

Christian Evolutionists in the United States, 1860-1900¹

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Abstract: In this paper I will examine the theistic evolutionism of four important American Christian leaders, Minot Judson Savage, Joseph Cook, Henry Ward Beecher, and Lyman Abbott. From the late 1870's to the 1890's these men played a key role in the construction of a theory of evolution congenial to various forms of Christianity. I will argue that an appreciation of significant differences in national context will help us to understand how theistic evolutionism remained a viable option in the United States up until the end of the nineteenth century.

Key Words: Theistic evolution, American Christianity, Darwin

Trained as a Congregationalist minister, Joseph Cook became a gifted public lecturer whose oratory drew large crowds. From 1880 to 1882 he undertook a world lecture tour to Great Britain, India, Japan, and Australia. Cook's success was based on his ability to assure his audiences that modern science and traditional Protestantism were cut from the same cloth. In 1877, his Boston Monday Lectures were published under the title *Biology, with Preludes on Current Events*. Here he maintained that there were several distinct evolutionary hypotheses that could be grouped according to their religious implications. He believed that "the question of chief interest to religious science is, whether the new philosophy is to be established in its atheistic, its agnostic, or its theistic form." Cook devoted two chapters to the 'concessions of evolutionists,' which indicated to him that agnostic evolutionists like T. H. Huxley were losing the battle to define the religious significance of Darwin's theory. In triumph, he stated that "it is the theistic, and not the agnostic or the atheistic school of evolution which is increasing in influence among the higher authorities of science."² Cook's claim in 1877 that theistic evolution was slowly winning the struggle for existence among scientists strikes us as wishful thinking. Huxley and his fellow evolutionary naturalists were at the peak of their power in the 1870's.

Huxley's views on the religious implications of evolution may have been in vogue among scientists in England, but Cook's observations about the growing influence of theistic evolution cannot be dismissed out of hand in the case of the United States. Cook's reading of the situation was shaped profoundly by the trajectory of the debates surrounding evolution in the U.S., rather than in the U.K.

¹ I am indebted to a number of scholars for sharing their incisive comments on this article with me, including Ronald Numbers, Jon Roberts, Marc Rothenberg, and Stephen Weldon.

² Joseph Cook, *Biology, with Preludes on Current Events* (Boston: James R. Osgood and Company, 1877), 7, 9-12.

In the U.S., the chief participants were almost all theists, whether, like Asa Gray, they supported evolution, or, like Louis Agassiz, they rejected it. Gray was Professor of Natural History at Harvard University. He specialized in botany and was an active Congregationalist. Even though he recognised that Darwin could not go as far as he wanted him to in the direction of a theistic interpretation of evolution, and even though it became clear to him in the late sixties that Darwinism had adopted a secular hue in Britain thanks to Huxley and other X-Clubbers, Gray continued to refer to himself as a Darwinian.³ From the publication of Darwin's *Origin of Species* in 1859 up until his death in 1888, Gray argued that evolutionary theory did not undermine theism. Pointing to the final paragraph of the *Origin*, Gray argued that the *Origin of Species* was a theistic work.⁴ He insisted that Darwin did not deny "purpose, intention, or the cooperation of God" in nature. "Purpose" was "implied" in Darwinism and it lay "in the whole."⁵ In fact, Gray claimed that Darwin's botanical work on orchids had "brought back teleology to natural history." Darwin could explain the existence of useless organs—either "they have done service in the past, or they may do service in the future"—and he could explain "the seeming waste as being part and parcel of a great economical process."⁶ It was Gray who provided the scientific legitimacy for the development of theistic evolutionism in the United States up to 1900.

In this paper I will examine the theistic evolutionism of four important American Christian leaders, Minot Judson Savage, Joseph Cook, Henry Ward Beecher, and Lyman Abbott. From the late 1870's to the 1890's these men played a key role in the construction of theories of evolution congenial to various forms of Christianity. In his study of the spatial situatedness of evolution David Livingstone has demonstrated that in 1874 Presbyterians responded quite differently to Darwinism in Princeton, Belfast, and Edinburgh. The theory of evolution was absorbed in Edinburgh, repudiated in Belfast, and tolerated in Princeton.⁷ Disparate reactions came out of different local contexts. Here I want to expand the scale of Livingstone's city-based study, and discuss the reception of evolutionary theory at the national level. I will argue that an appreciation of significant differences in national context will help us to understand how theistic evolutionism remained a viable option in the United States up until the end of the nineteenth century.

