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Science, Religion, and Charles Darwin

by John Luca

This year UCSB's Science, Religion, and the Human Experience lecture series began on January 11 with a talk by John Hedley Brooke, an historian of science who holds an endowed chair at Oxford University. This three-year series of lectures, primarily funded by the Templeton Foundation at a cost of more than one hundred thousand dollars, brings outstanding scholars from around the world to Santa Barbara to discuss issues concerning science and religion. Dr. Brooke was kind enough to talk with me at length.

How did you become interested in the relationship between—or to borrow from the title of one of your books—the “engagement” of science and religion?

My initial training was as a natural scientist, but I was also interested in the wider cultural implications of science. The opportunity to study the history and philosophy of science arose, and I found that was the subject that really excited me. The really significant revelation was that once one engaged upon a serious history of science you couldn't leave the religion out. Most of the early founders of modern science, certainly in the West, had very serious religious convictions, not always orthodox by the standards of their day, but they mostly had a deep sense that what they were uncovering was some pattern behind a rather chaotic appearance of nature. And as they disclosed that pattern through their scientific investigations, they saw something of the Divine behind it.

I guess the crucial words when one is looking at the 17th century and the origins of western science would be the words “law of nature,” which were used by Descartes and others like Kepler and Copernicus. These laws of nature were essentially Divine legislation. This was the way God had designed the world. Those laws were an expression of the will of the Creator. And that is such a deep philosophical presupposition in the western tradition that you find it even, for example, in Darwin's thinking when he began working on evolutionary theory. Darwin spoke about “a Creator creating through laws,” and even in the Origin of Species towards the end he talks about “laws impressed upon matter by the Creator.”

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Is your interest in this area solely academic or do you have other beliefs or philosophical inclinations that draw you to study the relationship of science and religion?

I always retained some sympathy for the theological enterprise. I have very little sympathy for religious belief in its fanatical or extremist expression, but I do recognize that, for a lot of people, it is their religious life that gives them an identity and sense of purpose in a universe that can often seem unfriendly.

I detect in myself a discomfort when I see scientific materialists and atheists attacking religion, when what they are doing is attacking a caricature. Equally, I find myself becoming dismayed and saddened when I hear religious fundamentalists—not just from Christian religions, we hear them from other religions as well—attacking what is so obviously a caricature of science. I think the very fact that I see myself as something of a mediator or a peacemaker may itself reflect certain deep metaphysical, religious assumptions.

Do you feel any personal resonance with Darwin's struggles with his scholarly studies and his beliefs?

Darwin is a very rich and complex figure. He is very attractive to many scholars because of his honesty. One of the striking things about *Origin of Species* is that it is a very honest book in acknowledging where many of the difficulties of his theory lie. He's not afraid to reveal what he knows will be problems for people.

I was at a conference in San Jose and, in the course of one of my talks, said that Darwin quite categorically stated in one of his private letters that, "I have never been an atheist in the sense of denying the existence of God."

Somebody—raised, I assume, in some fairly fundamentalist milieu—came up to me afterwards and said, "The whole of my religious life, I have always been told that Darwin was an atheist."

So one has the typical caricature here: the process of demonizing a figure like Darwin, which means that people are denied what we might simply call the truth. Perhaps "the truth" is too simple a notion here, because Darwin often said his religious beliefs fluctuated, as religious beliefs often do.

Towards the end of his life, Darwin called himself an agnostic, and I think in many respects that would be an accurate description of my own position; an agnostic, though with real sympathies, as I said earlier, for the attempt to interpret the world in some theological way.

Yes, I do find Darwin absorbing because I see certain resonances between his own outlook and my own.

It's very widely assumed that Darwin lost his Christian faith because of his science. I don't think his science made it any easier for him to believe in God, but I don't think that it was the theory of natural selection that destroyed his Christianity. It was a very gradual process. He experienced a number of very personal crises in his life, along with a great deal of physical suffering. He experienced a lot of pain, and frequently canceled public engagements because of that.

I think it's even more in the context of the Darwin family, a family of

dissenters, where one sees the real pressures on him. His brother, Erasmus, was an atheist. His grandfather, Erasmus, had been a freethinker. His father had very little time for religion, and therefore there was a very big question concerning Christian teaching about the afterlife.

Remember, those who were outside the religious fold would have to spend eternity in hell. Darwin's maturing years were spent during an evangelical revival in England, so he was familiar with rather powerful preaching about what was in store for unbelievers.

This reaches a certain crisis in the late 1840s when his father died. It was a very real question whether his father had gone to heaven or hell. It may sound rather simplistic using such language now, but it was a real issue at the time. Darwin found the doctrine of eternal damnation damnable. Damnable—that's the word he uses.

That's an example where you see Darwin engaged in a moral revolt against Christian teaching as he understood it. His wife always felt that it was a caricature of Christianity that he was rejecting.

The most recent scholarship recognizes that the loss of his daughter Annie, at the tender age of 10, was a severe blow to Darwin. It's very touchingly clear, because of the correspondence between him and his wife throughout their daughter's ailment. Charles [Darwin] has taken Annie out of town to his favorite doctor, and Emma, his wife, is still at home expecting their next child. It means that Charles is reporting to Emma several times a day on the progress of the illness. That progress is not in a straight line. On certain days Annie seems to recover. On other days she seems terrible.

Eventually she succumbs to the illness. Darwin describes it as "the crucifixion of all my hopes." He's very attached to her. He says he can't remember her even being a naughty child in any respect. I think this focused his mind on what theologians call the problem of theodicy: the problem of pain, evil, and suffering in the world. For Darwin, it is a moral question about how a beneficent God should allow a world in which his own daughter could perish in that way. He says that the sheer extent of human suffering is probably the strongest argument against belief in a beneficent God.

I think that gets to the heart of the matter, and turns Darwin into a perfectly normal human being. Because for a lot of people, human suffering has been the greatest sticking point to belief.

But Darwin resists the notion of atheism. In fact, in another letter he says, "I suppose I deserve to be called a theist."

I find many of these issues about which Darwin thought deeply to be issues which I also have had to think about.

The subject of Dr. Hedley's talk was Darwin, Design, and The Unification of Nature. The full text of his lecture is available online at www.srhe.ucsb.edu.

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