

## DARWIN AND RELIGION

A sermon preached by Rev. F. Raymond Sturtevant at the First Unitarian Church, Baltimore, on February 13, 1927.

Text: Ye shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free.  
John 8:32

Yesterday marked the birthday of two great men. And it is one of the happy coincidences of history, often commented upon, that they were born, not only on the same day, but in the same year; Abraham Lincoln in a Kentucky log-cabin, of sturdy pioneer stock, Charles Darwin in an English physician's home in Shrewsbury, of cultivated parentage and fine British breeding; the one destined to become a statesman of commanding prominence who achieved greatly in the life of this nation and the annals of history, the other destined to become a biologist of equally commanding prominence, probably the greatest in history, save Aristotle, a scientist who has helped the world, as has none other of his kind, to know the truth that maketh free and whose labors have produced a revolution of wide-reaching influence in the world of thought.

There is another reason for the subject: and that is the publication, within a few months, of Gamaliel Bradford's "Darwin", a book of compelling interest, thought-stirring and, I am free to say, profoundly impressive; a book that is bound to create in the minds of those who read it, as it did in mine, a considerable reaction.

Mr. Bradford has a flair for the study of the minds and souls of men and for some years has been painting his portraits of interesting figures of history. This of Darwin he offers, he tells us, as "an intimate study of a man whose influence upon other men, for good and evil both, has been enormous, and who was himself one of the simplest, purest, noblest, most candid, most lovable, most Christian souls that ever lived."

This book, then, with its comments and conclusions, may serve as a sort of gate-way to the subject, so much engaging in one form or another the general thought of our day, of "Darwin and Religion."

The book is not a biography, yet the life of Darwin, with a few crisp strokes, here and there, is admirably sketched; how, born of excellent parentage, with the goodly heritage of the Darwins, his father an able physician, his grandfather a notable scientist, and on the other side, of the Wedgewoods, famous makers of pottery, (both the Darwins and Wedgewoods were Unitarian families), he began his life in a home of culture and of property; how, after his University work, he was first designed for medicine but having no taste for that vocation, nor enduring the sight of blood, was expected to enter the Christian ministry; how, liking the outdoor life and the animals and plants and having a passion for collecting, he secured, at

the age of 22, the position of naturalist on the "Beagle" for its five year trip of exploration; how, as a result, he became intensely interested in this subject, devoted his life to it and more than 20 years later, in 1859, published his "Origin of Species".

But the delineation of the mind of Darwin is, of course, the substance of this portrait. The numerous facts of his character are presented, some of which we may here recall. There was his love of home-life and his affection for his family, a noble wife and ten children, the tenderness he felt for them, the interest in their development, the unfailing kindness and love with which he always treated them. There was only one other passion that claimed him, his love for his work, his absorbing interest in the pursuit of science, so absorbing that he completely lost all appreciation of art, music, literature, drama and religious observance, -of everything but his home and his work. Again and again, he expresses his joy in work and how he regretted the interruptions that his semi-invalidism compelled, how exhilarating always was to him his labor in the pursuit of truth. A sentence from one of his letters reveals this eager buoyant nature and with a lovely touch. Writing to a scientific friend, he closes with these words, "This letter is a most untidy one, but my mind is untidy with joy", surely a very beautiful, expressive, unforgettable phrase.

Then there was his love of truth and his desire always to be accurate. "How difficult accuracy is", he wrote; and again, "Accuracy is the hardest merit to obtain and the highest merit." There was his patience, a patience that enabled him to hold steady and hold back, after he had first conceived his theory, thru twenty years of labor and waiting. There was his humility, very notable in a mind of such brilliance and ability, that made him quite unconscious of his own greatness, tho he knew and admired the greatness of others, and led him once to say with perfect sincerity, "Anyone with ordinary faculties, if he had patience enough and plenty of time, could have written my book." - There was his caution that always held him back from premature conclusions and tempered all his statements. "Caution", he once said, "is the soul of science." There was his open-mindedness, his willingness always to listen to others, to "prove all things and hold fast that which is good". He was one who felt sure that this is the right and the only attitude before the problems of life. "The truth," he said, "will not penetrate a pre-occupied mind." There was his tolerance. He was never dogmatic, he was open to criticism, he was willing to admit mistake. "In fact," he said, "I am sure to be proved wrong on many points." And thru the storms of controversy that his book with its theory evoked, he never defended himself with argument but kept quietly at his work. And there was his gentleness, his tenderness of nature, that made him turn away from the career of a physician, that made him shrink from vivisection tho he acknowledged its necessity, that made him abhor slavery, that made him suffer always before the suffering of others. His was a mind, as Huxley once said.