I Savage: Evolution as Religion

After 1875, when it had become clear that the scientific community had endorsed the theory of organic evolution, American Protestant thinkers began to feel compelled to assess its theological implications. Over the next quarter of the century most concluded that modifications of traditional

³Darwin informed Gray early on, in a letter written in November 26th, 1860, that "I cannot honestly go as far as you do about Design." See Frederick Burkhardt, Duncan M. Porter, Janet Browne, and Marsha Richmond, eds, *The Correspondence of Charles Darwin, Volume 8 1860* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 496. Gray's sense of alienation from the British Darwinians by the late 1860's is evident in his letter of August 22nd, 1869 to R. W. Church. Writing from London, he told Church that he was happy that he could not attend the British Association meeting at Exeter. "I am on the whole glad enough to keep away," he declared, "especially from *Darwinian* discussions—in which I desire not to be at all 'mixed up' with the Huxley set, and the prevailing and peculiarly English Materialistic-positivistic line of thought—with which I have no sympathy—while in natural history I am sort of Darwinian." As cited in A. Hunter Dupree, *Asa Gray 1810-1888* (New York: Atheneum, 1968), 340.

⁴ Asa Gray, *Darwiniana: Essays and Reviews Pertaining to Darwinism*, Ed. A. Hunter Dupree (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1963), 221.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 225.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 294, 308-310.

⁷ David N. Livingstone, "Science, Religion, and Religion: The Reception of Darwinism in Princeton, Belfast, and Edinburgh," in *Disseminating Darwinism: The Role of Place, Race, Religion, and Gender*, Ed. Ronald L. Numbers and John Stenhouse (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 7-38.

formulations of Christian doctrine would allow them to accept evolutionary theory. Only a minority of Protestant leaders concluded that reconciliation was impossible.⁸ Savage's *Religion of Evolution* (1876) was among the earliest of books by a Christian leader endorsing theistic evolutionism in the United States. Minot Judson Savage (1841-1918) converted from Congregationalism to Unitarianism in 1872 after struggling with the religious implications of evolutionary theory. He served as pastor of the Third Unitarian Church of Chicago from 1873-1874, as minister of the Church of the Unity in Boston (1874-1896), and as minister at the Church of the Messiah in New York (1896-1906). At Boston he preached to large congregations. His sermons were printed every week and circulated in thousands around the world.

Published by Lockwood, Brooks, and Company in 1876, *Religion of Evolution* reached a third edition in 1881. Later, Ellis published the book in 1886, where by 1900 it again reached a third edition. In the opening pages of his book, Savage declared that the theory of evolution was "now accepted by nearly all the leading scientific and philosophic students of the world" and that it was "rapidly giving its own shape to the thought of civilization. Science, art, human life, religion, and reform are becoming its disciplines; and their tendencies in the near future must be largely determined by it." Whereas other departments of thought had been reshaped in accordance with the principles of evolution, "so far as I know in this country, no book has been devoted to a discussion of its effect upon religion." Savage rejected the entire notion, put forward by "some scientists" and "some frightened religionists" that "evolution is essentially atheistic and irreligious." On the contrary, Savage maintained that both science and religion sought truth and therefore both led to God. They were "at one, and need no reconciliation." Savage expressed gratitude towards the scientists of the past few centuries for helping to destroy "the superstitions, the crudities, the falsehoods, the misconceptions of men, concerning religion."⁹

