

Ipswich Unitarians

'THE ORIGIN OF SPECIES': CELEBRATING 150 YEARS

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I.

Imagine that you are sitting in this Meeting House one hundred and fifty years ago, in November 1859. Unitarians are liberal in their theology and, for the most part, their politics. They don't believe in the literal truth of every word in the Bible. In particular, they regard the Genesis Creation stories as mythology, not as history or, for that matter, as science. The Bible is, though, regarded as a crucial source of moral and spiritual authority, particularly with regard to the teachings of Jesus and the insights of Paul. They affirm the Golden Rule, 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself', and the declaration that humanity is 'of one blood' – 'created of one stock...to inhabit the whole earth's surface' (Acts 17: 26).

On this basis they had argued for, supported and welcomed the abolition of slavery in the British Empire. Now they look for its abolition in America too, although they may differ on how best and how effectively this should be done. War-clouds are gathering in the United States. Only a month ago, on October 16th, the militant Abolitionist, John Brown, had led the notorious raid on Harper's Ferry, raising the prospect of Civil War between the free states of the North and the slave states of the South.

The affirmation that we are one humanity throughout the earth is being challenged. Some challenge it on supposedly biblical grounds, citing the division of humanity after the Flood, when the children of Ham were condemned to slavery and servitude by divine decree. Increasingly, though, others challenge it on supposedly scientific grounds. Dubious 'sciences', like the very popular Phrenology, are, it is being claimed, demonstrating that there is not just one human species but several! Of these, the 'white' races are, supposedly, predictably and conveniently, the more advanced, whereas the 'black' races are more primitive – more like apes than true human beings, some say.

Needless to say, such ideas are popular amongst the practitioners and supporters of 'negro' slavery in America – but not only there. They are also useful to the advocates of conquest and subjugation in foreign lands, especially in Africa, Asia, Australia and the Americas. War and colonialism are easier for those advocates to justify if those on the receiving end belong to 'savage' or 'degenerate' races who worship idols and 'bow down to wood and stone', and who do unspeakable things to each other and to anyone else they catch!

These 'alien races' may be creations of God or of Nature, the argument goes, but not of the *same* act of creation as white Europeans, especially north and west Europeans and particularly those with their origins in Great Britain! 'We', as it were, are not really related to 'them' at all. And none of us are related to the 'brute creation' either - the living things who may share the planet with us but over whom we have been granted dominion to do with as we will!

II.

So what else was going on one hundred and fifty years ago that might have been exercising the interest and concern of our predecessors? In China, British troops were fighting in the Second Opium War, forcing opium and drug-addiction on to a weak Chinese Empire. Only a year before, the so-called Indian Mutiny had seen British rule challenged by presumptuous 'heathen' locals, both Hindu and Muslim. In Africa, France was consolidating its occupation of Senegal, and David Livingstone's explorations were blazing a trail for less benign travellers to follow. The

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age of imperialism was bringing to Britain an expanded knowledge of the peoples, animals and plants that God, in his wisdom, had placed around the world for our benefit – as most would probably have seen it.

And we were also learning about life at an altogether smaller scale – life that was often neither benign nor easily conquered. In another terrible war that had ended only three years earlier, such life as this had killed more soldiers than had died in battle, especially in the filthy, insanitary hospitals where the wounded were taken. That was in the Crimea, and it had taken the iron will and enlightened awareness of a radical Unitarian named Florence Nightingale to take on both the microscopic enemy and the military establishment and give some hope to the sick and wounded troops.

So, one hundred and fifty years ago, the congregation here might have had war on their minds, but also questions about the origins of life in general and of human beings in particular. They would have been engaged in a quest for truth: truth about God, about life, and about how human beings relate to each other – be that morally, spiritually or biologically. They wouldn't have looked to Genesis for answers. Few, if any, Unitarians saw its stories as factual – and hadn't done so since the days of Joseph Priestley half a century and more before. But they might have come across an idea called 'evolution'.

III.

