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EVOLUTION; THEORY AND THEME

In this sequel to his article on Immanentism (this VOLUME p.119) Dr. Sell studies the reactions of Christians and others to evolution from c.1860-c.1930. He shows that Darwin did not set out to attack Christianity or the Church, and that his hypothesis concerning natural selection was *relatively* little heeded by theologians. Rather, some succumbed to the mood of optimism which the ideas of evolution, development and progress encouraged; some made more cautious use of the theme of evolution; whilst others, conscious of the ways in which evolutionary thought could be exploited by naturalists and agnostics, recognised the threat its uncritical acceptance posed to the central message of the gospel.

Whatever truth may lie behind the suspicion that the ultra-conservative no less than the ultra-liberal *needs* an Aunt Sally, the fact is that Charles Darwin (1809-1882)<sup>1</sup> has been regarded as an appropriate target by many in the former category. To him has been attributed a slide into scepticism of gigantic proportions; an increase of moral laxity fired by the belief that humans are but animals - and so on. It will not be our purpose to examine the detailed scientific arguments which Darwin and others proposed, nor the counter arguments which other scientists urged against them. Rather, we shall attempt to put evolution into its proper perspective as an influential motif within nineteenth century thought, and we shall be especially

concerned with the use theologians made of it. We shall suggest that Darwin himself, far from being an originator, was in debt both to that immanentist tendency whose origins we have uncovered in Kant and German Romanticism,<sup>2</sup> and to that increasingly popular understanding of history which sought to explain the present as being a development of the past.<sup>3</sup> We shall show that Darwin's distinctive scientific contribution, the hypothesis of natural selection, far from holding any real terrors for the more thoughtful theologians, was quite often ignored by them in their positive constructions: the evolutionary theme rather than specific theories was what appealed to them, not least because it harmonised so well with what, on other grounds, they wished to believe in any case. We shall observe in passing that the generalisation to the effect that large tracts of the world of nineteenth century thought were caught up in a wave of evolution-based optimism to which only the First World War could give the lie is open to question. That there *were* such optimists we shall not deny (and the further they were from the theatre of war the more of them there seem to have been); but some had a properly sober understanding of sin *before* the War, whilst others managed to retain their optimism *after* it. Whatever nineteenth century theologians might think of evolution, they could not ignore it: not indeed that they were always very clear about what it was that they were not ignoring! As one commentator put it, "Evolution has, since Darwin's time, become invested with an omnipotence which, it may safely be affirmed, belongs to it only through a haze in the ideas of those who so exalt it".<sup>4a</sup>

The liberal preacher T. Rhondda Williams was typical of many popularisers in his pragmatic approach to the matter: "Evolution is still a hypothesis, but it is *the* hypothesis which is now used in every department of investigation, and, quite apart from the question of its ultimate validity, the use made of it at present is such that no man who wishes to serve his age in the interests of the Kingdom of God can afford to ignore it".<sup>5</sup> To the extent that Williams is accurate here — and undeniably evolutionary thought did permeate many fields of enquiry — we have impressive testimony to the rapidity with which the concept of evolution took root in the minds of men; for as A.J. Balfour said, even "men of science did not habitually think in terms of evolution till well into the second half of the Victorian epoch".<sup>6a</sup> That they began so to think at all is as much owing to the work of geologists as it is to workers in any other field of science.

The researches of Charles Lyell (1797-1875), which were written up in his *Principles of Geology* (first volume 1830), had two main effects. First, they demolished the approach of Archbishop James Ussher (1581-1656) to biblical chronology.

Ussher, it will be recalled, had calculated that the world was created in 4004 B.C. Lyell showed that the rocks gave evidence that the earth was much older than had once been thought. Secondly, Lyell's findings suggested that uniformitarianism rather than catastrophism was the more tenable hypothesis in respect of the development of the universe. Lyell thus threw down the gauntlet not only to natural theologians in the line of Paley (1743-1805), who *required* God's dramatic creative intervention to shore up their version of orthodoxy, but also to such a pioneer *geologist* as Adam Sedgwick (1785-1873), who by no means relished the possibility that science might undermine the scriptures. Dr. Young has put the terms of the debate in a nutshell thus: "If Sedgwick was concerned that *without* creative interference there might be no God, then Lyell was concerned that *with* creative interference there would be no science".<sup>7</sup>

At least three kinds of response were open to Christians confronted by the work of Lyell and his fellows. They could argue, as Dr. Pye Smith did in his Congregational Lecture for 1839, that theologians had erred in the chronological deductions they had made from scripture, and that uniformitarianism more accurately reflected biblical teaching than did catastrophism.<sup>8</sup> They could be deeply troubled, as was John Ruskin who, as early as 1851 wrote, "If only the Geologists would let me alone, I could do very well, but those dreadful hammers! I hear the clink of them at the end of every cadence of the Bible verses".<sup>9</sup> Thirdly, there was the somewhat later response to the effect that science can do the Bible no harm because each seeks answers to *different* questions. This approach is typified by R.W. Dale's comment that "ordinary Christian people...have frankly accepted all that the geologists have ascertained in relation to the antiquity of the earth and the antiquity of man; but their faith in Christ is undisturbed".<sup>10</sup>

