

The evolution of South African Christian responses to Darwinism after the publication of *The descent of man*

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Abstract

The impact of Darwinian evolutionary theory has remained an underexplored topic in South African historiography, and the early reactions of South African churchmen to this new current in biological thought have been almost completely neglected. The present article extends the frontier of scholarly knowledge about specifically Christian responses during the decade immediately following the publication of Darwin's *The descent of man* in 1871. Focussing chiefly on Anglophone denominations, it examines a representative sample of Christian opinion to reveal a diversity of reactions, which in the main were sceptical or staunchly hostile but also included more reserved positions. The latter half of the article brings the issue to a climax by examining how William Porter, the erstwhile attorney-general of the Colony of the Cape of Good Hope who had returned to his native Ireland in 1873 but nevertheless served as the chancellor of the new University of the Cape of Good Hope, and DP. Faure, the founding minister of the Free Protestant Church in Cape Town, had entirely different attitudes towards Darwinism. The article concludes with suggestions for further extending research on the general topic.

Introduction

In South Africa, as in the United States of America, Canada, and many other countries, not least those in which English was a prominent language of both intellectual and ecclesiastical life, Darwinian evolutionary theory posed a major challenge to the status of the Christian religion during the latter half of the nineteenth century. Charles Darwin published his ground-breaking *On the origin of species by means of natural selection, or the preservation of favoured races in the struggle for life* in 1859; *The descent of man, and selection in relation to sex* followed in 1871.¹ Coming at a time when modern

¹ Charles Darwin, *The descent of man, and selection in relation to sex*. Two volumes. London: John Murray, 1871.

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Biblical scholarship and theological liberalism were already eroding confidence in traditional doctrines and hermeneutics, Darwinism, as it was soon called, elicited many different responses from churchmen in one denomination after another. It remained a very divisive force. Roughly a century and a half later, Christians continue to espouse differing opinions of what well before the end of the Victorian era had found very wide acceptance among natural scientists internationally. To many, Darwinism remains anathema, one of the deadliest despoilers of traditional Christianity and the authority of the Bible, a dark force to be resisted vigorously. To others, not necessarily theologically liberally bent, the general theory of evolution was soon accepted as compatible with their understanding of God's relationship to nature.

The strife has played a much greater role in history than the historiography of South African Christianity. General surveys of church history in this country reveal precious little or nothing about this topic, despite its significance and evergreen character. Vincent Brümmer's recently published study of theological discord in South Africa during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, especially in Afrikaans-speaking circles, reveals nothing about the many and varied responses to Darwin's theory that gained some prominence and notoriety in the Cape beginning in the early 1870s.² Writing from a non-Christian perspective, Saul Dubow briefly treated certain general attitudes towards Darwinism in the Cape at that time but without pursuing in noteworthy detail how churchmen had reacted. He emphasised that *The Descent of Man* had apparently made "a significantly greater impact on the Cape's reading public" than had Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*.³ A critical question for historians of South African Christianity is how people reacted to what many immediately perceived as a major challenge to their Christian faith.

In the present article, I shall take steps towards extending the frontier of scholarly knowledge about the debates over Darwinism by exploring how a variety of theologically educated and other prominent churchmen in the Colony of the Cape of Good Hope responded to Darwin's highly controversial theory during the decade immediately following the publication of *The Descent of Man*. Our exploration will begin with generally hostile responses by alarmed pastors and laymen in the early 1870s in several denominations and culminates in a more detailed discussion of that by an ardent pro-Darwinist, David Pieter Faure, in 1876, one which was published in both Cape Town and England.

² Vincent Brümmer, *Vroom of regsinning? Teologie in die NG Kerk*. Wellington: Bybel-Media, 2013.

³ Saul Dubow, *A commonwealth of knowledge. Science, sensibility and white South Africa, 1820-2000* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 97.

Publicising Darwinism in South Africa in the 1870s

With the publication of *The descent of man*, Darwinism quickly evolved into a relatively hot topic in South African intellectual and, apparently to a lesser extent, religious circles in the 1870s. This coincided with the foundation of the University of the Cape of Good Hope, the early years of *The Cape Monthly Magazine*, the expansion of the secular press in Cape Town and other municipalities, and continuing European emigration to the British colony at the southern tip of Africa. According to the census of 1875, the aggregate population of Cape Town and its suburbs had reached 45 240.⁴ Steamships had reduced the length of the passage from London to approximately three weeks.

