

**NOTES ON THE TRUE AND FALSE THEORY OF
EVOLUTION (1887), BY REV. CHAUNCEY GILES**

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I often refer to the Nineteenth and early Twentieth Centuries in New Church scholarship as a time "when giants walked the earth." One of these giants was the unseemly Rev. Chauncey Giles (1813–1893). I say unseemly because he never really fit the profile of an intellectual or a scholar. Sickly and unassuming, he left Williams College in his junior year. He aspired to be a teacher and not an academic. This he did, but not successfully, until in 1853 his imagination was awakened by an encounter with the Church of the New Jerusalem. Swedenborg's spiritual-natural paradigm would thereafter inspire him to the pulpit for forty years, motivate him to write two hundred discourses as tracts, and to publish several books. One of these books is included in this issue of *The New Philosophy: The True and False Theory of Evolution* (1887).

What is remarkable about this book is not that he wrote it. From the moment that Darwin's *Origin of Species* appeared in 1859, people of all stripes began writing books about it, not the least of whom were clergymen, outraged at such a wicked proposition.

What is remarkable about this book, and the man who wrote it, is the maturity of understanding it brings to the argument, of an exceedingly subtle scientific theory then only twenty-eight years old. His grasp of the biological principles is sound, which is beyond remarkable for a man with his basic education. His "area" as we would call it today (while dismissing him out of hand) was New Church theology, and certainly not the field of population biology. And yet there it is.

Better yet is his not-so-remarkable response to both Darwin's theory and the negative clerical reaction to it. Where he got his biology we do not know, but his measured answer to this new and potential threatening doctrine was New Church, through and through. And this is what brings his little book into the orbit of *The New Philosophy*.

What did he say to those scientists who were too quick to accept Darwin's theory, despite its unintended theological consequences?

144. See footnote 143 on page 361 for Biography.

They would be in a much better position to discover the truth, if they accepted his premises and his facts, but denied his conclusions.

His approach to the controversy was not either/or, but both/and. With this caveat, he sums the argument up, and opens the door to another, necessary phase of scholarship, yet to come:

There is no ground for conflict between a true science and a true theology. They are the essential parts of a true knowledge of God and His works. They are a light to each other, which is essential to a correct understanding of both. Science without God is but half of the truth. It is a body without a soul.

Those who believe in the Divine origin of the creation may frankly admit all the facts of the advocates of Evolution. They may even gratefully accept them as a most important service to religion, and beautiful illustrations of the methods of infinite wisdom, while they utterly repudiate the essential theory they are summoned to prove. The theory leaves out of account the most important factor, the constant presence and persistent action of the spiritual and Divine substances and forces from which matter itself and all its forces are evolved, and by which it is constantly moved to action and molded into form.

Giles finishes with the chapter, "Degrees and Correspondence," which he offers as the potential solution to the problem of evolution missing from the current (1887) debate. This solution is missing still, 134 years hence.

But theistic scientists of the New Church persuasion are at work to introduce this missing piece into the mix and set things aright. The Swedenborg Scientific Association published a book about evolution in 2019 (*Intelligent Default: Swedenborg's Theistic Science and the Problem of Organic Form*), and later the same year a group of these scientists presented similar topics at a Theistic Science Symposium in Bryn Athyn, Pennsylvania. (See *The New Philosophy*, January–December, Vol. CXXI, Nos. 1–4 for transcripts of their presentations. Videos of the talk and PDFs are also available on the SSA website: [swedenborg-philosophy.org/news/events/theistic-science-symposium/.](http://swedenborg-philosophy.org/news/events/theistic-science-symposium/))

Swedenborg's scientific and theological writings offer a unique potential, not for just bringing science and religion together, as an exercise in conflict resolution might do. As Giles points out, science and religion are not at war; "...they are the essential parts of a true knowledge of God and His works."

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Swedenborg makes this abundantly clear in all his writings; there is only one reality, viewed from many perspectives.

The True and False Theory of Evolution is a small book with remarkably large and refreshingly modern ideas about the spiritual inspiration for natural evolution. Giles was way ahead of his time when he clearly understood that God continually brings natural forms into being, guided by spiritual influx, but using natural processes to do the work. (What else would God do?)

Rev. Giles's obituary in the *New Church Messenger* of 1893 noted that "in the removal of Mr. Giles we have taken from us the most widely known man of the New Church. He was beyond all comparison the leader in the work of the New Church evangelism, and has doubtless said, published, and done more for making known to the world the doctrines of the New Church than any other man in its history." A little overstated perhaps, to satisfy the emotional necessities of an obituary, but not really that far from true.... □