Savage reminded his readers that most scientists accepted evolution. The theory, simply stated, was "that the whole universe, suns, planets, moons, our earth, and every form of life upon it, vegetable and animal up to man, together with all our civilization, has developed from a primitive fire-mist or nebulae that once filled all the space now occupied by the world; and that this development has been according to laws and methods and forces still active, and working about us to-day." It was widely accepted by scientists because of its tremendous explanatory power. It explained the distribution of plants and animals, the present condition of the races of humanity, and the rise and fall of social, political, and religious movements. Savage acknowledged that the theory of evolution "calls in no unknown agency." Nevertheless, Savage insisted that the "life and power and movement of God" could be detected in the entire process. Savage conceived of an immanent God who was in the very laws of nature. Universal natural laws were "only universal, all-encompassing, tireless, changeless providence." Evolution therefore demolished the old materialism and offered "the grandest conception of God." Moreover, since Savage's account of evolution contained no mention of the theory of natural selection, he could conceive of the evolutionary process as progressive, and moral, in nature. "And not only do we see progress along certain definite lines of law that suggest the rightness of this life-force of the universe," Savage announced, "but this progress has lifted up into what we call the sphere of morals, and has been along certain other definite lines of what we call righteousness." Rather than leading to unbelief, evolution led directly to Christianity. "The whole

⁸ Jon H. Roberts, "Darwinism, American Protestant Thinkers, and the Puzzle of Motivation," in *Disseminating Darwinism: The Role of Place, Race, Religion, and Gender*, Ed. Ronald L Numbers and John Stenhouse, 145.

⁹ M. J. Savage, *The Religion of Evolution* (Boston: Lockwood, Brooks, & Company, 1876), 5, 27.

force of evolution, henceforth,” Savage announced, “will lift up and urge on humanity toward the fullest and highest Christian life.” Savage saw an inextricable link between his sense of himself as a Christian and his embrace of evolution. “I am a Christian *because* I am an evolutionist,” Savage declared.¹⁰

II Cook: The Varieties of Evolution

Like Savage, Joseph Cook (1838-1901) was another Christian evolutionist who had a gift for public speaking. However Cook was a more conservative thinker than Savage, and he sharply criticized New England Unitarianism. *His Biology, with Preludes on Current Events* (1877) far exceeded Savage’s *Religion of Evolution* in terms of sales. By 1883, *Biology* had reached a seventeenth edition. Cook argued that to properly evaluate the religious significance of evolution, it was crucial to recognize that “different schools of evolutionists must be distinguished.” The doctrine of evolution held by Huxley, Tyndall, and their school was based on the theories of spontaneous generation and natural selection. But Cook was not willing to concede that the atheistic and agnostic schools were backed up by scientific evidence. According to Cook, when Huxley had visited the United States in 1876, he had been unable to present compelling evidence in favour of the materialistic form of evolution. He had failed to show that spontaneous generation was a fact. As for the theory of natural selection, Cook believed that its importance had been “exaggerated.” It “should have a subordinate rank in contrast with yet unknown causes of variation.” Even Darwin had moved away from the theory. This led Cook to remark, “Darwin himself is not a good Darwinian.”¹¹

Cook stressed that it was possible to adopt a scientifically valid form of evolution that did not stand or fall with natural selection and spontaneous generation. As long as the distinction between mind and matter was retained, Cook wrote, “theism is logically safe.” Interestingly enough, Cook placed Darwin in the theistic evolutionist school, along with Gray and the liberal Anglican Charles Kingsley. Cook was not troubled by the elimination of miracle from the evolutionary process. He agreed with Kingsley that the notion of divine intervention in nature was inconsistent with a wise God. “What harm, we may say with Charles Kingsley,” Cook wrote, “can come to religion, even if it be demonstrated, not only that God is so wise that he can make all things, but that he is so much wiser than even that, that he can make all things make themselves.” Cook quoted from Gray and Kingsley to demonstrate that evolution allowed for design. “As science progresses,” Cook affirmed, “it draws nearer, in all its forms, to the proof of the Spiritual Origin of Force; that is, of the Divine Immanence in natural law; that is, of the Omnipresence of a personal First Cause; and the religious value of this proof is transcendently great.” Cook acknowledged that theistic evolutionists were not all agreed on how to reconcile evolution and religion. But it was unimportant to Cook “which of the three or four theistic systems of evolution is proven to be the best.” As long as it was known that evolution was at work in the universe, “we know that there has been an Evolver; and, if design, a Designer; for every change must have a sufficient cause.”¹²

III Beecher and Abbott: Evangelical Perspectives

¹⁰Savage, *The Religion of Evolution*, 42, 44, 46, 60, 149, 216, 231.