Under these circumstances, it is not surprising that *The Cape Monthly Magazine* carried a ten-page review of *The descent of man* within a few months of its publication in London. The anonymous reviewer, who did not refer to the Biblical account of mankind's origins, adopted a calm tone in dissecting and placing the book into the context of Darwin's scholarship generally. Broadly speaking, he found *The descent of man* impressive but not without its weaknesses. Among them, the chapter dealing with the development of "moral sense, or conscience" would "inevitably prove the stumbling-block of his work". This reviewer did not doubt that Darwin's book would meet with "severe (and in many quarters, hostile) criticism", but believed that a spirited debate about evolution would benefit scientific advancement. *The Descent of Man*, at any rate, was a study by a respected scientist and, though admittedly "speculative", was certainly "not a work to be treated lightly or contemptuously, as if it were but the crude notions of a mere fanciful theorist". Rather, in this already controversial two-volume contribution to science "the foundations are securely based upon the broadest and firmest of the known facts of organic existence".⁵

Certainly by 1872 at least a small number of churchmen in the Cape Colony had begun to protest publicly against Darwin. One who gained brief notoriety in this regard was Peter Parry Fogg. Born in Wales in 1832 and educated at Jesus College, Oxford, he had been ordained a deacon in the Church of England in 1860 and a priest the following year. A cleric in its evangelical wing, he had served curacies in London until 1871, when he sailed to the Cape and became the archdeacon and rector at St. Mark's Church in George. The "silver-tongued archdeacon" was sufficiently

⁴ *Results of a Census of the Colony of the Cape of Good Hope, Taken on the Night of Sunday, the 7th March, 1875* (Cape Town: Saul Solomon and Co., Printers, 1877), Part I, p. 9.

⁵ Anonymous review of *The descent of man, and selection in relation to sex*, *The Cape Monthly Magazine*, II, no. 6, pp. 321-330.

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respected in educated circles to be nominated to the initial council of the University of the Cape of Good Hope in 1873.⁶

On a visit to Mossel Bay on 12 September 1872, Fogg delivered what he subsequently termed a “popular lecture” about racial groups in Africa, a form of address which in his opinion required “emphatic expressions”. In this case, the recently arrived Briton called Darwin’s theory about the origins of the human species “absurd”, “baseless” and “monstrous”.⁷ Fogg argued that Darwin had contradicted himself, failed to adduce adequate evidence to prove his hypothesis and, with regard to his third epithet, shocked “the convictions of the majority of cultivated men by holding up before them a hideous caricature of the sacred record of their origin”.⁸ As reported in the local press, Fogg had sought to prove in his consideration of African tribes that “even among beings so degraded as many of those races are, there is abundant evidence against the modern doctrine of development”.⁹

By no means did Fogg speak for all Christians in South Africa at that time. In one of the earliest instances of a theologically educated person defending Darwinism in South Africa, Johannes Jacobus Kotzé (who had studied at the University of Leyden in the 1850s and was a liberal *dominee* in Darling), writing to the editor of *The Cape Argus* under his pseudonym “X.Y.Z.”, pigeonholed Fogg’s assault on Darwinism in the history of ecclesiastical hostility to scientific developments. Tracking familiar ground, he cited the Catholic Church’s persecution of Galileo Galilei with the “terrors of the Inquisition” as a telling example of this. Kotzé called attention to Fogg’s intemperate language in describing Darwinism as a modern day manifestation of the same alarmist spirit. He wondered why there should be such fear of the “development theory”, which, in his opinion, was “only an amplification of a received truth”. People in general favour development, he reasoned, in that they hoped the future would be better than the present. Furthermore, this seemed to go hand-in-hand with at least one central dimension of Christianity: “What is the high calling of the minister of religion but the development of man’s moral nature, the perfection and ennoblement of his species?”¹⁰

Other churchmen in the Cape sought to ply a caution *via media* between active endorsement of Darwinian evolution and outright rejection of

⁶ M. Boucher, “Fogg, Peter Parry”, in D.W. Krüger and C.J. Beyers (eds.), *Dictionary of South African Biography*, volume III (Cape Town: Tafelberg-Uitgewers Ltd, 1977), pp. 301-302.

⁷ “Local and General”, *The Mossel Bay Advertiser*, 18 September 1872, p. 3.

⁸ P.P. Fogg (George) to Editor, *The Cape Argus*, undated, in *The Cape Argus*, 12 October 1872, p. 3.

⁹ “Local and General”, p. 3.

¹⁰ X.Y.Z. (unspecified provenance) to Editor, *The Cape Argus*, undated, in *The Cape Argus*, 28 September 1872, p. 3.

it. One of these was Thomas Elkins Fuller, a former Baptist minister in England who served as the editor of *The Cape Argus* from 1864 until 1873. Born in Middlesex, this son and grandson of Baptist pastors had studied at Bristol Baptist College and held pastorates in Melksham, Lewes and Luton. On a trip to England, Saul Solomon, the owner of the *Argus*, recruited the young Fuller to edit his newspaper. After arriving in Cape Town, Fuller became active in liberal politics and delivered public lectures about religious topics but declined calls to return to the pastoral ministry.¹¹

