

## **A DANGEROUS BOOK**

**A critique of RESCUING DARWIN : God and Evolution in Britain Today. Nick Spencer and Denis Alexander. Theos, paperback, 70 pages. £10.**

*Martin Hagget*

This slender book (barely more than an extended essay) opens with the familiar and sweeping claim that “in 2009, the evidence for evolution by natural selection is overwhelming ... in scientific circles at least, it is now incontestable”. Such an assertion would have been unsurprising if it had come from the lips of a secular evolutionist, seeking thereby to brush aside any creationist argument. Actually it comes from a society which calls itself *Theos* and which describes itself as “a public theology think tank.” The fact that the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Cardinal Archbishop of Westminster were jointly involved in the launch of *Theos* two years ago tells us something about its ethos and aims.

*Rescuing Darwin* is both the title of the book and its controlling theme. We will seek to trace how this theme is worked out, and then make some observations upon the book's arguments.

### **Anomaly**

In the brief Introduction, reference is made to a survey commissioned recently by *Theos* in which it emerged that only 37% of people in the UK believe that Darwin's theory of evolution is “beyond reasonable doubt”. In other words, there is a considerable gap between the assumptions of the scientific community about the “incontestable” nature of the theory of evolution and popular perception. For the authors of the book, 150 years after the publication of the *Origin of Species*, in the country of Darwin's birth, this is “a sorry state of affairs.” However, no reference is made to the far sorer state of affairs in our land, which sees the very Word of God, the source of all our blessings, so widely and blatantly set aside and rejected.

Representing the general approach of theistic evolutionists, the authors see the explanation for this anomaly as lying in a false view of the relationship between science and religion. This view they believe leads to a “battle between tough-minded, atheistic evolutionists on the one side and soft-hearted, obscurantist believers on the other.” The only thing that these two sides agree on is that “evolution threatens belief in God.” It is to counter this idea that the rest of the book is written.

### **Charles Darwin's “faith”**

The first chapter proper traces briefly the path by which Charles Darwin moved from a position of some religious faith (though seriously tainted by Unitarianism and buttressed chiefly by Paley's *Natural Theology*) through deism to a final agnosticism. Growing doubts about the Bible, fuelled by reflections on a world of suffering came to a bitter head with the death of his eldest and favourite daughter, Annie.

### **Subsequent developments**

The second chapter seeks to survey the reaction of the Church in Great Britain and North America to the theory of evolution by natural selection in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It singles out men like Asa Gray, BB Warfield and James Orr who accepted evolution. It then goes on to claim that "creationism is largely a 20<sup>th</sup> century phenomenon." This of course is quite disingenuous: as a response to a mid-19<sup>th</sup> century theory, the counter-argument had to be a twentieth century one. But it misses the point that before 1859 "creationism" was the prevailing belief of the vast majority of scientists, whether Christian or not.

### **The research**

In the third chapter, a summary is given of the research commissioned by *Theos*, seeking to discover what proportions of the UK population held to evolutionary, ID (Intelligent Design) or creationist beliefs. The results showed much uncertainty and lack of clarity among those polled.

The fourth chapter takes up the challenge presented by the discovery (disconcerting to the authors ) that apparently a third of the population of the UK are "ill-disposed towards Darwinian evolution." It suggests that the primary reason is that there is still a widespread perception that the theory is incompatible with belief in God. Sources are quoted which would indeed lend support to such an idea! The writers rightly take Richard Dawkins to task for his vitriolic references to religion: "a kind of mental illness ... one of the world's great evils, comparable to the smallpox virus but harder to eradicate" (*The Humanist*). They also give a brief critique of the Intelligent Design movement, pioneered by Phillip E Johnson.

### **Genesis 1-3: historical or figurative?**

Operating on the belief that the "battle" between evolution by natural selection and belief in the Bible is unnecessary, the authors devote the fifth and final chapter to this, their central theme. They seek to do this in two ways. The first is to pursue the familiar liberal line that Genesis chapters 1-3 are to be understood not historically but in figurative terms, their main purport being to supply a critique of contemporary myths as to how the world came about.

There is indeed some useful material here in which the utter distinctiveness of the Genesis creation account is contrasted with the absurdities of the creation myths in the contemporary culture of the ancient world. But to acknowledge this is not in and of itself sufficient, especially when the authors then proceed to stress that the biblical account is not to be read as literal history or as science. The true approach for believers is surely rather to recognise in the pagan mythologies a debased and dim memory of what had been truly revealed by God to His people in His inerrant Word.

### **Is evolution essentially atheistic?**

The second obstacle Spencer and Alexander see, to a reconciliation between religion and science, is the idea that evolution is essentially atheistic. They seek to tackle this by arguing that since science does not concern itself with ultimate purpose, value and meaning, and since religion does, there need be no conflict. They see science and religion as simply two of several complementary ways of understanding life – all necessary, and not necessarily

competing with the other. But this is naïve, because of the claim in the Word of God to truth - truth not just for salvation, but for every area of life – which must include origins.

Equally naïve is the attempt to minimise the element of chance in the theory of evolution by natural selection and to equate the theory to the activity of “a God who has intentions and purposes for the world.” Whatever this vague notion might mean, it is certainly far removed from the historical and foundational account of creation revealed in God’s Word. A very brief final reference to Jesus Christ and the Bible as the key to understanding “the data gathered from other sources” reminds us of the skewed nature of the priorities which underlie this book and of the stream of thinking which it represents.

### **Problems in Theistic Evolution**

No attempt is made by the authors to address the theological problems at the heart of “theistic evolution” – most especially the issue of the existence of suffering and death before the Fall. But in reality one is left with the impression that the Fall itself is not a historical event, but a figurative one. And if the federal head of the human race is not a historical figure, what becomes of the believer’s glorious hope that “since by man came death, by man came also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive.” (1 Corinthians 15:21,22)?

### **Faith the basis**

Neither is any attempt made to acknowledge the distinction between *macro*-evolution (species change) and *micro*-evolution (change *within* species), which most creationists would recognise. Indeed the authors dismiss with something approaching scorn the work undertaken by creation scientists. As believers, we are most grateful for their sterling and courageous research. At the same time we recognise that in the final analysis the believer’s view of creation must rest on the fundamental presupposition revealed in the Word of God, “Through faith we understand that the worlds were framed by the word of God, so that things which are seen were not made of things which do appear” (Hebrews 11:3). Sadly, this book does not rest on that truth.

### **Conclusion**

What needs to be “rescued” is not Darwin’s reputation, but a robust adherence by believers to what God has so unmistakably revealed in His Word – not just in the realm of redemption, but in all about which Scripture speaks – including the bedrock truth of creation. Of course, the whole of Scripture is leading to and focused upon the glorious Person and Work of our Lord Jesus Christ. But the apex requires the foundation. Evolution, whether it be characterised as “theistic” or not, removes that foundation. And with it the whole Gospel scheme is damaged irreparably. God does not speak the truth concerning salvation and something other than the truth concerning creation.

The great majority of *BLQ* readers will not need to be reminded of these things, but it may be salutary to remind ourselves that alongside the open attack of enemies of the faith, represented by Richard Dawkins and others, is the stream of more subtle poison which may influence the unwary and particularly the young. This book sadly represents that stream and we can only warn our readers of its dangers. Sadly we can in no way commend it.

