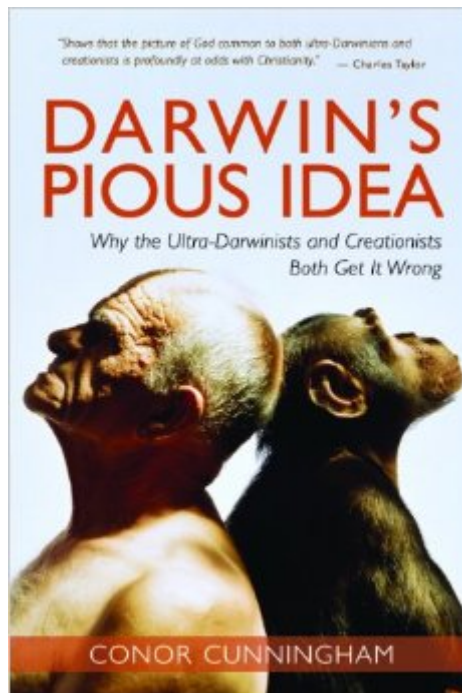


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Darwin's Pious Idea: Why The Ultra-Darwinists And Creationists Both Get It Wrong



Synopsis

According to British scholar Conor Cunningham, the debate today between religion and evolution has been hijacked by extremists: on one side stand fundamentalist believers who reject evolution outright; on the opposing side are fundamentalist atheists who claim that Darwin's theory rules out the possibility of God. Both sides are dead wrong, argues Cunningham, who is at once a Christian and a firm believer in the theory of evolution. In *Darwin's Pious Idea* Cunningham puts forth a trenchant, compelling case for both creation and evolution, drawing skillfully on an array of philosophical, theological, historical, and scientific sources to buttress his arguments.

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Customer Reviews

*Note: This review was originally published in *Cultural Encounters: A Journal For the Theology of Culture* Vol.8 No.1 2012: 144-148. I have been given permission to reproduce it here. For full disclosure, I also received a free review copy of the book. *Contemporary theology has many "afters" for which it must account: theology "after Auschwitz," or "after Wittgenstein," or "after the Death-of-God." Yet none of these "Afters" ever are so unhappy as that theology which must speak of "God after Darwin," (to steal John Haught's recent book title). Despite the very widespread and public antagonism between evolution and Christianity, "on these pages," writes Conor Cunningham, "we present Darwin's theory in such a way that "far from opposing religion generally and Christianity specifically" it is of great service to Christian religion" (xvi). To misappropriate another book title (this one from Wentzel van Huyssteen), Cunningham is insistent there is a much better story to be told of Christianity and

evolutionary theory, one where they are in a "duet" rather than a "duel." Evolution does not disenchant the world, but can show its intrinsic meaning: This is Darwin's pious idea. And Cunningham tells the tale with clarity and a sense of humor, showing himself to be a master of interdisciplinary sources unequalled by any similar offering currently available. On the back cover amongst the encomium of blurbs, the atheist philosopher Slavoj Žižek stands out by noting Cunningham's work is like "simple bread in our confused times." As Cunningham attributes the genesis of what came to be his recent opus magnum to a friendly debate over a few frosty mugs of Guinness, perhaps the book could equally be said to invite conversation like a fine brew.

David Bentley Hart and Conor Cunningham did not need to enter this debate. They did not need to write responses to the incoherent worldview of Dawkins. Any high school student having learned the difference between potency and act can dismantle the "arguments" of Dawkins' *The God Delusion*. In fact, if pages 100-103 of Dawkins' book are any indication of his philosophical prowess, then the high schooler knowing such a basic philosophical distinction will already prove to be Dawkins' philosophical superior. Still, we should be thankful that they did enter the debate, because amidst their rebuttals they provided us with two excellent works. In response to the sophistry and revisionist history contained in the works of the Four Horsemen (as Dawkins has called them), the erudite David Bentley Hart entered the discussion in 2009 with *Atheist Delusions: The Christian Revolution and Its Fashionable Enemies*. In the work, he echoed Nietzsche in showing how Christian metaphysics underpin some of our most cherished Western ideals, historically were the source of them and how we reject them to the detriment to our society. Institutions as diverse as the university, the hospital and even science, were motivated and supported by theological assumptions. Western values such as "personal dignity," and "human rights" are likewise grounded in the Christian metaphysic. Hart made the point that these ideals cannot be sustained when their undergirding assumptions are pulled out from underneath.

Extremely informative, an easy read in a lot of ways, on a highly controversial & highly technical subject area. Unlike other reviewers, I especially appreciated the "embedded quotation" style of the book, because it brings masses of technical information into the conversation in a naturally conversational and meaningful way. I learned a lot very quickly, about Darwin, Darwinism, and current views/trends/warfare in "evolution" science and as a critical subject to our world. Discovering the scientific appeal to "commonsense" that's actually happening in some high-powered circles of the scientific community and academia, was totally unexpected and refreshing. Cunningham's often

combative style, both engaging and enjoyable, did take some digesting; and by the penultimate chapter, on Naturalism, I was beginning to feel like I'd been in a bar fight. A less exhaustive treatment in earlier chapters, or a more inclusive overview earlier in the book, and additively throughout the work, would have been helpful in hanging in there through later rounds. The closing chapter, in which the author enters the domain of his "orthodox" christian beliefs, though, was a massive disappointment. There was so little effort expended to correlate orthodox christian teaching with the insights and conclusions about evolution that were, for me, established throughout the rest of the book. Many of the statements tendered in that final chapter, then, come across as just as unsubstantiated and wish-fulfilling a "Just So Story" as anything concocted by the Ultra-Darwinism, atheism, or fundamentalist Christianity that Cunningham takes so thoroughly, (and successfully, in my view) to task in the rest of the work.

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