It was when Robert Chambers (1802-71) published his *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation* (1844) that the transition was made in the popular mind from concern with rocks to concern with man; for Chambers scandalised some by maintaining that Lyell's uniformitarian principle ought to be applied not only to the physical creation, but also to man and his mind.<sup>11</sup> On this very problem Darwin was hard at work. Not indeed that he was without predecessors in the field. Certainly the notions of development and progress were well known in the ancient world. To take examples almost at random: Anaximander (611-547), Anaximenes (588-544), Xenophanes (576-480) and Empedocles (495-435) all entertained, in however *a priori* a fashion, the notion of the evolution of man from lower orders of creation. Again, Heraclitus (c.500) is famed for his doctrine of flux. Still more definite

affirmations (we use the term advisedly) concerning the origin and development of living things are to be found in the writings of Aristotle (384-322). He supposed that life originated from the inorganic, and that there was movement through successive stages from plants, which neither feel nor think, through animals, which feel and have elementary powers of thought, to man, who both feels and engages in abstract thought. The whole depends upon the Pure Form, said Aristotle, though what exactly he meant by this, and what kind of dependence he had in mind, is not altogether clear. Although Aristotle thus thinks in terms of successive stages of development, he does not employ the idea of evolution; indeed, he could not, for to him both species and genera are eternal. From Platonism, and especially from Neoplatonism, came the impetus to think of spiritual growth towards the divine; and the New Testament, with its teleological emphasis (growing up into Christ; the consummation) could be summoned in support. We find intimations of evolution in Leibniz; Lessing, Schelling and Hegel applied the evolutionary principle to history (though Hegel could well manage without a *scientific* hypothesis!); and J.G. Herder (1744-1803) regarded evolution as the vehicle of the divine providence. Ideas of development, progress, evolution, were thus not new when Darwin came on the scene, and indeed the implications of such ideas for social reform had already been indicated by Comte (1798-1857). It remained for modern scientists, by the production of evidence, to anchor these concepts empirically and, above all, to posit an explanatory hypothesis which would answer the "how" question.

Whereas Linnaeus (1707-78) in his monumental *Systema Naturae* did not raise the question as to how the species which he so diligently classified had come to be differentiated from one another, Georges Buffon (1707-88) was not so inhibited. It was one of his speculations which Erasmus Darwin (1731-1802), Chevalier de Lamarck (1744-1829) and Geoffroy de St. Hilaire (1772-1844) exploited — namely, that change occurred as a species progressively adapted itself to its environment. Both the contemporary scientific and theological orthodoxies were implacably opposed to any such suggestion, and it was not until Lyell's results were known that the modern evolutionists found much extrinsic support. Even then the evolutionist blaze was slow to kindle, not so much because of the opposition already mentioned, as because of a feeling that the crucial clue had yet to be produced. What Charles Darwin and Alfred Russel Wallace (1823-1913) independently arrived at was the principle of natural selection — of what Herbert Spencer (1820-1903) was to call the principle of "the survival of the fittest".<sup>12</sup> Justice prompts the comment that not even here were Darwin and Wallace the first in the field. The idea of natural selection had been mooted by W.C. Wells (1757-1817) in 1813 and by Matthew in 1831; but Darwin and Wallace were the men of the hour, and,

moreover, they had the *evidence* with which to support their hypothesis.

Both Darwin and Wallace had been influenced by Malthus's *Essay in the Principle of Population* (1798), which showed that when the human population outgrew the available sources of food an inevitable struggle ensued. They drew the analogy and applied it to all forms of organic life, thereby providing the world with an explanatory hypothesis to account for that change and development which many agreed was too well documented to be gainsaid. Once the secret was out — and *The Origin of Species* appeared in 1859 — Huxley remarked, "How extremely stupid not to have thought of that!" Principle Griffith Jones was only echoing those of an earlier generation when he expressed his opinion that Darwin had formulated "one of the most revolutionary generalisations ever attempted by the human mind".<sup>13</sup> In working out his theory Darwin was able to use the insights of his grandfather and of Lamarck concerning environmental factors in the production of change; and the special significance of Wallace from the theological point of view is his denial that distinctively human qualities could result from natural selection — for these an unique "special influx" was required.

It was only to be expected that Darwin's work should prompt jubilation in some quarters and consternation in others. The numerous debates and pamphlets often engendered more heat than light, and for this very reason it is especially important to record the fact that Darwin himself was the humblest of men, and that, unlike some scientists before and since, he was reluctant to pronounce upon matters outside his field of specialised knowledge. He did not regard himself as doing more than advance a biological hypothesis: it was not until his *Descent of Man* (1871) that he extended his interests specifically to man. An agnostic himself (though he defined himself thus only very hesitantly), he had no wish to upset the faith of others. He did recognise, however, that "the old argument from design in nature, as given by Paley, which formerly seemed to me so conclusive, fails, now that the law of natural selection has been discovered".<sup>14</sup> Even so, Darwin truthfully declared that he had never "published a word directly against religion or the clergy".<sup>15</sup> Some of the latter found no difficulty in thinking otherwise. Thus Bishop Samuel Wilberforce (1805-73) attacked Darwinism in the *Quarterly Review*, and spoke against the new teaching at the Oxford meeting of the British Association in 1860; whilst from the ranks of the laity the statesman W.E. Gladstone (1809-1898) rose to the defence of *The Impregnable Rock of Holy Scripture* (1890). Among the numerous complaints were the following: that what was presumed to be the biblical teaching concerning the fixity of species was being

