

<b>Institution: University of Nottingham</b>
<b>Unit of Assessment: 33 Theology and Religious Studies</b>
<b>Title of case study: Informing the Public Debate on Creation and Evolution</b>
<p><b>1. Summary of the impact</b></p> <p>The public debate on the conflict between creation and evolution has been changed by Conor Cunningham's research:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Dissemination and promotion of Cunningham's writings by the Archbishop of Canterbury within the Church of England contributed to new ways of thinking in the church.</li> <li>• Reviews of his book in a wide range of non-academic journals and blogs, together with the writing, presenting and broadcasting of a BBC documentary (with over a million viewers and subsequent syndication to Australia, Canada, and New Zealand) contributed to narrowing the gap between academic and public discourse.</li> <li>• Subsequent public debates at Lambeth Palace and elsewhere have contributed to a deeper public understanding of the relation between science and religion.</li> <li>• Talks and an online seminar given to church leaders and groups together with reviews of the book from secular scientific communities have created new dialogue between these two groups.</li> </ul>
<p><b>2. Underpinning research</b></p> <p>Conor Cunningham began research on Darwinism following his appointment to the University of Nottingham in 2004, in parallel with a module he was invited to teach under that title. He pursued this research up to and beyond the publication of his award-winning monograph <i>Darwin's Pious Idea</i> in 2010. He was initially appointed as a postdoctoral fellow to coordinate the new Centre of Theology and Philosophy, and was promoted to Lecturer in 2007. He took an interdisciplinary approach, learning major advances and theories in evolutionary biology, molecular biology, developmental biology and systems biology, while also exploring theologies of creation as well as philosophy, specifically philosophy of science, phenomenology and metaphysics. In conversation with his Nottingham colleague Professor John Milbank, he developed a theological approach to metaphysics out of Christian doctrines of Creation and Incarnation, drawing heavily on the Church Fathers and Aquinas. This research was also supported through the conversations arising from a series of major conferences, of which Cunningham was the principal organiser, held under the auspices of Nottingham's Centre of Theology and Philosophy: <i>Transcendence and Phenomenology</i> (Nottingham, 2005), <i>The Return of Metaphysics</i> (Granada, 2006), <i>The Grandeur of Reason</i> (Rome, 2008), and <i>What is Life?</i> (Krakow, 2011).</p> <p>The principal research finding was a suspension of the common modern distinction between the natural and supernatural upon which much of the science and religion debate is premised. Creation gives an account of the natural order that guides and directs scientific research without conflicting with it. This called into question attempts to build a metaphysics out of evolutionary theory, as done by ultra-Darwinists, as well as attempts to formulate notions of God as an instrumental designer on the basis of a scientific metaphysics, as performed by Creationists. The strong conclusion was that there is no conflict between the orthodox doctrine of creation and contemporary research into evolution. Moreover, careful attention to recent advances in biology made possible a more constructive and open account of Darwinism, no longer wedded to reductive assumptions about selfish genes.</p> <p>The main research output was the 563 page monograph, <i>Darwin's Pious Idea</i> [3.1], alongside articles responding to Richard Dawkins [3.2 &amp; 3.3], and other articles on the metaphysics of creation and naturalism [3.4, 3.5 &amp; 3.6].</p>

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## 3. References to the research

- [1] *Darwin's Pious Idea*: (Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 2010), 563 pages [listed in REF2].  
 French translation: *L'idée pieuse de Darwin* (Paris: Editions Ad Solem, 2012)  
 Spanish translation: *Idea Pías de Darwin* (Granada: Editorial Nuevo Inicio, 2012)  
 German translation: *Der fromme Darwin* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 2012)  
 Korean translation: 다윈의 경건한 생각 (Darwin Ui Kyung GeonHan Saenggak)  
 (Holy Wave Plus Publishing Co., 2012)
- [2] 'Dawkins is Dead, Long live Evolution!', *New Blackfriars*, forthcoming [available on request]
- [3] 'Dawkins the Neanderthal and Darwin's Pious Idea' in *The Unknown God: Sermons responding to the New Atheism*, ed. John Hughes (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2013) [available on request]
- [4] 'Naturalism Lost: Nature Regained', in *A New Book of Nature: Philosophical essays on the Imagination, Nature and God*, eds. Charles Taliaferro and Jill Evans (Oxford: OUP, 2011), pp.156-189 [listed in REF2]
- [5] 'Creation and Naturalism', in *Rivista Anthropolites* (September, 2010), pp. 121-181 [available on request]
- [6] 'Trying my very best to Believe Darwin, or, The Supernaturalistic Fallacy: From Is to Nought', in *Belief and Metaphysics*, eds. Peter M. Candler, Jr. and Conor Cunningham (London: SCM Press, 2007), pp. 100-141 [available on request].

