

Movie spotlights Darwin's loss of faith, family crisis

February 5, 2010

WASHINGTON (RNS)—Heated debate. Loss of faith. Religious discord. Questions about death, the universe, and our place in it. According to a new film, Charles Darwin saw—and wrestled with—all of that and more as the implications of his theory of evolution became clear for society as a whole, but even more so, within his own family.

[Creation](#), a recently released film by director Jon Amiel, introduces Darwin as a 40-something father working on his seminal work, *On the Origin of Species*, which laid out his theory that would revolutionize society's understandings of human history.



Paul Bettany and Jennifer Connelly portray Charles and Emma Darwin in the new film, *Creation*. (RNS PHOTO/Courtesy Liam Daniel/New Market Films)

Darwin (Paul Bettany) is haunted by the recent death of his daughter Annie (Martha West). His grief, along with his gradual loss of faith, creates a gulf between Darwin and his beloved wife Emma (Jennifer Connelly), a devout Christian.

“Two people who adore and respect each other are driven into opposite corners by firstly a desperate loss, the loss of a child,” Amiel said in an interview.

“But we also see that exacerbated by the fact that Charles rails against an

uncaring deity that could make such a bad thing happen to such a good person, whereas Emma retreats to the consolation of religion that their child must be in heaven and takes great consolation from that.”

As his relationship with his wife and other children deteriorates, Darwin falls into the grip of a mysterious illness that some now believe may have been psychosomatic, or induced by mental stress. Enduring a potent treatment of laudanum—a medicine derived from opium—and water therapy, he begins to see visions of his departed daughter.

It’s all a lot to deal with when you’re already struggling with a book that you know will upend the social order.

Amiel describes Darwin as “a deeply shy and socially conservative man who finds himself almost unwillingly in possession of this ideological time bomb, and he is deeply unwilling to throw that bomb into the middle of a society he fundamentally respects and endorses.”

The film, based on the book *Annie’s Box* by Darwin’s great-great grandson Randall Keynes, is the latest salvo in an ongoing debate among Darwin scholars. Was Annie’s death the final fatal blow to Darwin’s Christian faith? Or was he agnostic as the result of dispassionate scientific research?

“I think (Annie’s death) was a very substantial factor,” Amiel said. And yet, “Darwin himself was very clear—and we quote this in the film—that his loss of faith was something that happened over a thousand afternoons. It was more like the slow shifting of continents for him than the sudden snapping of a tree.”

Michael Ruse, director of Florida State University’s history & philosophy of science program, said Annie’s death was less pivotal than the film portrays.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fz2oEayPqNM>

“I just don’t think the Annie episode was the key issue in Darwin’s religious

life. He had become a deist (and) ... remained one right through the writing of *The Origin*, and then became an agnostic because he did not like the idea of eternal punishment for nonbelievers, a group that included his father, whom Darwin thought was the best man he had ever known.”

For his part, Amiel cautioned against inferring too much religious fervor from Darwin’s early seminary studies. Darwin was, he said, “a man who never had a very powerful connection with faith.”

“Darwin went to Cambridge to study divinity, but frankly spent more time talking to ... all the other great scientists there, and puttering around in the fens looking for mollusks, than he did studying divinity.”

Darwin had “a respect for (faith), but not a personal connection,” Amiel said. “And I think that connection was weakened substantially by the death of his daughter.”

The film touches on the divide between faith and science, giving the religious side a chance to air its views. However, the heart of the story is the break, and ultimate reconciliation, between Emma and Charles, lovingly depicted by real-life husband and wife Bettany and Connelly.

Ruse, who is not connected with the film, also feels the film overplays the divide between Charles and Emma over their respective beliefs.

Charles Darwin “saw the social value of Christianity and was not about to upset his wife with crude atheism. He was never a crude atheist and always believed in a God right through the writing of *The Origin*. Unlike (fellow naturalist Thomas) Huxley, Darwin was always first and foremost an English gentleman; he may have lost his faith, but he could not be strident.”

Amiel sees “a parable for all of us” in Charles and Emma, who were able to reconnect despite their strongly divergent beliefs.

“In a sense, without wanting to sound too corny,” Amiel said, “the story of Charles and Emma Darwin really has a lesson to teach us about how love and mutual respect can overcome seemingly unconquerable differences.”