undermined; that, despite Wallace's concession, man, as now naturalistically understood, could no longer be regarded as God's special creation;<sup>16</sup> that there was something morally offensive in the idea that survival depended upon an individual's being sufficiently aggressive; that the tendency of evolutionists to observe results rather than seek causes left little room for the idea of purpose — as Huxley declared, evolution dealt the death blow to teleology;<sup>17</sup> and, as we have noted earlier, that apologetics had been undermined. For all of these reasons, and others, some, including the judicious James Orr, were persuaded that Darwinism "asks us to believe that accident and fortuity have done the work of mind".<sup>4b</sup> Such scholars took little comfort from Darwin's own testimony that "The birth both of the species and of the individual are equally parts of that grand sequence of events which our minds refuse to accept as the result of blind chance";<sup>18</sup> indeed, given his presuppositions, they were hard put to understand how he could say such a thing at all.

Few Christians gave evolution so cordial a welcome as did Baden Powell F.R.S. in his paper in *Essays and Reviews* (1860). Rather more felt that the Ark was being assailed. Two types of development assisted thinking men and women towards a more balanced view. In the first place, a number of scientists began to fault Darwin's detailed case. More importantly, some, including the highly respected Lord Kelvin, affirmed that science required rather than destroyed the concept of a creative power; still others began to reach the conclusion bluntly expressed by Sir F.G. Hopkins, President of the British Association in 1933, that "all we know is that we know nothing" of life's origin.<sup>19</sup> Secondly, such views as T.H. Huxley's that "it is not true that evolution necessarily presupposes natural selection"<sup>4c</sup> came to be regarded as providing theologians with a convenient escape from naturalism. This accorded well with their twin desires to shun a doctrine which "estimates a man solely by his worth to the community, and is proud of him only as he has the strength that can be victorious in the struggle",<sup>20</sup> whilst exalting the ideas of progress and of ethical development.<sup>21</sup> *A fortiori* it armed them against "the sanctified competitiveness of a Social Darwinianism in which, as Bishop Gore said, 'it is a case of each for himself as the elephant said when it danced among the chickens'".<sup>22</sup> So it transpired that R.W. Dale could sound in no way untypical in arguing that whereas Christians had for too long, in deistic fashion, employed God as a necessary hypothesis, "It will be something if science enables us to recover a firmer hold of the ancient faith, and enables us to see for ourselves the present activity of God".<sup>23a</sup>

The very fact, however, that theologians could be as sanguine as this confirms our claim that *Darwin's* views had been so

modified as to be almost unrecognisable. Dean Inge was not wide of the mark in asserting that "In reality, human progress is the primary assumption, which the scientific theory of development was brought in to support. A popular religion is a superstition which has enslaved a philosophy. In this case the superstition was belief in the perfectibility of the species; the philosophy was a misreading of the biology of Darwin".<sup>24</sup> If we overlook the fact that we are confronted by a *variety* interpretations of evolution, and that evolution is pressed into the service of a number of different and sometimes contradictory presuppositions, we shall be in danger of making those very generalisations which it is part of our purpose to question. Thus, for example, Professor H.G. Wood reminded us that whilst Marx read revolution out of evolution, the Fabians contented themselves with gradualism.<sup>25</sup> Again, whereas A.N. Whitehead thought that Victorian Christians were ill advised not to give evolution a more cordial welcome since, by virtue of its anti-materialistic organic principle and its underlying necessary activity, it lent itself to the very kind of teleological interpretation in which they might have been expected to be interested,<sup>26</sup> Huxley, as we have seen, thought that evolution destroyed teleology. This latter view was reaffirmed by Otto to whom Darwin was the Newton of biology because of the "radical opposition" of his doctrine of natural selection to teleology.<sup>27</sup> Some Christians knew only too well that if they were to purge evolutionary theory of its less congenial aspects they would have to *spurn* Darwin's gift of *natural* selection. Even Baden Powell, "advanced" as he was, was under this necessity, for he invoked "a Supreme Moral Cause, *distinct from and above nature*".<sup>28</sup> Whatever the precise terms of his personal ideology may have been, Darwin's biological hypothesis left little room for this. But if Powell trimmed evolutionary thought in the direction of deism — as the words we have just italicised suggest, others employed the notion in quite different ways.

In the first place, there were the naturalists. Few subjected them to such searching criticism as A.J. Balfour (whatever we may think of his own alternative), and it will suffice us to hear him:

this is a position which is essentially incoherent. Its conclusions discredit its premises. The doctrines in which we believe throw doubts upon the truth-producing value of the process by which we have come to believe them. For we remember that these reasons are without exception not only reasons but effects. As effects they owe nothing in the last resort to reason or purpose. If snatches of reason and gleams of purpose occasionally emerge in the latest stage of the evolutionary process, this is but an accident



... Everything we believe, because in the order of causation blind matter and undirected energy happened to be distributed in a particular manner countless aeons before man made his earliest entry on the cosmic stage. From this senseless stock, and from this alone, has sprung, according to naturalism, all that there is, or ever can be, of knowledge, practical or speculative, earthly or divine — including, of course, the naturalistic theory itself! How then can we treat it with respect?<sup>6b</sup>