Speaking to a nondenominational and, quantitatively, “remarkably good” audience at the Wesleyan Chapel in Wynberg on 8 August 1872, the parson-turned-journalist acknowledged Darwin’s scholarly qualifications (which he thought surpassed those of the anonymous author of the popular though ever-controversial work of 1844, *Vestiges of the natural history of creation*, whose identity as the Scotsman Robert Chambers was not revealed until the twelfth edition was published in 1884) and urged his hearers to reserve judgment on the recently published theory of human origins. As reported in the *Argus*, Fuller “did not think this theory deserved the scorn and ridicule with which it has been very generally regarded”. After all, he observed, some “conclusions” which are initially regarded as “strange and repugnant to the feelings of the age” eventually gain general acceptance. Fuller himself thought that the “superstructure” of the Darwinian explanation of human origins “rested on very slender evidence”. At any rate, he assured his audience that even if the theory is “admitted”, it should not have “any material influence upon existing spiritual beliefs” and devoted much of his speech to amplifying that crucial point. Christians could continue to maintain their “belief in one God as the Creator and up-holder of the material fabric of the heavens and earth with all that they contain”. Moreover, it would not affect our “human instincts which constitute the root of religious moral and refined sentiment”. Finally, in Fuller’s view, Darwinism would not diminish Christians’ convictions about the “historic development of religious faith, or quash our aspirations after or destroy our hopes of eternal life”. Of course, some Christians in Cape Town and elsewhere had already disagreed with these assurances and would continue to do so, but at the meeting in Wynberg at least one other man of the cloth, David Smith, who in the early 1870s was described not as an active church minister but a “private tutor” and was involved in discussions preceding the University of the Cape of Good Hope, in which he argued for the desirability of Greek over Latin in the subjects to be examined,¹² voiced his agreement with Fuller.¹³

¹¹ F.R. Metrowich, “Fuller, Sir Thomas Elkins”, in W.J. de Kock (ed.), *Dictionary of South African Biography*, vol. 1 (Cape Town: Nasionale Boekhandel Bepker, 1968), p. 304.

¹² “The Cape University”, *The Cape Argus*, 22 July 1873, p. 3.

¹³ “Lecture in Wynberg”, *The Cape Argus*, 13 August 1872, p. 3.

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Challenging Professor John Tyndall's Darwinism

A highly publicised speech in Belfast on 19 August 1874 added another fibre to the link between South Africa and the British debate over Darwin. It was delivered by the newly elected president of the British Association for the Advancement of Science, Professor John Tyndall. This prominent physicist, who was employed for decades at the Royal Institution in London, was one of the most popular public educators of the Victorian era and delivered hundreds of lectures to non-specialist audiences. Unlike many other physicists of his time who found science and religion compatible and in some cases actively sought to bolster the basis for an understanding of their harmony, Tyndall, together with men like Thomas Huxley, supported Darwinism and argued that science and natural science should be kept separate from each other. In his internationally reported Belfast address, he reviewed the history of evolutionary theories and mentioned Darwin favourably more than twenty times. Tyndall left no doubt about what the limits of religious belief were in relation to natural science: "All religious theories, schemes and systems, which embrace notions of cosmogony, or which, otherwise reach into its domain, must, in so far as they do this, submit to the control of science, and relinquish all thought of controlling it." He noted that history had proven the danger of religion overstepping its bounds and thought it "fatuous" for it to do so in the present. Science must be given a free rein to advance for the benefit of humanity, the "lifting of the life", and when "dogmatism, fanaticism, and intolerance" were excluded, such progress would itself be a kind of evolution. His speech was printed *in toto* in the November 1874 issue of *The Cape Monthly Magazine*.¹⁴

In the meantime, Reverend James Cameron, the registrar of the new university in Cape Town who served as a part-time nondenominational minister at Sea Point, had delivered a speech titled "On Professor Tyndall's Address" on Sunday evening, 11 October 1874. It, too, was printed in *The Cape Monthly Magazine*. Cameron did not seek to counter Darwinism as such. Rather, he concentrated his remarks chiefly on what he regarded as Tyndall's unwarranted comments about the place of religion *vis-à-vis* natural science and the professor's alleged implications for the future of Christianity. Cameron thought that Tyndall had spoken rashly and in effect asked Christians "to cast away our faith in God, and the soul of man, in immortality and heaven". The minister in Sea Point disagreed with unnamed persons who thought that Tyndall's views did "not necessarily exclude the idea of a God". At any rate, he countered, the assertion that matter in itself contained "the

¹⁴ "Professor Tyndall's Address", *The Cape Monthly Magazine*, IX, no. 5 (November 1874), pp.304-319.

