

Book Review

David N. Livingstone, *Dealing with Darwin. Place, Politics, and Rhetoric in Religious Engagements with Evolution*, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014, 265 pp., ISBN 13: 978-1-4214-1326-6

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Evolution and the Theologians

The eminent evolutionist, Theodosius Dobzhansky wrote in 1973 that “Nothing in biology makes sense except in the light of evolution.” But it was only in the middle decades of the twentieth century that Darwin’s theory of evolution by natural selection became generally accepted by biologists and other scientists. How was Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species* received by his contemporary scholars, particularly by theologians and religious authors? That is the subject of the thoroughly researched and elegantly written book by David N. Livingstone, *Dealing with Darwin. Place, Politics, and Rhetoric in Religious Engagements with Evolution*.

Two answers. The first answer is that Darwin’s theory of evolution was well received and, at times enthusiastically endorsed, by Darwin’s contemporary religious authors in the English speaking world. The second answer is that Darwin’s theory and supporting evidence to account for the origin and evolution of organisms, including humans, were energetically rejected, as contrary to the teachings of the Bible and the Christian faith, by his contemporary religious authors in the English speaking world. Whether the first or the second answer obtains deepens on where in the English speaking world you look. The responses were different in different countries, and between different institutions within the same country, particularly in the United States and the United Kingdom.

The book’s focus is on “how Calvinist communities in different cities *dealt* with the Darwinian phe-

nomenon—some rejecting it outright, others tolerating it, yet others embracing it” (p. 26 [author’s emphasis]). As Livingstone asserts, “delving into local culture and conditions exposes new dimensions of the evolution-religion interface ... there is, I think, a need to go ... to a ... systematic interrogation of place, politics, and rhetoric in religious encounters with evolution. That is this book’s ambition” (p. 25)—and what the book splendidly delivers.

John Duns (1820–1909), professor at Edinburgh’s New College, is representative of how Darwin was received in Calvinist Scotland. In his two-volume *Biblical Natural Science* (1863), Duns concluded that “species have a real and permanent existence in nature”; the Darwinian version of evolution by natural selection was “wholly opposed to the utterances of the Bible on these topics.” The physicist David Brewster, Principal of the University of Edinburgh, asserted in 1862 that the *Origin of Species* was composed of “little more than conjectures” in support of which Darwin had “not addressed a single fact.” In 1867, the Rev. Thomas Smith, minister of Cowgate-Head Free Church sneered at the idea of a gorilla transmuting into a human. According to Robert Flint (1876), professor of divinity at Edinburgh University, the “speculations of the Darwinians have left unshaken [William Paley’s] design argument.” The 1985 General Assembly of Highland Presbyteries carried a rebuttal of Darwin’s *Ascent of Man* by a voting majority of more than 120 members.

There were early on conciliatory voices. Robert Rainy (1826–1906), undisputed leader of the Free Church

of Scotland in his 1874 Inaugural Address as Principal of New College in Edinburgh, did “not regard the question, whether man’s animal constitution could conceivably be developed from lower forms, as one of great theological interest.” As the nineteenth century wore on and in early years of the ensuing century, the significant voices of conciliation kept increasing and even coming into first place. To the theologian George Matheson (1842-1906) there simply was no “incompatibility between the claims of evolution and the claims of creation.” It was as easy for the Christian “to admit that man has grown out of the animal, as it is to hold that the man was made immediately from the dust of the earth.” James Iverach (1839-1922), Free church Professor of Apologetics in Aberdeen, saw that it was “in the interests of theology to welcome every conquest of science and every fresh proof of the universal reign of law”; the “view ... that each species or kind was directly created by God ... and has gone on reproducing itself after its kind ... [could] no longer be held.”

In Belfast, the theologians’ responses to evolution traced Scotland’s. “The Scottish intellectual tradition”, writes Livingstone, “had delivered to Ulster Calvinists both philosophical and theological resources to foster the cultivation of a scientific culture in the north of Ireland” (p. 61). Yet Josias Leslie Porter (1823-1889) could only discern “melancholy proofs that science and philosophy” were no longer “safe guides in the education of people.” In his inaugural 1874 address at the Presbyterian College in Belfast he asserted that “not a single scientific fact has ever been established ... from which [evolution] dogmas can be logically deduced.” A meeting in Belfast in 1874 of the British Association for the Advancement of Science attracted the attention of numerous theologians and religious authors. According to Henry Wallace (1801-1887), professor of ethics at Assembly’s College, the aim of the Belfast meeting was the dissemination of the “atheist principle” and the findings presented were not “dwelt upon so much for their scientific value, nor as records of progress, but merely to serve the cause of atheism.” There was an additional dimension in Belfast’s reaction to evolution: “tussles over who should control higher education in Ireland, and a long-standing anti-Catholicism that colored virtually every aspect of cultural and political life during the final decades of the nineteenth century” (p. 88).