Next, there was the ambivalent and delightfully eclectic Herbert Spencer (1820-1903), whose writings had considerable vogue, and who was the butt of many a theologian's jibe. He was, moreover, in the evolutionary field before Darwin's *Origin* appeared. As early as 1850 he had published his *Social Statics*, and in 1855 there appeared his *Principles of Psychology*. From 1862-93 he was found publishing the several parts of his synthetic philosophy. Spencer's evolutionary stance, and in particular its ethical implications, earned him the attention of numerous theologians. Turning his back upon the older intuitionism, Spencer held that our ethical notions are inherited from our ancestors, and that our present mental and moral capacities are as they are by virtue of the evolutionary process which must continue. The empiricism here places Spencer in the line of Hume; the implied relativism he, together with Hamilton (1788-1856), explicitly affirmed; and his agnosticism emerges in his declaration, following Kant, that the Absolute is unknowable. We might therefore have expected to find consistent naturalism or materialism in Spencer, but we do not. His ambivalence emerges in that so long as evolutionary process is allowed he seems to fluctuate between cashing the doctrine variously in idealistic or materialistic terms. Thus he can allow that there is a Power behind the universe, though when he declared that "the Power which the Universe manifests to us is utterly inscrutable"<sup>29</sup> he provoked not a little incredulity among such competent theologians as Dr. Iverach: "He speaks of knowledge and its manifestations, and does not see that if the Unknowable is manifested, so far as it is manifested it can be known".<sup>30a</sup> Iverach and others were equally baffled by Spencer's insistence on explaining the higher in terms of the lower: "One has sympathy with those who labour at an impossible task. It is hard on one who has undertaken to explain evolution in terms of the distribution of matter and motion to arrive at a stage where matter fails, and then to be compelled to deal with super-organic matter... We can but express our sympathy, and pass on to the conviction that the source of explanation lies not where they are seeking it".<sup>31</sup> Many theologians appealed to naturalists to "come clean" on these two points, and H.R. Mackintosh was subsequently to feel that "The

one fact which has given Materialism its otherwise inexplicable fascination for the less instructed modern mind is, we can scarcely doubt, its wholly illegitimate alliance with the doctrine of Evolution".<sup>32</sup>

Turning once more to the theists we find that many of them absorbed evolutionary theory (though not Darwinism) into their systems by the expedient of assuming God to be immanent in the evolutionary process. (The refrain of the jingle comes to mind: "Some call it evolution; others call it God".) On this basis even the cautious Dr. Orr could envisage the possibility that evolution "may become a new and heightened form of the theistic argument".<sup>4d</sup> A.E. Garvie went further in maintaining that the notion of cosmic evolution demands an immanent, dynamic God, and declared that since God works out his purposes in history, the understanding of religion as "the flight of the alone to the Alone" is no longer tenable.<sup>33a</sup> Garvie further held that evolution indicated the method by which the immanent God made himself known - that is, gradually and progressively, rather than catastrophically.<sup>33b</sup> Edward Caird (1835-1908) and Henry Jones (1852-1922) were among those who followed a similar line from the side of philosophy. It cannot be maintained, however, that the immanentists gave an entirely satisfactory account of the divine transcendence. They tended, perhaps in partial reaction against both the older natural theology and deism, to leave the concept on one side, and certainly Kingsley's early attempt to solve the difficulty by redefining all *natural* events as miracles did not find universal acclaim.<sup>34</sup> Again, some theologians were alive to the fact that certain forms of teleological idealism, in which the end was determined from the beginning were, as William James said, but the "reverse side of mechanism";<sup>35</sup> whilst Professor Emmet, viewing the debate from a more distant vantage point, noted that evolutionary idealisms tended to get into difficulties over the empirical, and that the supreme deductive idealist, McTaggart, was forced to recognise that apart from the empirical premise that "something exists" his system could never have got under way.<sup>36</sup>

If some varieties of evolutionary idealism were as inimical to theologians as the various kinds of naturalism and materialism, there were other developments of evolutionary thought which promised them more encouragement by reason of their "spiritual" approach to matter. Thus James Ward (1843-1925) in his *The Realm of Ends* (1911), and Bergson (1859-1941) in his numerous writings, spoke respectively of epigenesis and of the *élan vital*.<sup>37</sup> According to both evolution was the datum, but in opposition to materialism they held that the more recent was not merely educed from the earlier, but that there was novelty attaching to it. The process is dynamic, vital, creative - not merely reproductive.

The appeal which such teaching could have to the more homiletic popularisers is plain, though such men had perforce to sit rather loosely to such empirical factors as disease and pain — in theological terms, the problem of evil — which tended to militate against it. Dean Inge had his own, characteristic way of expressing his dissatisfaction:

"Bergson and his followers naturally advocate the Lamarckian *élan vital*, an inner impulse towards change, in opposition to the merely mechanical doctrine of Darwin, which does not admit of qualitative alteration. It must, however, be admitted that for a metaphysician a minimal change is as great a problem as a mutation. We cannot admit the excuse of the girl who palliated the appearance of her baby by saying that it was a very small one".<sup>24b</sup>

In the twentieth century we find a development in the direction of emergent evolution. According to this theory the Creator himself is subject to change, and reality is identified with process. This doctrine is variously associated with the names of C. Lloyd Morgan (1852-1936), Samuel Alexander (1859-1938) and A.N. Whitehead (1861-1947), and some theologians felt, with Donald Baillie, that they were too ignorant to pass judgement upon it.<sup>38</sup> Others felt that their understanding of God could be neither helped nor harmed by the more esoteric speculations of their philosophical contemporaries, Lloyd Morgan's talk of "Spiritual Agency"<sup>39</sup> notwithstanding. It is only much nearer to our own time that Charles Hartshorne, Schubert Ogden, John Cobb and others have developed process theologies out of Whitehead's later metaphysics; and into these we cannot at present enquire.