promise and potency of every form and quality of life” ran counter to Christian theism. To Cameron, this could be reduced to the proposition that “there is no need of a God, and no room for Him, in the system of the universe”, for the world is self-developed – it makes itself.” Continuing his loosely structured argument, he asked on what grounds Tyndall had said “in effect” that God does not exist and therefore Christians should abandon their “first and strongest religious beliefs”. To Cameron, the answer was clear: “there is none! Simply and absolutely none.” No-one had yet disproved God. Moreover, he thought that Tyndall, having devoted his life to natural science, was “less competent” to explore religious questions, and he criticised Tyndall’s demand that religion not “intrude” in matters of knowledge and the attendant notion that “religion must have nothing to do with facts; it may only regulate the feelings.” Nonsense, answered Cameron; the Bible dealt to a great extent with facts, and he cited I John 1:1-2, Luke 1:1,4, and II Peter 1:16 as evidence. Cameron thought Tyndall’s argument that religion had retarded progress and persecuted practitioners of science was “mere idle talk” and hardly appropriate in the late nineteenth century. Too optimistically, he assured his audience in Sea Point that contemporary Christianity would not “in any way interfere with the freedom of the intellect in the researches of science”. As his parting shot, Cameron suggested that the situation had been reversed in recent times and now “religion, instead of imposing restrictions on others, is obliged to protest against the imposition of constraint upon herself”.¹⁵

Porter’s commitment to natural theology and Christian ethics

Among the men in Tyndall’s audience who would comment disparagingly from Christian perspectives on his remarks were William Porter and his brother, John Scott Porter, a Presbyterian minister in the city. Although the former had left the Cape and returned to Belfast in 1873, William continued to enjoy great esteem in Cape Town. The son of a former Presbyterian minister who had become a Unitarian, he was born near Londonderry in 1805. After studying law at Gray’s Inn in London, he was called to the Irish bar in 1831. Eight years into his career, Porter was appointed attorney-general of the Cape Colony, despite never having set foot there. He gained sufficient respect in colonial political and administrative circles to be named the first chancellor of the University of the Cape of Good Hope in 1873. Porter held that largely honorary post from afar but remained in close contact with the colony whose legal interests he had served for decades. In certain

¹⁵ James Cameron, “On Professor Tyndall’s Address”, *The Cape Monthly Magazine*, IX, no. 5 (November 1874), pp. 257-266.

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respects, he had already served as an intellectual bridge between the United Kingdom and the Cape Colony for decades. Porter was also an active churchman.¹⁶

It must be emphasised that Porter was a layman and who lacked formal theological education. However, he was conversant with certain topics in Christian religious thought, and it seems likely that his views of the relationship between Christianity and natural science had been formed before he emigrated to Cape Town. At any rate, his comments in 1876 suggest that he had drunk deeply at the well of “natural theology”, which during the first half of the nineteenth century influenced many British churchmen who understood that the Enlightenment had brought challenges to orthodox Christian theology. Particularly significant in this apologetic current were the works of William Paley, a Cambridge-educated philosopher and Anglican divine who was among the first to argue for “intelligent design”, a term which would resurface with increasing frequency in the late twentieth century. Some of his works, such as *View of the evidences of Christianity* (1794) and *Natural theology: or, Evidences of the existence and attributes of the deity, collected from the appearances of nature* (1802) became part of the backbone of the Victorian theological defence against the challenges of Darwinism. Central to natural theology (as opposed to revealed theology) was the conviction that human reason could prove the existence of God.

To a considerable degree, Paley’s version of natural theology, which left room for Deism, was embodied in the *Bridgewater Treatises*, an uneven series of apologetic works by several British authors published between 1833 and 1840, that is, chiefly while Porter was practising law in Ireland. In brief, natural theology in general and the teleological argument for God based on intelligent design were part of the intellectual baggage which he transported to the Cape at the end of the 1830s and to which he remained committed after returning to Belfast more than three decades later. They formed the bedrock of his position on Christianity in the face of the Darwinian challenges to orthodoxy. At least on the surface, Porter’s presuppositions were incompatible with any view put forth by a scientist or non-scientist which postulated random, unguided natural selection as the basis of the life sciences. His underlying theological convictions went hand-in-hand with his commitment to widely accepted notions of Christian ethics incorporating the moral teachings of Jesus Christ, which stressed *inter alia* love of one’s neighbour and protection of weakly placed members of society.

¹⁶ J.L. McCracken, “Porter, William”, in W.J. de Kock (ed.), *Dictionary of South African Biography*, vol. 1 (Cape Town: Nasionale Boekhandel Beperk, 1968), pp. 623-627.

Porter *contra* Darwin and Haeckel

In July 1876 Porter's "An address to the University of the Cape of Good Hope" (which in fact was an essay, not an oration) was published in the Cape Town press. It was also issued as a short book.¹⁷ In it, the retired jurist touched on a spectrum of themes he found particularly germane to the intellectual climate of the new university. Among the general secular topics, he expressed his view that it remains an examining and not a teaching institution. Much of his discourse, however, was devoted to his highly critical Christian view of Darwinism.

