

THE RELIGIOUS VIEWS OF CHARLES DARWIN.

By EDWARD B. AVELING, D.Sc.,

Since the death of our great teacher, the clergy, who denounced him a lifetime with that vehemence of which long practice in the art of vituperation has made them consummate masters, have claimed the illustrious dead as one of their flock. Not content with burying in Westminster Abbey the man whom they had all reviled and maligned, the man at whose great discoveries they had sneered, they have had the audacity to say that the teaching of Evolution is wholly in accord with that of the Church and of the Bible. Only the two truly religious bodies have remained faithful to ignorance. The Roman Catholic Church and the Salvation Army alone have clung to god, and been deaf to the voice of science, dumb she never so wisely. The Roman Catholic Bishop of Salford is of opinion that Charles Darwin is even now suffering the tortures of the damned. Mr. Booth, the demoraliser of the uncultured folk, no more believes in Evolution than he understands the principle of Natural Selection. But those who are trying to effect a compromise between the irreconcilables, religion and scientific thought, from the Archbishop of Canterbury upwards, are asserting as that the great truths of Evolution are all in harmony with the Bible, and have been this long time embodied in more or less hidden guise in the teaching of the Church—that, in short, the discoveries of to-day are a godsend to religion, whilst less versatile thinkers had regarded them the rather as a god's evil. All this might have been passed by with pity and a sigh for something more novel. But when these same persons tell us that Charles Darwin was a religious man and a Christian, a feeling other than one of pity is born. An indignation that is, we hope, righteous takes possession of us. They slandered him when living, not without protest from us; and now that he is dead and evil is spoken of him, our voices must be raised again.

It is in consequence of the statements that Darwin was a Christian, and in consequence of the suppression by our English newspapers of his remarkable letter on religion, that I now write an account of a visit paid by two Atheists to Down in the year 1881. One of the Atheists was Dr. Ludwig Büchner, of Darmstadt, President in 1881 of the Congress of the International Federation of Freethinkers, and one of the distinguished popularizers of Darwinism in its second home, Germany. The other was the present writer. Dr. Büchner had been in correspondence with our English philosophers, and had in his remarkable works, and especially in "*Die Darwinische Theorie*," "*Der Mensch und seine Stellung in der Natur*," thrown light upon the great principles enunciated by Darwin and extended their application. Between the author of the "*Origin of Species*" and myself several letters had passed. I was grateful then, and am more gratefully grateful now, for the generous readiness with which all help and information were given me when I was attempting to prepare an epitome of his works. A list of his books, with their dates of publication in his handwriting, and his letters of explanation and of encouragement, are now very precious relics to me.

The International Federation of Freethinkers held its Congress in London on the Sunday, Monday and Tuesday, September 26th, 28th, 29th of 1881. Dr. Büchner, its President, was very anxious to see Darwin, and had only the Wednesday of that same week disengaged. On Tuesday, therefore, I telegraphed to Mr. Darwin the wish of the German thinker, and had a telegram in return asking us to lunch with him on the following day. Hence it fell out that on a day that summer seemed to have left behind it as forgotten in its flight northwards, we were driving from the white, sleepy station of Uxbridge, through English lanes, a long four miles to Down. As we passed by the house of Sir John Lubbock, student of insects and flowers, as the great thinker by my side spoke in his gentle fashion of variation and heredity and Evolution, as I remembered to what English home we were moving, the world of living things making gay the aftermath of summer in the September sunshine had a deeper meaning to me than ever.

He met us in the hall of his home with the kindest, the most genial of greetings. Any embarrassment that might have been felt by the youngest present in coming thus face to face with him, and in witnessing the first encounter between two men so material as these, vanished in a moment under the spell of the frankest and the kindest eyes that ever looked into mine. He was tall, and built on powerful lines; yet with a suggestion of fragility running through the massive frame. In his carriage, in the serenity and strength of his face, in the honored head white with age, and in the calm, steady, self-contained voice, there

was a quiet majesty, very impressive. One felt that one was in the presence of a king among men, whose manner was so courtierly gentle, so unassuming, so frank, so graceful with an unstudied ease, that he almost made men forget how far above them all his intellect ranged. A man intensely human, whose being near you made your own life more intense. One of those rare natures whose increasing to the chamber of a convalescent is like a breath of strengthening air from the sea or the mountain, and begets a swifter striding towards health.