¹¹ Joseph Cook, *Biology, with Preludes on Current Events* (Boston: James R. Osgood and Company, 1877), 12, 37, 46-47, 62.

¹² *Ibid.*, 30, 32, 38, 61.

Like Savage and Cook, the liberal evangelicals Henry Ward Beecher (1813-1887) and Lyman Abbott (1835-1922) explored the potential of integrating evolutionary theory into Christian theology. Though he points to a diversity of positions on evolution within the evangelical movement in the decades before 1920, in his *Darwin's Forgotten Defenders* David Livingstone has drawn our attention to a large number of American evangelicals, including James McCosh, Archibald Hodge, Joseph Van Dyke, Francis Patton, and B. B. Warfield, who found "the theological resources necessary to absorb the implications of the new biology."¹³ Livingstone does not discuss Beecher or Abbott at length. Yet through their public speaking and accessible books they had a real impact on how the relationship between theism and evolution was viewed. After his appointment as head of the newly formed Plymouth Congregational Church of Brooklyn in 1847 Beecher gained a reputation for being a talented writer and speaker. A passionate abolitionist, Beecher supported his sister Harriet Beecher Stowe in her publication of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in 1852. By the early 1860's he became a power within the Republican party and he urged Lincoln to issue the Emancipation Proclamation. After the publication of Darwin's *Origin* Beecher lectured widely on the compatibility of religion and science.

In his *Evolution and Religion* (1885), which reached a second edition, Beecher offered eight sermons discussing the bearings of evolutionary philosophy on the fundamental doctrines of evangelical Christianity. In his own case, Beecher welcomed evolutionary theory wholeheartedly. "For myself," he declared, "while finding no need of changing my idea of the Divine personality because of new light upon His mode of working, I have hailed the Evolutionary philosophy with joy." Beecher assured his readers that he was not alone, as "Evolution is substantially held by men of profound Christian faith." Evangelical Christianity, he claimed, was "helped and not hindered" by evolution. Though theology had to be rebuilt, the essential religious truths remained. Addressing "the fearful and the timid," Beecher told them "that while Evolution is certain to oblige theology to reconstruct its system, it will take nothing away from the grounds of true religion." Beecher discussed the "bearings of the Evolutionary philosophy on some of the fundamental doctrines of our religious faith, --the Divine Nature, the question of Human Sinfulness, the Inspiration of the Bible, the Divine Providence, and correlated subjects." Though "special design" had to be given up, a grander notion of design was restored by evolution. "Evolution ... teaches that God created through the mediation of natural laws," Beecher argued, "that creation, in whole or detail, was a process of slow growth, and not an instantaneous process." The entire universe was "moving onward and upward in determinate lines and directions" so that "the whole physical creation is organizing itself for a sublime march toward perfectness."¹⁴

Like Beecher, Abbott was engaged in a project of theological reconstruction, known to their contemporaries as the "New Theology." Both had substantial experience in the world of journalism. Abbott edited the *Illustrated Christian Weekly* in the early 1870's before joining Beecher's *Christian Union* in 1876, eventually becoming chief editor and changing the title of the periodical to the *Outlook*. Abbott became more liberal working with Beecher, and gave up the literal accuracy of the Bible. In his *Evolution of Christianity* (1892), which reached a fourth edition within two years, Abbott summed up the aim of his book as "an attempt to restate the eternal yet ever new truths of the

¹³ David N. Livingstone, *Darwin's Forgotten Defenders: The Encounter between Evangelical Theology and Evolutionary Thought* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1987), 145.

