condemned for his heterodoxy. His father, Robert Darwin, showed little sympathy for religious creeds; and his brother Erasmus was an atheist. The idea that these men would be condemned to eternal perdition because of their dissent was, for Charles, a ‘damnable doctrine’. The circle of friends in London, to whom he was introduced by his brother, and which included Harriet Martineau, was one in which high moral principles were evinced independently of religious allegiance. It has been plausibly argued that this made a deep impression on Charles, correcting the common assumption (made explicit by John Locke) that atheism was not to be tolerated because it would prove subversive of a stable society.

There were philosophical as well as ethical considerations. Darwin was well aware that to posit a first cause for the universe could leave the door open for awkward questions concerning the cause of that cause. When, in his Autobiography, he gave the fullest account of his reasons for renouncing Christianity, he also mentioned the fact that false religions, notoriously, often spread quickly – a consideration that David Hume had underlined in his philosophical works. It is also clear that he did not find the miracle stories in the Bible sufficiently compelling to authenticate the Scriptures as a divine revelation. This antipathy to revelation he expressed many times, often declaring the ignorance of the biblical writers.

For some scholars, notably James Moore, the death of Darwin’s daughter Annie early in 1851, when she was only ten years old, was the event that marked the death throes of any vestigial Christianity. It was a cruel loss that left a permanent scar. When his father had died in 1849, there was the question of his eternal destiny. Annie’s death precipitated other questions: why would a beneficent God permit so innocent a child to suffer? One cannot read the letters that passed between Charles and Emma at this desolate time without shedding tears with them. What pattern could possibly be discerned in such a devastating human tragedy?

This leads to me another respect in which the only pattern Darwin could discern was the absence of pattern or meaning. It concerns what is sometimes called the offence of the particular and it is enshrined in one of Darwin’s letters to Asa Gray:

An innocent and good man stands under a tree and is killed by a flash of lightning. Do you believe (and I really should like to hear) that God designedly killed this man? Many or most persons do believe this; I can’t and don’t. If you believe so, do you believe that when a swallow snaps up a gnat that God designed that that particular swallow should snap up that particular gnat at that particular instant? I believe that the man and the gnat are in the same predicament. If the death of neither man nor gnat are designed, I see no reason to believe that their first birth or production should be necessarily designed.

We might note that the concept of design that Darwin is rejecting here is rather different from the design celebrated by Paley. In theological terms it is derived from a doctrine of providence that presupposes a God interested in the minutiae of each human life and to whom the fall of every sparrow is known. To reject that was to reject more than the traditional inferences to design based on anatomical contrivances or the felicitous laws of nature.
After the publication of the *Origin*, the deism that Darwin owned in the late 1850s was gradually affirmed with less conviction. I think several reasons can be given for this. In the first place, Darwin certainly smarted from clerical attacks, calling himself a "martyr" after his old Cambridge friend Adam Sedgwick reproached him for having dismissed final causes from nature, and with them a sacrosanct link between the physical and the moral. Another reason is perhaps less obvious. Looking at the alterations he made between the first and second editions of the *Origin*, it is clear that he hoped to persuade his readers that there was "no good reason why the views given in this volume should shock the religious feelings of anyone". In the second edition (1860) he had even been able to include the supportive response of the Christian socialist Charles Kingsley to the effect that Darwin’s conception of a deity working through the laws of nature was arguably nobler than one that required so many miraculous acts in the origination of new species.

But the problem was this. The very success Darwin enjoyed in persuading some religious commentators that their god had been too small, only encouraged them to treat him to doctrinal effusions with which he had already lost sympathy. It was almost as if in the very quest for conciliation he had created too great a space for theological superstructures of dubious merit. An illustrative example occurs in a long letter Darwin received from William Henry Harvey in August 1860. Harvey did not see in the *Origin* the denial of a ‘Superintending Providence’; but he immediately went on to lecture Darwin on how to give the intelligence and the vigilance of the deity more prominence.¹⁴

