

SERMON

"FOURTEEN DECADES AFTER DARWIN"

Charles Darwin died on 19 April 1882. He did not invent the concept of evolution. There were many people before him, Christian and non-Christian, who held ideas of evolution in some form. What Darwin did was to present a theory explaining evolution through natural selection, and to present it on the basis of a solid sub-structure of observed fact.

Darwin had shown some interest in the people of Tierra del Fuego and their life and customs when he visited that part of the world in *The Beagle* in the 1830s, though his account of them is somewhat unscientific. His observations are mostly of other animals.

However much preparation there was for Darwin's great work, it was the publication of The Origin of Species in 1859 which marked the turning point, and The Descent of Man, more shocking in its own day (1871), seems now only the working out of his original insight. In its simplest terms, his theory has been described as "the survival of the fittest".

What Darwin did was to make evolutionary theory intellectually reputable; furthermore, he placed humanity firmly in the context of animals generally and nature as a whole. This came to have important consequences for religion, and particularly for the study of religion.

Darwin's work meant that the habits of human beings (including their religious habits) were as much the legitimate object of scientific study as the habits of any other animal, insect or bird or mammal. What is more, evolution became the key to unlock all doors. Henceforth, scholars were going to look for an evolutionary account of religious development.

To follow its geological analogy: they would see religious history as a series of strata, and would try to peel off (or chip away) later accretions to the primal I primitive religion beneath.

The great philosopher of Darwinism was Herbert Spencer (1820 - 1903), who defined evolution as "a transformation of an indefinite incoherent homogeneity into a definite coherent heterogeneity, the change being accomplished through a long series of differentiations and integrations."

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That may not seem very clear at first glance, but it is precise - more precise than "from the simple to the complex".

Herbert Spencer believed that primitive man was rational. He wrote: "The mind of the savage, like the mind of the civilised, proceeds by classing objects and relations with their likes in past experience."

Primitive people saw the sun rise and set, clouds appear and disappear, a chrysalis vanish and a butterfly appear, and they got the idea of duality, of visible and invisible existence. The individual has a second self, which appears and disappears in shadows, reflections and dreams. Savages (the term Spencer used) believed that they were attended by a double, sometimes present, sometimes withdrawn, for they naturally equated the dream-self and the shadow-self.

Temporary insensibility, such as sleep or fainting, is a withdrawal of this second self. The same principle is applied to death. Hence the belief in ghosts. Hence the attention paid to the needs of the dead. Hence, too, little by little, ghosts become gods; a chief or leader of exceptional skill dies; the tribe seek to retain the protection of the chief's other self.

The chief becomes the tribal god; the chief's grave becomes a temple; offerings to the chief become religious sacrifice; appeals to the chief become prayers; praise of the chief becomes liturgy. Spencer considered that "ancestor worship is the root of every religion". NOTE: the root, not the branch or the fruit.

Across the centuries, ancestor-worship becomes systematised into a pantheon of a hierarchy of gods with different functions, and from this, at a much later stage, monotheism emerges.

Darwin was not greatly interested in a study of religion. His theory of evolution was a biological theory. However, theorists in the second half of the 19th century - led by Herbert Spencer - suggested that the biological laws of evolution applied in all areas of human culture, including religion. Like other organisms, religion had evolved from simple beginnings into more and more complex forms.

The great question became: How did religion begin?

How did religion begin? It was generally assumed that it must have begun with a germ or a prototype, which was not quite religion, though containing within itself the seeds of religion. A supplementary question had subsequently developed, on its way either to ethical monotheism or to ethical agnosticism.

Since the absolute origins of religion are inaccessible to the investigator, an important technique was provided by the theory of "survivals". This asserted that here and there on the face of the earth there are pockets of culture which have simply failed to evolve. These may be studied not only for their own sake, but also for the light which they can throw on the question of origins. For example, the Australian Aborigines could be studied as specimens of 'stone age people' practising 'stone age religion'.

By the early part of the 20th century, evolution, from being a theory, had become an atmosphere. It covered the whole of recorded history, and reached far back into the dawn of time.

Then came the Great War, and the optimistic view of human culture suffered a severe blow: it now seemed less acceptable to view human culture as inevitably improving, as proceeding 'onward and upward forever'.

Since the 1920s, much less has been heard of evolutionary theory in the area of religion than formerly, though biological evolution is still generally accepted as a theory. NB: as a theory, not necessarily as fact.

Behind evolutionary method in the study of religion there lies an important assumption: namely, that in matters having to do with human culture, similar conditions will always produce similar results. This does not deny the possibility that borrowing has taken place between cultures, but this theory of 'diffusion' to some extent contradicts some evolutionary assumptions.