¹⁴ Henry Ward Beecher, *Evolution and Religion* (London: James Clarke & Co.; New York: Fords, Howard and Hulbert, 1885), 3-4, 51-52, 113-115.

religious life in the terms of modern philosophic thought.” Abbott argued that he hadn’t abandoned the historic faith of Christendom to become an evolutionist. On the contrary, “when stated in the terms of an evolutionary philosophy” the “historic faith of Christendom” was “so cleansed of pagan thought” that it could be presented “in a purer and more powerful form.”¹⁵

Abbott referred explicitly to himself as a “Christian evolutionist,” and one of the important themes in his book was how the development of Christianity could be better understood by conceiving of the Church as subject to the evolutionary process. “The Christian evolutionist, then,” he wrote, “will expect to find modern Christianity more complex than primitive Christianity,” and will discover that the Bible, theology, the Church, Christian society, and the soul were all in a state of evolution. Despite its failings the Christianity of the nineteenth century was “better, intellectually, organically, morally, and spiritually, than the Christianity of the first century.” In his chapter on “The Evolution of the Bible,” for example, Abbott treated revelation as a “gradual and progressive unveiling of the mind” rather than “a final statement of truth, crystallized into dogma.” Chapters on “The Evolution of Theology” recast the conception of God as immanent in nature, rather than merely the transcendent being of traditional theology. This emphasis on divine immanence allowed Abbott to present a revised natural theology. The immanence of God in nature pointed to “a Designer, a Thinker, and a Purposer.”¹⁶ Beecher and Abbott’s project of theological reconstruction was based on integrating evolutionary principles into the heart of Christian thought.

IV A Tale of Two Contexts

Beginning in the late 1970’s historians of science such as James Moore drew our attention to the existence of significant numbers of post-Darwinian Christian evolutionists. Moore’s aim in his *Post-Darwinian Controversies* was to raise questions about the reliance on the “military metaphor” in our understanding of the historic relationship between science and religion.¹⁷ Since then, the “conflict thesis” has been completely demolished by scholars, who now prefer John Brooke’s richer approach of studying science and religion in each historical age without any preconceived master narrative. The result has been the production of many fine local studies that emphasize the complex situation in different national, urban, and other contexts. Scholars working on the nineteenth century have been drawn towards the British context, where evolutionary naturalists, led by Huxley and Tyndall, aggressively pursued the agenda of professionalizing science. In the British context, where the established Anglican Church had dominated science in the first half of the century, professionalizing science required secularizing nature, at least from the point of view of the evolutionary naturalists. It involved displacing the Anglican clergy from their place as cultural authorities. In their essays, books, and public lectures Huxley and his allies therefore worked hard to forge a strong link between evolution and agnosticism. Their aim was to make the connection between science and unbelief seem natural and inevitable. To some extent they succeeded in Britain, though other groups rejected their arguments. The situation in the United States was quite different, and our fascination with the British context sometimes obscures the strength of the link between evolution and Christianity in the minds of American intellectuals and the public. This is why Cook,

¹⁵ Lyman Abbott, *The Evolution of Christianity* (Boston and New York: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1892; reprint, New York and London: Johnson Reprint Corporation, 1969), iii-iv.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 7-8, 112, 246.

¹⁷ James R. Moore, *The Post-Darwinian Controversies: A Study of the Protestant Struggle to Come to Terms with Darwin in Great Britain and America, 1870-1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979).

Savage, Beecher, and Abbott are such important figures. Their work indicates that theistic evolution appealed to a broad spectrum of Christian constituencies. Jon Roberts has affirmed that by 1900 thirty-five percent of American Protestant leaders embraced the theory of organic evolution, twenty-five percent rejected it, and forty percent embraced some version of progressive evolutionism.¹⁸