Evidence of quality:

*Darwin's Pious Idea* already been translated into French, Spanish, German and Korean, and has been reviewed in an extraordinarily wide range of academic and non-academic journals and media, including science as well as theology journals. It won a Catholic Press Award for 'Science and Religion' (2011). The Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr Rowan Williams, wrote in the *TLS*: '**This is certainly the most interesting and invigorating book on the science-religion frontier that I have encountered.**' Cunningham has subsequently been appointed to a nine month fellowship (2012-13) at the Center for Theological Inquiry, Princeton, to work collaboratively with scientists, philosophers and theologians on evolution and religion.

## 4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

Cunningham's book has had an exceptionally wide public reception for an academic monograph. In addition, the ideas and insights have been actively disseminated through a series of public lectures, talks and interviews, and through writing and presenting a BBC2 documentary, 'Did Darwin kill God?' Through these means his research has influenced civil society and public discourse in the following ways:

Influencing the self-understanding of the church

The Archbishop of Canterbury took the rare step of distributing Cunningham's first essay on Darwinism to all 44 Diocesan bishops in the Church of England in 2008, and subsequently quoted it in his public Lent lectures that year. Cunningham was then invited to speak at Lambeth Palace to an audience including politicians (MPs and Lords), journalists, celebrities, scientists, clergy, and school children in July 2009 – this event was mentioned in *The Times*, the *Guardian* and *The Tablet*, and Madeleine Bunting, who chaired it, wrote an article in the *Guardian* citing Cunningham's work (which in itself generated 144 comments) [5.1]. This series of events at once illustrates the contribution made by Cunningham's work to thought within the church, and describes the further diffusion of his ideas beyond the church and into public discourse through the media.

Informing the public debate – talks, sermons, reading groups

The American Vineyard Church theological conference 2012, consisting of pastors, lay people and theologians, held a panel on the book, *Darwin's Pious Idea*. Similarly, Duke University and the

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Mormon Brigham Young University held multidisciplinary reading groups on the book.

Cunningham has also delivered a number of sermons on the subject during the REF period; one, to students and fellows at Jesus College, Cambridge (February 2011), is published in *The Unknown God* (see above). He has delivered public lectures in schools (Belfast, October 2009; Nottingham, December 2011; Leicestershire, September 2012) and churches (Bottesford, June, 2008; Bexhill-on-Sea, April 2009), and talks at book festivals, science festivals, and Nottingham Contemporary Art Gallery. These include at the Darwin Festival, University of Cambridge, (June 2009); Open Shelf Book Festival, Sheffield (October 2010), as well talks as far afield as Portugal (Braga, June 2009), Spain (Granada, May 2012) and USA.

During Cunningham's fellowship at the Princeton Center for Theological Inquiry, he gave three lectures to a non-academic audience on their 'Youth Day', and, together with an evolutionary anthropologist Agustin Fuentes, delivered an online seminar to an audience of over 12,000 church leaders and laity: the seminar showed how evolution makes more sense within theism, rather than if theism and evolution are pitted against each other.

As a result of this public engagement work, Cunningham's ideas have contributed to public debate about the compatibility of science and religion, emphasising the misunderstanding of creation by fundamentalists and the misunderstanding of evolutionary theory by ultra-Darwinists.

Informing the public debate – media and online discussion:

*Darwin's Pious Idea* has been widely discussed outside academia and beyond domains one might expect for theological research. Michael Ruse, a biologist from the University of California, wrote in the *Quarterly Review of Biology*: 'The level of scientific sophistication on display is remarkable for a theologian; his reading and his ruminations have been extensive, more than sufficient to provide a devastating critique of the narrative stories and metaphors of Dawkins not just with respect to religion, but also with respect to evolutionary biology itself.' Since 2010, reviews have appeared in: *Church Times* (where the reviewer described the book as 'nothing short of magnificent. Every now and then Providence sends a book to save the day. *Darwin's Pious Idea* may be one of those books.'), *Times Literary Supplement*, *Commonweal*, *Symposia*, *Times Higher Education Supplement*, *Christian Century*, *The Guardian* [5.2], *Perspectives on Science And Christian Faith*, *National Catholic Register*, *The Tablet*, *Isis*, *Cosmos*, *First Things*, *Christian Books*, *CBA Retailers and Resources*, *The Times*, and *Scientific and Medical Network Review*.

Reviews, discussions and symposia on the book have taken place on various blogs, including: Biologos Foundation [5.3] By Common Consent; Regent College: Cosmos; Vox Nova; The Socialist.Net; Logic of the Cross; The Intention Experiment; Bensonian, A Greater Courage.

All of this activity demonstrates the reach, uptake and use by educational, theological, faith and science communities along with the wider public. This circulation of his research findings through public discourse is sometimes at quite a technical level of sophistication. For example, in a review of *Darwin's Pious Idea* reposted from the *TLS* on the Australian Broadcasting Corporation website [5.4], Rowan Williams wrote: '[T]he presumption of an omnicausal gene leads into the fallacy-soaked morass of "misplaced concreteness." A gene is not a thing, not a biological billiard ball: it is a cluster of information-carrying material. Its unity or identity is given by the nature of the information it carries; it does not exist as such independently of the chain of "instruction" in which it functions.'

