

# Science and Faith at the Movies

Movie Exegesis

By Brian Godawa

## **Creation**

(2009) Directed by John Amiel, Screenplay by John Collee, based on the book *Annie's Box* by Randall Keynes.

In this new column I will review both recent and past movies that deal with the issues surrounding science and faith. If you read my preliminary paper of the same title as this column, you know that I consider storytelling to have as much influence on the cultural conversation as science and politics. The discourse of imagination, though different in how it operates from the rational and empirical disciplines, is just as legitimate an aspect of our human quest for truth. In light of that goal, I thought it would be most fitting to start this column with a review of *Creation*, the biopic about Charles Darwin, the patron saint of evolution.

This movie telegraphs its intent on the opening title card that it is the story about how *The Origin of the Species*, “the biggest single idea in the history of thought” came to be written and published in 1859. As anyone educated in the history of ideas knows, paradigms and grand narratives do not originate in a vacuum of intellectual abstraction or objective scientific observation. They are often birthed through a confluence of new discoveries as well as the cultural zeitgeist fertilizing the idiosyncratic history, psyche, and imagination of their authors. *Creation* makes the argument that Darwin’s *Origin* is no exception to this rule, thereby crafting a deeply personal look at the rich genealogy of this world changing book in the noble sufferings of a reluctant but brave scientist.

This is a rather dour and somber period British story, not the light fanfare of Jane Austen fans, but a smartly crafted, melodramatic bittersweet love story between Charles and his dearly devoted wife, Emma. Charles is depicted as losing his faith, and Emma is a Christian believer, so their tumultuous relationship becomes a metaphor for the very “warfare of science and religion” that was being constructed in the progressive circles of European naturalists of the day. Charles Darwin, played with a personal and private sensitivity by Paul Bettany is nicely complemented by the Victorian yet loving austerity of Jennifer Connelly as Emma Darwin.

The very spirit of the era is captured in the desaturated cinematography of Jess Hall, using wide angle close ups of drab or cluttered environments and intimate microzooms to capture the world through the eyes of 19<sup>th</sup> century naturalists -- a world of detailed examination of the processes, pieces and minutiae of nature. One poignant visual moment is when we follow Charles’ eyes at a picnic to a little rat in the grass. The camera zooms in, following the rat up to a cattle skull in the ground where time lapse shows us the maggots that breed, and are picked up by a bird for her chicks. One of the chicks falls to

the ground, dies, and is eaten by bugs and maggots form again. A cinematic depiction of the cycle of nature red in tooth and claw, life founded upon death.

Though the movie depicts evolution as an enemy of God, Emma is not unfairly portrayed as the typical Hollywood version of an uneducated fanatical zealot. Yes, she cares for her husband's soul, and tells him she doesn't want to see him end up in hell, but it comes out of a deeply held conviction and true love for her spouse. A portrayal of their different view of life is embodied in a contrast of their focused activities: he in joyfully recording minute details of his daughter's physical growth while Emma plays passionately beautiful music on the piano -- a Thomistic portrait of nature versus grace, or is this a more balanced picture of the beauty of science and the science of beauty?

Even the Reverend Innes, played with caring sensitivity by Jeremy Northam, is not a preachy oppressive authoritarian, but rather a man of his time, sincerely affirming the consensus view. In fact, Darwin becomes as much at fault for their eventual breakup when he lashes out at Innes from his own intolerance. And the movie also portrays some of the very science and medicine of the day in all its glaring weaknesses showing its own share of superstition. Charles spurns the Reverend's religion that makes his daughter kneel on stones at religious school as punishment for asserting her belief in dinosaurs (only recently discovered) but engages in the now laughable hydrotherapy and sweating treatment to purify the blood. So science and religion are not as black and white opposites as first supposed.

The assumed enmity between God and evolution is incarnate in the first frames of the film when we see a series of images of nature ascending in complexity from bacterium all the way up to a human fetus, which has its little hand out in the pose from Michelangelo's famous Sistine Chapel painting, *The Creation of Adam*. But in this case there is no creator's hand to meet it, just the title of the movie. Charles tells the true story of Captain Fitzroy attempting to "civilize" captured native children from the del Fuego tribe with Christian culture, only to fail when taking them back to their people for evangelism. The children discard their western garb and instantly turn back into their little savage selves, thus displaying the incompetence of Christianity to understand human nature.

