

The Religion of Charles Darwin

Church Life

Good Morning! My name is Kirk Newport and I'd like to welcome you to the U2C3. I'm a member of this congregation and I have the privilege of conducting this morning's service. Our Minister, Rev. Philip Douglas is enjoying his Sunday off, but he will return next week.

If you're visiting us for the first time, I would like to extend a special welcome to you. If you would like to introduce yourself or if you have a guest that you'd like to introduce please feel welcome to do so.

Are there any very brief announcements?

Chalice Lighting (*Read - light - sing*)

May this flame, symbol of transformation since time began, fire our curiosity, strengthen our wills, and sustain our courage as we seek what is good within and around us, appreciation of our shared hopes and values.

Opening Words

It has been said that Church is a place where you get to practice what it means to be human. So it might be wise to consider the following. We humans are social beings. We come into the world as the result of others' actions. We survive here in dependence on others. Whether we like it or not, there is hardly a moment of our lives when we do not benefit from others' activities. For this reason it is hardly surprising that most of our happiness arises in the context of our relationships with others.

Offertory

Generosity honors the real world. This church honors the real world also, and it lives by the generosity of all of us. The morning offering will be given and received in grateful.

Meditation (Lullaby by Alfred Lord Tennyson)

Sweet and low, sweet and low,
Wind of the western sea,
Low, low, breathe and blow,
Wind of the western sea!
Over the rolling waters go,
Come from the dropping moon, and blow,
Blow him again to me;
While my little one, while my pretty one sleeps.

Sleep and rest, sleep and rest,
Father will come to thee soon;
Rest, rest, on mother's breast,
Father will come to thee soon;
Father will come to his babe in the nest,
Silver sails all out of the west
Under the silver moon:
Sleep, my little one, sleep, my pretty one, sleep.

Closing Words

*Cherish your doubts, for doubt is the servant of truth.
Question your convictions, for beliefs too tightly held strangle the mind and its natural wisdom.
Suspect all certitudes, for the world whirls on -- nothing abides.
Yet in our inner rooms full of doubt, inquiry and suspicion, let a corner be reserved for trust.
For without trust there is no space for communities to gather or for friendships to be forged.
Indeed, this is the small corner where we connect -- and reconnect -- with each other.*

Reading #1 (Charles Darwin)

I am a strong advocate for free thought on all subjects, yet it appears to me (whether rightly or wrongly) that direct arguments against Christianity & theism produce hardly any effect on the public. Freedom of thought is best promoted by the gradual illumination of men's minds, which follow[s] from the advance of science. It has, therefore, been always my object to avoid writing on religion, & I have confined myself to science. I may, however, have been unduly biased by the pain which it would give some members of my family, if I aided in any way direct attacks on religion.

Reading #2 (Alan Watts)

Human purposes are pursued within an immense circling universe which does not seem to me to have purpose in our sense, at all. Nature is much more playful than purposeful, and the probability that it has no specific goals for the future need not strike one as a defect. On the contrary, the processes of nature as we see them in the surrounding world and in the involuntary aspects of our own organisms are much more like art than business, politics, or religion. They are especially like the arts of music and dancing, which unfold themselves without aiming at future destinations. No one imagines that a symphony is supposed to improve in quality as it goes along, or that the whole object of playing it is to reach the finale. The point of music is discovered in every moment of playing and listening to it. It is the same, I feel, with the greater part of our lives, and if we are unduly absorbed in improving them we may forget altogether to live them.

The Religion of Charles Darwin

Kirk Newport

February 15, 2009

There's a short but telling scene from the 1970 novel *The French Lieutenant's Woman* by the English novelists John Fowles. The story takes place in 1860's England and it's a fascinating look into the Victorian era with all its style, formality, sexual angst and the brutal reality which shaped the lives of both the upper and lower classes. Britannia ruled the seas and the empire ran like clockwork. But there was tension and a sense of unsettledness in the lives of almost everyone. The industrial revolution was transforming the landscape and new discoveries and ideas permeated the culture. In the novel, two of the principle characters, modern, educated and progressive men, are about to have an extremely important discussion. The nature of the conversation is so solemn, that one of the characters, a medical doctor, takes out a book and swears both of them to truthfulness and confidentiality. The book is held outward between the two of them, followed by a nod of unspoken mutual acknowledgement and reverence for its merit. They had taken a sacred oath on the sacred writings.

