

Do You Not Know? Have You Not Heard?

Isa. 40.21–31

A Sermon on the Occasion of the 200th Anniversary of the Birth of Charles Darwin
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The Chapel of Saint Timothy and Saint Titus
Concordia Seminary

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God speaks through the prophet Isaiah:

²¹ Do you not know? Have you not heard?
Has it not been told you from the beginning?
Have you not understood from the foundations of the earth?

...

²⁸ Do you not know? Have you not heard?
The Lord is the everlasting God,
the Creator of the ends of the earth.

Well, that is one opinion. ... But the man born 200 years ago today regarded it as the prime example of uninformed ignorance. You see, today is being celebrated around the world as *Darwin Day*: the international celebration of *the most influential man* in the last two centuries of human intellectual progress, *Charles Darwin*.

Everyone knows that Darwin is given the credit for being the father of the theory of evolution, even though that theory was around for at least a century before Darwin. Fewer people know that Darwin neither invented or discovered the theory of evolution; he merely popularized it. And while some people *still* try to maintain that Darwin did not *really* believe that man was descended from apes, Darwin's own words make his position clear:

We thus learn that man is descended from a hairy, tailed quadruped, probably arboreal in its habits, and an inhabitant of the Old World.¹

It is not surprising that, holding such a view, Darwin was widely criticized by the church when these words were published in his 1871 volume *The Descent of Man*. It is also not surprising that some of the same churches that criticized Darwin's views *then* are falling all over

¹ C. R. Darwin, *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex*, 2nd edition (London: John Murray, 1882), 632.

themselves *now* to “make amends” for their past mistakes and use this this occasion of his 200th birthday to endorse Darwin’s views. Just last September the Church of England ‘apologized’ to Darwin in these words:

Charles Darwin: 200 years from your birth, the Church of England owes you an apology for misunderstanding you and, by getting our first reaction wrong, encouraging others to misunderstand you still.²

A statement from on the Church of England’s web site explains:

Darwin’s meticulous application of the principles of evidence-based research was not the problem. His theory caused offence because it challenged the view that God had created human beings as an entirely different kind of creation to the rest of the animal world.

But whilst it is not difficult to see why evolutionary thinking was offensive at the time, on reflection it is not such an earth-shattering idea. Yes, Christians believe that God became incarnate as a human being in the person of Jesus and thereby demonstrated God’s especial love for humanity. But how can that special relationship be undermined just because we develop a different understanding of the processes by which humanity came to be? It is hard to avoid the thought that the reaction against Darwin was largely based on what we would now call the ‘yuk factor’ (an emotional not an intellectual response) when he proposed a lineage from apes to humans.

But for all that the reaction now seems misjudged³

Oh really? Well, considering the source, perhaps we ought not to be surprised. Not to be outdone, this week officials from the Church of Rome completed their own embrace of Darwinism, which began with a statement from Pope Pius XII in 1950 and continued with the re-affirmation of that position by Pope John Paul II in 1996. Two days ago Archbishop Gianfranco Ravasi, head of the Pontifical Council for Culture, stated that Darwin’s theory of evolution was compatible with Christian faith, saying, “In fact, what we mean by evolution is the world as created by God.”⁴ Not to be outdone, Father Giuseppe Tanzella-Nitti, Professor of Theology at the Pontifical Santa Croce University in Rome, went further, claiming that Darwin’s teachings had been anticipated by both St. Augustine and Thomas Aquinas. *Boy, would they have been surprised to hear that!*

But before *we* join in this birthday love-fest, perhaps we ought to think a little more deeply about where Darwin has actually led us. You see, Darwin did not simply construct what the Anglican Church called “a different understanding of the processes by which humanity came

² Rev Dr Malcolm Brown (Director of Mission and Public Affairs for the Church of England), “Good Religion Needs Good Science” quoted from the Church of England web site at <http://www.cofe.anglican.org/darwin/malcolmbrown.html> on 11 February, 2009.

³ Ibid.

⁴ As cited by Richard Owen in the article “Vatican Buries the Hatchet with Charles Darwin” in *The London Times*, as quoted on 11 February 2009 from http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/comment/faith/article5705331.ece#_jmp0_.

to be.” Darwin himself made it clear what he thought about the idea that God created the world. Darwin wrote:

The universe we observe has precisely the properties we should expect if there is, at bottom, no design, no purpose, no evil, no good, nothing but blind, pitiless indifference.⁵

And of the notion of the existence of God, Darwin wrote:

Formerly I was led by feelings ... to the firm conviction of the existence of God, and of the immortality of the soul. ... But now the grandest scenes would not cause any such convictions and feelings to rise in my mind.⁶

Ideas have consequences. And it is clear from Darwin’s later writings that his ideas not only led him to deny the Biblical account of the creation of man, but also to deny the existence of God and the human soul.

