

## **A Review and Synopsis of Paradise Lost: The Religious Life of Charles Darwin**

David Wollert's film, *Paradise Lost: The Religious Life of Charles Darwin*, has an obvious bias. It seeks to present Charles Darwin, not as an enemy of Christian faith, nor as a secular saint of science, but as a nineteenth century scientist whose research, whose personal losses, and whose religious reflections turned him into a “reluctant revolutionary” ... “an honest and vulnerable human being in a state of perpetual soul searching.” Wollert maintains that the knotty problem of integrating scientific knowledge with faith is nowhere better illustrated than in the life of Charles Darwin. Wollert paints a sympathetic picture of a man whose own evolution led him from Christianity into deism, and then into agnosticism—but never atheism. Darwin, says Wollert, was at the end of his life a man plagued with religious doubt, but who supported Christian missions and remained a responsible churchman.

The film is beautiful. We go through the seasons of Darwin's life. It is Spring. Piano music plays while we see fields of flowers; and we see portraits of a clean-shaven Darwin, the young man who embraces special creation based on William Paley's argument from design; who comes under the influence of godly teachers such as John Henslow; who embarks on the HMS Beagle voyage full of faith in God and the Bible. Indeed, part of the Beagle's assignment was to lend support to the evangelization of Tierra del Fuego.

It is Summer. We see a portrait of Darwin in middle-age, and we hear the piano underscoring striking film footage of lush vegetation, mammalian, amphibian, aquatic, and avian life. After five years aboard the Beagle, having analyzed displays of creation around the world, but also having witnessed human depravity, namely slavery and savagery, Charles Darwin still marvels at “endless forms, most beautiful and wonderful . . . breathed by the creator . . . which have been and are being evolved . . .” But he is now a deist. He has encountered the gloomy writings of Thomas Malthus and has developed a theory of natural selection. He has outgrown a biblical hermeneutic based, in part, on Aristotelian presumptions. Darwin has also contemplated the predictable, unhappy consequences of publishing a theory that rejects a literal understanding of Genesis; so, considerate of family and religious friends, he has decided to publish only posthumously. Twenty years transpired. Only when other researchers were about to publish similar theories did Darwin's *Origin of Species* come off the press.

It is Fall. We see close-ups of desiccated mushrooms, autumn foliage, and grains of wheat with heavy heads. Darwin, too, is gray-bearded. He has become a celebrity with far-flung champions for his theories. In the United States theistic evolutionist Asa Gray at Harvard University promotes natural selection, while in Germany atheist Ernst Haeckel does the same, but draws contrasting conclusions. Herbert Spencer coins the phrase “survival of the fittest.” Capitalists like Andrew Carnegie, and Karl Marx himself, find something for themselves in Darwin's theory. And Darwin has moved from deism to agnosticism. His own physical misery (migraines, boils, stomach disorders, which were

perhaps the result of years of exposure in the tropics) and the death of his darling ten-year-old daughter Annie convince Darwin that Paley's watchmaker God cannot account for "too much misery in the world." How do parasites square with a beneficent, omnipotent God? Darwin describes himself as an agnostic.

Wintry scenes bring us toward the end. Darwin's beard has grown massive and white. Theological and philosophical reflections have forced him to regard a Christian concept of eternal punishment as "damnable doctrine." But Wollert maintains Darwin never gave up on God. "God's existence," we hear an actor voicing Darwin, "is beyond the comprehension and resolve of the human intellect. I have never been an atheist . . . an agnostic would be the more correct description of my state of mind." Emma Darwin, devoutly religious, is concerned for her husband's spiritual welfare, but her pleas for him to reconsider his position bear no fruit. Wollert investigates, and dismisses, popular stories of a deathbed conversion. Darwin died without faith in Jesus. The problem of suffering had proven insurmountable. He could find no spiritually satisfying answer.

Wollert's film concludes with a brief analysis of where leading evolutionary scientists today stand regarding faith in God. He considers the positions of atheist Richard Dawkins, Oxford University; deist Edward Wilson, Harvard; Roman Catholic Kenneth Miller, Brown University; and the late Stephen J. Gould, Harvard, who claimed agnosticism. Wollert concludes that faith does not mean believing the impossible. Rather, it is something else. "Responding to a belief in a divine creator is something that human beings have struggled with for centuries, and no one struggled harder than Charles Darwin."

*Paradise Lost: The Religious Life of Charles Darwin* is a serious piece of work. Its best audiences will be in college classrooms and lecture halls, and in serious, adult Bible study settings. People who are struggling with issues of faith and a scientific worldview will find this sympathetic treatment of Darwin instructive. I will see to it that our college library adds this documentary to its permanent collection, and will recommend to our Communications Area that students of film become acquainted with this example of rhetoric and artisanship.

**Dr. Theodore N. Thomas**  
Milligan College