The book of course, was not the King James Bible, the customary source of truth and authority, but *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection*. And in case you missed it, this past February 12th was the bicentennial of the birth of its author, Charles Darwin. He was born on February 12th, 1809. Curiously, the same exact day as Abraham Lincoln. This year also marks the 150th anniversary of the publication of his monumental and still controversial book. And just like the two men in the novel, there's still a dramatic appreciation and reverence that many still hold for the Darwin and his accomplishments. An organization has formed to organize events and celebrate every February 12th as Darwin Day. Quoting their website:

Darwin Day is an international celebration of science and humanity held on or around February 12, the day that Charles Darwin was born on in 1809. Specifically, it celebrates the discoveries and life of Charles Darwin -- the man who first described biological evolution via natural selection with scientific rigor. More generally, Darwin Day expresses gratitude for the enormous benefits that scientific knowledge, acquired through human curiosity and ingenuity, has contributed to the advancement of humanity.

Just so there's no confusion, this has absolutely nothing whatsoever to do with the famous, or infamous, *Darwin Awards* that you might have heard about. If you're not familiar with the Darwin Awards, let me assure you, you don't want to receive one. Not even an honorable mention.

To give you just some of the flavor of the Darwin Awards, here are some recipients. To receive an Honorable Mention, you need to do something really stupid and embarrassing. But the full Darwin Award requires a much greater sacrifice.

In Czechoslovakia, a thief made his way to the bottom of an old mine shaft, determined to remove a valuable steel cable hanging from the elevator shaft above. After considerable effort, he finally cut through the cable with his hack saw. At that instant, the counterbalance, no longer held in check, started to move silently downwards, accelerating until it reached the bottom of the shaft.

My personal favorite is the lawyer that enjoyed showing visitors to his high rise office building just how strong the floor to ceiling window actually was. As a practical demonstration of its strength, he would back away, get a running start and hurl himself against the window.

These are just some of the recipients of the Darwin Awards, (and I'm quoting) *Named in honor of Charles Darwin, the father of evolution, the Darwin Awards commemorate those who improve our gene pool by removing themselves from it.*

Poor, poor, Charles Darwin. He wouldn't have appreciated the Darwin Awards. It wasn't his style. And of all people, he doesn't need any more bad press. First he killed God, destroyed religion and morality. And as if he has nothing else left on his plate, now he's killing dumbbells for sport. He could have died an obscure naturalist. He sat on his book for 20 years, content to leave well enough alone. But circumstances beyond his control forced his hand and he's been catching hell and admiration ever since.

It didn't start well, either. Less than a year after the publication of the *Origin of Species*, the first large public debate on evolution was organized at Oxford University. Thomas Huxley, Darwin's advocate and the Anglican Bishop, Samuel Wilberforce squared off in a classic mano-a-mano debate. Only it wasn't much of a debate. At one point, Wilberforce inquired if it was Huxley's grandmother or grandfather that was descended from monkeys. Huxley retorted that he would be prouder to have descended from a monkey than from a man that abused his position of authority and rhetoric to obscure the truth. All hell broke loose. Students in the background began chanting "monkey, monkey, monkey." Darwin's old dinner partner on the HMS Beagle, the now Admiral FitzRoy stormed out holding the Bible in the air, all the while shouting "the book, the book!" 150 years later, not much has changed.

Charles Darwin was born a child of privilege and of some distinction. His grandfather was Erasmus Darwin, a notable 18th century naturalist and poet in his own right. His father was a successful physician and the Darwin family was wealthy by any definition of the time. Charles lacked for nothing and was sent to the best schools where he was expected to continue in his father's footsteps. But as many of us have realized the hard way, children don't always follow the plan. He was a mediocre student at best and was fonder of hunting than studying. None the less, his father's connections got him into the University Of Edinburgh Medical School. Although Charles had no problem cutting up dead animals, he was surprisingly squeamish when it came to the various unpleasanties associated the medical profession, and after about one year and dropped out. Returning home, his father gave him a little candid criticism. "You care for nothing but shooting, dogs, and rat-catching, and you will be a disgrace to yourself and all your family." Ouch!