The tone of Porter's essay was generally calm. However, he did not doubt that Christianity had reached an unprecedented crossroads and that the 1870s were a kairotic time in the history of the faith. In previous centuries, he noted, the church had suffered from major internal strife, not least at the time of the Protestant Reformation. But as crucial as the issues of previous eras had been, "they vanish into nothingness before the questions of to-day", Porter asserted. "Atheism –avowed, aggressive, and here and there almost intolerant – is preached as the first and legitimate outcome of Physical Science." The chancellor fixed his sights on a German biologist who had recently become internationally notorious in this regard and for several years been a lightning rod in debates about the alleged incompatibility of science and faith, Professor Ernst Haeckel of the University of Jena. His *Natürliche Schöpfungsgeschichte*, initially published in Berlin in 1868, was reaching the British public through a recently issued translation by E Ray Lankester of Exeter College, Oxford, *The history of creation*. Porter's characterisation of Haeckel's book as "Darwinism fully developed" was not quite correct. In fact, the German biologist differed from Darwin at a crucial point by rejecting the notion of natural selection and continued to put faith in the Jean-Baptiste Lamarck's acceptance of the inheritability of acquired traits. That nicety apparently escaped Porter, who described the tone of Haeckel's book as "belligerent and defiant". More to the point, the chancellor found the volume's title as misleading. It had nothing to do with "creation", he lamented, quoting Haeckel that what was really under discussion was "development" (*Auswicklung* in German), for if one spoke of "creation", "the unscientific idea of a Creator existing outside of matter and changing it may easily creep in."¹⁸

This alarmed Porter, who believed that the theistic underpinnings of Christianity were at stake and, with them, the traditional Christian concept of man as a being with a unique relationship to God. Particularly disturbing was

¹⁷ William Porter, *An address to the University of the Cape of Good Hope* (Cape Town: Saul Solomon & Co., Printers, 1876).

¹⁸ Porter, *An address to the University of the Cape of Good Hope*, pp. 30-31.

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the linkage with prototypical forms of life. If Haeckel was correct, he reasoned, "our most ancient ancestors were structureless and formless little lumps of mucus, or albuminous matter, spontaneously generated, without author and without aim, from inorganic substance". It boggled Porter's mind that such globs had "blindly developed themselves, in the struggle for life, into the poets who have sung important songs, into the heroes who bravely fought for Fatherland and freedom, into the martyrs who nobly died for truth and justice". He did not attempt in his *Address* to refute Haeckel's theory that there had been twenty-two stages between the most primitive forms of life and *homo sapiens* but did not doubt that the cost of accepting them was one's belief in God. "These doctrines may be true," Porter allowed, "but if they are, then there has passed away a glory from the earth, and Humanity can only send into the darkness its despairing cry."¹⁹

Referring to his own Christian intellectual formation, Porter noted what he believed were the consequences if one accepted evolution as an adequate explanation for the state of mankind. "Paley's *Natural Theology*, and the *Bridgewater Treatises*, and hosts of other works of the same class, which once carried conviction to our minds, may all be thrown into the fire." Intimately related to this undermining of foundational precepts, Porter knew that contemporary European thinking was challenging the notion of a "Benevolent Designer" who had created a world replete with blessings for humanity and other forms of life. Without mentioning its most prominent proponent, Arthur Schopenhauer, by name, he regretted that a "Philosophy of Pessimism" had lately arisen and was offering a contradictory view, one in which "the world instead of being viewed as a chequered scene of happiness and misery in which, however, happiness is the rule and misery the exception, is simply evil altogether".²⁰

The moral repercussions of accepting Haeckel's *Weltanschauung* also seemed potentially enormous and frightening. He found "indications" in *The history of creation* that the German biologist's "scientific creed" was, at least on the theoretical level, perverting his "moral sentiments". It disturbed Porter that Haeckel seemed to have written approvingly of the ancient Spartan and more recent Native American willingness "to kill all sickly, weak and crippled children" in order to promote what in the language of Herbert Spencer and Darwin was called the "survival of the fittest" and that Haeckel had accordingly ridiculed against "so-called humane Civilization" which protested against such culling. "Christendom does not kill its sickly, weak, and crippled children," Porter reminded readers. "It builds hospitals for them, and hires nurses to attend upon them, ... and they meet, from all around

¹⁹ Porter, *An address to the University of the Cape of Good Hope*, pp. 32-33.

²⁰ Porter, *An address to the University of the Cape of Good Hope*, pp. 34-35.

them, sympathy and kindness.” To Haeckel, this merciful approach embodied “a higher and truer Utilitarianism” than did the survival of the fittest, “since a far larger share of human happiness is secured in a Society where the strong support the weak and helpless than in a Society where the weak and helpless are ruthlessly stamped out.”²¹

Faure’s Darwinist “Discourse” of 30 July 1876

Although David Pieter Faure was not the first South African clergyman to defend Darwinism, he was possibly the most notorious and persistent one to do so in the 1870s and early 1880s. Standing at the liberal pole of the theological spectrum, he approached the topic from a perspective quite different from those of more orthodox counterparts in English-speaking, Afrikaans-speaking, and other circles on the national religious landscape.