T.H. Huxley, played with vindictive acidity by Toby Jones, arrives to challenge Darwin to write his book based on his new ideas of natural selection and descent with modification. Huxley spews his venom with delight, "You killed God, sir. And I for one say good riddance to the vindictive old bugger. Science is at war with religion. And when we win, we'll finally be rid of those damned archbishops and their threats of eternal punishment."

Charles is deeply troubled by this antagonism because of his apparent commitment to the church as a social binding force. He is visibly sickened and will be so for the rest of the story, because of the very implications of his pursuits being against his tradition as well as his wife's beliefs. This is a man who does not have the same hostility toward religion that his enemies do. For him, to lose God is to lose everything. As he states to his

daughter in answer to her question of why he is troubled, “Suppose the whole world stopped believing God had a plan for us. Nothing mattered. Not love, trust, faith, not honor. Only brute survival. Apart from everything else, it would break your mother’s heart.”

But this is not just a love story of man and wife, this is also a story of Charles’ tortured love for his favorite eldest daughter Annie, played with lively vigor by Martha West. Annie became ill and died at age ten. The movie’s use of non-linear storytelling allows us to see contemporary events in their context with past events surrounding Annie and her special relationship with Charles in order to craft a deep identification between the two. And the filmmakers also effectively use a technique of Charles talking to a figment of his own imagination of Annie to show his guilt haunting him.

We ultimately see that in Annie’s death lies the emotional crux between Charles and Emma and with Charles’ own lack of faith in God. For the very thing that brought anger with a “loving” God, the death of his most beloved child, a mirror of his own intellectual curiosity, also becomes the one thing that haunts him as he writes his *Origin*. As He writes his book about survival of the fittest we discover that Charles’ marriage to his first cousin Emma is in fact an example of the weak genes of such interbreeding being weeded out by survival.

But Charles cannot accept this. Because of his love for his dying daughter, he fights against his own theory of survival of the fittest. He cannot allow the weak to die, and he behaves in an altruistic Christ-like fashion by leaving his family flock to save his one sheep by bringing her to a cure center far away in the town of Malvern. In a deeply moving and ironic exchange of places, Emma, the Christian, chooses the evolutionary path of staying with her brood of children instead of going with him -- and never forgives herself for it.

When Charles himself goes to the same cure center for the same hydrotherapy years later, we see through intercuts of Annie’s water therapy years earlier a sort of religious atonement that Charles engages in taking on the guilt of his child’s suffering and seeking to purge the sins of his blood. He even prays to the God he has not yet left to be a sacrificial substitute: “Take me if you must take someone.” So, in a sense, we see a man who does not want to accept the perceived consequences of his own ideas, who seeks to maintain the very meaning and purpose in life that he believes his theory has expunged. He is a tormented soul.

We eventually learn that Annie’s death is what drove Emma to faith for comfort, and Charles to science. It is not until Charles heals his relationship with Emma that he overcomes his physical sickness. And when he comes face to face with Emma’s unchanging love for Charles, he is reborn in a marriage that would last until he died at age 73. In a creative scene of renewed intimacy, Charles and Emma make love, but it is not the raw physical “scientific” details of the natural sex act that is shown, but rather, the afterglow of intimate human connection, the spiritual side of love. This pivotal moment serves to highlight the relationship of Charles and Emma as one of deep love despite their

personal religious differences, and may in fact be an analogy for how faith and love transcends the physical world.

Charles finishes the book and in a daring scene of renewed trust in his wife, asks her to read it and make the decision of what to do with it: publish or let it perish. She looks at him with surprise as he tells her, “Someone needs to take God’s side in all this.” Well, we all know what happened: the book was published. So in the last moments of the film, now Emma looks into his eyes and says with bittersweet love for him, “And so. You’ve finally made an accomplice of me.” Perhaps the filmmakers are seeking to make a metaphor here of an uneasy harmony between faith and science that avoids the hostility of atheism while seeking an honest pursuit of science no matter where it leads.

