

## Darwin's Pious Idea

Why the Ultra-Darwinists and Creationists Both Get it Wrong

Conor Cunningham

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### REVIEWS

#### Michel Morange

—Professor of Biochemistry, École Normale Supérieure, Paris, author of *A History of Molecular Biology*

"This is an excellent book! Very well informed and written in an accessible style, it will be easily understood by lay readers, especially thanks to the beautiful, simple examples, stories, and quotations that Cunningham employs. In addition, his interpretation of genetic science is faultless. I learned a great deal from this book!"

#### Louis Dupré

— Yale University

"This work of stunning scientific erudition and critical insight differs from the common polemics with Dawkins's and Dennett's theories which, while accepting their extreme Neo-Darwinist thesis, isolates it from their atheist conclusions. Conor Cunningham shows on a wealth of scientific evidence how vulnerable the thesis is that lies at the root of those conclusions and how its genetic one-sidedness undermines the ground of Darwin's evolutionary biology."

#### David Bentley Hart

— author of *The Beauty of the Infinite* and *Atheist Delusions*

"Cunningham has taken the time to immerse himself in the literature of contemporary evolutionary biology (of which he provides a far better and far more probing general treatment than does, say, Richard Dawkins), and as he is deeply grounded in the whole tradition of philosophical theology, he produces an argument that casts a brilliant light on the innumerable and inevitable intersections between evolutionary theory and metaphysical speculation. This book is a signal achievement, a wonderful antidote to the tiresome caricatures and diatribes constantly generated these days by the preening apostles of doctrinaire materialism."

#### Stanley Hauerwas

— Duke University

"Writing with engaging humor that betrays an extraordinary energetic intelligence, Conor Cunningham shows us why, given the Christian God, an evolutionary account of life is necessary. In the process he negotiates the philosophical controversies intrinsic to evolutionary science in a manner that illumines how some of the implications of that science mimic Christian heresies. This theological account of creation, I believe, will become a classic."

#### Ian Tattersall

— Professor of Evolutionary Anthropology, Curator, American Museum of Natural History, New York

"The last couple of decades have witnessed a dismal and hopelessly polarized confrontation between literalist Christians and equally fundamentalist ultra-Darwinians. Darwin would have been appalled. Here at last is a judicious and fascinating book that elegantly shows the artificiality of this mutually debilitating conflict"

#### Slavoj Žižek

"Even those sympathetic to the recent wave of evolutionary attacks on religion cannot help feeling that something is missing there: Dawkins and company lack a minimum of understanding of what religion is about, of how it works. Cunningham's book is thus obligatory reading for all interested in this topic: while fully endorsing the scientific validity of Darwinism, it clearly brings to light its limitations in understanding not only religion but also our human predicament. A book like Cunningham's is needed like simple bread in our confused times."

**Archbishop Joseph Życiński**

— Catholic University of Lublin, Poland

"A brilliant and enlightening book! Through profound philosophical insight, coupled with an interdisciplinary approach, this book is singularly important for the dialogue between science, religion, and culture."

**Justin L. Barrett**

— University of Oxford

"Cunningham's *Darwin's Pious Idea* is a fascinating book that reveals the behind-the-scenes issues and controversies that nonspecialists rarely see or consider. Those who think scientists have nothing to learn from theologians should give this theologian a fair listen: they might learn something — maybe even something about science."

**John Hedley Brooke**

— Oxford University

"Conor Cunningham pulls no punches in his full-frontal assault on the ultra-Darwinism of Richard Dawkins and Daniel Dennett. But this is no anti-evolution diatribe. Cunningham is equally merciless in his critique of latter-day 'creationism,' which he rightly portrays as a deviation from classical Christian orthodoxy. This is a work of intellectual depth, informed by a study of the latest genetics as well as by theological erudition. Also drawing on the work of historians who have demythologized the popular stereotypes of 'science' and 'religion,' Cunningham's book will delight the discerning who observe with dismay the puerility of much that passes for authoritative judgment."

**William Desmond**

— University of Leuven

"Conor Cunningham's book is a vigorously written and marvelously engaging work. It is highly informed and hugely informative with regard to both scientific theory and theological reflection. It is constantly judicious in the way it lifts current debate to a genuine level of seriousness, beyond the sometimes thoughtless, even shrill rhetoric associated with recent debates on God and evolution. Cunningham engages those with whom he disagrees with properly respectful consideration, not lacking in frequent touches of deft humor. This is a most welcome contribution to these current controversies. First-rate and very highly recommended."

**David Fergusson**

— New College, University of Edinburgh

"In a study that is both readable and scholarly, Conor Cunningham offers a sustained philosophical and theological engagement with Darwinian science. Eschewing tired images of a simple conflict between progressive science and benighted faith, he shows how the resources of the Christian tradition enable a constructive conversation with evolutionary theory. A rich and bold treatment of the subject, this book should command the attention of all working in the field."

**John F. Haught**

— Georgetown University, author of *Making Sense of Evolution: Darwin, God, and the Drama of Life*

"Ever since Darwin, materialist interpreters of nature have wielded evolutionary biology as a weapon in their war against religious faith and theology. In this timely and insightful study, Conor Cunningham exposes the incoherence of evolutionist materialism. He does the job thoroughly, devastatingly, and humorously. At the same time he shows how a theological vision of nature can make very good sense of Darwin's fascinating portrayal of life. Highly recommended."