But if those were the only consequences of Darwin’s ideas, then we in the church would simply have joined Isaiah in saying to him what we might say to any sinner:

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But as I said, *ideas have consequences*, and influential ideas like those of Darwin have *far-reaching consequences, consequences that go far beyond their starting point*. Before we leave Darwin’s birthday party, we should count up the consequences of Darwin’s ideas:

- One of Darwin’s first and most influential disciples was German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche. Embracing Darwin’s denial of God, and promoting Darwin’s idea of the emergence of a master European race as the natural outcome of the process of evolution, Nietzsche in turn inspired Adolph Hitler to create a political system that embodied the fascist version of Darwin’s theory. **The result: 20 million dead.**
- Another of Darwin’s disciples took seriously Darwin’s vision of universe characterized by ‘blind pitiless indifference’ and his recognition that mankind may need set aside pity for individuals for the sake of the survival of the race. This disciple had a different set of political presuppositions, and Lenin created a political system that embodied the communist version of Darwin’s theory. **The result: 100 million dead.**
- Yet another disciple of Darwin read these words of his:

With savages, the weak in body or mind are soon eliminated; and those that survive commonly exhibit a vigorous state of health. We civilised men, on

⁵ As cited by the web site “Charles Darwin Quotes.” Quoted on 11 February 2009 from http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/authors/c/charles_darwin.html#_jmp0_

⁶ Charles Darwin, *Recollections of the Development of My Mind and Character*, later published as his *Autobiography* (1887). Quoted on 11 February 2009 from <http://www.cofe.anglican.org/darwin/faith.html>.

the other hand, do our utmost to check the process of elimination; we build asylums for the imbecile, the maimed, and the sick; we institute poor-laws; and our medical men exert their utmost skill to save the life of every one to the last moment. ... Thus the weak members of civilised societies propagate their kind. No one who has attended to the breeding of domestic animals will doubt that this must be highly injurious to the race of man. It is surprising how soon a want of care, or care wrongly directed, leads to the degeneration of a domestic race; but excepting in the case of man himself, hardly any one is so ignorant as to allow his worst animals to breed....⁷

And believing these words from Darwin, Margaret Sanger first promoted the eugenic ideal of preventing the breeding of the unfit (which she estimated at one-half of the American population), and then formed Planned Parenthood to work for the the elimination of the unfit through controlling their birth-rate. **The result: the promotion of abortion as a form of birth control and 35 million dead in America alone, not to mention a president who just recently signed an executive order that will make America the world's largest exporter of abortion and the deaths of untold millions more around the world, with *you* paying the bill.**

We could go on. ... But someone will protest and say that it is not fair to blame Charles Darwin for the excesses of those followed him. That *might* perhaps be true, if those who followed him were acting contrary to his ideas. But they were not; Nietzsche and Hitler, Lenin and Stalin, and Margaret Sanger were doing nothing but putting into practice the obvious and direct implications of Darwin's ideas. They might have become evil on their own, but they became exactly the evil that they were because they embraced Darwin's universe of 'blind pitiless indifference' and his belief in a purely material man who had not only the *right*, but the *duty* to crush all opposition and to prevail in nature's struggle in which only the fittest survive. They are Darwin's children, and their ideas are extensions of his own, a putrid excrescence from the anus of hell, an excrescence responsible for more than 150 million victims ... and counting.

And what of you? Are you one of Darwin's children? I ask because, you see, there are plenty of people around, even within our Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod, and even on this campus, who think that all of this is much ado about nothing, a debate over some obscure, even trivial, point of theology that does not really matter much at the end of the day. But if you will bear with me one more moment, I would like to explain why this does matter, why it is not, as the Anglican church says, just “a different understanding of the processes by which humanity came to be.”

On one level it matters a great deal what we think man is, or shall we say, what we think *we* are. It matters because what we think we are shapes what we become, just as it did for Hitler

⁷ Darwin, *Descent*, 168-169.

and Lenin and Sanger. But on a second and ultimately more important level *the Christian doctrine of creation is not so much about what we are as it is about what God is*. We tend to think of the omnipotence of God expressed through His creative acts as a nice theological theory. It is more than that; it is fundamentally and essentially tied to the Gospel, because it is tied to God's ability to save.

Like Darwin, the paganism of the ancient world held the view that matter was eternal. As a result, the ancients thought that no god was all-powerful; no-god had sufficient power to do everything that he wanted. By contrast, the Biblical doctrine of creation and the many miracles that God performs in both the Old and New Testaments comfort us with the confidence that the One True God *has the power necessary to accomplish His will and carry out that which He intends*. And this is a source of comfort to us because in Jesus Christ God has revealed that His will and intention is to *save you*. Only the all-powerful creator can bend water and bread and wine to His will and use them as means to give you His grace. Only the all-powerful creator can give life to dead flesh and raise you from the grave to everlasting life in Him. It is finally *that* confidence that is at stake in the debate over Darwin's views.

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And because He is the creator, He has the power to deliver on His promise to save you in Jesus Christ. Now you have heard. Now you know. Go in peace in Christ Jesus who both made you, and made you His own. Amen.