"conspicuous for its powerful humility and strong gentleness."

Think of these things, and then of a tall, well-built man, with a slight stoop to his shoulders, a massive face, bluish-gray eyes, clear and steady, beneath bushy over-hanging brows, a pleasant smile that came and went readily, an alertness of appearance and a wistfulness of patient thought, and in general a cordial charming personality that drew friends and brought children to his side: and you have a picture of the man whose life-work produced this revolution of thought, greater than any since Christ walked in Palestine.

What Darwin's theory was needs no discussion here. But it would be helpful if those who condemn evolution and know very little about it, would realize that the doctrine of evolution began with the ancients, that for centuries it was taught in one form or another, that in the years preceding Darwin, there were diligent workers in the field trying to discover what is the method of evolution and that Darwin was the scientist who won the battle for evolution because, armed with his enormous mass of evidence after 20 years of research, he presented a theory, the theory of Natural Selection, that made evolution generally accepted, tho as the years have gone on with changes and modifications. Darwin himself once said that probably much that he had written would be found to be rubbish, but he hoped and believed that the frame work would endure. And that is precisely what has happened. There are disputed points among scientists today as to the theory of natural selection, but there is none whatsoever as to evolution itself; thanks to Darwin, they and all intelligent public opinion everywhere have accepted the truth that the Genesis story of special creation is only beautiful poetry, that all life is related, that man evolved thru a long process from lower forms.

This is neither the place nor the person to discuss science. What is of moment to me, what should be of interest to you, is the effect of all this on religion.

Mr. Bradford has a chapter in his book on "Darwin, the Destroyer." He puts upon the great scientist the heavy burden of having destroyed the power, persuasiveness and reality of religion; he declares that these scientific conceptions, working in the popular mind, have fixed it upon the affairs of this world and its struggle for existence and have reduced the spiritual realm to a "shadowy inconsistency"; have "disposed of hell, with a ludicrous completeness" and also heaven along with hell; have made immortality an impossible doctrine and prayer an impossible or at best only a vague practice, have taken the heart out of worship and reduced God to the vanishing point. He says that he himself first read the "Origin of Species" when 16 years of age, and the impression it made upon him has never been obliterated; that since then he has never prayed, never had a God to worship, always had the sense of being aimlessly adrift in a vast universe of consciousness, of struggle and strife.



He deplores, even ridicules the efforts of those who would reconcile science and religion; and after quoting statements of those who believe the two compatible, he reminds us of what Darwin himself once wrote, in commenting upon one of his orthodox admirers who seemed to find in Darwin's books some help for his theology, "How funny men's minds are!" And he closes his chapter with these pathetic words: "It was Darwin, the gentle, the kindly--who at least typified the rigorous logic that wrecked the universe for me and for millions of others."

It would be ungenerous to say that all this is posing. But certainly the publishers, with a keen sense for sales, have made the most of it and have placed on the jacket of the book this quotation from it in reference to Darwin: "He made hell a laughing-stock and heaven a dream" and otherwise advised us how Darwin "upheaved the very foundations of religion and morality."

Now it is difficult to know precisely what he means when he says that Darwin wrecked the universe for him. But probably it is a rhetorical statement to indicate the loss of religion; to convey to the public that because of evolution God as a reality has been taken from him; and he ends his book with some self-revealing verse, the last couplet of which is this: "But my one unchanged obsession wheresoe'er my feet have trod, Is a keen, enormous, haunting, never-sated thirst for God."

Did Darwin do all this? Did he "wreck the universe for millions?" Is he responsible for the so-called irreligion of the day? In this present time, when there is a renewal of interest in evolution, when anti-evolution bills are being introduced into our State legislatures so fast that one can hardly keep track of them and millions of money being used for the defence of Fundamentalism, the question becomes important. The Fundamentalists, seeing this book, might well point to it as a fair proof of the necessity of killing the disastrous doctrine of evolution and saving our people, more especially our youth, from a "wrecked universe".

But there is one thing about it that is incontrovertible. We are commanded by One greater than the Fundamentalist, we are counselled by our own best sensibilities and urged by our own highest ideals to seek the truth that maketh free. "Ye shall seek the truth and the truth shall make you free". If religion cannot stand that test, then it is not religion. If the universe is wrecked by the searchings of truth, then it is a pretty poor universe.