Cook, Savage, Beecher, and Abbott were able to forge a strong connection between theism and evolution in the United States for two reasons. First, the theory of natural selection, with all of its anti-theistic connotations, was not widely accepted by American scientists.¹⁹ This gave Christian intellectuals, eager to draw on modern science to update theology, license to reject natural selection and build teleological dimensions into the evolutionary process. It allowed them to refer to themselves as Christian evolutionists. Second, there was no group parallel to the British evolutionary naturalists in the United States. Scholars have at times made comparisons between the British evolutionary naturalists and the American Lazzaroni. Both sought to professionalize science. But what that entailed in the two contexts was somewhat different. There was no established Church in the U.S. that controlled science in the way that the Anglican Church had in Britain. The most prominent members of the Lazzaroni were A. D. Bache, Louis Agassiz, Benjamin Pierce, and Joseph Henry. Bache was an Episcopalian, Agassiz and Peirce Unitarians, and Henry a Presbyterian. All objected to a literal interpretation of the Old Testament and responded angrily to ministers interjecting their opinions into scientific questions, but none could be characterized as being opponents of Christianity.²⁰ Although there were American agnostics, such as Robert Ingersoll, for whom Darwinian evolution was an element in his challenges to conventional religion, and although unbelief became, as Turner asserts, “a fully available option in American culture” by the 1880’s, nevertheless Ingersoll and his ilk lacked the scientific authority of Huxley and his allies.²¹ In the United States, no group of agnostically minded scientists were at work systematically constructing a link between evolution and unbelief. Cook’s claim that the theistic, and not the agnostic, school of evolution was increasing in influence among the higher authorities of science is explicable only if we recognize that his assertion reflects the conditions of the American context.²²

V Conclusion: The 2009 Darwin Celebrations

In the last twenty-five years, historians of Victorian science have produced a picture of the period that has moved Darwin away from the centre of things. It was an age in which the eclipse of Darwinism took place. Or rather, as Bowler has argued, “there was no *eclipse* of Darwinism in the late nineteenth century, because *Darwinism*—in the modern sense of that term—had never been

¹⁸ Roberts, “Darwinism, American Protestant Thinkers, and the Puzzle of Motivation,” 148.

¹⁹ Ronald L. Numbers, *Darwinism Comes to America* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: Harvard University Press, 1998), 44.

²⁰ I am indebted to Marc Rothenberg for many of these points.

²¹ Susan Jacoby, *Freethinkers: A History of American Secularism* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2004), 151-185; James Turner, *Without God, Without Creed: The Origins of Unbelief in America* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985), 262.

²² The American context was congenial to theistic evolutionism despite the fact that it gave birth to the “military metaphor” in the works of Draper and White.

very popular.”²³ Though two of the finest biographies of Darwin have been produced since Bowler made that statement, historians have become interested in working class science, the scientific work of neglected women, the popularization of science, and the continuing power of the aristocracy in the world of science. Scholars have also explored the continuing power of Christian and spiritualist modes of thought in the post-*Origin* period. Needless to say, these developments in the history of Victorian science place scholars in an awkward position as we celebrate the 200th anniversary of the birth of Darwin and the 150th anniversary of the publication of the *Origin of Species*. In 2009, my colleagues and I are in the uncomfortable position of playing the role of wet blanket, of party-poopers, as when we are asked to help celebrate these anniversaries, the story we tell about science in Darwin’s age seems to push him to the sidelines.

Previous anniversaries have been the subject of historical investigation. In 1909, the centenary of Darwin’s birth, and the fiftieth anniversary of the publication of the *Origin*, was celebrated at the University of Cambridge. Richmond describes it as “one of the most magnificent spectacles ever recorded in the annals of science.”²⁴ Delegates to the conference sought to honour Darwin as a revolutionary scientist, but they also used the occasion to reexamine the status of evolutionary theory in the wake of new developments, especially the rediscovery of Mendel’s laws of heredity. Delegates could not reach a consensus on the extent of the role of natural selection in the evolutionary process. For Richmond, the primary significance of the event was the stimulation it gave to the future development of biological science.²⁵

