

Darwin at 200

Richard McBrien | May. 18, 2009 Essays in Theology

There have been several events in North America and around the world marking this year's 200th anniversary of Charles Darwin's birth. I write this week about his significance -- and that of Sigmund Freud and Karl Marx -- for our understanding of who we humans are and where we fit into the broader contexts of nature, the inner psychological universe, and society at large.

Charles Darwin was a biologist who, in his early years, was a believing Christian, albeit of an apparently literalist type. Thus he accepted the fixity of species and their special creation as depicted in the book of Genesis.

But in 1835, after visiting the Galápagos Archipelago (600 miles off the coast of Ecuador in the Pacific Ocean), doubts began to surface in his mind. He had noticed that very small differences were present in the species inhabiting several of the islands (the archipelago consists of thirteen large islands and six smaller ones).

His doubts were reinforced by his additional observations of flora, fauna, and geological formations at widely separated points of the globe.

All living things, Darwin tentatively concluded in his book, *The Origins of the Species* (1859), have developed from a few extremely simple forms, through a gradual process of natural selection, which involved the adaptations of living things to their often hostile environments.

At first Darwin encountered opposition even from fellow biologists, but eventually all such criticisms collapsed under the weight of data and arguments presented in his later work, *The Descent of Man* (1871). The only surviving opposition came from fundamentalist Protestants.

By the time of Darwin's death in 1882, many mainline Christians had come to terms with the concept of evolution, viewing it, as the Catholic church generally has done, as entirely compatible with Christian faith. Even the highly conservative pontificate of Pius IX did not place any of Darwin's books on the Index of Forbidden Books, nor did this pope condemn evolution in his *Syllabus of Errors* (1864).

In the 1920s fundamentalists waged a sustained, public battle against Darwinism, with the most dramatic instance being the famous Scopes trial in Dayton, Tennessee (1925), which pitted the agnostic defense attorney Clarence Darrow against the former presidential candidate William Jennings Bryan.

A public school teacher, John Scopes, had been indicted for teaching evolution in the classroom. He was found guilty, but was later released on a legal technicality. The law itself was repealed in 1967.

In 1950 Pope Pius XII issued an encyclical letter, *Humani generis*, which, while insisting that all human beings are literally descended from Adam and Eve, pointed out that any scientific explanation of the origin and development of the human species is acceptable to the Catholic faith so long as it does not exclude God from the creative process.

Whatever one thinks of the scientific teaching on evolution, thanks to Darwin we now recognize that we are bodily creatures, not disembodied spirits, and that we are materially linked with the rest of creation, and especially with other living beings.

The survival-of-the-fittest aspect of Darwin's findings has sometimes been wrongly applied by politically conservative theorists to the detriment of the poor, the sick, and the powerless in society. Government, these "social Darwinists" have insisted, has no responsibility to them.

"Social Darwinism" was encapsulated in one of the lines attributed to Ebenezer Scrooge in Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*: "If they would rather die [than go to the poor house], they had better do it and decrease the surplus population."

Charles Darwin was only one of a trio of major figures who have profoundly influenced our understanding of what it means to be human.

Sigmund Freud helped us to see that not everything that appears on the surface of human activity is what is really the case. There is a vast internal universe of hidden psychological drives that affect our thinking and behavior.

These internal forces do not negate free will (except in cases of severe mental imbalance), but they can influence or impair its normal functioning.

Karl Marx, on the other hand, helped us to see that we are part of a larger societal universe where our thinking and behavior are shaped by relationships and events beyond our own making.

Thus, many who live in a relatively prosperous, all-white environment, without the benefit of a critical education, find it difficult to tolerate, much less appreciate, racial and ethnic differences, or to generate any understanding of, and compassion toward, the poor.

Darwin, Freud, and Marx have frequently been portrayed as enemies of the faith. But there is still much to be learned from them.

This 200th anniversary of Charles Darwin's birth serves as a reminder of that.

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