

RECORD: Fordyce, J. 1879. Is Darwin a theist? *Grimsby News* (2 May).

REVISION HISTORY: Transcribed by Christine Chua and edited by John van Wyhe. 11.2019. RN1.

NOTE: See the image of the article at DAR226.2.47.

Introduction by Christine Chua

John Fordyce, a Christian teacher and author, after writing to the editor of the *Grimsby News*, received a letter from Darwin on 7 May 1879. Darwin stated that he had never been an atheist and that "an Agnostic would be the more correct description of my state of mind". LL1:304. The letter was marked 'private' but after Darwin's death, Fordyce published it in his book *Aspects of scepticism*, 1883 (F1861).

Fordyce replied on 8 May 1879 thanking Darwin for his kind note.

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[Grimsby News. May 2d 1879.]

IS DARWIN A THEIST?

To the Editor of the Grimsby News.

DEAR SIR, - In a report of a lecture delivered by Mr. Thomas Cooper on Evolution, I find the following words: - "Because Darwin in his book (Origin of Species) several times made use of the word 'Creator', it had been inferred that he believed in a God, but the lecturer held the whole structure of the book ... was to show that there was no God, and the Germans very rightly said that it 'turned God out of doors.'"

Now I am one of those who have inferred and asserted that Darwin is no atheist. In my judgment we have no right to call a man atheist simply because we think that logically he ought to deny the existence of his Creator. Nor is it wise in my opinion for a Christian advocate to associate the theory of Evolution with Atheism. It is a well known fact that many Theists hold this theory, whether rightly or wrongly remains to be seen. "Our little systems have their day," and now it is the day of Evolution.

Time will show what amount of truth there is in this theory of life. As to Darwin's belief in a God there seems to me no room for doubt. I will put the evidence before the public in the interests of truth they must form their own opinion. Darwin, p. 481, "Origin of Species" [1860, 2nd edition] sees "no good reason why the views given in this volume should shock the religious feelings of any one." Suppose for a moment this Naturalist had believed that his theory had "turned God out of door" would he have seen no good reason for people being shocked? He then goes on to quote from what a "celebrated author and divine" had written to him. His author and divine (Charles Kingsley I presume) has "gradually learnt" that Darwin's theory gives as "noble a conception of the Deity" as the one it is intended to displace. Again, p. 428, he says - "Authors of the highest eminence seem to be fully satisfied with the view that each species has been independently created. To my mind it accords better with what we know of the laws impressed on matter by the Creator, that the production and extinction of the past and present inhabitants of the world should have been

due to secondary cause, like those determining the birth and death of the individual." If Darwin has turned God out of doors, where does he get his beginning? And if he leaves a Creator who impresses certain laws upon matter, I for one see no reason why Theists should reject him from their society. Again p. 429, after describing a tangled bank clotted with planets, with birds singing in the bushes, insects flitting about, worms crawling through the damp earth, &c., he says, "There is grandeur in this view of life, with its several powers having been originally breathed by the Creator into a few forms or one, " &c. Now if there is a Creator in the Darwinian scheme, who "impresses law upon matter," and "breathes life with its several powers" into one or more forms, why should we say he has turned God out of doors? Lest anyone should say that Darwin has given up this view I shall make a few citations from a later work, his "Descent of man" - my copy bears date 1874. At p. 93, he speaks of his "enabling belief in the existence of an Omnipotent God." He says there is no evidence that man "was aboriginally endowed" with this belief, but he admits, and indeed affirms, that this question is wholly distinct from "that higher one, whether there exists a Creator and Ruler of the universe; and this has been answered in the affirmative by some of the highest intellects that have ever existed." If the belief in God is ennobling "can it be a delusion? Are we to suppose that a naturalist, who set himself to refute the almost universal teaching of his brethren because he thought the facts did not justify their theory, would affirm that it "ennobles man" to believe a lie! At p. 113, note, speaking of love and hatred, Darwin says "To do good in return for evil, to love your enemy, is a height of morality to which it may be doubted whether the social instincts would, by themselves, have ever led us. It is necessary that these instincts, together with sympathy, should have been highly cultivated and extended by the aid of reason, instruction, and the love or fear of God, before any such golden rule would ever be thought of and obeyed."

