2. The Impact of Darwinism on Religion

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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 ascendency 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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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 doc-
trines, 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 main-
taining 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 recon-
cile 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 be-
liever in Divine Providence, Charles Darwin, and Herbert Spen-
cer. John Fiske (1842-1901), an American historian and pub-
licist, 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 follow-
ing 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 con-
clusion that Man seems now, much more clearly than ever,
the chief among God's creatures. On the primitive bar-
baric 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 travelling together in order to
bring forth the last consummate specimen of God's handi-
work, the Human Soul.