of participants and sponsors. It has its own website, as you may imagine: darwinday.org. There we learn that "Darwin Day celebrates several characteristics of both science and humanity. Charles Darwin symbolizes the adventurous spirit, the quest for knowledge and understanding, wonder, curiosity and exploration, plus, several humane qualities our species should encourage within each other such as kindness, consideration, tolerance, reflective thought, and a deep appreciation for the similarities, as well as the diversity, among us."

As it happens, Darwin really did embody all those desirable traits, along with others like humility. He was a good husband and father, and was much liked as well as admired by his fellow scientists. The sociobiologist Robert Wright notes that "By all accounts, [Darwin] was enormously civil and humane (except, perhaps, when circumstances made it hard to be both; he could grow agitated while denouncing slavery, and he might lose his temper if he saw a coachman abusing a horse). His gentleness of

manner and his utter lack of pretense, well marked from his youth, were uncorrupted by fame. ‘[O]f all eminent men that I have ever seen [Darwin] is beyond comparison the most attractive to me,’ observed the literary critic Leslie Stephen.”¹

Wright later writes that Darwin “was a good guy. The *Times* of London observed, ‘Great as he was, wide as was the reach of his intelligence, what endeared him to his many friends, what charmed all those who were brought into even momentary contact with him, was the beauty of his character.’”²

But by popularizing the theory of evolution, which operates by natural selection, complete with the notion that humankind came into being just like any other species, Darwin not only transformed biology, but did more than anyone else to usher in the modernist controversy within Christianity that changed everything, although not everybody.

Already, centuries before, churches had been forced to come to terms with the fact that whatever the Bible says, in fact the earth revolves around the sun and is just one of a bunch of planets that do so. Now Darwin proclaimed that here on earth, humans are not the point and center of creation, again, whatever the Bible may say. And for that matter, whatever the Bible may say, the creation of species – including our own – did not happen in six days some four thousand years ago, it took place over hundreds of millions of years, during which one species after another -- including ours -- evolved from another, or else didn’t and went extinct, by a perfectly natural process.

Darwinism arrived simultaneous with the other major challenge that modernism posed, the study of the Bible that began in Germany called higher criticism. It encouraged people to think of the Bible not as a guide to history or science, divinely inspired as a whole, but as religious literature, composed by particular people at particular times, and then edited and altered, some of it divinely inspired, if you want, but not necessarily so.

¹ Robert Wright, *The Moral Animal* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994) 14-15

² Wright 287

Many church folk were quite upset at these attacks on the existing ways of viewing the world, and Darwin became a symbol of impiety to them. Indeed, these many years later, he and his most basic ideas still upset many in the growing ranks of Protestant fundamentalists.

But some denominations never resisted the new information, the new understandings of the Bible, creation, and the ways of nature. True, upset over Darwin and higher criticism led to the beginnings of fundamentalism in America a hundred years ago, but back then that movement was relatively small in the midst of what is called by historians the age of Protestant Liberalism.

Some made the transition to a Darwinian outlook on creation by redefining the words in the Bible, so “days” doesn’t need to mean our 24-hour days but could mean millions of millennia. I wouldn’t be at all surprised if some of you like to hold on to the words of Genesis and do so that way.

But accepting evolution (higher criticism, too) came easily and quickly among Unitarians, who expected science and religion to harmonize, the one providing the facts, the other the meaning, ethics, community, and faith, consonant with those facts. And the fact is, how species derive is by a natural selection: those that survive are those that happen to be adapted for survival in a particular circumstance.

(I find this a sobering thought, by the way, as we humans have prospered enormously by virtue of our fortuitously capable brains, thumbs, and whatnot, but we also seem to have a terrible inclination to damage or kill each other. At least many of us do, and those big brains will not contribute to our fitness for survival if put to destructive use. Quite the contrary.)

My encyclopedia tells me that Darwinism has been supplemented and modified by modern knowledge, “but in its basic outline Darwinism is now universally accepted by scientists.” But as a religious matter, the controversial issues won’t go away, and even some scientists – not many, but some – are challenging

one central tenet of Darwinianism, the neutral nature of the selection process, its gratuitousness.

I find it useful to separate these two challenges to evolution. The first is that Darwin was wrong, and the Bible is literally true – there were these two first humans that God made on the spot some thousands of years ago, and all the artifacts that apparently testify to humanity’s longer existence are just the ways God made things when he did, several thousand years ago, or we err in dating them, or whatever.

It’s hard to understand how that argument survived into the twentieth century, and it didn’t much outside the United States. That it is still going strong in the twenty-first century is evidence of the human need to believe the Bible has all the answers without fail or mistake, whatever those Germans or Charles Darwin say and despite every shred of actual evidence.