**No Purpose Seen In Nature**

Through Darwin’s correspondence with Asa Gray in the early 1860s he was helped to see more clearly what he could not believe about providential design in nature. And through living with his wife Emma, he was helped, continually and poignantly, to see what he could no longer believe on the basis of privileged biblical texts. To add to his mistrust of religious authority, he suffered at the hands of the Roman Catholic evolutionist St. George Mivart, whose critique of natural selection Darwin considered distasteful and unfair. This was because in the *Origin* Darwin had considered the pros and the cons of his theory, whereas Mivart in *The Genesis of Species* (1871) had dwelled only on the cons. A complete account of Darwin’s disenchantment would also have to consider another shift – away from the belief that the existence of order in nature is sufficient to establish the existence of transcendent purpose. He had sometimes written in ways that suggested an overarching purpose in the production of the higher animals. In the closing paragraph of the *Origin* they were described as the “most exalted object which we are capable of conceiving”.¹⁵ But in a letter written to William Graham in July 1881 – the year before Darwin’s death – he took explicit exception to Graham’s claim that the existence of natural laws implies purpose: “I cannot see this. Not to mention that many expect that the several great laws will some day be found to follow inevitably from some one single law… Would there be purpose if the lowest organisms alone, destitute of consciousness existed in the moon?”¹⁶

Having rehearsed some at least of Darwin’s adventures during his difficult religious journey, two features of his thinking about religion leave a vivid
impression. They may still have a contemporary significance, especially as an example of how to conduct oneself in religious controversy. One cannot but admire his intellectual integrity and humility. On the deepest metaphysical questions, such as those concerning determinism and free will, or the ultimate origin of the universe, he had an aversion to dogmatism. And secondly, in keeping with that agnostic spirit, he displayed a gentle tolerance of opinions other than his own. It would be ‘absurd’, he told John Fordyce in 1879, to doubt that one could be an ardent theist and an evolutionist.” In so far as he had a creed at the end of his life, it was that each man should hope and believe what he can.

During the hundred and fifty years since Darwin published his *Origin of Species* so much has been added to our scientific understanding of the world and its evolution that one might reasonably ask why Darwin’s religious journey should matter to us. I believe it does for several reasons. One is that in many parts of the world popular religious opposition to evolution remains grounded in many of the concerns with which Darwin was familiar. Not only that; but, where opposition exists, it has come to be characterised by a mutually reinforcing extremism – exemplified by the aberration of young-earth creationism on the one hand and a militant, insensitive atheism on the other. Darwin’s moderation stands in judgment over the aggression and intransigence that are so often displayed today. But more than that, the story of his religious journey and its complexity warns us against taking too simple a view of the relations between scientific advance and processes of secularisation. There were indeed elements in Darwin’s science that contributed to his eventual agnosticism, but the primary reasons for his rejection of Christianity did not originate in his science. It was to the problem of suffering that he returned in his *Autobiography*. He noted that “some have attempted to explain this in reference to man by imagining that it serves for his moral improvement”. But, as so often, Darwin had an arresting rejoinder: “the number of men in the world is as nothing compared with that of all other sentient beings, and these often suffer greatly without any moral improvement”.

References
3 Charles Darwin to Asa Gray, 22 May 1860, in Frederick Burkhardt (ed.), *Correspondence*, vol. 8 (1993), 224.
11 Charles Darwin to Asa Gray, 3 July 1860, Burkhardt, *Correspondence*, vol. 8 , 273-5.
12 Charles Darwin to Richard Owen, 13 Dec 1859, in *Correspondence*, vol. 7, 430.
16 Charles Darwin to W. Graham, 3 July 1881, in Francis Darwin (ed.), *Life and Letters*, vol. 1, 315.
17 Charles Darwin to John Fordyce, 7 May 1879. This sentence was not included in the excerpt that Francis Darwin provided in the *Life and Letters*, vol.1, 304, but the full text can be found in letter 12041, in the ‘Darwin and Religion’ section of the website of the Cambridge Darwin Correspondence Project: [www.darwinproject.ac.uk](http://www.darwinproject.ac.uk)

**Bibliography**

Access to a comprehensive bibliography on the subject of Darwin and religion can be gained from my earlier essays in:


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**VIEWPOINT**

Not Just The Slave Trade

In the opening sentence of her article on Moncure Conway (October ER), Ellen Ramsay cites his opposition to "the slave trade", but that phrase is too narrow. It was, of course, not just the trade itself that Conway opposed, but slavery altogether. The words ‘slave trade’ are linked in this country with the name of William Wilberforce, whom Christians honour as an abolitionist because he was the only leading British Christian to go even as far as that, particularly with regard to the British ships carrying Africans across the Atlantic. However, it was only in old age that Wilberforce began to champion the total abolition of slavery, in line with many freethinkers before him.

Barbara Smoker - Bromley, Kent

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