Fifty years earlier the French biologist, Baptiste Lamarck, in his, 'Philosophie Zoologique' (1809), had suggested that species are not fixed, that they do adapt and change by passing on acquired characteristics. Thus, in the classic example, the giraffe has a long neck because as each generation stretched its neck a little further in order to reach leaves higher in the trees, the results were inherited by their descendants. And members here might also have come across the writings of Darwin: not the young man who had sailed round the world twenty years earlier and then retired to his obscure studies in the Kent countryside, with his Wedgwood cousin for a wife; no, not him, but rather his grandfather the notorious Midlands physician, Erasmus Darwin.

Hadn't Erasmus Darwin suggested, in his book, 'The Temple of Nature', that, 'millions of ages before the commencement of the history of mankind,' 'all warm-blooded animals' might have, *'...arisen from one living filament, which the First Great Cause endowed with animality; with the power of acquiring new parts...new propensities, and thus possessing the faculty to improve by its own inherent activity, and of delivering down those improvements by generation to its posterity, world without end.'*

(Cited in Jenny Uglow's 'The Lunar Men', p. 428)

I dare say some of those who worshipped here one hundred and fifty years ago were familiar with Erasmus Darwin's idea, although he had never explained how exactly his idea might work, or whether his somewhat remote 'First Great Cause' (as Deists like him saw God) took much interest in this 'living filament' once it had been set in motion. They may have drawn some comfort, though, from a hymn Darwin had written and which they probably sang:

*'The Lord, how tender is his love!
His justice, how august!'*

But that November in 1859, on the 26th to be precise, his grandson, Charles Darwin, finally broke cover from his rural retreat with an astoundingly novel idea, contained in a new and immediately best-selling book entitled, 'On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection'. All living things, including ourselves (if you read the book carefully!), are part of a great 'tree of

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life' with a single point of origin. Generation after generation, life had developed and diversified into the great divisions, or 'Kingdoms': into genus after genus, species after species. Nature had itself selected the most successful to survive, procreate and diversify again, while the less successful, the failures and the misfits, were eradicated and lost their place on the tree of life.

This *worked*, where Lamarck's theory didn't. And it provided a mechanism where Erasmus Darwin had only speculated, as much poetically as scientifically. And what's more, even though the 'Origin of Species' says little about it, 'evolution by means of natural selection' had produced *homo sapiens* too. We are part and parcel of the tree of life, not the specially and separately created 'lords' and observers of it. And in 1859, this was dynamite!

Atheism wasn't new; 'freethinking' wasn't new, even 'evolution' wasn't new – but they hadn't been anything more than mere abstract philosophy. Charles Darwin's book was science, based on years of painstaking observation and experiment. It didn't encroach on abstract philosophy or on theology. It ignored them. But it did set out, step by step, how all living things – including, by clear implication, ourselves – had come into being, not out of nothing but from an original primal life-form by the process called 'natural selection'.

Where was God in all this? Darwin didn't say. He did, though, believe in God at the time, if not the conventional personal Deity of orthodox Christianity. And although the 'Origin of Species' is a work of science, it is not without its spiritual quality too. Here is an affirmation of all life's common source and, as he was to make more explicit later in his, 'Descent of Man' (1871), of the oneness of the human species, beyond all superficial differences. Darwin explains the mechanism of natural selection:

'...the inhabitants of each successive period in the world's history have beaten their predecessors in the race for life...'

But he also sees it in more than merely mechanistic terms:

'It is a truly wonderful fact...that all animals and plants should be related to each other...in the manner which we everywhere behold.'

And later in the book:

'There is grandeur in this view of life, with its several powers, having been originally breathed into a few forms or into one; and that, whilst this planet has gone cycling on according to a fixed law of gravity, from so simple a beginning endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful have been and are being evolved.'

I think our predecessors here would have welcomed the 'Origin of Species' when it was published one hundred and fifty years ago. They would certainly have given it serious and thoughtful consideration. And I believe that we should celebrate this anniversary, not because Darwin was right in every detail – something he would most certainly never have claimed – but because, for all who value the search for truth, all who care for this wonderful planet and its 'tree of life', for all who want to see our one humanity delivered from ignorance, prejudice and bigotry, his seminal book stands as one of the great landmarks in scientific, spiritual and human understanding.