The other argument is less easily dismissed – that life on earth did indeed evolve over time, but Darwin was wrong about natural selection in believing that nature is without a plan, a conscious intent, the goal of which is us. Not you and I in particular, but humankind. We are the culmination of Intelligent Design, as this outlook is often referred to.

I’m sure many of you have seen this case made: that all the conditions here on earth had to be exactly as they were for the process to begin and continue that led to life that led to life on land that led to mammals that led to us.

In its religious form, part of the point of this design is the creation of us conscious beings capable of being aware of, appreciating, and praising the creator. But as you’ll see if you go to their Intelligent Design website, many adherents disavow a religious connection, presumably because they hope to have their viewpoint presented in schools as science. This has led to cynicism about the movement on the part of many biologists and educators, who consider Intelligent Design to be a sneaky way of trying to get a form of creationism into the classroom.

But Intelligent Design people counter that it's the evolutionists who are practicing religion, specifically "Naturalism, ... the doctrine or belief that everything we see in the universe and nature is the result of purely natural causes, i.e. chance and natural law, and that design inferences are invalid."³

Even though I believe in a purely naturalistic understanding of evolution myself, and with no small conviction, indeed, believe in it about as much as I believe in anything, I think it's an interesting discussion. After all, those old-time deists like Jefferson, Franklin, and Washington, who look so religiously radical in retrospect, believed that the universe was intelligently designed.

As opposed to the literal truth of the story Adam and Eve, the concept of Intelligent Design still has its adherents among the thoughtful, even as it leaves others worked up or cold. I happen to know there is that diversity in this room. I have been told by a parishioner who had given it much study and thought that there had to be a plan at work in creation, so human life had an inherent meaning in the maker's mind. And then there are naturalists like me, who believe in chance and natural law (and will as well), period.

To hear the Intelligent Design folk talk, you'd think Darwin was clearly on my side. But the matter is less clear. In his fine little autobiography he wrote about his struggles over whether to believe in God. One source of the conviction that god exists that he found weighty was "the extreme difficulty or impossibility of conceiving this immense and wonderful universe, including man with his capacity for looking backwards and far into futurity, as the result of blind chance or necessity. When thus reflecting I feel compelled to look to a First Cause having an intelligent mind in some degree analogous to that of man; and I deserve to be called a Theist.

³ Press release, 1/5/00, on the Idnet website

“This conclusion was strong in my mind about the time, as far as I can remember, when I wrote the Origin of Species;”⁴ and you might wonder why the folks at Intelligent Design dislike him so. But he goes on, “since that time it has very gradually with many fluctuations become weaker.”⁵ At which point he begins to wonder how the human mind, which he has posited “developed from a mind as low as that possessed by the lowest animal, can 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 to us; and I for one must be content to remain an Agnostic.”⁶ And on he goes to describe how a person like him, unsure of God or an afterlife, can have a rule for life, which he says is “only to follow those impulses and instincts which are strongest or seem to him the best ones.”⁷

As Darwin had to concede, whether life is an accident or part of a plan is ultimately beyond human knowing. My life has confirmed my own belief. But I know that others have found life has taught them the opposite.

When I was preparing to preach about God last month, I came upon an old quotation by the science fiction writer Frederick Pohl, whose wife taught Sunday school in the Unitarian church I attended as a teen. Pohl wrote, “God is either of transcendental concern or doesn’t matter at all, and which depends on you. Evidence for the existence of God is utterly conclusive to people who are already convinced, and not worth examining to people who aren’t. It depends on you.”

Maybe Intelligent Design is like that. So much of what the world has seen would seem to argue for randomness to me, for naturalism pure and simple – and not just history but my own experience, and the vastness of space and time, the cosmic insignificance of our little planet, pretty as it can be. But Darwin

⁴ Charles Darwin, *The Autobiography of Charles Darwin: 1809-1882* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1958) 92-93

⁵ Darwin 93

⁶ Darwin 93, 94

⁷ darwin 94

may be right: the most we can know is that none of us can know for sure.

You know, when I began writing this sermon, I thought I'd be spending time on that biology professor in Texas who recently made the news because he won't write recommendations to graduate school for students who don't believe in evolution. He's being sued. Probably some of you have been wondering, when is Ken going to get to that biology professor in Texas?

Well, it's not going to happen. There just isn't time. You can figure out the case yourselves over coffee or tea. I say so confident that by the time I preach on all this again, maybe some Darwin Day to come, another case will have arisen, or fifty by then, as civilization continues to come to terms with the amazing discovery made by the amazing mind of Charles Robert Darwin.