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Apologize to Charles Darwin?

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A senior cleric of the Church of England wants his church to apologize to Charles Darwin in time for the observance of the 200th anniversary of Darwin's birth next year. The Rev. Dr. Malcolm Brown, Director of Mission and Public Affairs for the church, made his case in an article entitled, "[Good Religion Needs Good Science](#)," published in a special new section of the Church of England's official Web site.

"Charles Darwin: 200 years from your birth, the Church of England owes you an apology for misunderstanding you and, by getting our first reaction wrong, encouraging others to misunderstand you still," Brown wrote. "We try to practice the old virtues of 'faith seeking understanding' and hope that makes some amends."

Apologize to Charles Darwin? The Church of England may well need to apologize, but not to Charles Darwin. If anything, the church needs to apologize for its rightful embarrassment in considering an apology to Darwin. But, it seems, this church is not embarrassed.

Dr. Brown apparently is a big believer in Darwin's theory of natural selection. "Subsequent generations have built on Darwin's work but have not significantly undermined his fundamental theory of natural selection," he insists. "There is nothing here that contradicts Christian teaching."

Well, Charles Darwin sure thought that the theory of natural selection contradicted Christian teaching. But, then again, he may have had a better understanding of Christian teaching than Dr. Brown.

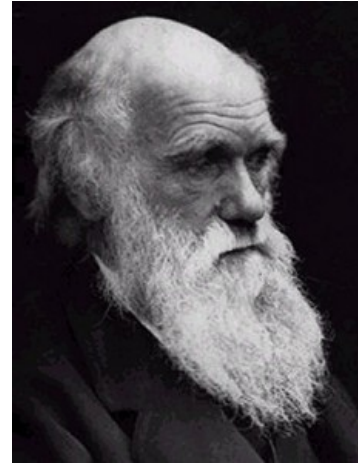
To the end of his life, Darwin identified himself as a "nominal" Anglican, but by that time he had long abandoned theism and any belief in a personal God. The relationship between Darwin's changing religious beliefs and his developing scientific theory can be read either of two ways, and even Darwin appeared to have been unclear in his own mind how the two were related. The two options are these: Either Darwin's theory of natural selection undermined his belief in a personal God who directed creation, or his abandonment of his belief in a personal God as the agent of creation led to his development of the theory of natural selection. Either way, Darwin himself was clear that the belief that God is Creator and the belief that life is evidence of natural selection are incompatible beliefs.

Darwin differed, for example, with the American botanist Asa Gray over just this question. Gray allowed for God as the agent of design, working through what appeared to be natural selection — a form of what is often called "theistic evolution." But Darwin would have none of that, and he rejected any role for a divine Designer.

As Peter J. Bowler explains in *Charles Darwin: The Man and His Influence* (Cambridge University Press), "The one thing Darwin could not admit was that God somehow played an active role in controlling the direction of evolution."

Dr. Brown argues that Darwin was misunderstood. In his words: "Darwin's meticulous application of the principles of evidence-based research was not the problem. His theory caused offense because it challenged the view that God had created human beings as an entirely different kind of creation to the rest of the animal world."

No, his theory caused offense because it challenged the view that God had *anything* to do with the creation of *any* species at all. Dr. Brown's version of Darwinism simply isn't compatible with what Darwin actually believed.



Dr. Brown wants to make the apology to Darwin because he is embarrassed that some in his church rejected Darwin's theories. This, Brown suggests, was due to the fact that the church is often fearful of new ideas. "When a big new idea emerges which changes the way people look at the world, it's easy to feel that every old idea, every certainty, is under attack and then do battle against the new insights."

That kind of facile thinking is all too evident in today's doctrinally disarmed church. Here a senior cleric attempts to do public relations by offering a posthumous apology to Charles Darwin, while dismissing any theological concern about his theory and instead insisting that nothing in Darwinism contradicts Christian teaching.

Charles Darwin abandoned belief in God, and he himself traced this loss of faith to his theory of natural selection. He believed that his own doctrine of evolution was a direct contradiction to theism in general and to Christianity in particular.

Darwin argued that belief in miracles was insane and that the Christian doctrine of hell is immoral. In his *Autobiography* he wrote, "I can hardly see how anyone ought to wish Christianity to be true; for if so, the plain language of the text seems to show that the men who do not believe, and this would include my father, brother and almost all my best friends, will be everlastingly punished. And this is a damnable doctrine."

There are several points to observe here. First, Darwin clearly expressed confidence that Christianity is not true, and that we should be thankful for this fact. Second, Darwin, unlike some modern reformers of hell, understood that "the plain language of the text," that is, the Bible, points to hell as everlasting punishment. Third, Darwin simply would not believe in a God who would send his relatives and friends to hell — period.

But, by the time Darwin wrote his *Autobiography*, he had already abandoned belief in any personal deity. As Janet Browne of the British Society for the History of Science and University College, London, explains: "Living out for himself the archetypal Victorian crisis of faith, Darwin perhaps recognized that he had lost the last vestiges of faith when he discovered that biology provided him with the answers he most desired. In the end, in his autobiography, he asserted that religious belief was little more than inherited instinct, akin to a monkey's fear of a snake."

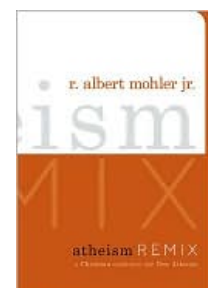
In other words, Charles Darwin was, as he suggested, the original "Devil's Chaplain." In this role he made the same basic arguments now offered by Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, and other "New Atheists." Does Dr. Malcolm Brown intend to apologize to these atheists, too?

An official with the Church of England rushed to clarify in the press that Dr. Brown was not offering an official apology on behalf of the church. *The Telegraph* [London] reported that a member of the Darwin family dismissed the apology as "pointless." Andrew Darwin, a great-great-grandson of Charles Darwin, asked, "Why bother?" He went on to argue that the "apology" was more about making the Church of England "feel better" than to right a wrong.

Well, Dr. Brown's apology, offered on the official Web site of the Church of England, and in his role as Director of Mission and Public Affairs, may be "pointless," but it certainly makes a point about the Church of England. As a matter of fact, it might go a long way toward explaining how a church that once formed the backbone of British life now holds the attention of less than five percent of British citizens on any given Sunday.

People come to church hungry for the Gospel and in order to fear God, not for an apology offered to a self-described enemy of the faith — who believed that faith in God is akin to a monkey's fear of a snake.

For a response to the New Atheists, see my new book, *Atheism Remix: A Christian Confronts the New Atheism* [Crossway Books].



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