We turn instead to the doctrinal implications of the earlier theological utilisation of evolutionary theory. Concerning the doctrine of creation, the realisation that Darwinism was not a theory of causes, but rather an account of causal methods, gave considerable comfort to theologians:

All these terms — Evolution, Natural Selection, the Survival of the Fittest, and the like — are descriptions of a method, or of a result, and not a definition of a cause. Yet to mistake a result, a method, or a description for a reason and a cause is the failing of the common talk of many Evolutionists; a mistake from which Darwin, at least in his circumspect moments, kept himself entirely free.<sup>40</sup>

Theologians thus felt justified in understanding evolution as being God's way of revelation. Dr. Garvie said as much:

"Evolution is God's method of creation of the world and man, and it is no less the method of His revelation, for a communication beyond the capacity of man to receive and respond would be idle and vain. We may say that human development is by divine education".<sup>33c</sup> (It is interesting to note in passing that a not dissimilar stance was adopted by those who were working within the Roman Catholic fold for a revival of Thomism. They urged evolution as the *modus operandi* whereby universals were realised in the actual world). Garvie and others like him were quite convinced that evolutionary theory could and should coexist with supernaturalism:

The recognition of evolution, and of progress in evolution, removes an objection to the admission of the supernatural which was rooted in the static view of the world. If the world were thought of as a finished article...any fresh departure must seem incredible. But admit the conception of progress, then no stage can be regarded as so finally and adequately expressing the whole mind and will of God that any new expression would appear incredible.<sup>41a</sup>

As far as man is concerned, it is by a gradually evolving process that man increasingly co-operates in God's advancing purpose;<sup>41b</sup> evolution inspires us onward in the struggle against evil;<sup>42</sup> indeed, "in the whole long story of evolution pain is the condition of progress"<sup>43</sup> — and of this the Cross is the supreme illustration.

Thus it was that some theologians, not to mention many preachers, adopted an optimistic attitude towards the world and man's place in it. One might have thought that Spencer's declaration concerning the inevitability of both the disappearance of evil and immortality, and of the perfection of man, would have given them pause. But the appeal of the idea in the air was too much for some. We can understand this — after all, it really did seem that science and the new technologies held the promise of a better life than most had ever dreamed of. As early as 4th January 1851 *The Economist* had roundly declared that "All who have read, and can think, must now have full confidence that the 'endless progression' ever increasing in rapidity, of which the poet sung, is the destined lot of the human race".<sup>44</sup> Even the sober Martineau, having examined regress, stoicism and progress, could affirm that the last alone "is the most accordant with the divine interpretation of the world...neither of these two modern discoveries, namely, the immense extension of the universe in space, and its unlimited development in time, has any effect on the theistic faith, except to glorify it";<sup>45</sup> and Garvie, even after the First World War could still declare that God "is

completing the evolution of the world and of mankind in the progressive manifestation of the sons of God".<sup>33d</sup>

Commentators have sometimes generalised from such statements in an unacceptable way. There was optimism, but it was not universal — as the works of von Hartmann (1842-1919), for example, show — and it was not always unthinking. Many of those theologians who wished to make most of progress, development, aspiration, sought also to take due account of sin, and of the actuality of moral stagnation and decadence. In this connection Dr. Garvie comes to mind once more.<sup>41c</sup> Others were even more reserved concerning the inevitability of progress. Of Croce's words "The plant dreams of the animal, the animal of man, and man of superman..." Inge confessed, "I can see nothing in his hymn to progress except delerious nonsense".<sup>24c</sup> And with even closer implications for the theological utilisation of the evolutionary principle the poet James Thompson averred,

I find no hint throughout the Universe  
Of good or ill, of blessing or of curse.

In his Romanes Lecture for 1893 Huxley warned that the theory of evolution "encourages no millenial expectations". Those who overlooked such warnings may have felt that they were in good company, for near the end of *The Origin of Species* Darwin had said that "as natural selection works solely by and for the good of each being, all corporeal and mental endowments will tend to progress towards perfection".<sup>46</sup> Thus if he had wished, Dr. L.F. Stearns, the American Congregationalist, could have claimed quasi-apostolic authority for his jubilant statement, "We have seen the scientific theory of evolution turned from an enemy to a friend of religion".<sup>47</sup> It was but a short step to Social Gospel theory.