A basic awareness of Faure’s theological formation and his relationship to the Dutch Reformed Church in the Cape is essential for understanding the significance of his arguments in favour of Darwinian evolutionary theory. Born in Stellenbosch in 1842, he felt called to the pastoral ministry of the Dutch Reformed Church and followed a well-trodden path by sailing in 1861 to the Netherlands for his theological education, in his case the University of Leiden. There he drank deeply at the well of liberal theology and came under the strong influence of Professor Johannes Henricus Scholten, an increasingly prominent Biblical scholar who had accepted what would become known as “higher criticism”. When Faure returned to Cape Town in 1866, he had shed the orthodox theological skin of his youth and become an exponent of liberalism. In the meantime, theological strife had shaken the Dutch Reformed Church in the Cape. Thomas François Burgers, a young minister in Hanover, and his counterpart in Darling, Johannes Jacobus Kotzé, had been suspended for heterodoxy by the Cape Synod in 1862 and 1864, respectively. Weary of strife, the Dutch Reformed leadership had implemented a mandatory *colloquium doctum* for all prospective ordinands as a means of weeding out those who, from a conservative doctrinal perspective, were theologically questionable. Thus examined, Faure did not pass muster and was denied ordination. Instead of becoming a conventional parish *dominee*, therefore, he began to hold independent services in the Mutual Hall and soon attracted audiences comprising hundreds of people. In 1867 he and the nascent flock constituted the Free Protestant Church. At its services chiefly on Sunday evenings, Faure often delivered a series of “discourses” rather than preaching about specific Biblical texts. He used these opportunities to advocate theolo-

²¹ Porter, *An address to the University of the Cape of Good Hope*, pp. 36-37.

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gical liberalism and discuss contemporary religious thought.²² This form of homiletics would be continued and brought to full blossom by his successor, Ramsden Balmforth, who tended to develop a series of Sunday evening discourses about a general theme. The fact that Faure devoted a service to defending Darwinian evolutionary theory as compatible with belief in God was thus not entirely novel; indeed, it dovetailed quite neatly with his overall rhetorical scheme.

Under the title “Darwinism and Atheism”, Faure delivered his discourse on Sunday, 30 July 1876. It was printed in *The Standard and Mail* four days later. The Free Protestant Church paid to have it inserted in that thrice-weekly newspaper, as it did for many other sermons by its maverick minister. As Faure explained in his memoirs in 1907, his discourses had to be printed as advertisements, because if the local editors granted him free publication of his sermons, they would feel pressured to grant equal privileges to the clergymen of the city’s other churches, thereby converting their “political broadsheets” into “religious papers”. Despite the necessary fees, Faure believed that such publication was strategically prudent as “the most effectual means of spreading the new doctrine”.²³

In his opening section, Faure employed a classical rhetorical device by saluting his opponent. He hailed Porter as “that great and good man who has proved such a true friend to the colony” and as one “whose memory is revered throughout all South Africa” and acknowledged that the “style, tone, and literary excellence” of the *Address* had been praised. But the very eminence and influence of its author provided the *raison d’être* for his response to it. He declared that he felt called to reply and, after stating why he differed, “try to remove any bad effects his words may have produced and to contest any false views which they may have instilled or confirmed”.²⁴

Was his response to Porter a suitable topic for the pulpit? Apparently Faure believed that some members of his flock might disagree. He devoted a lengthy paragraph to justifying his speech about the matter in what he identified as his “discourse”. No one should reject his choice of theme for the evening on the grounds that he has come to church “for religious purposes and not to hear such questions discussed”. Religion as such was at stake: “For if the Development theory renders the existence of God unnecessary and impossible, then religion has no longer the right to exist; if it is true – as true

²² For a detailed analysis of the liberal theology to which Faure was exposed in the Netherlands and how this shaped the origins of the Free Protestant Church in Cape Town, see Frederick Hale, “The Origins of the Free Protestant Church in South Africa: David P. Faure *contra* Dutch Reformed Calvinism”, *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae*, XXXIII, no. 1 (June 2007), pp. 327-350.

²³ D.P. Faure, *My life and times* (Cape Town: J. C. Juta & Co., Publishers, 1907), p. 47.