**E. J. Lowe**

— Durham University

"This wide-ranging and well-informed book constitutes an extremely important contribution to current debate over the significance of evolutionary theory both for our self-conception as human beings and for our conception of the universe in which we find a place. Conor Cunningham makes at once a reasoned case and a passionate plea for a *via media* between the extremes of fundamentalist religion and dogmatic scientism. His book should be read by scientists, philosophers, and theologians alike — indeed, by anyone with a concern for the intellectual health of contemporary public discourse about the questions that most deeply affect our present and future as a species."

**Michael S. Northcott**

— New College, University of Edinburgh

"If we do not want to join the atheist capitalism in the 'wanton destruction of all that is' we need to rediscover Christ as the 'cosmological liturgy of all life.' With this arresting and stunning thesis Dr. Conor Cunningham, presenter of the BBC documentary *Did Darwin Kill God?* answers the question with a firm and richly documented negative. Darwin loved life. He feared his love had killed God. Cunningham shows it was not God that Darwin killed but only the god of the Deists. Drawing on science, theology, and contemporary culture he gives us in this monumental work an impassioned plea for the theological truth of Darwinian evolution: there is NO life, from the simplest amoeba to the human brain, that is not enriched and inspired by the breath of God. Cunningham argues that only those who receive life as a divine gift — analogous to the gift of Christ's life in the Eucharist — can perceive beauty and goodness in the unfolding of all creatures from their first moments until the eschaton. And only those who receive life as a gift can guard life from the wanton destruction of life occasioned by capitalism."

**Dan Robinson**

— Oxford University

"It is not easy to enter a world of rants and systematically transform it into a worthy conversation. Conor Cunningham earns this distinction through his fair and scrupulous attention to the soundest arguments on all sides of this issue. He clearly acknowledges his own position and defends it with restrained passion. Nonetheless, his respect for opposing views is generous and exemplary."

**Holmes Rolston III**

— Colorado State University

"In this magnum opus Cunningham steadily pushes ultra-Darwinism and reductionist materialism for their self-undermining inconsistencies, in extremes neither permitting enough logic for understanding life. Exposing these sciences turned into scientism, he then embraces, complementary to the sciences, a deeply Christian account of creation, of both nature and human life enriched in encounter with Christ. A provocative, moving, and stimulating account."

**Robert Sokolowki**

— Catholic University of America

"Conor Cunningham does not simply clarify both sides in the debate between Darwinism and religion (though he certainly does that); he also shows that evolution does not disenchant the world and the human being. To the contrary, it reveals their intrinsic worth. In extremely clear and colorful prose Cunningham presents the science behind the debate, the history of the controversy, and the meaning of terms used in it. Cunningham shows that the biblical teaching on creation is not at all the kind of discourse that conflicts with science, and he convincingly questions the coherence of many concepts used in Darwinism, especially the idea of 'the selfish gene' and the prioritization of selfishness tout court. His writing is undoubtedly authoritative as it is based on a breathtaking range of sources, both contemporary and classical, in science, philosophy, and theology. He reminds us that evolution deals with living things that cannot on pain of contradiction be reduced to dead matter, and that life has evolved into great complexity, providing a place for the kind of living we call intellectual or spiritual. The theory of such evolution, far from making religion superfluous, should inspire our reverence toward the source, power, and wisdom expressed."

**Ken Surin**

— Duke University

"Conor Cunningham established his reputation with the original and profound *Genealogy of Nihilism*. In recent years a handful of 'sand-box' atheists, prominent in the media, have invoked Darwin and evolution when defending their positions. In this sparkling yet rigorous book Cunningham deals with the philosophical dimensions and theological implications of evolutionary theory. Anyone who longs for this debate to be taken to a proper, intellectually challenging level needs to read Cunningham."

**Charles Taylor**

— McGill University, author of *A Secular Age*

"This book attempts to connect the debate about the nature of Darwinian evolution to the Christian theology of creation. The latter is often implicitly invoked — as, for instance, when the claim is made that Darwin has shown that

God cannot exist — but rarely clearly discussed. Cunningham shows that the picture of God as the great Designer of artifacts, espoused by Paley and common to both ultra-Darwinians and Creationists, is profoundly at odds with Christianity. The battle between these last two is another of those incidents foreseen by Arnold in his 'Dover Beach,' where 'ignorant armies clash by night.' "

**Tracey Rowland**

— John Paul II Institute, Melbourne, Australia

"This is a work of extraordinary interdisciplinary breadth spanning biology, sacramentality and the theology of creation. It offers a highly sophisticated critique of "ultra-Darwinism" (for example the positions of Richard Dawkins and Daniel Dennett) as a modern manifestation of Zwinglian metaphysics. Notwithstanding the breadth of material covered it is presented in a very accessible and engaging style with illustrations drawn from popular culture, including the *lebenswelt* of Fred Flintstone. Thomas Aquinas, Gregory of Nyssa and Benedict XVI come out of it better than those who seek fame and fortune in the denial of the *Logos*."