

RELIGION

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Charles Darwin, his work, beliefs remain topic of study

19th-century biologist was not anti-religion

By DAN VERGANO
Gannett News Service

More than a century after his death, people still are trying to understand Charles Darwin. A new report says those who label him anti-religion are wrong. The 19th-century English biologist famous for his the-

ory of evolution supported Christian missionary work his entire adult life, reports a cultural historian.

"I don't think Darwin would recognize his defenders today and probably wouldn't understand his attackers," said cultural historian Mark Graham of Grove City (Pa.) College, author of the *Journal of Religious History* report.

Darwin, who died in 1882, has been a lightning rod since he first set pen to paper. His belief that all species

evolved over time through a process called natural selection has been opposed vehemently by many who believe in the Bible's depiction of the creation of human and animal life.

Natural selection says that new species develop as survival-weakening characteristics are winnowed out in successive generations.

Attacks against Darwin's supposed heretical ways flared brightly at the 1925 Scopes trial over a Tennessee law that forbade teaching

"that man has descended from a lower order of animals." At the trial, politician William Jennings Bryan called evolution a threat to religion. More recently, biologist Richard Dawkins of England's Oxford University wrote in his 1986 book *The Blind Watchmaker* that "Darwin made it possible to be an intellectually fulfilled atheist."

Attackers and defenders of Darwin today may be surprised, Graham said, to learn Darwin's first publica-

tion, coming after his 1831 to 1836 worldwide voyage on the H.M.S. *Beagle*, was a defense of missionary work in the Pacific.

"It's a mistake to say that missionary work was a primary purpose of the *Beagle* voyage," said historian John van Wyhe of the University of Cambridge's *Complete Work of Charles Darwin Online*. Missionary work was not part of the *Beagle*'s charter — Darwin's role was to collect samples of exotic species — but the ship's

captain, Robert FitzRoy, was a supporter who wanted to take a missionary to South America on the voyage.

Critics of Darwin often overlook his initial plans to become a vicar and his support for missionaries is well-known, van Wyhe said, but is not seen as a major part of his life.

Darwin never was hostile to religion, even though he died an agnostic, Graham said. He was "a rather nice, timid gentleman living a quiet life," Graham said.