And there is another thing that is equally incontrovertible: and that is, that evolution is true. It is as true, the general idea of it, as anything we may know is true.-- Probably not one in a hundred thousand of our population has ever studied or even read anything about evolution. And of educated

persons, only a relatively few are equipped with an understanding of its method. We accept, as in other departments of knowledge, the findings of those who are equipped to know. And they are all of one mind: the facts are too overwhelming, from the records of the rocks, the study of fossils and from biology, the study of the living forms of the present. And anyone of intelligent understanding may study or read enough to know that here, in its main outline, is the truth.

Evolution needs no defence in this company: nor religion either. For this church belongs to a religious communion that from the beginning has accepted evolution. But it would be well for us all, in these agitated times, to be sure that the two are fully reconciled in our own minds and also to be equipped somewhat to meet the Fundamentalist who fears for his faith and who lacks the vision of the more spacious world of thought and the quite unharmed universe that evolution reveals.

Henry Fairfield Osborn, who is Research Professor of Biology at Columbia and President of the American Museum of Natural History, has written a keen but kindly comment on Mr. Bradford's book. And while he commends the picture, therein of Darwin, the man and naturalist, he wishes that the chapter on Darwin as the destroyer might have been omitted altogether from the book as misleading, inaccurate, quite untrue: that Darwin was not the destroyer, but the upbuilder of the modern age, one of the great moralists, indeed, of our twentieth century; and all this, he declares, we may say without any scientific or religious dissimulation.

That is the testimony of a great scientist of today; and it points the general attitude, as he himself avers, of our present scientific fraternity throughout the country.

My own experience may easily be duplicated. When I first studied biology in college and gained the broad outline of evolution, it seemed to me at first a bit strange, then wonderfully and beautifully true; and I carried it with me, into the ministry, as a background of thought, as a valuable and integral part of religion itself.

For some 15 years or more, Dartmouth College has had a compulsory course in evolution for the Freshman year; it has never made atheists, it has never wrecked the universe; on the contrary, graduates of Dartmouth today have declared that it was the most valuable, most helpful course, in the entire curriculum. Would not Tennessee and Mississippi and the others, if they could be brave enough, have a somewhat similar experience?

The trouble with many is that when they gain a corner or a fringe of the truth, they are either afraid to go further or, because it runs against their preconceived notions, conclude that after all it is not true. Science itself has only gained a fragment of the ultimate truth, however apparent may



may be the general framework. But it is not afraid, it is eager to go on. Evolution in its broad outline is the accepted fact; but what interesting questions and controverted points must ever remain? Prof. Osborn in one of his books says, "I am strongly of the opinion that the laws of life, like the ultimate laws of physics, may prove to be beyond analysis." --The true scientist, so far, is agnostic. There is much that is not known: but there is quite enough to go by. The true religionist must also bow before the unknown: yet always there remains enough to go by.

The so-called irreligion of the day is not due to evolution. In my opinion, it is caused, in part, by the overweening prosperity of our time, by the deceitfulness of riches and by the love of pleasure among rich and poor alike. It is also caused by the confusion of thought in regard to both science and religion, what they are and what is their truth; by the unwillingness of so many, either from timidity or from prejudice or convention, to seek whole-heartedly the truth that maketh free.

The collapse of faith, so often attributed to the new science, is not the collapse of any reality. To believe that man is descended from lower forms has nothing to do with the central evangel of Christ and does not even remotely touch the teaching of his moral and religious truths. What evolution does do is to make impossible many false and foolish dogmas of theology which for so long have been a hindrance and a hurt to true religion; dogmas that were never accepted in this Church. And as H. G. Wells has said, "In the end, men may discover that religion shines all the brighter for the loss of its doctrinal wrappings."

Evolution comes, but God remains; prayer is still real and immortality the heart's hope. Men may have their different conceptions of God, their different ways of prayer, uttered or unexpressed, and their different thoughts of the future. But however much is destroyed by the searchings of science, nothing real can ever be lost; love abides and with it, the truth that leads to God.

And so what we call evolution is in itself a great mystical fact of religion that enlarges the universe, that makes more wonderful the story of man, that should even bow our heads in reverence. And this thought is beautifully expressed in the first stanza of a familiar poem (by a Unitarian layman):

"A fire-mist and a planet,  
A crystal and a cell,  
A jelly-fish and a saurian,  
And caves where the cave-men dwell,  
Then a sense of law and beauty  
And a face turned from the clod:  
Some call it evolution--  
And others call it God."