



Darwin and Religion: A definitive web resource

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A short article introducing the new electronic Darwin archive.

WE SHOULD BE very thankful that Charles Darwin (1809-1882) did not live in the e-mail era. Instead he exchanged letters with nearly 2000 correspondents in the course of his life, and a massive collection of originals or copies of 14,500 of his surviving letters has been collected by the Cambridge University Library Darwin Archive. The Darwin Correspondence Project coordinated by Dr Alison Pearn aims to make these resources more widely available.

With 2009 marking the 200th anniversary of Darwin's birth, as well as the 150th anniversary of the publication of his *Origin of Species*, the 'Darwin industry' shows no signs of running out of steam, and the Darwin Correspondence Project is preparing many new materials in readiness for the double centenary.

Fifteen volumes of Darwin's letters have already been published by the Cambridge University Press, taking the correspondence up to 1867, but this only represents the halfway mark, and it will be many years yet before print publication of all the letters is completed. The Project has therefore been developing extensive web-resources, to be found at www.darwinproject.ac.uk, a site now containing around 5,000 transcriptions of the letters, many as yet unpublished, together with interviews, articles and other useful materials.

Darwin corresponded extensively with notable scientific figures such as the geologist Charles Lyell, the botanists Asa Gray and Joseph Dalton Hooker, the zoologist Thomas Henry Huxley and the naturalist Alfred Russel Wallace. Darwin also maintained widespread contacts in Britain and overseas with gardeners and nurserymen, diplomats, clergymen, army officers, colonial officials, and naturalists, who provided him with observations on the fauna, flora, and peoples of the world. No less than 200 of Darwin's correspondents were clergymen, and a significant proportion of his letters address questions of science, religion, and wider philosophical issues.

A recent grant awarded to the Darwin Correspondence Project by the John Templeton Foundation is now being used to develop a 'Darwin and Religion' section of the web site that includes folders on Darwin's views on topics such as design in nature, his own personal beliefs and the boundaries of science and religion. A wealth of other valuable materials have already been posted, including the correspondence of Darwin with the Presbyterian Asa Gray, Professor of Botany at Harvard, representing a collection of around 300 letters exchanged over the period 1854-1881, half previously unpublished. In addition, a rare collection of Gray's reviews first published in book form in 1876 under the title *Darwiniana* has also been posted.

A further feature of the 'Darwin and Religion' section of the web site is a series of interviews with experts in the field of Darwin studies. An interview with the philosopher of biology, Tim Lewens, is already available, and other conversations with Simon Conway Morris, James Moore and Randal Keynes will be appearing shortly, together with review material addressing Darwin's own thinking on key elements in the science-religion debate.

An innovative initiative, closely tied in with development of the 'Darwin and Religion' web site, is the dramatisation of the Darwin-Gray correspondence. The letters were given to the dramatist Craig Baxter who developed them into a script, now available in the 'Design' section of the web page. The Cambridge-based Menagerie Theatre Company were employed to develop and produce the theatrical production, and two performances were staged in March as part of Cambridge University's Science Festival program. A full performance was also filmed by Cambridge Media, and excerpts edited for a podcast available on the web site.

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One of the particular charms of this wonderful correspondence is the kind and gentlemanly manner in which it was pursued. From Darwin: 'My dear Dr Gray. I really hardly know how to thank you enough for the very great trouble which the list of close species must have caused you. What knowledge and labour and judgment is condensed in that little sheet of note-paper!' When later on Gray the devout Presbyterian and Darwin the wavering agnostic, chose to differ on whether or not evolution displayed purpose and design, the differences were explored in a spirit of free enquiry and polite discussion, a type of dialogue sadly lacking in some of the acerbic exchanges on the same topic that characterise our own day.

The Darwin-Gray dramatisation has received a very positive response, leading to requests for future performances. A

shorter two-actor version, more appropriate for small audiences, was performed this past summer at the science and religion conference in Lancaster, UK, marking the retirement of Professor John Hedley Brooke, and also at the Templeton Journalists Fellowship Program in Cambridge, and the Cambridge Science Summer School. Performances in the US in 2008 are currently being planned. There will be one at Cornell University as part of their Darwin Day event, and major performances are planned to take place in Boston, also in February 2008, to coincide with the meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science.

On 18 November 1859 the Revd Charles Kingsley wrote to Darwin, thanking him warmly for Darwin's kind gift of an advance copy of the *Origin of Species*, saying that 'All I have seen of it awes me' and then making a comment that Darwin liked so much that he quoted from it in the Second Edition of the *Origin*: 'I have gradually learnt to see', writes Kingsley,

'that it is just as noble a conception of Deity, to believe that he created primal forms capable of self development... as to believe that He required a fresh act of intervention to supply the lacunas [or 'gaps'] which he himself had made.'

Kingsley's warm endorsement of Darwinian evolution within a theistic framework set a trend which continues to the present day. The Darwin Correspondence Project provides fascinating resources to all those with an interest in both Darwinism and the 19th century science-religion debate. Get to know Darwin the letter-writer – you will not be disappointed.

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