Dr. Iverach, by contrast, was by no means so persuaded of the unqualified benefits of evolutionism. Whilst he was prepared to accept a version of theistic evolution according to which evolution was the method of God's working, he did not wish to obscure the importance of sin, or the need of grace. He could not regard evolutionary progress as automatic: "Many hindrances there are on Christ's view to the communication of God to his creation; but the main hindrance is that men are not pure in heart".<sup>30b</sup> The Anglican Scott Holland complained that the doctrine of evolution "yields no Categorical Imperative";<sup>48</sup> John Dickie argued that whereas evolution may at best be able to tell us why we do what we do, it could not explain why our moral sense condemns some of our actions as *sinful*";<sup>49</sup> and, above all, James Orr attacked those who would replace the doctrine of the Fall with the view that sin is a necessary part of man's ascent rather than

"the voluntary defection of a creature who had the power to remain sinless",<sup>50</sup> and who overlooked the fact that "Sin is that which ought not to be *at all*. It has throughout the Bible a volitional and *catastrophic* character".<sup>51</sup> Orr may sum up for us the adverse bearings of an uncritically accepted doctrine of evolution on the heart of the gospel:

Man, on the new reading, is not a fallen being, but is in process of ascent; he deserves, not blame, but, on the whole, praise, that he has done so marvellously well, considering the disadvantageous circumstances in which he started; the doctrines of redemption associated with the older view — atonement, regeneration, justification, sanctification, resurrection — have no longer any place, or change their meaning... Unfortunately, the elements it is proposed to dispense with — the sense of sin and guilt, the pain of spiritual bondage, the war between flesh and spirit, recognised as *evil* in the shame and self-condemnation that attend it, the craving for atonement, the felt need of regeneration, the consciousness of forgiveness and renewal — are not simply so interwoven with the texture of Scripture that to part with them is virtually to give up *Christian* theology altogether, but are parts of an actual human *experience* that cannot be blotted out of existence, or dismissed from consideration, even to suit the requirements of a modern scientific hypothesis.<sup>52</sup>

We believe that in showing the bearing of evolutionary theory upon the doctrines of sin and salvation we have reached the crux of the matter. This is not to deny that evolution impinged on other aspects of theological thought. We have already referred to the doctrine of creation; but in addition to that evolutionary theory fertilised the doctrine of development beloved of Catholic Modernists; it undergirded the work of the new breed of comparative religionists, some of whom profoundly disturbed the faithful because of the relativism to which their position tended, and in which some of them rejoiced;<sup>53</sup> and Dr. Gill has recently pointed out that evolutionary assumptions persist in sociology down to our own day — "even within the sociology of religion".<sup>54</sup> It is not difficult to echo E.C. Moore's sigh, "This elaboration and reiteration of the doctrine of evolution sometimes wearies us".<sup>55</sup> But *we* need elaborate no further, for we have provided enough evidence for our case, and may now present our summary conclusion.

We have seen that Darwinism was a debtor both to an age-long idea of progress, and to that modern immanentist thrust which

derived from Kant and the German Romantics, and which found one of its expressions in the modern understanding of history. We have emphasised the fact that Darwin himself did not set out to destroy the faith, and that his particular offering of natural selection was by-passed by the majority of theologians.<sup>56</sup> Some theologians, of whom Orr was a prominent example, entertained serious reservations concerning evolution; others, like Dale, saw advantages in the theory provided that the rights of conscience and morality were not submerged under naturalism.<sup>57</sup> The upshot is that even when the more competent theologians utilised the evolutionary principle they were not entirely uncritical of it, and many of them retained a sufficiently strong sense of the exceeding sinfulness of sin. On the other hand, truth to tell, some were bowled over by an optimism in man which could hardly be described as scriptural. That last word prompts the reflection that those who took most readily to evolution were, on the whole, those who were most open to the findings of the newer biblical criticism. There have ever been those who have set their faces against that criticism, and Professor Floyd E. Hamilton may be taken as representing their view:

Whatever prejudice theologians have against evolution is due to the fact that they have independent proof that the Bible and Christianity are true, so they feel that a theory which denies the truth of both is false and should be rejected... We have, it is true, certain presuppositions ... A man may have assumptions and yet be fair in his examination of evidence and arguments. His very prejudice may enable him to see flaws in the evidence that would escape the advocate of the theory.<sup>58</sup>

But this was a minority view. Most would have endorsed the following typical statements: "Physical Science may render service to Religious Faith; but first of all Religious Faith must render a greater service to Science by teaching her that Nature is not God, and that although the Heavens declare His glory, and the earth is full of His goodness, in Nature God is not seen at His highest and best".<sup>23b</sup> Again, "in Jesus Christ, and in Him alone, we have the pledge of the human world's fulfilling its destiny, of the vanquishing of all the obstacles that can arise, of the great career's reaching, at last, that

...one far-off divine event  
To which the whole creation moves".<sup>59</sup>

Here we see clearly the qualified use of the evolutionary idea. Undeniably Darwinism created a climate of thought in which such affirmations could gain wide acceptance among Christians. But

upon Darwin's distinctive biological hypothesis such affirmations do not depend in the slightest degree. To those theologians who got most mileage out of it, evolution was more a theme than a theory.