Plan B was to have Charles do what many ne'er-do-well sons of the upper classes do. Any guesses? What else but the Ministry! For Charles, this meant a career as an Anglican country parson.

This involved something of a theological realignment, because the Darwin's had been traditionally Unitarians. But even though the Darwin family was on the liberal end of the theological spectrum, Charles could probably have been classified as a complacent, conventional Christian. Like most people, he was imbued with the culture of his time and the traditional biblical accounts of the origin of the world. Personally, he had little interest, reason or motivation to question them.

He actually took to the idea of becoming a country parson at the beginning, but not for entirely honorable reasons. He figured the work was easy - a sermon once a week, Board meetings, ect. We know the drill. But more importantly; it would provide him time to pursue his outdoor hobbies, hunting and bug collecting. Money was always a non-issue, so again, with his father's influence, Charles was sent packing to Cambridge. His theological studies went better than medical school, but he took an increasing interest in botany, geology and taxonomy. In one of the unintended consequences of colonialism, England became home to increasingly large collections of plants and animals from every corner of the realm.

In one of history's most fortuitous events, a Cambridge professor knew of an opportunity to accompany a survey ship, the HMS Beagle on a 5-year voyage that would circumnavigate the globe. He suggested that Charles accept the position. In addition to collecting animal and plant specimens, a socially acceptable companion was also needed for the Captain of the ship, Robert FitzRoy. Charles' skeptical father initially thought the voyage was just another stupid waste of time and it took the intervention of an uncle to gain his father's consent. So off the 22-year-old dinner companion - naturalist Darwin sailed to South America, the Galapagos Islands, and eventually into history with arguably the greatest scientific insight ever.

Without boring you with a biology lecture, Charles returned home 5 years later with a lot of dead animals, a big notebook full of observations and budding ideas about how the amazing diversity of life was tied together. The idea that life has changed over time wasn't new, but Darwin was the first to offer a rigorous and logical explanation for it. And in the *Origin of Species*, he explained how new species could emerge from the acquisition of advantageous physical traits that gave them a reproductive edge over their competition. This was the beginning of the oversimplified "survival of the fittest" mantra.

Darwin's explanation for the development of earth's incredible biodiversity was broadly accepted by the scientific community even in his own lifetime. 150 years later, the evidence is even stronger. Our understanding of genetics, comparative anatomy, biochemistry and the fossil record have only added other lines of evidence that Darwin never had access to. He probably would have been very satisfied to know how it developed.

But in the United States, the debate goes on without a letup. A 2007 Gallup Poll indicates the American public is divided evenly down the middle, a statistic that hasn't changed much in over 20 years. There continues to be numerous, unending, running legal battles over evolutionary biology in public education.

Darwin never relished his role as a troublemaker, but his career does seem to mark a significant turning point of the relationship between religion and science. Prior to Darwin, most scientists were theists, or deists at worst, who viewed their scientific discoveries as the illumination of God's laws. Darwin did not. And it's probably fair to say that the majority of scientists after Darwin were not theistically inclined. Darwin's close friend and associate, Thomas Huxley, personally led the charge, stating that science was poised to assume religion's role as a method to understand the universe and man's nature. It was Huxley that coined the term agnostic. Darwin didn't relish the "sting of battle," like Huxley, but his spirit was all encompassing.

I've often wondered why *Darwinism* is so controversial. And notice how just the term *Darwinism* is so anthropomorphic. It's his idea! He did it! And for many, it's caused a lot of trouble and it's his fault. Again, poor Charles Darwin.