In the drawing-room, where we were introduced to wife and daughter and to Francis Darwin, co-worker with his father, and at luncheon in the bright airy room looking out upon the classic ground of the Kentish garden, in which so many notable experiments have been conducted, our talk was on what is strangely called physical or natural science. These adjectives seem more than usually out of place when our topic is the man who, more than any other, has served his fellows in breaking down the artificial barrier erected in man's salad days between the knowledge of matter and motion and the knowledge of mental phenomena. At the luncheon table three generations were gathered together. Mrs. Darwin was at the head, nearest the window that gave upon the garden. Charles Darwin sat, with Dr. Huxner on his right and myself on his left, on the right-hand side. His son Francis faced the mother, and opposite to us were little children. Between myself and Mrs. Darwin sat a clergyman of the English Church.

The talk ran, as I have said, mainly upon what are generally known as scientific subjects. Especially, I remember, there was discussion as to instinct. Ludwig Buchner's "*Genetischen der Thiere*," familiar to English readers through Annie Semon's translation, was in some sense our text. It is well known that Buchner, in that remarkable volume, adduces incontrovertible evidence against the old idea of instinct as a blind, unreasoning faculty, implanted in certain animals by a creator, and deeming them, as it were, to perform certain definite acts in a rigidly monotonous, uniform, unintellectual fashion. He shows us that much—in some cases all—of such so-called instinctive acts is due to education by parents. Whilst the German thinker never ignores heredity, in his anxiety to demonstrate clearly the inaccuracy of the old notions as to instinct, he lays stress mainly on the education-factor, and his great English brother was questioning, in his gentle, thoughtful manner, whether the relative amount of effect of the two factors, education and heredity, was yet recognised or even recognisable. He quoted Douglas Spalding's experiments, as showing that whilst education at the parents' hands has much to do with the performance of certain acts on the part of the offspring, heredity comes also largely into play, and that tendencies and aptitudes are both

transmitted. He told us of his book on "Vegetable Mould and Worms." It was published but a week or two after that memorable visit, and has to all men a melancholy interest added to all its other charms, in that it is the last of his written utterances to us. In my youthfulness I expressed a foolish surprise that he who had written the "Origin of Species" should deal with a subject so insignificant as worms. I see his face now, as he turned it on mine and said quietly: "I have been studying their habits for forty years." I might have remembered better his own persistent teaching, that in Nature no agency can be regarded as insignificant, that the most stupendous effects have been produced by the ceaselessly repeated action of small forces. Forty years he studies the habits of worms, and then he thinks it is time to write a book upon the subject. This is the very nature of the man. And some of us, as soon as we have borrowed an idea from someone else, see for printing it in pamphlet form incontinently.

In talk such as this the luncheon-time passed swiftly. That meal over, the four whose interest in science at least placed them upon a common ground, though at such different levels, passed to his study, and there, amidst the stacks of cigarettes, with his books looking down upon us, his plants for experiments laid by, we fell to talking, on his own suggestion, about religion.

I believe I am speaking for Dr. Buchner as well as myself when I say that there was no intention on the part of the visitors to Down to touch upon the question of religion. We knew that we could not leave the choice of subjects for converse in other hands than those of our host, and the selection of religion as matter for discussion was his, not ours. When once we were within the walls of his study, and he was sitting in most unconventional fashion in the large, well-worn easy chair, almost the first thing he said was, "Why do you call yourselves Atheists?" And here I have to record a fact that will seem strange to those who fail to keep in mind two things. One of these is the wide extent of the popular error as to the meaning of the name so dear to us. The other is that, as far as I know, Charles Darwin had given but little attention to the great conflict raging between the religious and the scientific folk. Of the latter fact we had evidence in more than one remark made at that memorable interview. That the misunderstanding of the word *Atheist* is far-reaching is shown by the fact that even he held the opinion that the *Atheist* was a *denier of god*. And his holding this opinion is in turn evidence bearing upon the second of the two statements just made.

