

## OPINION

## Global Darwin: Eastern enchantment

People from Egypt to Japan used Darwin's ideas to reinvent and reignite their core philosophies and religions, says **Marwa Elshakry** in the first of four weekly pieces on how evolution was received around the world.

No other nineteenth-century scientist possessed Charles Darwin's global renown. Between the appearance of *On the Origin of Species* in 1859 and *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex* some 12 years later, his works were discussed in scores of languages. Darwin noted in his autobiography, published in 1887, that the theory was debated as far afield as Japan, and added with some surprise that he'd even seen an essay on the *Origin* in Hebrew showing that "the theory is contained in the Old Testament!"

His worldwide fame was, in part, thanks to technology. The first telegraphic cables were laid across the Atlantic Ocean floor around the time the *Origin* was published, and the next two decades saw Europe connected in the same way to India, China and Australasia. Meanwhile, mechanical advances in paper making and printing helped to move ideas across the globe at record speeds.

Yet the main reason for the worldwide success of Darwin's ideas was the ease with which they were assimilated into local traditions of thought — as the example of the Jewish attempt to reconcile science with scripture hints. Although Darwin himself may have found such reconciliation surprising, it was certainly not as unusual as he might have imagined. Scholars from Calcutta to Tokyo and Beijing constructed their own lineage for the theory of evolution by natural selection, tracing it to older and more familiar schools of thought and claiming ownership of what they saw as the precursors to these ideas. Although some, particularly in Europe, saw Darwin as a weapon beating down religious beliefs, around the world he was as much a force for religious resurgence and revivification as for religious scepticism. Even nineteenth-century Muslim thinkers reconciled Darwinian ideas with their own past religious and philosophical texts; which may seem ironic, given the rise of Muslim creationists today.

### Cosmic order

Take as one example the work of Chinese scholar Yan Fu. In the late 1890s, Yan published a popular translation of Thomas Huxley's *Evolution and Ethics* in which he reinterpreted both Huxley and Darwin in the light of Confucian ethical debates.

Huxley, one of Darwin's most vocal



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supporters, had argued that humans acted against the natural order of things when putting the interests of others above themselves. But for Yan, this gloomy view of nature ran counter to what he understood to be Darwin's — and Confucius's — belief

in the perfectibility of the cosmic order. Echoing older Confucian ethical debates while drawing on his own reading of Darwin and other Victorian naturalists, Yan argued that selfishness and selflessness were part of the natural order, and that each has its place in the journey towards an ideal state: the key is to achieve the right balance between the two. This was how Darwin effectively gave Yan, and many of Yan's readers, new licence to endorse one of Confucianism's ethical prescriptions.

Darwin's ideas were similarly used by late-nineteenth-century Bengali intelligentsia to support long-standing Hindu cosmological beliefs. Some of these thinkers wrote of how modern theories of positivism (the idea that true knowledge is that based on verifiable sensory experience) and evolutionism had echoes in Hindu theories of creation.

For example, Satish Mukherjee, a leading member of the Indian Positivist Society, saw Samkhya, one of the oldest schools of Hindu philosophy, as a precursor to the modern view of evolution. Under Samkhya, the world unfolds as a result of a continual cycle between creation and dissolution: consciousness, self or spirit becomes realized in matter and then separated from it, and so on. These cycles are seen to account for the creation of species as well as for the evolution of different stages of the Universe. For Mukherjee, as for many later Indian thinkers, Samkhya was therefore the theory of evolution applied to the entire cosmos.

Muslim readers found their heritage in Darwin's theory too. Supporters and critics pointed out that Muslim philosophers had long referred to the idea that species or 'kinds', as the Arabic term *anwa* suggests, could change over time. For this reason the great classics of early Muslim philosophy and cosmology were almost always cited whenever Darwin was discussed in Arabic, Farsi or Urdu.

Muslim writings from the tenth and eleventh centuries referred to a hierarchy of beings, from minerals to flora and fauna, and even argued that apes were lower forms of humans — more evidence for nineteenth-century Muslims that Darwin's theory was 'nothing new'.

### Empire and evolution

One of the driving forces behind many of these scholars' work was a desire to push back against the forces of Western imperialism. At the height of European imperial power, claims about white superiority were widespread. In response, defenders of non-Western faiths drew attention to the greater rationality of their creeds to defend themselves against Western charges of backwardness and superstition. Many were keen to show that their traditions, unlike those of Western Europe, accepted, reinforced or had even anticipated the findings of modern science. By embracing Darwin's ideas, they emphasized that Christianity alone was in conflict with science.