But it was a pretty disorienting discovery. Prior to *The Origin of Species*, there was a long intellectual and scientific history that emphasized the immutable elements of nature; Atoms, forces and laws of nature didn't change. Isaac Newton, Darwin's countryman, saw the forces that governed the orbits of the planets as predictable and beautiful signs of God's design. Looking at it today, some people might say something like, the evidence was every where. Evolution should have obvious. Easy for us to say, but Darwin was bucking even the scientific culture of his era, not to mention the religious establishments. Darwin's unsettling revelation was that life itself was not immutable and that our world was unpredictable.

Much to their credit, the official position of the Catholic Church is to accept the evidence for the evolutionary development of life on earth. In a 1996 message to the Pontifical Academy of Sciences, Pope John Paul II declared that: "New scientific knowledge has led us to the conclusion that the theory of evolution is no longer a mere hypothesis." Pope Benedict XVI, recently called the debate over evolution "an absurdity because on one hand there is much scientific proof in favor of evolution, which appears as a reality that we must see and which enriches our understanding of life and being as such." Even so, they still believe that evolution is God's design.

Other people seem more than comfortable to make evolution their religion. I have a problem with that. But rather than explain it in my own words, it's better summarized by the late astronomer Carl Sagan:

The idea that God is an oversized white male with a flowing beard who sits in the sky and tallies the fall of every sparrow is ludicrous. But if by “God” one means the set of physical laws that govern the universe, then there is clearly such a God. But this God is emotionally unsatisfying ... it does not make much sense to pray to the law of gravity.

I don't like either option. I doubt that a deity pulls strings to get desired results and I'm not comfortable with some sort of warm fuzzy form of pantheistic nature worship because, quite frankly, the natural world seems to be indifferent to any morals and values that I would want to worship.

If I may to be so bold as to offer a very modest criticism of Darwin, it's that he altered the foundation of how we understand ourselves, but then assumed the classic “I just work here” attitude when it came to dealing with the consequences. He did his best to avoid the philosophical implications of his science. So here we are, 150 years latter, still trying to come to grips with it.

The troubling “it” is something Darwinian supporters, opponents and even I don't like. We all tend to place man at the end point of evolution as if there were some direction or purpose to it that leads to a satisfying resolution. We're very proud of ourselves! We've arrived at this wonderful place where we understand so much. But there isn't any end to it. If life is a complicated mechanism of biochemistry and chance events, we'll continue to change. And if our morality is based upon our biology, then our morality will change as well.

Darwin seems to have solved the dilemma with his own example. After returning home from his voyage, well before he got serious about publishing his book, he married his first cousin Emma Wedgwood. This is the same Wedgwood of china and tableware fame. Emma was a devout Christian. He was sensitive of her religious faith and clearly valued their relationship more than he valued theological debate.

Together they had 10 children. By all accounts, they were happy together. But there were tragedies in their lives. Two of their children died in infancy and their daughter, Anne, died at the age of ten, probably of tuberculosis. It was the death of Ann that probably severed Charles' waning belief in Christianity.

Still, the family supported the local Anglican Church with money and charitable work. Charles was on friendly terms with the Deacon, but he always took a walk after seeing the family to the church gate for Sunday morning services. Inside the church, Emma was careful not to participate in the Nicene Creed. Any guesses? She was a Unitarian!

I almost wish I could tell you about his scandalous misadventures, but there is nothing whatsoever to tell about Charles' secret life. He doesn't appear to have had one. He was the very model of a proper Victorian husband and father. In the 40 years after his voyage, he never left England again. He only occasionally even left his home just south of London, usually to visit new exhibits at the Royal Museum of Natural History.

At the age of 73, he died at home surrounded by his wife and family. But even in death, controversy followed him. A fantasy story was created by an English fundamentalist who claimed she too was at Darwin's death bed, and found him singing hymns and praying for forgiveness. For friends and enemies alike, he's never been an easy man to let go of.

My concluding words are those of Darwin:

I fully subscribe to the judgement of those writers who maintain that of all the differences between man and the lower animal, the moral sense of conscience is by far the most important....It is the most noble of all the attributes of man.

Amen

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5Q55z6EsL8M&feature=related>