

Book Review

J. David Pleins, *The Evolving God: Charles Darwin on the Naturalness of Religion*, Bloomsbury Academic, 2013, 192 pp., \$26.96, ISBN-10: 1623562473

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Who owns Darwin? More specifically, who gets to claim both the man and his theory in support of their ideological worldview? If you were like me, at first glance this would be an obvious answer: godless naturalism intertwined with the “New Atheism” of the Richard Dawkins’s and Sam Harris’s of the world gets to lay claim to the man and his ideas, or at least they have often appropriated him in this fashion. However, J. David Pleins’s book *The Evolving God* endeavors us to carefully rethink this position, as he attempts to reclaim Darwin from the grasp of the New Atheists by charging him with uncovering “[t]he truth about religion...” (Pleins 2013, 113). But does he succeed?

What many do not realize is that Darwin had very nuanced views on religion that often go un-discussed amidst more popular appropriations of him as a champion of rational atheism, and thankfully, Pleins brings such views to light. In his detailed treatment of Darwin, the author goes far beyond recounting his voyage aboard *The Beagle*, and explores the evolution of Darwin’s thoughts about “religion” as they unfolded overtime. The book, which seems largely written for a popular audience, is overall interesting, enough so that the scholar or scientist of religion might find it thought provoking, however for different reasons. For scholars interested in discursive approaches to the category of “religion,” this book is simply “data.” It is loaded with appeals to what religion “really is” and what it “really isn’t.” For scientists, who typically see concerns about definitions of religion as unproductive [1], the book draws loosely on several lines of work in cognitive science of religion and connects

them to Darwin’s own thoughts on religion. In short, *The Evolving God* is an interesting book and worth the read, provided the reader can stomach Pleins’s lukewarm attempts to construct and advocate for a kind of “religious naturalism” in his scholarship. That being said, this will also appeal to many as well. The remainder of this review will place a critical focus on evaluating to what extent the author appropriates Darwin to advocate for religious naturalism in order to remove Darwin, the man and his theory, out of the clutches of the so called “New Atheists.”

Pleins’s conceptualization of “the study of religion” (religious studies) is simply indistinguishable from theology. Thankfully, this can be inferred from the preface: “The road to a modern view of religion and theology lies along this revolutionary path tread by Darwin” (Pleins 2013, x). What is problematic about this endeavor, since this book is in many respects a biography, is that it’s hard to be sure if you are reading Darwin’s thoughts on religion or Plein’s own. The reader might conflate the author’s attempts at creating a religious naturalistic theology as though this was what Darwin was really trying to do, but this is not so. This should give us cause for concern, as many times the reader is forced to conduct a hermeneutical analysis to try and figure out who is saying what. Importantly, this risks taking a particular interpretation of Darwin’s thoughts as “really” what Darwin thought about religion.

Toward the end of chapter one, the reader is treated to what religion “really is.” Or, as Pleins summarizes

Darwin's trip aboard *The Beagle*: "During his voyage, he encountered the sublime powers of the world that stood at the root of the human religious sense" (Pleins 2013, 27). This particular kind of essentialist thinking about "religion" I will term as the *awe equals religion equation*. There is little doubt that experiences of nature can trigger powerfully moving feelings and experiences. Anyone who has ever peered off the ledge of a mountain, gazed at a waterfall, hiked through the woods, stood at the edge of the Grand Canyon, etc., has been filled with a sense of awe and wonder. But is this a "religious sense"? Does a "religious sense" exist? Unlikely, "...as most scholars and researchers have been unable to identify such a thing as a primordial *sui generis* religious emotion [sense] or feeling with the possible exception of mystical experience" (Coleman, Silver and Holcombe 2013, 1; [Barnard 1997; Belzen 2010; Berger and Luckmann 1991; Boyer 2001; James 1985; McCutcheon 1997; Paloutzian and Park 2013; Taves 2009; Vergote 1997]).

What does exist, however, is the ability for a particular experience, or experiences, to be framed in multiple ways. There is no such thing as religious experience, only experiences deemed religious (Taves 2009). That "...the sublime powers of the world..." (Pleins 2013, 27) can underlie religion, should be uncontroversial. What is highly controversial, and what Pleins argues in support of throughout his book with Darwin as his champion, is that awe and wonder *do* equal religion, or a "religious sense" rather. This is simply incorrect, as experiences of awe and wonder can and are had by many (likely all!) atheists and nontheists (Coleman, Silver and Holcombe 2013; Coleman, Silver and Hood in press). Ironically, Pleins essentializes and uses the category of "religion" in precisely the same fashion as the New Atheists he seeks to rebuke with this book. Albeit, where they might see religion as the root of the world's ills, Pleins places religion at the root of awe and wonder. Both, however, find utility in placing some things – but not others – into the category "known" as "religion."

Throughout the book, there appears to be at least two kinds of "religion." There is *good religion*, which is what Darwin apparently had, as Pleins argues he held "sophisticated [views about] religion" (Pleins 2013, 112). Then, there is *bad religion*, which is presumably what the author refers to as "naïve Biblicism," respectively (Pleins 2013, 30). Although he doesn't come right out and say this is what he is doing, this distinction allows

Pleins to construct what the category of religion *really is*, with more "sophisticated" qualities of religion on one side, and the less desirable qualities in the other. Basically, divide and conquer. Interestingly, he seems to credit Darwin with uncovering "[t]he truth about religion" (Pleins 2013, 113), which Pleins says he found as "greater than the half-truths of the past," which he then implies is *really* just "traditional religion" (ibid). That "traditional religion," whatever that might entail, is implied to be a "half truth" seems like the very rhetoric used by the New Atheists called out in his book.

How to summarize *The Evolving God*? Overall, it made for an interesting read. Pleins intended for the reader to discover that Darwin did indeed ponder questions of meaning and "religion," and much more than certain polemical voices would have us believe. The book is clearly valuable in this respect. However, readers looking for a more historical view advocating neither for nor against religion should look elsewhere. While I agree with Pleins when he charges that Richard Dawkins' uses "Darwin like a sledgehammer to beat religion" (Pleins 2013, 107), Pleins ends up using Darwin like building blocks that need to be slapped together with theological mortar in order to create a "religion" that evolved, and that he argues is continuing to evolve. We might ask, what is the mechanism doing the selection for this type of evolution? It is most certainly not the blind process of natural selection, as in biological evolution; rather this mechanism seems more like "intelligent design," the intentional whim of theologians. In short, we must be aware of theology cloaked in academic scholarship. Because of Darwin's prominence and position in the history of science, he makes for a wonderful tool to be exploited by both the pro-religious and anti-religious factions as they take to uncovering "the truth," be it religious or otherwise. Both the New Atheists and Pleins's *The Evolving God* are testament to this point.

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Endnote

[1] I must admit, I always see discussions over definitions and meanings productive, as they shed light on the illusion of a value free science of humans, and uncover what contested ground this science of humans really stands on.