Darwin holds that we find the rudiments of a moral sense in some of the lower animals but he admits that we need instruction, and the 'love or fear of God' in order to exhibit the highest morality. Here, again, is a strange thing, if Darwin be an Atheist. He gets a higher type of moral life out of belief in what is false! At p. 116, speaking of the different motives, he says man "must likewise avoid the reprobation of the one God or gods to whom, according to his knowledge or superstition, he may believe." Here Darwin appears to term belief in God "knowledge," while belief in gods he calls "superstitions." At p. 126, he says the "ennobling belief in God is not universal with man." This may be disputed. I simply call attention to the epithet applied to the belief - "ennobling." At p. 612, he speaks of the "assumed instinctive belief in God as a "rash argument," and adds "the idea of a universal and beneficent Creator does not seem to arise in the mind of man, until he has been elevated by long-continued culture." An Atheist hardly speaks of this belief as elevating. On the same page he says, the "conviction of the existence of an all-seeing Deity has had a potent influence on the advance of morality." The Atheist speaks and thinks of this conviction as a degrading superstition. At p. 613, some may find proof that Darwin regards man as an

"immortal being." Again, he protests against his view being considered "irreligious," and says the "birth both of the species and the individual are equally parts of that grand sequence of events which our minds refuse to accept as the result of blind chance. The understanding revolts at such a conclusion, &c., &c. I find I have overlooked an important remark on p. 144. "The highest form of religion - the grand idea of God hating sin and loving righteousness was unknown during primeval times." The above will, by most minds, be considered proof sufficient that Darwin himself is no Atheist. His theory may be either Theistic or Atheistic; about that I do not speak, but he himself clearly wishes us to believe that he is a believer in a God, and that his views are not inconsistent with this belief which he considers "ennobling." Here I might stop and content myself with having placed the evidence before impartial minds. But I shall give a few opinions of men familiar with these themes. Professor Stanley Jevens, in his great work on "Scientific Method," looks upon the theories of Darwin and Spencer as the "most probable hypotheses ever proposed," yet, he adds, "I cannot for a moment admit that the theory of evolution will alter our theological views." Again, "Theologians have dreaded the establishment of these theories, as if they thought they could explain everything upon the purest mechanical and material principles, and exclude all notion of design.... The doctrine of evolution gives a complete explanation of no simple living form." Professor Huxley may be supposed an authority, and he says (Ency. Brit., vol. viii., 9th Ed.) "That Darwin has confined himself to the discussion of the causes which have brought about the present condition of living matter, assuming such matter once to have come into existence." Of course Spencer and Haeckel go far beyond this, but I am concerned only with Darwin. According to Mr. Sully, in his article "Evolution," in Ency. Brit., Darwin's theory is against design, but he says - "On the whole Darwin's doctrine has been said (as it is by the author himself) not only to be compatible with the idea of an original creation of the world, but to supply a higher conception of the divine attributes than the hypothesis of special creations." There are some of your readers who will respect what Mr. Cook (Boston Monday Lectures) says in part vi., page 113 of his lectures - "Professor Asa Gray maintains that Charles Darwin is guiltless of all atheistic intent; that he never denied the possibility of creative intervention in the origin of species; that he never sneered at the argument from design to which John Stuart Mill advised philosophers to adhere in their proof of the Divine existence." In the same lecture (p. 117) Mr. Cook divides, very properly in my opinion evolutionists into three schools - the atheistic, the agnostic and the theistic, and Darwin he places in the last class. I might add many more testimonies to the same effect, but this is unnecessary. Until Darwin withdraws the remarks I have cited from his "Origin of Species and Descent of Man," I hold that we must regard him as at least wishing to be considered a believer in a Creator.

Yours, &c.,

J. FORDYCE.

Grimsby, April 30th, 1879.