Very respectfully the explanation was given, that we were *Atheists* because there was no evidence of deity, because the invention of a name was not an explanation of phenomena, because the whole of man's knowledge was of a natural order,

and only when ignorance closed in his onward path was the supernatural invoked. It was pointed out that the Greek *ε* was positive, not negative; that whilst we did not account the folly of god-denial, we avoided with equal care the folly of god-assertion: that as god was not proven, we were without god (*ἀθεοι*) and by consequence were with hope in this world, and in this world alone. As we spoke, it was evident from the change of light in the eyes that always met ours so frankly, that a new conception was arising in his mind. He had imagined until then that we were deniers of god, and he found the order of thought that was ours differing in no essential from his own. For with point after point of our argument he agreed; statement on statement that was made he endorsed, saying finally: "I am with you in thought, but I should prefer the word Agnostic to the word Atheist."

Upon this the suggestion was made that, after all, "Agnostic" was but "Atheist" writ respectable, and "Atheist" was only "Agnostic" writ aggressive. To say that one did not know was the verbal equivalent of saying that one was destitute of the god-idea, whilst at the same time a step was thrown to the Caribbees of society by the adoption of a name less determined and uncompromising. At this he smiled and asked: "Why should you be so aggressive? Is anything gained by trying to force these new ideas upon the mass of mankind? It is all very well for educated, cultured, thoughtful people; but are the masses yet ripe for it?" Then we asked him whether the same questions he now asked of us had not been addressed to him about the years 1859-60, when his immortal "Origin of Species" first saw the light. Many at that time had thought a greater wisdom would have been shown in only enunciating the revolutionary truths of Natural and Sexual Selection to the judicious few. Many had, as of old, dreaded the open declaration of truth to the multitudes. New ideas are always at first regarded as only for the study. Danger is feared if they are proclaimed abroad on the house-tops, and discussed in market-places and homes. But he, happily for humanity, had by the gentle, irresistible power of reason, forced his new ideas upon the mass of the people. And the masses had been found ripe for it. Had he kept silence, the tremendous strides taken by human thought during the last twenty-one years would have been shorn of their fair proportions, perhaps had hardly been made at all. His own illustrious example was encouragement, was for a command to every thinker to make known to all his fellows that which he believed to be the truth.

Then the talk fell upon Christianity, and those remarkable words were uttered: "I never gave up Christianity until I was forty years of age." I commend those words to the careful consideration of all and sundry who claimed the great naturalist

as an orthodox Christian. The unscrupulous will probably quote this remark hereafter with a designed omission of the last seven words. But by a similar device, the Bible can be made to say that "there is no god."

I confess that a great joy took possession of me as I heard a statement by its implication so encouraging. I, like the rest of the outside world, was not sure as to his position in regard to religion. Now, from his own lips, I knew that before I was born this, my master, had cast aside the reigning faith. The step taken by so many of us had been taken by him long ago. What a strength and hope are in the thought that the first thinker of our age had abandoned Christianity!

He was asked, with all deference, the reason of the long delay. With a charming frankness, he made answer that he had not had time to think about it. His time had been so occupied by his scientific work, that he had none to spare for the careful study of theological questions. Nor must this want of time be urged as an objection to his conclusions. For, in the first place, a like want of time to devote to the subject is never urged on the opposite side. Sudden conversions were and are quoted as strongest of evidence on behalf of religion. The testimony of the last few minutes of a long, mis-spent life is taken as in favor of Christianity. A dying thief, the legends have it, purchased Paradise by the compassion of a few moments after years of wrong-doing. Men, women, even children, often of the lowest intellectual order, bringing to bear on this subject brains infinitely inferior to his, both by birth and by training, declare on the side of religion, and their witness is accepted. I would weigh the witness of this one man against that of the whole of the Salvation Army. And in the second place, he had given attention to the matter. For, on further inquiry, he told us that he had, when of mature years, investigated the claims of Christianity. Asked why he had abandoned it, the reply, simple and all-sufficient, was: "It is not supported by evidence." And this came from the most careful and unbiased weigher of evidence the generations have known. Those who remember his painstaking in regard to all evidence bearing on scientific points, who remember his scrupulous fairness, his honest statement of both sides of a question, the labor devoted to the right balancing of adverse claims, will grasp the immense significance of that answer: "It is not supported by evidence."

