

# EDITORIAL

## NAME DROPPING

*Charles Darwin (1809-1882) is usually recognized as the one who provided the world with the theory of evolution. Students often learn about his famous world voyage as naturalist on the HMS Beagle. While visiting remote parts of the world he became convinced that species became modified over time. This variation served as a basis for his principle of survival of the fittest by natural selection. This concept was further interpreted by Darwin as an evolutionary mechanism that would provide for advanced forms of life without the need of a Creator God.*

*While other scientists had also contributed to the concept, Darwin soon gained notoriety and recognition for this major contribution to a “scientific” world view. His evolutionary mechanism is still widely accepted, although in recent years it has evoked significant criticism even from within the scientific community. Darwin has been, and still is, famous for being a thought leader who made a major contribution to the secularization movement during the past two centuries, especially in the Western world. Darwin’s notoriety has attracted a number of unwarranted and unwelcome “friends” who traded on his fame.*

*One of the more persistent themes, too often echoed by conservative religionists, is the story of Darwin’s deathbed confession. For more than a century allegations have been made that Darwin turned towards Christianity when he faced the end of his life. Over one hundred such accounts have been published. One clergyman reported this only a few days after Darwin’s death.*

*Probably the most important source of many such accounts is the famous “Lady Hope Story.” Lady Hope worked diligently for the cause of temperance, sometimes ministering to the drunkards and the destitute not too far from Darwin’s estate at Down in England. Darwin also had some interest in the cause of temperance. Lady Hope reports in detail a visit with Darwin in his home about six months before his death. According to her account, he was ill, but in good spirits, and had a Bible in hand. He spoke to her about the grandeur of the book of Hebrews and of salvation in Jesus Christ, but was pained when asked about creation. He expressed*

*surprise that some of his earlier queries and suggestions had spread like wildfire, and that people had made a religion of them.*

*The authenticity of this account has been much debated. The Darwin family has thoroughly denied it, although with inconsistencies. Some of the physical details given by Lady Hope leave little doubt that she had actually been in his home. A later version of this incident, also written by Lady Hope, differs in some details and suggests that there was more than one visit. The purported incident took place quite a long time before Darwin's death, hence is not a deathbed confession. There is no record of Darwin renouncing his views thereafter, and Darwin does not appear to have changed his mind on that point. His family has refuted any suggestion of a last-minute "conversion." Although we cannot be absolutely certain, the argument should not be used until good evidence can be brought forth. Unfortunately, the story has been used by many as evidence of the strength of the Christian gospel message. It is impressive to have the hero of evolution finally see the light of the gospel.*

*Secularists have also latched onto Darwin's fame in support of their world view. They usually deny the Lady Hope story and readily point to Darwin as one of their champions who helped emancipate humanity from religious superstition. Darwin's home at Down has become, in a sense, a shrine for rationalists and free thinkers; so much so that some tourists of a different mindset have been afraid to enter. However, Darwin's relation to the secularists has not been placid. When two atheists came to visit him at Down, he severely remonstrated with them for being so belligerent. He advocated passive agnosticism instead of aggressive atheism. A few months after this incident, Darwin died. Because of his fame he was given a religious State funeral with burial in Westminster Abbey. One secularist quipped that though the Church had Darwin's corpse, it did not have his ideas — ideas which were undermining its foundation.*

*To secularists Darwin was an ally, working for their cause. However, when Darwin's family published a "purified" version of his Life and Letters which over-emphasized his religious concerns, some freethinkers countered with a pamphlet that accused Darwin of hypocrisy, of lapsing from disbelief, and of yielding to the*

*pressure of the priests and their fire (pyre)! An unexpurgated version of his Life and Letters was not published until 76 years later. Nevertheless, since Darwin provided the secular community with a model for the origin of species that excluded God, Darwin's authority is readily appropriated in support of secular philosophy.*

*What were Darwin's real religious beliefs? While they are often summarized by the word "agnosticism", this is a gross oversimplification of the conflicts and changes that occurred over his lifetime.*

*While religious beliefs are difficult to discern with much accuracy, some facts shed light on this elusive question. Darwin had theological training at Cambridge University as he was preparing to become a country parson; however, his interest in natural history soon dominated. His wife was a devout Christian who worried about his eternal salvation. Darwin's children were christened at the Down church, and he gave generously to some of its activities, although he was not faithful in attendance. The question of religion in the Darwin home was a matter of tension which was not much discussed: Darwin and his sons tending more towards secularism, while his wife and daughters favored religion.*

*In his later years, Darwin thoroughly repudiated revelation and Christianity, but he remained open on the question of life after death. He shied away from controversy, the irreligious, and atheism, but he boasted of having "no remorse of having committed any great sin." While Darwin was somewhat despondent during his final year, one of his last utterances was "I am not the least afraid to die." It is also of interest that in the closing paragraph of the last five of the six editions of his famous book *On the Origin of Species*, Darwin casually refers to the Creator originating life. This still leaves intact his evolutionary concept for the origin of most life forms. The mixed picture one derives from these details indicates that Darwin is not one who should be claimed as the hero of either the secularists or the religionists. Actually, the popularity of evolution is probably due more to the work of secularists than to Charles Darwin.*

*We like to associate our views with the famous. This can lend credence both to our views and to ourselves. "Name dropping" is especially successful if the name being called is very famous. But is this being forthright, especially when the views of those with*

*whom we associate do not agree with the conclusions being emphasized? Accuracy is ill-served by such practices. Both the secularists and the religionists appear to have been misusing Darwin.*

*We can also learn other lessons from the incidents reported above: e.g., using care in formulating conclusions, and not being too gullible. The cause of truth would also be generously served if we would drop the practice of name dropping.*

*Ariel A. Roth*

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