

# Charles Darwin service: Science and Faith - The Intersection

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**Dr Philip Freier, Anglican Archbishop of Melbourne**

**St Paul's Cathedral, Sunday 8 February 2009**

This year 2009 is the two hundredth anniversary of Charles Darwin's birth and the 150th anniversary of the publication of 'On the Origin of Species'.

Unlike many of us whose efforts are not long remembered in this life let alone likely to be remembered after our death, Charles Darwin has become one of those people who have remained significant in the contemporary world generations after his own historical period.

He is the kind of prismatic personality who interprets the age and its values through his own life. His apparent loss of Christian faith at the time of his daughter Annie's death in 1851 seems to neatly correspond with the broader societal loss of faith as the scientific era became the interpreter of reality to the whole society not just the elite.

Perhaps Darwin's own life journey is also a metaphor for many in science who have lost their Christian faith as a result of their exposure to the questioning of the scientific worldview.

We do a provocative thing in meeting here in this holy place at the beginning of a conference that has its focus on the lasting contribution of Darwin's thought.

There may be some among your professional colleagues who will think that you have taken leave of your professional senses by attending here. For some people it seems the tables have been turned.

We read earlier from the book of Job how God challenged the limitations of Job's knowledge which proved to be insignificant compared with God's wisdom. We have all heard versions of the contemporary charge that Christianity is a movement in conflict with scientific knowledge and responsible for leading people into dumb ignorance.

I want to say to you, as I suspect many of you already have decided, that Christian faith and scientific endeavour are not mutually incompatible.

I say this in full consciousness that Christian faith has a foundational understanding of God as Creator, something that we have expressed in the beautiful eloquence of the prologue to St John's Gospel, *'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.'*

From the book, Genesis to the Psalms and through to the promise of a new heaven and new earth in the book of Revelation the theological conviction that God is creator and the measure of all things is inescapable.

We should in no way be surprised that the creed commences with this affirmation, *'I believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible.'*

It thus makes sense to look at the doctrine of Creation if we are to consider the wisdom of the church and how we might frame an understanding of faith's relationship with science.

Oliver Quick, writing in 1938 just before he became the Regius Professor of Divinity at Oxford, recalled the attitude, prevalent in that pre-war period that, 'Darwin's Origin of Species is [considered] today a good deal more profitable as theology than the first chapter of Genesis'.

This view was confused he said and failed to distinguish between 'a theological doctrine of creation and a scientific doctrine of origins.' 'Natural science' he said 'is concerned with the causal order of events as they actually happen and have happened in space and time.

This, as it is traced backwards, brings us to certain primitive events which we may believe to have been the origin of life, or of the earth, or of the solar system or the stars.

As to the nature and succession of these events it is doubtless true that the authority of such experts as Darwin is to be preferred to the author of Genesis.'

But he goes on to make a telling point, '...theology is not interested primarily or chiefly in the question of temporal origins, even when it is stating its doctrine of creation. It is interested primarily and chiefly in the end or value of what has been created.'

John Calvin's commentary on Genesis, written at the time when astronomy was providing new knowledge of the universe, is instructive in helping to apply this distinction. He lived at a time in the early part of the sixteenth century when the structure of the universe was being described in new ways.

Calvin was in no doubt that Moses had used descriptions of the natural world that were consistent with both the worldview of his time and the rudimentary appearance of things.

The cosmology of the book of Genesis is one of a terrestrial zone or layer that has been inserted as a dividing layer between the waters beneath the Earth and the waters above the heavens.

This, according to Calvin 'appears opposed to common sense, and quite incredible ... to my mind, this is a certain principle, that nothing is here treated of but the visible form of the world. He who would learn astronomy, and other recondite arts, let him go elsewhere.'

Calvin is wary of people who import a cosmology from a previous unscientific period into the core of Christian doctrine. 'The assertion of some, that they embrace by faith what they have read concerning the waters above the heavens, notwithstanding their ignorance respecting them, is not in accordance with the design of Moses.'

Given that he was speaking into a faith/science debate as far as the insights of astronomy were with odds with cosmological conclusions from Scripture - which there can be no doubt that John Calvin considered authoritative - his praise for science and rejection of its critics invites us to see a parallel in the Young Earth Creation ideas that underlie the so called 'Creation Science' and scientific thinking more broadly.

'Moses makes two great luminaries; but astronomers prove, by conclusive reasons that the star of Saturn, which on account of its great distance, appears the least of all, is greater than the moon. Here lies the difference; Moses wrote in a popular style things which without instruction, all ordinary persons, endued with common sense, are able to understand; but astronomers investigate with great labour whatever the sagacity of the human mind can comprehend.

Nevertheless, this study is not to be reprobated, nor this science to be condemned, because some frantic persons are wont boldly to reject whatever is unknown to them.