Informing the public debate – BBC documentary

One of the principal ways in which the research has reached a wider audience is through the BBC2 documentary, 'Did Darwin Kill God?', written and presented by Conor Cunningham, and aired at 7pm, Tuesday 31 March 2009 [5.5]. The documentary, while including interviews with the likes of Daniel Dennett and Richard Dawkins, does also express clearly Cunningham's own research findings. It received the Sandford St Martin Trust Merit Award for Religious Broadcasting. The chair of the judging panel making the award commended Cunningham's documentary for the way in which it provided 'relief from the ritualised combat of extremists such as Richard Dawkins and

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assorted creationists, who are fighting a battle many think is more suited to the early 19<sup>th</sup> century than the 21<sup>st</sup>. He also suggested that the high viewing figures (1.06 million) for such a 'demanding' programme attested to 'its success in engaging viewers with abstract argument', confirming its role in contributing knowledge and insight to wider public debate, and, as the section above suggests, beyond audiences one might expect for theological research. [5.6] It has subsequently been shown in Australia, Canada, and New Zealand, and has been further disseminated by non-academic individuals copying it onto Youtube in seven different locations, generating a further 10,000 views and heated discussion, involving over 600 comments. [5.7] The documentary is now a bestseller on Classroom Video's Secondary Education catalogue for summer 2013 [5.8].

Cunningham has given a number of interviews on radio, television, and for websites [e.g 5.9], including contributing to a series of BBC Knowledge Worldwide programmes, 'Does God Exist?', with separate contributions aired 6, 13 & 20 March 2012, two appearances on BBC1 'The Big Questions' (6 June 2010, 25 March 2012), and 'Sunday Morning Live' (31 July 2011). Overall, his media work has generated correspondence from teachers, scientists, lay people, and philosophers who have reacted positively to his argument that science and religion can exist side by side. Sixth form teachers write to say they are showing the documentary in their classes [available at 5.5 & 5.8]. He is thanked by one correspondent for his 'good work to restore the tender balance between between God and science'.

## 5. Sources to corroborate the impact

[1] Madeleine Bunting, 'Science, Religion and Our Shared Future: Science and religion both have the ability to teach us how interconnected we are – and it's a lesson we cannot ignore', *Guardian*, 1 July 2009.

[2] 'Ultra-Darwinists and the Pious Gene', Mark Vernon, 18 February 2011 [viewed 16/9/13]. Available at: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/belief/2011/feb/18/darwin-pious-gene-dawkins-creationism>

[3] 'The Biologos Foundation and *Darwin's Pious Idea*', Parts 1-6, John Wesley Wright, 4 January – 25 March 2011 [viewed 16/9/13]. Available at: <http://biologos.org/blog/series/pious-idea-series>

[4] 'Mind all the way down', Dr Rowan Williams. Review from *TLS* posted on ABC website 24 June 2011 [viewed 16/9/2013]. Available at: <http://www.abc.net.au/religion/articles/2011/06/24/3253101.htm?topic1=&topic2>

[5] 'Did Darwin Kill God?' BBC documentary online [viewed 16/9/13]. Available at: <http://topdocumentaryfilms.com/did-darwin-kill-god/>

[6] 'Speech by Roger Bolton', Sandford St Martin Trust, 25 May 2010 [viewed 16/9/13]. Available at: [http://www.sandfordawards.org.uk/sandford/userfiles/Speech%20by%20Roger%20Bolton\(3\).doc](http://www.sandfordawards.org.uk/sandford/userfiles/Speech%20by%20Roger%20Bolton(3).doc)

[7] Social media report on *Did Darwin Kill God* available as a pdf.

[8] 'Did Darwin Kill God?' BBC Documentary available through Classroom Video: <http://www.classroomvideo.co.uk/Product.aspx?id=4726>

[9] 'Ultra-Darwinism and Creation's Sabbath', interview by Eric Austin Lee, *The Other Journal*, 23 March 2011 [viewed 16/9/13]. Available at: <http://theotherjournal.com/2011/03/23/ultra-darwinism-and-creation%E2%80%99s-sabbath-an-interview-with-conor-cunningham-part-i/>

'Interview with Conor Cunningham', by Jarrod Longbons, *The Art of the Good Life: Contemporary Thinkers You Should Read*, 1 September 2011 [viewed 16/9/13]. Available at: <http://theartofthegoodlife.blogspot.com/2011/09/interview-with-conor-cunningham.html>

Interview on radio programme, *Culture Shocks with Barry Lynn*, 11<sup>th</sup> January, 2011 [viewed 16/9/13]. Available at: <http://www.cultureshocks.com/shows/2011/01/28/conor-cunningham/>