“On Monday, 9 June 1884, the pages of the *Toronto*

World were host to a spat between a certain Dr. Wild and an anonymous correspondent writing under the signature ‘evolutionist’” (p. 89). Joseph Wild, “a theological controversialist,” minister of the Bond Street congregational Church in Toronto, had promised the readers of the *Toronto World* that the Pope and Freemasonry would be in his crosshairs but evolution had gotten his attention and focused instead in “ridiculing the theories of some writers as to an evolution from an incandescent nebulae as being as silly as the evolution from a monkey.” Much of *Dealing with Darwin’s* chapter 4 is dedicated to “the august authority of Sir John William Dawson (1820-1899), the Nova Scotia-born geologist ... who became principal of McGill University in 1855” (p. 91). Ostensibly, Dawson dwelt on the “scientific flaws” in Darwinism, “conspicuously trading on his geological expertise” (p. 94). He proudly characterized himself “as one of the few naturalists who do not believe in the theory of evolution.” He argued that “evolutionary progress [could only] be understood as the empirical outworkings of divine design” (p. 96). Dawson asserted that “there may be a theistic form of evolution, but let it be observed that this is essentially distinct from Darwinism ... It necessarily admits design and final cause.” Other Toronto scientists seeking a theologically-acceptable evolution included the Scottish archeologist Daniel Wilson, who spent nearly forty years at the University of Toronto, the geologist Edward John Chapman (1821-1904) and the Irishman William Hincks (1793?-1871), who had come to the University of Toronto in 1853, when he obtained the chair of natural history, defeating “Darwin’s bulldog” Thomas Henry Huxley, who was seeking the same chair. In Livingstone’s view “in Toronto evolutionary motifs fared rather better in certain theological circles than in scientific ones” (p. 115).

Antebellum Presbyterians of the Old South “had come to regard biblical orthodoxy as the foundation stone of the southern societal order” (p. 155). Notwithstanding the occasional but increasing threat of antislavery sentiments, southern Presbyterians asserted “their conviction that an honest-to-goodness, unadulterated reading of the bible provided ample warrant for the institution of slavery and, later, for racial segregation” (p. 155). The Bible provided the authority to resist the Yankee evils of racial democracy, emancipation, and higher criticism. Scientific claims arising from geology and evolution were thus to be resisted as intolerable attacks on the supremacy of the Bible.

The most entangled case of the emerging controversy involved the uncle of Woodrow Wilson, James Woodrow (1827-1907), a firm believer in the “divine inspiration of every word” in the Bible and its “absolute inerrancy.” On account of his views on Darwin’s theory of evolution, Woodrow was dismissed from the professorship he held at the southern Presbyterian Theological Seminary in Columbia, South Carolina. Woodrow insisted to no avail that evolution simply described the derivation of organic beings from previous life-forms without “any reference to the power by which the origination is effected; it refers to the mode, and to the mode alone.” Attacks emerged from all sources, numerous civilian and theologian authorities. Eventually the General Assembly convened in Columbia in 1888 “detected in evolution an infidel canker that would rot the entire fabric of southern culture” (p. 118). Eventually, Woodrow received the unexpected, and surely unwanted, commendation of Andrew Dickson White’s famous *History of the Warfare of Science with Theology* (1896). Woodrow in 1863 had lamented the “mistake of anti-geologists, who are so fond of classing geologists with infidels, or with those who know little of the bible and its teachings.” In 1878, the distinguished geologist Alexander Winchell was dismissed from Methodist Vanderbilt University because of his acceptance of evolution. John Girardeau, a leading vocal antagonist of Woodrow, had made it clear that “the immediate creation of Adam from literal dust was a non-negotiable doctrine” (p. 152).

In the last third of the nineteenth century, Charles Hodge enjoyed an unrivaled reputation as the leading exponent of Calvinism in the United States. In addition to numerous other writings, he published in 1872 two volumes of his *Systematic Theology*, an extended and authoritative exposition of Old School confessional Presbyterianism. Two years later in a volume entitled *What is Darwinism?*, he delivered the unambiguous answer: “It is atheism.” Hodge saw Darwin’s use of “natural” as “antithetical to supernatural”: “in using the expression Natural Selection, Mr. Darwin

intends to exclude design, or final causes”; which brought “it into conflict not only with Christianity, but with the fundamental principles of natural religion.”

James McCosh (1811-1894) had arrived from Belfast in 1868 to take the presidency of the college of New Jersey (later Princeton University), which for more than three decades would be, together with Princeton Seminary, the focus of the controversy and antagonism against evolution. McCosh would later emerge “as perhaps the foremost reconciler of evolution and Protestant theology” (p. 162). But McCosh strenuously resisted any resort to Darwinian explanations in ethics. However powerful an explanatory mechanism natural selection was, it could not explain “how Life arises, or Sensation, or Consciousness, or Intelligence, or Moral Discernment.” “Princeton Calvinists found themselves located somewhere between their Presbyterian colleagues in Edinburgh and Toronto, on the one hand, and Belfast and Columbia on the other ... all the while they reiterated their deep conviction that should evolution come to be verified, it could be Calvinized with little difficulty” (p. 196).

“Darwinian Engagements: Place, Politics, Rhetoric,” chapter seven, is the last one and the shortest of *Dealing with Darwin*. It is a summarizing meditation on the themes subjacent to all the previous, historical chapters. “In one place [Darwin’s] theory of evolution was seen as an individualist assault on collectivism, in another as a justification for colonial supremacy; elsewhere it was taken to be a subversive attack on racial segregation, yet elsewhere as a symbol of progressive enlightenment” (p. 197). Livingstone adds: “Multiple geographies are at work here. The religious communities on which this analysis concentrates were deeply rooted in Scottish Calvinist culture, but in different places this confessional tradition was marked by the fixations of the society in which it was domesticated” (p. 198). Like all previous chapters, chapter seven is clearly written, intelligent and enlightening—a superb colophon to a superb book.