But the journey of Charles Darwin in this movie is one of a troubled soul in conflict with his pursuit of truth. The very suffering and death that he personally experienced with his own beloved child and echoed in a world built upon mass extinction and death is a legitimate concern for the Christian who believes in a loving God. One poignant moment occurs in the film when Reverend Innes attempts to comfort Charles with the glib, “The Lord moves in mysterious ways.” Charles responds, “Yes he does, doesn’t he. He has endowed us in all of his blessed generosity with not one but 900 species of intestinal worms. And on the love he shows butterflies by inventing a wasp that lays its eggs inside the living flesh of caterpillars.”

## **Creation and the Problem of Evil**

*Creation* depicts the intrinsic opposition between God and evolution that 19<sup>th</sup> century scientists reflexively assumed, as well as the warfare metaphor that supported it. Huxley claims in the movie that if everything evolved over millions of years, then God didn’t create it all in 6 days, as if the literal interpretation of that text was the only option. Even Darwin himself is shown laboring under the presupposition that evolution cannot be guided or providentially ordained, that a system of life based upon massive amounts of death cannot be a part of God’s created “good” order. Perhaps it would be too much for the film to raise these questions in that original context. And perhaps that is where the weakness lies in an otherwise gripping and personal drama about the origins of *The Origin*.

The issues raised by this movie are of critical concern for evangelical Christians and their understanding of Darwinian evolution. It is far too simplistic for Christians to write off Darwin as an infidel bent on destroying the faith. The historical evidence seems to indicate that this movie’s suggestion is true: Darwin’s descent into agnosticism was fueled by a legitimate personal experience with the theological problem of evil both in the broader reality and more specifically in the suffering and death of his daughter. Whatever may be said of Darwin’s theological failings, his struggle with reconciling suffering with a good God is a journey for every person who has any shred of humanity or compassion in their soul. It is not just that there is death and suffering in the world that troubles him, but that death and suffering is a necessary part of the biological system to make it run.

Within his internal struggle, Darwin acknowledged the possibility of a theistic presence behind the laws of evolution. William E. Phipps points out in his book, *Darwin's Religious Odyssey*, Darwin's own words in a letter:

“With respect to the theological view of the question: this is always painful to me. I am bewildered. I had no intention to write atheistically. But I own that I cannot see as plainly as others do, and as I should wish to do, evidence of design and beneficence on all sides of us. There seems to me too much misery in the world.... On the other hand, I cannot anyhow be contented to view this wonderful universe and especially the nature of man, and to conclude that everything is the result of brute force... I can see no reason why a man, or other animals, may not have been aboriginally produced by other laws, and that all these laws may have been expressly designed by an omniscient Creator, who foresaw every future event and consequence.”<sup>1</sup>

This notion of a God behind the laws of evolution seems to be the last refuge for Darwin's agnosticism. The God who created the universe and sustains it (Col 1:15-17) could easily have put into place exactly those laws that he could foresee would result in the evolutionary fruit of human beings created in His image. Another possibility is that God himself is directly behind the regularity of physical law, including the process of evolution. Whether through indirect allowance or direct mediation, whether through foreknowledge or foreordination, Darwin certainly acknowledged that God is using evolutionary change to accomplish His purposes. That would have to mean that death and suffering must be part of God's loving plan. And Scripture seems to declare this all over the place.

The litany of God's actions proclaimed to Job include both natural law and animal predation. God not only claims to be the active agent behind natural forces like snow (37:6), rain and lightning (37:11-12), and astronomical planetary forces (38:31), but God also claims to actively take a hand in the predation of wild animals (38:39-41), as well as predation of evil human nations upon others (Isa 10), and to raise up and destroy nations (Job 12:23). “He causes it to happen” (37:13). Even taking into consideration the primitive non-scientific Mesopotamian cosmology of the Bible, Scriptural theology still has no problem accepting God's causal activity behind the destructive forces of nature (Psa 104) and of human evil. God does not merely “allow” evil to exist in the Hebrew worldview, He somehow actively ordains it.

I form light and create darkness,  
I make well-being and create calamity,  
I am the LORD, who does all these things.  
Is. 45:7

Who has spoken and it came to pass, unless the Lord has commanded it?  
Is it not from the mouth of the Most High that good and evil come?  
Lam. 3:37-38

Let us not forget that God's speaking forth is the common expression of his active creation as in Genesis One. God's hand, a metaphor for his active causal participation, is even described in the New Testament as being involved in the the murder of God's own Son.