Muhammad Abduh, the Grand Mufti of Egypt, for instance, was worried about the inroads that missionaries had made into the educational system of the Muslim Ottoman lands. He was also tired of critics pointing to Islam's supposed inability to accommodate modern pedagogy and science. In *Science and Civilization in Christianity and Islam* (1902), Abduh argued that, in contrast to Christianity,

Islam was free of the conflict with science that had so violently plagued Christian civilization in Europe. To stress this difference, he repeatedly wove references to Darwin and evolution

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into lectures on the exegesis of the Koran.

Although many used Darwin to highlight the glory of their founding civilizations, they also co-opted his theory to explain their falling behind the Western world in modern times. It was seen as a way to explain both the rise of the West's technological and imperial superiority in the present, and the path to success for the rest of the world in the future.

At the height of the scramble for Africa in 1899, for instance, the Egyptian intellectual and women's-rights advocate Qasim Amin warned that "Western civilization, speeded by steam and electricity, is advancing and



has expanded from its origins to all parts of the earth". The weak, he warned, would be unable to survive the onslaught. For civil servant Amin, this meant that social reform was needed. 'Self-strengthening' state reformers in Korea and Indian nationalists in the early twentieth century felt much the same way, and they too turned to evolution's advocates for instruction while pushing key governmental reforms. Of course, the battle cry of intellectuals was not always heeded.

In promoting political 'evolution', most of Darwin's proponents outside Europe subscribed not to revolution, but to change of a very gradual sort, mimicking the step-by-step slow change of natural selection.

Hiroyuki Kato, an instructor of law at the Tokyo Imperial University, used Darwin's theory to defend Japan's imperial rule at the beginning of the twentieth century. At that time, a rise of democratic movements was challenging the power of the Emperor Meiji. Kato, who also gave weekly lectures to the Emperor on constitutional and international law, supported a strongly centralized imperial line of rule. He found in Darwinism a new language in which to dress his arguments and a scientific explanation for why radical change wasn't the answer to Japan's problems.

Kato reinterpreted Darwin's 'struggle for life' as a slow, steady 'struggle for ethics'. The ethic he favoured could be counted as part of the samurai principle of self-sacrifice, which in this case he took to mean absolute allegiance to the Emperor above all other commitments. Just as through death the samurai was said to become the perfect winner, so the ultimate victor in the struggle for ethics was the

martyr dying for the sake of something bigger.

This demonstrates another characteristic common to non-European responses to Darwinism: the real question most saw lurking behind the theory of evolution was whether one could draw a moral code from nature. For Kato as for so many others, mere survival was not enough to comprise a true ethics — evolutionary or otherwise. There had to be something beyond life to give life itself a purpose. As Muslim reformer Muhammad Iqbal later put it, the main problem with Darwin's view of evolution was that it gave death 'no constructive meaning'. Perhaps for this reason, many attached their own meanings and linked Darwin to long-standing ethical systems of their own.

### Paragon of scepticism?

If the ease with which Darwin's ideas were assimilated into local traditions of thought is little known today, it is because much of the discussion about Darwin in the West has focused on the supposed clash between his theory of evolution and Christianity. Certainly, ever since 1859, Darwin's name has been invoked by supporters of the forces of science in their battle against religion, and the image of Darwin as a paragon of religious scepticism has helped him to become an enduring icon of the modern sciences.

Darwin's theory did indeed help to sharpen the sense of a boundary between ideas of science and of religious faith. For disciples such as Huxley, Darwin's empirical approach offered a way to distinguish knowledge from belief, or fact from fiction. The Church of England, along with many other establishments, fought back: bishops preached that to believe

Darwin was to risk endangering one's soul.

Yet in truth, things were never this simple. Darwin was indefinite and at times inconsistent on the question of religion in his own writings. He famously left the ultimate origin of species ambiguous in the last line of the *Origin* — speaking of the power of life as 'originally breathed' into one or several forms, deploying a key Christian metaphor for creation — and he often conveyed himself as an agnostic in his letters. Not all Christians recoiled from Darwin's ideas; some Protestants and Catholics believed that they too could reconcile their doctrines with his theory and were spurred to revisit their own interpretation of scripture.

Then, as now, Darwin meant different things to different people. Globally, he was not so much a revolutionary or a scourge of faiths, as he was a revivifier of traditions. He straddled worlds between the moderns and the ancients, giving a new lease of life to ancient philosophers, ethical debates and even dynastic loyalties.

In an age in which advocates of intelligent design battle to have evolution removed from classrooms, we would do well to recall how Darwin once captured and captivated the world — not by ridding it of the forces of enchantment, faith or even God, but by revitalizing traditions of belief and re-enchanting so many. ■

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