²⁴ D.P. Faure, “Darwinism and Atheism”, *The Standard and Mail*, 3 August 1876, p. 4.

it is – that Darwin’s theory of the origin of the human species finds more favour and acceptance day by day, and if it be true also that Atheism is the legitimate outcome of that, then the ‘to be or not to be’ of religion itself is the question.” Furthermore, Faure understood that “some perverted account” of evolutionary theory was widespread and needed to be corrected for, as he put it in allusion to Alexander Pope’s famous dictum in his 1709 “Essay on Criticism”, “a little learning is a dangerous thing”. Consequently, he stated that he would devote his discourse to stating his reasons “for believing Darwin’s Theory” and attempting to convince his hearers that Darwinism “is in no way subversive of believe in God, in a God who is the Father of all, in a God ‘in whom we live and move, and have our being’”.²⁵

Faure obviously did not discount the magnitude of the present challenge to religious belief, but he did not share Porter’s pessimism. The Unitarian informed his audience that the current perceived threat by natural science was not without precedent and in fact stood in a long series of supposed attacks. Far too often, he lamented, theology had cried “Wolf!” when defenders of orthodoxy had seen “innovations” in science. Marshalling a well-worn example, Faure cited the case of Galileo Galilei in the seventeenth century. That Italian astronomer’s advocacy of heliocentric cosmology had led to a trial before the Inquisition, torture, and an insincere recanting of his views. Eventually, of course, as Faure noted Galileo’s position prevailed, and “even the most orthodox have sacrificed their Bible which they call infallible to Science which they call atheistical”. As in the seventeenth century, so also in the nineteenth, when the strife had shifted from astronomy to geology. When the Biblically inspired notion that the world was approximately 6 000 years old had come under fire and geologists had dated its origins to a vastly earlier time, a similar hue and cry had gone up from defenders of literal hermeneutics: “Nothing now-a-days is sacred, said they; God’s revelation is cast aside, corrupt human reason is placed on the throne, the whole fabric of theology is attacked, Religion is in danger, Atheism rides roughshod o’er the land!” But again their objections had passed into oblivion, or so it seemed to Faure. By the 1870s geology had emerged victorious over the “worshippers of the Bible”, and “every educated man, orthodox or not”, accepted the findings of geology. When it conflicted with statements in the Scriptures, “they get over the difficulty by saying that is not and was not intended to be a hand-book of Science.” Religion survived.²⁶

To Faure, the dispute over Darwinism echoed a familiar theme. Science was demonstrating that mankind had not originated in the way described in Genesis, and consequently “the believers in the old Theology go

²⁵ Faure, “Darwinism and Atheism”, p. 4.

²⁶ Faure, “Darwinism and Atheism”, p. 4.

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in sackcloth and ashes, mourning over the infidelity of the times, the approaching downfall of Religion, the inroads of Atheism". Alluding to Porter's prediction, he denied explicitly that acceptance of Darwinism would ultimately lead mankind to a despairing cry in the darkness. On the contrary, Faure forecast that far from having such dire consequences, the evolutionary view of mankind will "serve only to give men a deeper insight in the admirable and wise laws of nature, which are the thoughts of God, and will inspire them with greater veneration for the Omnipotent Cause for all".²⁷

That the Darwinian theory of human origins squarely contradicted at least a literal interpretation of Genesis, Faure of course could not deny. Rather, his rhetorical strategy was to address directly the underlying presupposition that the Bible was the infallible word of God. Nonsense, he retorted; "we know that the bible is *not* infallible; we know that it is *not* the word of God". Faure did not delve into the meanings of the polysemous phrase "word of God". Instead, he explained, in full accordance with the nineteenth-century theology he had imbibed in Utrecht and from Anglophone sources, that the Bible is "a collection of writings, in which are contained the ideas entertained by certain Jews and Christians, ideas sometimes mistaken, sometimes correct, sometimes low, sometimes exalted, sometimes immoral, sometimes pure". Faure did not mince words in stating his relationship to those notions: "They have no binding authority for us." Rather, people must use their rationality to determine what to accept as truth and what to reject. Genesis was essentially nonsense, he judged. Among its debilitating flaws, its account of Creation has the earth existing before the sun, and light, day, and night exist before the sources of light come into being.²⁸ The verdict he passed on the doctrine of the divine inspiration of the Scriptures would have aroused a storm of protest and undermined the cogency of his case in most Christian assemblies, but in the Free Protestant Church it reflected the Biblical scholarship he had brought back from the Netherlands in the previous decade.

Having dethroned the Bible from its throne as the judge of science, Faure nailed his rationalistic colours to the mast and stated unambiguously what believers' lodestar should be when orthodox religious notions conflicted with the scientific discoveries or theories. Quite simply, the former should yield. Rather than accepting or rejecting statements by scientists on the basis of their relationship to theology, Christians should weigh them on the balance of "examination and reflection". If a scientific theory thus passed muster, one's theology should be modified, "even if that frightful catastrophe, the downfall of Paley and the Bridgewater Treaties should be the result". After

²⁷ Faure, "Darwinism and Atheism", p. 4.