#### NOTES

- 1 It goes without saying that the literature on Darwin and (what is by no means entirely the same thing) evolutionism is vast. Since we are concerned not so much with scientific detail as with evolution as a theme in nineteenth century thought, it will suffice to mention the following works in addition to the writings of Darwin, T.H. Huxley and Spencer, and to the works to be noted later: H.F. Osborn, *From the Greeks to Darwin*, New York 1894; A.R. Wallace, *Darwinianism*, 1909; J. Huxley, *Evolution: The Modern Synthesis*, 1942; C.C. Gillespie, *Genesis and Geology*, Cambridge Mass., 1951; R.E.D. Clark, *Darwin: Before and After*, Exeter 1966.
- 2 See A.P.F. Sell, "Immanentism and the Theological Enterprise", this JOURNAL, 1977, 104, 119.
- 3 This was, of course, a spirit upon which the Oxford Movement capitalised, and it goes far towards accounting for what E.B. Pusey (1800-82) called "ecclesiastical antiquity": "If a Reformed Church must be a student of Scripture, a Catholic Church must add to the study of Scripture that of ecclesiastical antiquity". See H.P. Liddon, *Life of E.B. Pusey*, 4 vols. 1893-7, I p.336.
- 4 James Orr, *God's Image in Man*, 1907, (a) p.84, (b) p.95, (c) p.89 n.2, (d) p.96.
- 5 T. Rhondda Williams, *The Working Faith of a Liberal Theologian*, 1914, p.205.
- 6 A.J. Balfour, *Theism and Thought*, 1923, (a) p.8, (b) pp.237-8.
- 7 David Young, "The impact of Darwinianism on the concept of God in the nineteenth century", *Faith and Thought*, 1972, 101, 25. The entire article is most illuminating, particularly on the more strictly scientific aspects of the debate. It is amply furnished with references.
- 8 See his *The Relation between the Holy Scriptures and some parts of Geological Science*.
- 9 L. Elliott-Binns quoting Cook's *Life of Ruskin in English Thought 1860-1900*, 1956, p.175n.
- 10 R.W. Dale, *The Living Christ and the Four Gospels*, 1895, p.5.
- 11 Chambers's work appeared anonymously, and it was not until 1884 that the author's identity was made public. See Robert M. Young, "The impact of Darwin on conventional thought" in ed. A. Symondson, *The Victorian Crisis of Faith*, 1970, p.16. This article, though factually informative, contains some



- generalisations of the kind which abound in discussions of evolution, and which it is part of our purpose to modify. Thus Mr. Young says that "what evolution took away from man's spiritual hopes by separating science and theology and making God remote from nature's laws, it gave back in the doctrine of material and social and spiritual progress" (p.27). But by no means all evolutionists adopted the *quasi*-deistic stance here implied. Idealist-immanentist evolutionists were, as we shall see, of quite another mind.
- 12 Wallace's paper and Darwin's abstract appeared in 1858 in the same number of *The Journal of the Linnaean Society*.
- 13 E. Griffith-Jones, *Providence - Divine and Human*, 1925, p.22.
- 14 Quoted by Darwin's son Francis in his *Charles Darwin*, 1908, p.58.
- 15 ed. F. Darwin, *The Life and Letters of Charles Darwin*, 1887, II p.289. By the same token Darwin refused to allow Marx to dedicate the English edition of *Das Kapital* to him on the ground that he did not wish to be associated with attacks on Christianity and theism. See R.M. Young, n.10 above, p.31 and refs. Again, when Tennyson asked Darwin whether his conclusions adversely affected Christianity he replied, "No, certainly not". See L. Elliott-Binns, n.8 above, p.37.
- 16 Hence the celebrated "Monkey Trial" of as late as 1925 in which William Jennings Bryan successfully prosecuted John T. Scopes for having broken the law of Tennessee by denying Biblical creationism and teaching that man had ascended from lower forms of life. For this case see e.g. Stewart G. Cole, *The History of Fundamentalism* (1931), Westport, 1971. Dr. C.F.H. Henry draws attention to the naturalistic, anti-theistic impetus of John Dewey upon American thought, and points out that whereas in the first edition of the *International Standard Bible Dictionary*, whose General Editor was Dr. James Orr, there was an article in favour of evolution and none against, in the second edition (1929) the latter deficiency was made good. See his *Evangelical Responsibility in Contemporary Theology*, Grand Rapids 1957, p.41. With Dewey may be contrasted John Stuart Mill, who conceded that the hypothesis of a limited God was not altogether improbable, and who was anxious to maintain the mind-body distinction, and to deny that the former could be understood exclusively in naturalistic terms.
- 17 T.H. Huxley, *Lay Sermons, Addresses and Reviews*, 1870, p.330. He further explained: "According to Teleology, each organism is like a rifle bullet fired straight at a mark; according to Darwin, organisms are like grapeshot of which one hits something and the rest fall wide" (p.31). For example, where Teleology says that cats exist in order to catch mice, Darwinism says that (surviving) cats exist because they catch