Not, perhaps, without something of presumption, warranted, let us hope, by the momentous, fateful nature of the subject under discussion, his attention was called to the well-known passage in his "*Origin of Species*," wherein the phrase is used that the Creator breathed into one or more primordial forms the breath of life. This phrase is constantly quoted by Christian-evidence persons who, rejecting the teaching of Darwin as every

other point, with an inconsequence that would be strange were it not theirs, suddenly adopt it on this one point. They will have none of him as long as he teaches Natural Selection, Evolution, the origin of man from lower forms; they reject, in a word, the whole of his teaching on subjects whose observation is possible, and then accept as true the one statement not founded on observation. He was asked whether, in using the phrase quoted above, he had not gone beyond the bounds of scientific statement, whether the strictly logical method he had used throughout all the rest of his argument had not, at this point, been abandoned. As he had explained so much for us, without the hypothesis of supernatural intervention, was it philosophical to invoke it as essential to the origin of life? And at these questions, urged, let us hope, very gently, very respectfully, he was silent and thoughtful for a space.

A little later he admitted that there was an enormous waste of energy in respect to the supernatural generally, and to the god-idea particularly. Man had so much time, so much strength at his disposal. Whilst work was to be done on earth and for humanity, whilst Nature had so many of her secrets, so many of her methods still hidden in her maternal bosom, even from the children that nestle there, half terrified but all loving, so long the time, money, strength, the individual lives, the organization devoted to aims other than natural, were wasted.

Francis Darwin, sitting all this time silent by the window, chimed in with but one remark, that showed how closely and critically he had followed the line of talk. It was as to the non-provenceness of duty, and the utilisable energy wasted in the senseless and hapless seeking after god.

In all this is a beautifully welcome confirmation of the ideas of Charles Darwin as enunciated in the letter to Baron Moeggen, and in the letter to a Dutch student in 1879, that was published, I believe, for the first time in England, in the *National Reformer* of October 1st, 1882. The explanations of his irreligious views, as due to age and weakness, vanish, if they ever had any tangible existence, at the sound of those memorable words: "I never gave up Christianity until I was forty years of age." The Roman Catholic *Tribune* hails the famous letter as the utterance of the arch-heretic. It recognizes the true glory of that letter and of its writer. The

War Cry, if its writers read decent literature, would quote the words written to the young student of Jena in triumph. But the religious writers and speakers that are temporizers, the Messrs. Facing-both-Ways, would have stifled it, had the power been theirs; and now, with a sense of shame and impotence gnawing at their hearts, tell you it is nothing, and bid one another be of good cheer, whilst their faces are white with dread.

⁷ Thousands are glad that he, being dead, yet speaketh on

this tremendous matter. We know that he had, consciously or unconsciously, been undermining religious belief his long and honorable life through. His eyes, at work within study and garden, closely bent on the search for truth, had hardly seen, as had eyes less keen but looking farther a-field, the whole consequences of his great generalisations. But to his lesser fellows, who, studying his teachings from without, recognised their bearing upon the fading belief in the supernatural, possibly even more fully than he, it is a joy that our Master had cast off the old bonds, and was walking in the large freedom that he has given to so many of his brothers and sisters.

When the estimate of his majestic work is made by minds more capable of judging than are ours, more capable in that they will have the light of future centuries beaming upon them, it is more than possible that highest of all the results of his vast generalisations will rank the fatal blow thus dealt at the very foundations of all belief in the supernatural.

PRICE ONE PENNY.