²⁸ Faure, "Darwinism and Atheism", p. 4.

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all, Faure reasoned, “what is true in the field of Science cannot be false in that of theology. Truth is one.”²⁹

With regard to human development, Faure rejected anti-Darwinist arguments based on the gap between “the civilised European” and higher apes. He conceded that such a cleft existed but found it unconvincing. The fallacy, Faure believed, lay in concentrating on “civilised man”, because that accentuated the magnitude of the “missing link” between the species. Humanity itself was varied. “There is less difference between the Bushman and the highest developed ape,” he asserted, “than there is between the Bushman and the civilised European.”³⁰ Victorian optimism nearly reached its apogee in Faure’s acceptance of the concept of progress. Evolution should be welcomed as a phenomenon that will continue: “Tell men that perfection is before them and that there is no golden age behind them,” he urged his audience; “tell them that the human race has not retrogressed and fallen, but that it is ever advancing and rising, strengthened, they will rise no longer fear that man ever will sink in the mire of Materialism, they will not fear that glory of faith and aspiration will ever pass away from the earth, and that the Humanity of the Future will only send into the darkness its despairing cry.”³¹

Apparently Faure never shifted course. The debate over Darwinism’s compatibility with Christianity continued to occupy him from time to time. Much of that lies outside the scope of the present study. We can note, however, that in 1880 he delivered a series of four “discourses” in which he continued to implore his audience in Mutual Hall to be open to the claims of natural science and not fear that they were necessarily incompatible with liberal religious faith. These were initially published in *De Onderzoeker*, a periodical which liberals who were or had been in the Dutch Reformed Church but were at odds with confessional Calvinist theology had established in 1860.³² Edited by Faure’s brother-in-law, Leopold Marquard, and frequently carrying articles and other pieces about Unitarianism, that monthly served as a vehicle of modernist theological dissent and was undoubtedly a bone in the throat of more conservative Dutch Reformed churchmen in South Africa for the twenty-four years of its existence. In these speeches delivered to the Free Protestant Church, Faure did not broach Darwinism directly but shed further light on some of the presuppositions of his pro-Darwinian position he had taken in 1876. He revealed that he had taken his cue from a recently published book by an “advanced Unitarian”, the American minister James Thompson Bixby, *Similarities of physical and religious knowledge*,

²⁹ Faure, “Darwinism and Atheism”, p. 4.

³⁰ Faure, “Darwinism and Atheism”, p. 4.

³¹ Faure, “Darwinism and Atheism”, p. 4.

³² D.P. Faure, “Godsdienst en Wetenschap”, *De Onderzoeker*, XXI, no. 247 (30 July 1880), p. 49.

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which had sought to establish a “scientific theology” in harmony with the faith increasing numbers of people were placing in natural science. Faure’s aim was to “preach that book to you”, because “the relation between Science and religion is one which intimately concerns us, and which is increasing in importance day by day”.³³ A detailed consideration of Faure’s understanding of the harmony of natural science and theology lies outside the scope of the present study. However, this series of discourses, which were soon published in both Dutch and English, illuminates how one very liberal minister placed his faith unflinchingly in the modern scientific spirit of the times.

Conclusion

It must be emphasised that studies of the impact of Darwinism on Christianity in South Africa are still in their infancy. The present one has extended the previously very limited frontier of scholarly knowledge about this topic by demonstrating that explicitly Christian responses to Darwin’s controversial theory of human origins differed markedly in the wake of the publication of *The descent of man* in 1871. Within a few years, comments by churchmen varied across a broad spectrum from categorical rejection to fervent endorsement. The fact that in this article the arrangement of those responses suggests a crescendo of acceptance should be taken *cum grano salis*. There is no reason to believe, for example, that Faure was any less favourable to Darwinism in the early 1870s than he was in 1876. Conversely, unqualified opposition to the shocking theory remained strong for many decades, and it is still found among many churchmen in the twenty-first century.

Although the present study has found a variety of attitudes expressed in several Protestant denominations within a period of approximately five years after the advent of *The descent of man*, exploration of the topic remains a fertile field crying out to be worked. Many corners of it are virgin soil. How, for example, did Dutch Reformed theologians (other than the coterie of liberals who were associated with Faure) of that era react? And, among Anglophone ministers of the Gospel, were there others who adopted Faure’s affirmative position before the end of the 1870s? How did the reactions of Anglican and British Free Churchmen in the Cape Colony (and, for that matter, Natal) reflect the varied responses among their ecclesiastical counterparts in the United Kingdom? Finally, what did German and other continental European clergymen in South Africa say and write about Darwinism during the period under consideration? These and related questions await answers as research on this historical interplay of religious and intellectual life evolves.

³³ D.P. Faure, “Religion and Science”, *De Onderzoeker*, XXII, no. 255 (30 July 1881), p. 33.

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