- mice well (p.332). Cf. John Oman's way of making the point in *The Natural and the Supernatural*, Cambridge 1931, p.259: "All that put Darwin's theory in motion – the purpose of the living creature, its will to live, its subjective selection from environment, its choice of partners – instead of being the positive, directive, creative elements of evolution, were regarded merely as results".
- 18 C. Darwin, *The Descent of Man*, 1871, II, p.395. In Darwin's view the term "chance" was used to "acknowledge plainly our ignorance of the cause of each particular variation". See *The Origin of Species*, 1963 edn. p.128.
- 19 Quoted by J.S. Bezzant, *Aspects of Belief*, 1937, p.23.
- 20 A.M. Fairbairn, *Studies in Religion and Theology*, New York 1910, p.92.
- 21 Cf. e.g. James Iverach, *Theism in the Light of Present Science and Philosophy*, 1900, p.73. The same writer provides a still useful survey of the evolution debate in his *Christianity and Evolution*, 1894.
- 22 Horton Davies, *Worship and Theology in England: From Newman to Martineau, 1850-1900*, Princeton 1962, p.173.
- 23 R.W. Dale, *Fellowship with Christ*, 1900, (a) p.186, (b) p.187.
- 24 W.R. Inge, *God and the Astronomers*, 1933, (a) p.142, (b) pp. 137-8, (c) p.154.
- 25 H.G. Wood, *Belief and Unbelief since 1850*, Cambridge 1955, p.53.
- 26 A.N. Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World*, New York 1926, p.157.
- 27 R. Otto, *Naturalism and Religion*, 1907, p.89.
- 28 B. Powell, *Essays on the Spirit of the Inductive Philosophy*, 1855, p.168.
- 29 H. Spencer, *First Principles*, 1862, p.46.
- 30 J. Iverach, *Christianity and Evolution*, (a) p.208, (b) p.207.
- 31 J. Iverach, *Theism in the Light of Present Science and Philosophy*, pp.94-5.
- 32 H.R. Mackintosh, *Some Aspects of Christian Belief*, n.d. but preface has 1923, pp.284-5.
- 33 A.E. Garvie, *The Christian Doctrine of the Godhead*, 1925, (a) p.14, (b) p.184, (c) p.318 and cf. many others, e.g. A.M. Fairbairn, *The City of God*, 1903, p.60, (d) p.214.
- 34 Kingsley wrote, "My doctrine has been for years...that below all natural phenomena, we come to a transcendental – in plain English, a miraculous ground". See his *Letters and Memories of His Life*, ed. by his wife, 9th edn. 1877, II p.67.
- 35 E.g. Dr. Griffith-Jones as n.13 above, pp.125-6.
- 36 D.M. Emmet, *The Nature of Metaphysical Thinking* (1945), 1966, p.84.

- 37 For Ward see *DNB* 1941-50; for Bergson see *inter alia*, H.W. Carr, *Henri Bergson*, 1912; A.D. Lindsay, *The Philosophy of Bergson*, 1911; B. Russell, *The Philosophy of Bergson*, Cambridge 1914; J. McK. Stewart, *A Critical Examination of Bergson's Philosophy*, 1912.
- 38 D.M. Baillie, *Faith in God and its Christian Consummation* (1927), 1964, p.276.
- 39 For these philosophers see e.g. J.W. McCarthy, *The Naturalism of Samuel Alexander*, New York 1948; William McDougall, *Modern Materialism and Emergent Evolution*, 1929; D.M. Emmet, *Whitehead's Philosophy of Organism*, 1932; W. Mays, *The Philosophy of Whitehead*, 1959.
- 40 J. Scott Lidgett, *The Christian Religion*, n.d. but preface has 1907, p.59. Among numerous books designed to relate evolutionary theory to Christian doctrine we may note S.A. McDowall, *Evolution and the Need of Atonement*, Cambridge 1912; and ed. F. Hastings and A.F. Muir, *Christianity and Evolution*, 1887.
- 41 A.E. Garvie, *A Handbook of Christian Apologetics*, 1913, (a) pp.58-9 and cf. A.C. Fraser, *Philosophy of Theism*, Edinburgh and London 1899, p.210, (b) p.209, (c) pp.116-7.
- 42 A.C. Fraser as n.41 above, p.281.
- 43 O.C. Quick, *The Ground of Faith and the Chaos of Thought*, 1931, p.132.
- 44 Quoted by Gordon Harland, *The Thought of Reinhold Niebuhr*, New York 1960, p.99. Cf. the similar view of Condorcet and some of the Encyclopaedists.
- 45 J. Martineau, *The Seat of Authority in Religion*, 1890, p.17.
- 46 C. Darwin, *The Origin of Species*, 1963 edn. p.462.
- 47 L.F. Stearns, "The present direction of theological thought in the Congregational churches of the United States", *Proceedings of the International Congregational Council*, 1891, p.81.
- 48 H. Scott Holland, *Personal Studies*, 1905, p.173.
- 49 J. Dickie, *The Organism of Christian Truth*, n.d. but preface has 1930, p.154.
- 50 J. Orr, *Sin as a Problem of Today*, 1910, p.139.
- 51 J. Orr, *Sidelights on Christian Doctrine*, n.d. preface has 1901, p.94.
- 52 J. Orr, *The Progress of Dogma*, n.d. but preface has 1901, p.328.
- 53 Professor Robert Watts attacked the relativism of Henry Drummond's *Ascent of Man* (1894) in his *Professor Drummond's 'Ascent of Man' and Principal Fairbairns's 'Place of Christ in Modern Theology'*, *Examined in the Light of Science and Revelation*, Edinburgh, n.d.
- 54 Robin Gill, *The Social Context of Theology*, 1975, p.116.

- 55 E.C. Moore, *An Outline of the History of Christian Thought since Kant*, 1912, p.17.
- 56 The Calvinist James McCosh is an interesting exception here. In his *The Religious Aspect of Evolution*, 1888, he utilised natural selection as an analogy of that gracious election of God whereby men are saved. This view did not command widespread support, not least because by now all things Calvinistic were under a cloud.
- 57 R.W. Dale, *The Ten Commandments*, n.d., p.159: "If it be said that this scientific history of our physical organization constitutes a theory of human nature, that it explains our position in the universe, that it solves those questions concerning our destiny by which the hearts of the wisest men in all ages have been perplexed, I can only reply that it explains nothing that I am most anxious to understand. My moral life remains a mystery still".
- 58 F.E. Hamilton, *The Basis of Evolutionary Faith*, n.d. but preface has 1931, pp.58-60.
- 59 Robert Mackintosh, *From Comte to Benjamin Kidd*, 1899, p.281.