For truly in this city there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, to do *whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place*. Acts 4:27-28

But this is not to make God evil or the Bible contradictory. For the Christian, this is first and foremost an exegetical issue. Regardless of what philosophical problems Christians may have with the notion of God's sovereignty and evil, our first commitment is to discover what the Bible says about the issue, *not* to presuppose what can and cannot be proposed philosophically. Clearly, the Bible claims that God somehow ordains natural disasters and both good and evil in such a way that man's responsibility is not diminished, nor is God himself engaged in evil. Just how this is so is not explained to us. But this is why Joseph can accept the evil actions of his brothers as having two causal agents behind them: "As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good" (Gen 50:20 – one action, two actors – human freedom *and* God's sovereignty). It is not that humans have no freedom and that God is a puppeteer, but rather that there is a mysterious consilience between the two, best expressed in the proposition that God foreordains the free acts of men.

And herein lies the fundamental flaw in assuming that death and suffering is contradictory to a loving God's providential care of creation: it begs the question. Who says God cannot have a morally sufficient reason for why he uses death and suffering to accomplish his purposes? It is not a logical problem; it is an emotional one. Does not a father have morally sufficient reasons for putting his dog-bitten child through the excruciating pain of rabies shots? That child may suffer horribly, and even wonder why a loving father would impose such an evil upon his child. But what the child does not understand in the present, he will much later when he is healed or is intellectually matured. So, we will never know the fullness of purpose behind suffering and death until we see Him face to face (1Jn 3:2; Rom 8:18-25).

This is clearly not the kind of answer that will satisfy the hubris of those who demand that God meet their criteria of autonomous human reason or he cannot be God. But it is perfectly logical and Biblical. God humbled Job's complaint for such justification with rhetorical questions that revealed an ignorant humanity with limited, sinful and often faulty understanding of even the most simple elements of the universe. Would not that same God dress down post-Enlightened Darwinian Einsteinian man demanding answers to suffering with such questions as, "Were you there at the Big Bang, or before it? Where were you when I put in place the process by which I created the first cell? Is it by your understanding that the diversity of species exists? Can you create life without suffering? Do you establish fixity and variation? Tell me your unified field theory that binds the

four elementary physical forces of nature? Can you make a single quark or gluon or fill the universe with dark matter?”

Unfortunately, the Bible does not divulge God’s purposes for most of our suffering and death. Sometimes, he reveals his good purposes in this life, like he did with Joseph’s suffering as a means to rescue the children of Abraham from starvation (Gen 50:20), or Esther’s sexual slavery as a means to save Israel from genocide (Esther 4:14), or Christ’s suffering as a means to the redemption of the world (Rom 5:18). But for those who struggle over their young child’s leukemia, or the ravages of the modern sex slave trade, or Darfur’s genocide, or even the natural existence of all life based upon mountains of death, it appears to our limited finite and sinful minds as senseless and without purpose. He only gives us the promise that in the end there will be justice, in the end there will be redemption from all pain, in the end all will be put to right -- but he doesn’t explain to our modern scientific minds just how that will be or through what mechanism.

“Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth passed away... and He will wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there will no longer be any death; there will no longer be any mourning, or crying, or pain; the first things have passed away.” (Rev. 21:1-4)

We must rely upon faith in the Creator God, that if He is the sovereign creator and sustainer of all reality, then we can trust him when he tells us “all things work for the good” even if he does not reveal how this can be so. Faith. Yes, that is the very thing that would anger a mind bent upon demanding all truth be reducible to categories of current human understanding – a limited mind under the delusion of its own limitless grandeur, unconvinced of the nuance of mystery all around him. And I would suggest that is precisely the ultimate act of arrogance; to say that since *I* can think of no good reason for the death and suffering in this world, then there can *be* no good reason for death and suffering. Might this not be the ultimate science stopper, an “unbelief of the gaps”? Might this not be the ultimate idolatry: self-deification?

Then Job answered the LORD and said:

“I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted.

‘Who is this that hides counsel without knowledge?’

Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know.

‘Hear, and I will speak; I will question you, and you make it known to me.’

I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you; therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes.” (Job 42:1-6)

---

<sup>i</sup> William E. Phipps, *Darwin’s Religious Odyssey* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity International Press, 2002), p. 100.