For astronomy is not only pleasant, but also very useful to be known: it cannot be denied that this art unfolds the admirable wisdom of God. Wherefore, as ingenious men are to be honoured who have expended useful labour on this subject, so they who have leisure and capacity ought not to neglect this kind of exercise.'

Two centuries later the insights of science had led to technologies that had revolutionised the western world and enabled England to become a world power.

Calvin's hope that 'ingenious men' would expend useful labour in scientific investigation had produced results beyond his imagining. Unlike the discoveries of people like James Watt that had quickly enabled improvements in mining, manufacture and transport, Darwin's theories seemed more speculative and intrusive into the domains reserved for theology and cosmology.

Initial responses from the Church of England to Darwin's theories were hostile. The Revd John Stevens Henslow, Regius Professor of Botany at the time of Darwin's studies in Cambridge and Darwin's mentor in natural history strongly rejected Darwin's thinking about evolution.

A year after the publication of the Origin of Species, Samuel Wilberforce the Bishop of Oxford, always an enthusiast for controversy over ideas, debated against the botanist Joseph Hooker (1817-1911) and the biologist Thomas Huxley (1825-1895) and put his arguments for the rejection of Darwinism.

It is easy enough to imagine the thinking of those who were ambivalent to the new ideas of science or even the social impact of the new technologies. Change of any kind always leaves room for wondering if the change is for the good.

For Darwin to suggest that the sinful and fallen world was itself the means of bringing about the great and rich diversity of living things was for some a monstrous contradiction of what they judged had already been settled in the Bible. The question of where cosmology sits in relation to the doctrine of creation is never far away from the conflicts between science and Christian faith.

Swedish theologian Gustav Aulen pointed to St Paul's words in Romans 11.36, *'For from him and through him and to him are all things'* as a succinct description of the scope of this Christian doctrine of creation.

He could have as easily chosen the reading we have heard from Colossians 1,15-20. Aulen went on to say, 'God's creative activity includes beginning, continuation and goal. The full significance of this all-comprehending activity is interpreted from the point of view that creation as a whole is inseparably connected with Christ.'

The activity of science, the better understanding of the physical and natural world on this understanding is located for Christians within the doctrine of Creation. Scientific endeavour is an expression of what it means to be human, looking for order and meaning in the world around us.

Adam's naming of the animals in Genesis 2 : 20 is perhaps the prototypic scientific activity where human consciousness sufficiently emergent from the unfathomable power of cosmic origins engages in this new and defining activity.

The Christian doctrine of creation is thus Christocentric, it is fundamentally built around the revelation of God's purposes in Christ, on the revealed truth that Christ is God and one with the Father and dynamically present through the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer.

It is hardly surprising that a rejection of this foundational principle, the Jesus is God's son on a divine mission to reconcile God with humanity, will instead propose cosmology as the bottom line in accounting for the world as we experience it.

A Christian doctrine of creation is primarily about the human person in relationship with God and with each other and only secondarily about cosmology.

I think that it is at this point, where cosmology is debated, that the argued incompatibilities between Christianity and science exist This is also the point where both Christianity and science are involved in theorising at least several steps removed from their respective primary principles.

If you accept my argument for the distinctiveness and priority for a Christian doctrine of creation within Christianity Michael Ruse's conclusion about Darwinism may be helpful, 'Darwinianism at base is a scientific theory, You can make metaphysics out of it, but that is not true Darwinism, or at least it is an optional extension.'

Bishop Lee Rayfield is a colleague of mine who visited Australia last year, he is the bishop of Swindon in the Church of England and is by his professional training an immunologist. Like other Anglican bishops he wears a pectoral cross as a symbol both of his office as a bishop and of his calling as a disciple of Christ.

These are his reflections on what he chose as his bishops' cross:

One of the distinctive symbols of office for a bishop is a pectoral cross. Quite often bishops will choose a design that reflects a significant aspect of their spiritual journey and convictions about God.

When I was consecrated a bishop in 2005, I chose the emblem of The Society of Ordained Scientists - a cross surrounded by a 'halo' of DNA, the physical building block of life.

The cross of the Ordained Scientists reflects my own journey of faith as a biological scientist and my conviction that scientific insights and Christian belief are meant to be companions not competitors.

Are we able to look at the model of the DNA molecule, the physical building block of life that stands in front of the pulpit as a metaphor for faith and science? Can they in fact be two strands of truth inevitably 'needing each other to make the whole or are we looking a situation that will always be even at its best a tangled mess?

Many of us will conclude the former and find our science and our faith mutually enriched by what they tell us about the world and ourself. I would like to conclude with Caryl Micklem's prayer for scientists:

Heavenly Father,

you give us responsibility that we must exercise, and call upon us to make decisions at the risk of making mistakes.

We remember all who are brought to such a test, and find themselves on their own.

We remember scientists of all kinds, who know that results of their work could become a blessing or a curse.

We pray that they may be careful not to be compromised in evil experiments; that they may put their trust in revealing the truth; and that they may keep their integrity in whatever dilemma they may find themselves.