

TEMPLETON REPORT

NEWS FROM THE JOHN TEMPLETON FOUNDATION

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Darwin Among the Faithful

On November 27, 1878, Charles Darwin wrote a letter to John Brodie Innes, his friend and local vicar: "There is no reason why the disciples of [religion and science] should attack each other with bitterness, though each upholding strictly their beliefs." Given how tense the dialogue between

religion and science has become at times during the 150 years since the publication of *On the Origin of Species*, it is worth noting that history's preeminent biological thinker repeatedly called for moderation on all sides.



Alison Pearn, the assistant director of the Darwin Correspondence Project at Cambridge University, points to this letter as one of many statements by Darwin that need to be read more widely by scientists, theologians, and the general public. Thanks to a \$1.1 million grant from the John Templeton Foundation, the work of disseminating Darwin's own thoughts on these questions is well under way. Pearn, her co-investigator Paul White, and their colleagues are developing a web-based resource called "Darwin and Religion," which will collect some 700 of his letters on matters of faith and provide commentary on them.



Alison Pearn

As the website for the project explains, Darwin "often relied on information and support from scientific colleagues who had strong religious convictions, and he was approached for advice on the implications of his work for morality and religious belief. The letters show that Darwin's work could mean many different things to different people. Some saw Darwinism as a threat to religion, but many found ways of reconciling their beliefs with an evolutionary view of nature."

Darwin was "very private about his own religious beliefs," says Pearn. In a letter to the mathematician and teacher Mary Everest Boole, he replied to her question about the origin of suffering in the world: "My opinion is not worth more than that of any other man who has thought on such subjects, & it would be folly in me to give it; I may however remark that it has always appeared to me more satisfactory to look at the immense amount of pain & suffering in this world, as the inevitable result of the natural sequence of events, i.e. general laws, rather than from the direct intervention of God, though I am aware this is not logical with reference to an omniscient Deity." Pearn notes that Darwin was "very cautious about imposing his views on others."

The grant from the Templeton Foundation also supports a play commissioned by the Darwin Correspondence Project called *Re:Design*. Written by Craig Baxter, it is based on the letters that Darwin exchanged with the Harvard botanist and devout Presbyterian Asa Gray. The drama has already been staged at Harvard, MIT, and Cornell, and a more ambitious U.S. tour, with productions at several colleges and large religious congregations, is being contemplated. *Re:Design* will also be a part of the weeklong Darwin celebrations at Cambridge University this summer.

It is expected to take until 2025 to publish the 31 volumes that will contain some 15,000 of Darwin's surviving letters, but Pearn believes it is a crucial project to complete. His correspondence sheds a great deal of light on his scholarship and thought, she says, but it is often misquoted or quoted out of context. "It is our responsibility to provide as much help as we can to people trying to understand Darwin."

Paul Wason, the director of life sciences for JTF, sees the project as a “perfect fit” for the Foundation. “Evolution is one of our core themes, and we’re particularly interested in funding efforts that seriously engage scientific work with philosophical and theological questions.” Making the letters widely available was also an important consideration, according to Wason. “We liked that the project would emphasize the website, thereby multiplying the audience.”

With support from Templeton, the Darwin Correspondence Project has also sponsored two international contests for students, for essays on science and religion that are based on Darwin’s letters. In 2008, entries were received from six countries, and the £1,000 prize went to Kathryn Tabb, a Ph.D. candidate in the history and philosophy of biology at the University of Pittsburgh, for an essay titled, “Darwin on Orchis Bank.” Two £1,000 prizes will be awarded in 2009 (one for school-age children and one for college and graduate students). The deadline for submitting essays is May 1.



Patrick Morris, left, as Asa Gray and Terry Molloy as Charles Darwin perform in *Re:Design*.

NOTEBOOK

“Evolution and the Ethical Brain” with David Brooks

Evolution is often invoked to explain the darker side of human nature, but does it also account for traits like altruism, cooperation, conscience, and a sense of justice? Can a richer view of our evolved nature help us to understand modern society? These and other Big Questions will be the focus of the Templeton Foundation’s first major event in celebration of the great Darwin anniversary year.

The panel discussion, entitled “Darwin 200: Evolution and the Ethical Brain,” will be held at the Times Center in New York City on the evening of Wednesday, March 4. The *New York Times* columnist David Brooks will moderate a wide-ranging discussion with: Michael Gazzaniga, director of the SAGE Center for the Study of Mind at the University of California at Santa Barbara and the author of *The Ethical Brain: The Science of Our Moral Dilemmas*; Jonathan Haidt, associate professor of psychology at the University of Virginia and the author of *The Happiness Hypothesis: Finding Modern Truth in Ancient Wisdom*; and Steven Quartz, director of the Brain, Mind, and Society doctoral program at Cal Tech and the co-author of *Liars, Lovers, and Heroes: What the New Brain Science Reveals About How We Become Who We Are*.



David Brooks

For information about attending the event, visit www.templeton.org/darwin200.

“Rescuing Darwin”

Two hundred years after Charles Darwin’s birth in 1809, at least half of the British population is still skeptical about the theory of evolution. That is the finding of a new study released in February by Theos, a London think tank that brings theological perspectives to bear on public issues. With the support of a \$600,000 grant from the Templeton Foundation, Theos has embarked on a campaign called “Rescuing Darwin,” which aims to show that Darwin never espoused many of the views commonly associated with him, especially atheism.



A survey of more than 2,000 people commissioned by Theos and conducted by the polling agency ComRes revealed that only 25 percent of British adults think that evolution is “definitely true,” with another quarter thinking it is “probably true.” Around 10 percent consistently choose “young earth” creationism (the belief that God created the world some time in the last 10,000 years) over evolution, and about 12 percent consistently prefer intelligent design (the idea that evolution alone is not enough to explain the complex structures of some living things). The remainder of the population, over 25 percent, are unsure of their views and often mix evolution, ID, and creationism together.

In an opinion piece in the *Guardian*, Nick Spencer, the director of studies at Theos and the co-author of the report, set out these findings and suggested the primary reason for the public’s skepticism. It “appears to lie in the fact that too many encounter Darwinism not as an elegant, parsimonious, and well-evidenced scientific theory, but as a quasi-metaphysical one, an outlook on life that has become inextricably linked, through the purple prose of its most eloquent modern proponents, with reductionism, nihilism, atheism, and amorality.”

For more information, write to communications@templeton.org.

JOHN TEMPLETON FOUNDATION

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