

Did Darwin Die as a Christian?

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Many Christians believe that Charles Darwin repented and converted to be a Christian just before he died. This story came to my attention through a gospel tract written by Dr. Oswald J. Smith. In fact, I met Dr. Oswald J. Smith and I shook his hands about twenty six years ago. Dr. O. J. Smith quoted extensively from an account supposedly given by a "Lady Hope." Shortly afterwards, I published an article in a University of Toronto magazine based on the information of Dr. O. J. Smith's tract. At that time, I was a theistic evolutionist. I was converted to a young earth creationist in 1978 after several years of looking into the subject. Then I felt cheated by university professors concerning the theory of evolution.

About six years ago, I came across a book entitled "Did Charles Darwin Become A Christian?" written by Dr. Wilbert H. Rusch, Sr. and Dr. John W. Klotz. I felt I was betrayed by the story published by Dr. O. J. Smith concerning Darwin.

I published my own 350-page book entitled "Did God Use Evolution to 'Create'?" in 1993. The following is adapted from my book.

"Did Darwin become a Christian at his deathbed?" The answer to this question is most likely negative. Darwin died on April 19, 1882, but the story of Darwin's conversion was not published until many years later. Darwin's daughter Henrietta was at his deathbed. She said that her father did not become a Christian before he died. This was reported in the Humanist magazine. Darwin's son Francis wrote a book about his father in which no mention was made that his father was ever converted. Quite the contrary, he confirmed that he was an agnostic, an unbeliever until his dying day.

According to the story, Lady Hope said her visit was "during that glorious autumn afternoon..." Thus this visit would have occurred in autumn. If Darwin had confessed to be a Christian during that previous autumn, the London Times would have had a headline story on his conversion. After all, Darwin was a famous man and he was buried in Westminster Abbey where Isaac Newton also rested in peace. Darwin's own writings indicate that just three weeks before his death, he was still a confirmed unbeliever.

Young Darwin thought that the miracles in the four Gospels were not credible to any "sane man" and that physical laws could explain everything. In order to be admitted to Cambridge, young Darwin had to believe in the 39 articles of faith in the Anglican Church. However, 50 years later, he wrote, "It never struck me how illogical it was to say that I believed in what I could not understand and what is in fact unintelligible." That same year, in December 1831, he was offered the position of a naturalist on board the H. M. S. Beagle. He spent five years on the Beagle, which ultimately changed his life. Some historians say that he changed from a Bible believer to an agnostic, while others think that he never understood the Bible and never was a Christian. At

age 70, he wrote about the "damnable doctrine" that would condemn all unbelievers to everlasting punishment. He also said that "this would include my father, brother and all my best friends." Darwin rejected the supernatural origin of the Bible in favor of a slow and gradual process proposed by Charles Lyell. In 1844, he confessed to his friend Joseph Hooker, "At last gleams of light have come, and I am almost convinced (quite contrary to the opinion I started with) that species are not (it is like confessing a murder) immutable." What kind of murder was this? Some historians believe that Darwin confessed a murder of God, because his theories totally explained away God. Darwin said, "Disbelief crept over me at a very slow rate, but was at last complete. The rate was so slow that I felt no distress, and have never since doubted even for a single second that my conclusion was correct." These are some of his last words. Atheist Edward Aveling, Karl Marx's son-in-law, claimed that Darwin's religious views were essentially atheistic. However, Darwin's last writings showed that he was an agnostic.

Dr. Wilbert H. Rusch concluded that the story of Darwin's conversion has several internal inconsistencies. Apart from the above problems, Lady Hope's account reads, "I was a young man with unformed ideas, I threw out queries, suggestions, wondering all the time over everything; and to my astonishment the ideas took like wild fire. People made a religion out of them." Although young Darwin wrote extensively on natural selection, his ideas were not published until he was 49 years old. At that age, he could not be "a young man with unformed ideas." Furthermore, the story said that "he was almost bed-ridden for some months before he died." Dr. Rusch noted that his correspondence remained rather voluminous through most of these last six months and continued until March 28, 1882, just three weeks before he died. Darwin was still a non-Christian.

Dr. Bolton Davidheiser has researched this subject at some length. Darwin's wife Emma was very religious, though a Unitarian, and if Charles had professed faith she would have been pleased to admit it openly. She removed from his autobiography parts which were particularly anti-Christian. When his daughter Henrietta wrote about the matter she said there was no "Lady Hope" that visited her father. Dr. Davidheiser also corresponded with Darwin's granddaughter Nora Darwin Barlow, who restored the missing parts to his autobiography. She called the story "a myth."

Based on the above analysis, only uninformed and gullible Christians can believe that Darwin became a Christian at his deathbed.

Christians do not need to propagate a dubious hoax to persuade people. I regret that I made use of the same story to evangelize other people twenty years ago, and I repent for my ignorance. That is why I retracted my statements on Darwin's conversion in front of my students at the seminary. Please look into this subject in any university graduate research library and make up your mind about it.

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