Human development has taken place along one broad line, with variations merely serving to emphasise essential similarities. The out-and-out evolutionist therefore tended to construct a ladder of religious development reaching from the 'lowest' and most rudimentary beginnings up to the 'highest' manifestations of religion. This scheme often took the form of a thorough-going dogma; material was forced to fit the scheme, and facts which did not fit the scheme were often simply ignored.

Concerning the gathering of material: most of the early evolutionists were working at second or third hand, relying on evidence provided by untrained or only partly trained observers. With few exceptions, they had no first-hand experience of 'primitive cultures' and were therefore open to the criticism of being 'armchair anthropologists'. Perhaps there was little alternative at the time. However, later first-hand investigation has in many cases invalidated early hypotheses and conclusions.

Another important point of method concerns the role of the theory of 'survivals'. Again, it was a matter of too sweeping conclusions being drawn from available evidence. The fact that a certain culture still makes use of stone tools (the Australian Aborigines) does not mean that its members are living in 'the stone age' in every respect.

Although it is true that the advance of technology leads to social change, there is no necessary connection between types of technology and ways of thinking.

Surviving primitive peoples do, of course, in fact have just as long a history as that of the advanced West - and sometimes longer. Again, later investigation has shown that religious ideas of considerable subtlety were held by tribes which remained at a very low level of technical development.

According to accepted evolutionary theory at the end of the 19th century, tribes possessing a rudimentary culture were more or less bound to have only rudimentary ideas of religion - belief in spirits, ghosts, or perhaps impersonal power. However, in the 1890s, while investigating the material, Andrew Lang found that such tribes often in fact believe in a moral Creator-God, who is believed to live in the sky, although he may not be directly worshipped because he is too remote. This theory of 'high gods' went entirely against dominant theories, and was therefore largely ignored; however, Lang was later shown to be right.

In the second half of the 19th century, the main controversy caused by the use of the evolutionary method in the study of religion was between the evolutionists and the orthodox Christians. Evolutionary material was not limited to the study of humankind (anthropology); it also included new views on the age of the earth. Prehistoric studies were just as much a matter of geology as of anthropology. Geology had, indeed, already pushed accepted dates farther back than anything which the Bible and its interpreters were prepared to allow.

In the evolutionary view, humankind had evolved out of something which was not human - in seemingly direct contradiction to the story of creation as recorded in Genesis. Similarly, could it not be argued that religion had evolved out of something which was not religion? Trouble was inevitable. William Robertson Smith was dismissed from his post in a Scottish theological college in 1880 for 'unscriptural and pernicious' teaching.

Nevertheless, liberal Christians (and others) adapted to evolutionary theory. The Hand of God could be seen in the process of evolution, from the beginning of time to all recorded history. Theology, history and evolution could join and help to create a broad view of the history of religion - development could be seen to follow the history of natural law_

There was a move from blind acceptance of authority to free inquiry, with evolutionary scientists and anthropologists providing much of the evidence.

The main initial advantage of the evolutionary approach to the study of religion in the late 19th and early 20th centuries was that it was able to carry that study far beyond what could be discovered simply from the study of texts and monuments.

Religion did not begin with stone buildings or with the invention of writing. Evolution opened up the study of what had previously been vaguely called 'paganism', and had been regarded as hardly worth studying. The pagans ('country-dwellers') were believed to be possessed only by fear of the unknown, and to be prepared to worship random objects ('fetishes'). Now they came to be seen in a new light.

When they were studied more closely, they could be differentiated from one another, although there was still a tendency to lump them together for the purposes of theory-making.

Evolution also helped scholars to realise that religion can never be a static thing, but it is a set of human acts and responses subject to constant change. The real question was: 'Do those changes follow fixed laws?'

On the negative side, many evolutionists were too bound by their basic theory, and by their notion of natural law, to be able to allow for variations in patterns of belief and behaviour. Fairly superficial resemblances were often taken as evidence of complete identity. Religious experiences were often believed to have been 'understood' when they had been slotted into an overall evolutionary scheme of development, or placed on a rung of an evolutionary ladder. The theory of survivals was invoked much too freely, and theories were often based on inadequate research - in contrast with rigorous historical and scientific methods.

Because of such limitations, and because the theory of evolution was the product of a more optimistic world than the one we live in today, few scholars today would base their work on the theory.

Nevertheless, the theory had an all-pervasive influence on turn-of-the-century (and later) work on the study of religion.

To apply an evolutionary scheme, scholars had to be prepared to make sweeping value judgements in placing some religious expressions 'higher' or 'lower' on the evolutionary scale. Over the last century, attempts have been made to get over this difficulty by using other methods (psychological, phenomenological) in which value judgements were less intrusive.

Although out-and-out evolutionism in the study of religion has been almost completely abandoned, it is still undeniable that there is a process of development and change to be observed there.

However, change is usually far less bound by hard-and-fast rules than the evolutionists once believed. Progress on one area may well be accompanied by decline in another, and revolution may be as active a factor as evolution.

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