In 1959, the one-hundredth anniversary of the publication of the *Origin of Species* attracted a large contingent of scientists to the University of Chicago’s Darwin Centennial Celebration. In the wake of the establishment of the evolutionary synthesis of the 1930s and 1940s, the conference took place at a time when a reassessment of the state of biology was needed. By the mid-1950s a well-defined community of evolutionary biologists had emerged who could participate in such an activity. Since natural selection had been restored within a genetical and population framework, Darwin was reinvented as the founding father of the discipline. Smocovitis has argued that the emotion generated by the celebration can be explained by recognising that what it meant to be a twentieth century evolutionary biologist depended on identifying with the narrative of Darwin’s life and work. The celebration, she points out, had little to do with the historical Darwin, and everything to do with post-war American culture’s embrace of a new synthetic science of evolutionary biology.²⁶ Smocovitis also points out that an unintended outcome of the 1959 centennial was that it sparked the regrouping of Christian evangelicals who eventually became known as the scientific creationists.²⁷ It is ironic that one of the themes of the 2009 celebrations could become the rejection of creationism, as well as intelligent design. Both Smocovitis and Richmond have shown that in these two key celebrations, the preoccupation of the participants was with the current state of science rather than with the historical Darwin. Given the growth of the history of science since 1959, and the transformation of its historiographical basis, it will not be surprising if there is a disparity between the aims of historians and those of scientists when they celebrate Darwin in 2009.

²³ Peter J. Bowler, *The Eclipse of Darwinism: Anti-Darwinian Evolution Theories in the Decades Around 1900* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983), x.

²⁴ Marsha L. Richmond, “The 1909 Darwin Celebration: Reexamining Evolution in the Light of Mendel, Mutation, and Meiosis”, *Isis* 97, No. 3 (Sept. 2006), 447.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 448, 484.

²⁶ Vassiliki Betty Smocovitis, “The 1959 Darwin Centennial Celebration in America”, *Osiris* 14 (1999), 278-279, 321-323.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 322.

The current celebrations should not prevent us from viewing Darwin and his impact on religion in historical context. Replying to one of his correspondents, John Fordyce, on May 7, 1879, Charles Darwin wrote, “it seems to me absurd to doubt that a man may be an ardent Theist and an evolutionist.” As examples, Darwin referred to Charles Kingsley and Asa Gray.²⁸ Though Darwin described himself as an agnostic, he was unwilling to insist that evolution logically entailed unbelief. I want to second the implications of Darwin’s assertion. The religious meaning of evolutionary theory has been purely contingent. The link between evolution and Christianity, or between evolution and unbelief, had to be forged by Darwin’s contemporaries, and then re-forged by subsequent generations. Groups with varying agendas forged those links differently in the American and British contexts. In the U.K., Huxley and his allies had managed to create a new form of unbelief, agnosticism, and to defend it from charges that it lacked respectability. At the same time, they instilled evolution with agnostic connotations. Although some British Christians argued that evolution could be accommodated within a revised theology, their position was a more difficult one to sustain in the face of a cadre of scientific naturalists who claimed a monopoly on the proper interpretation of the religious implications of evolutionary theory.

But the American story is significantly different. American unbelief was just beginning to emerge as an intellectual option in the latter half of the nineteenth century. However agnosticism became a powerful and respectable intellectual position in Great Britain long before it did in America. In the U.S., theistic evolutionism was still a viable and intellectually respectable option across the spectrum of American Christianity right up until 1900. The situation changed only in the early twentieth century when militant Fundamentalism emerged and adopted the British evolutionary naturalists’ position that there was an inevitable link between evolution and unbelief. In the changing social and political context of this period, tacit agreement with evolutionary naturalism on this point served their agenda. From that point on, evolution became contentious in the United States. But if we recall the influential status of the Christian evolutionism of Cook, Savage, Beecher, and Abbott in late nineteenth century America, the anti-evolutionism movement of the 1920’s and thereafter cannot be regarded as possessing a monopoly on possible Christian responses to evolution.²⁹ When we look back, then, at the response of Christians to evolution in the late nineteenth century, we cannot distort the historical record by attempting to read the Fundamentalist movement back into the American story. For at least forty years after the publication of the *Origin of Species* American Christians did not automatically associate evolution with unbelief.

²⁸ Darwin Correspondence Project website, Letter 12041.

<http://www.darwinproject.ac.uk/darwinletters/calendar/entry-12041.html>

Darwin goes on to say that his own views are of “no consequence to anyone except myself.” His judgment “often fluctuates,” but generally, as he grows older, “an agnostic would the most correct description of my state of mind.”

²⁹ Livingstone, *Darwin’s Forgotten Defenders*, 169.