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2. The Impact of Darwinism on Religion

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2. The Impact of Darwinism on Religion

Abstract

The tremendous impact of evolution upon Western religious thought resulted in large part from the sweeping implications of the theory itself, which challenged the basic tenets of traditional dogma. It is difficult to understand the nature and intensity of the controversy that developed, however, if it is not understood that the challenge was given additional weight by the ascendancy of science in the nineteenth century. In considering the influence of Darwin's findings on religion, as on other areas of thought, it should be kept in mind that the theory of evolution was presented to a world that was observing a period of scientific achievement far surpassing anything witnessed during any earlier epoch in history. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

Contemporary Civilization, Charles Darwin, Evolution, Western Religion, Theology, Old Testament

Disciplines

Comparative Methodologies and Theories | Ecology and Evolutionary Biology | Evolution | Religion

Comments

This is a part of [Section XV: Biology and the Rise of the Social Sciences](#). The [Contemporary Civilization](#) page lists all additional sections of *Ideas and Institutions of Western Man*, as well as the [Table of Contents](#) for both volumes.

More About Contemporary Civilization:

From 1947 through 1969, all first-year Gettysburg College students took a two-semester course called Contemporary Civilization. The course was developed at President Henry W.A. Hanson's request with the goal of "introducing the student to the backgrounds of contemporary social problems through the major concepts, ideals, hopes and motivations of western culture since the Middle Ages."

Gettysburg College professors from the history, philosophy, and religion departments developed a textbook for the course. The first edition, published in 1955, was called *An Introduction to Contemporary Civilization and Its Problems*. A second edition, retitled *Ideas and Institutions of Western Man*, was published in 1958 and 1960. It is this second edition that we include here. The copy we digitized is from the Gary T. Hawbaker '66 Collection and the marginalia are his.

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2. The Impact of Darwinism on Religion

The tremendous impact of evolution upon Western religious thought resulted in large part from the sweeping implications of the theory itself, which challenged the basic tenets of traditional dogma. It is difficult to understand the nature and intensity of the controversy that developed, however, if it is not understood that the challenge was given additional weight by the ascendancy of science in the nineteenth century. In considering the influence of Darwin's findings on religion, as on other areas of thought, it should be kept in mind that the theory of evolution was presented to a world that was observing a period of scientific achievement far surpassing anything witnessed during any earlier epoch in history.

There have been relatively few discoveries or events in history that have altered man's permanent vision of humanity's role in the universe. The findings of Charles Darwin, like those of Copernicus, forced men to adjust their thinking to a less flattering and ego-satisfying view of their cosmic significance and uniqueness than had been compatible with their previous knowledge. Any such adjustment must be, at least temporarily, in conflict with those religious beliefs which had supported men in their earlier, and more comfortable, position. The theological reactions to Darwin, when seen in this light, were inevitable. At first examination, the fact of man's intimate connection with other forms of animal life appeared to be a direct refutation of much of the Old Testament. The idea of man's having been created in the image of God and the Biblical interpretation of man's creation and fall were hardly

compatible with the possibility of man's having evolved from a single cell. Further, it was asked, if man and ape had a common ancestor, how could man believe that he was the end and purpose of the creation? How could his soul be accounted for in the evolutionary process? These and many other problems caused some people to reject not only the traditional religious doctrines, but their faith in religion, substituting for this a faith in science.

There were two other significant and widespread reactions to the theory of evolution. On the one hand, in Darwin's time as today, there were those who would attack any conclusions that cast doubt on orthodox religious dogma. Benjamin Disraeli (1804-1881), the British statesman, speaking in the House of Lords, expressed the thinking of many men of his time (and many men of our time) when he said, "The question is this -- is man an ape or an angel? My Lord, I am on the side of the angels." In America the outstanding naturalist, Louis Agassiz (1807-1873), joined those who shared this opinion, claiming that Darwinism was blasphemous and a fad. It is noteworthy that among American scientists Agassiz was virtually alone in maintaining this view.

Between the two positions already described stood those who could not deny the validity of Darwin's conclusions and were troubled by the implications of evolution, but who at the same time were not willing or able to deny their religious faith. A reassessment of religious tenets was undertaken by these people who did not believe that any conflict existed between science and religion which could not be solved by a judicious combination of faith and reason. Attempts to reconcile science and religion may well be a perpetual challenge to mankind. Certainly such attempts are commonplace in our own time. An accommodation between evolution and religion was achieved to the satisfaction of many by an enthusiastic believer in Divine Providence, Charles Darwin, and Herbert Spencer. John Fiske (1842-1901), an American historian and publicist, upon reading Darwin and Spencer was untroubled, even strengthened, in his faith. He recognized no incongruity between the belief in evolution and immortality, insisting that Darwin and Spencer had made it possible for human beings to gain some insight into the glorious unfolding of the Divine Plan. He was undaunted by the fact that neither writer had ever claimed to possess such insight for himself. The following passage illustrates the enthusiasm with which Fiske made his attempt to reconcile God and evolution, religion and science:

According to Darwinism, the creation of Man is still the goal towards which Nature tended from the beginning. Not the production of any higher creature, but the perfecting of Humanity, is to be the consummation of Nature's long and tedious work. Thus, we suddenly arrive at the conclusion that Man seems now, much more clearly than ever,

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the chief among God's creatures. On the primitive barbaric theory, which Mr. Darwin has swept away, Man was suddenly flung into the world by a miraculous act of some unseen and incalculable Power, acting from without; and whatever theology might suppose, no scientific reason could be alleged why the same incalculable Power might not at some future moment, by a similar miracle, thrust upon the scene some mightier creature in whose presence Man would be like a story beast of burden. But he who has mastered the Darwinian theory, he who recognizes the slow and subtle process of evolution as the way in which God makes things come to pass, must take a far higher view. He sees that in the deadly struggle for existence which has raged through eons of time, the whole creation has been groaning and travailing together in order to bring forth the last consummate specimen of God's handiwork, the Human Soul.
