Church makes ‘ludicrous’ apology to Charles Darwin - 126 years after his death

By Jonathan Petre
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The Church of England will tomorrow officially apologise to Charles Darwin for misunderstanding his theory of evolution.

In a bizarre step, the Church will address its contrition directly to the Victorian scientist himself, even though he died 126 years ago.

But the move was greeted with derision last night, with Darwin’s great-great-grandson dismissing it as ‘pointless’ and other critics branding it ‘ludicrous’.

A meeting of minds: Charles Darwin and, right, the Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr Rowan Williams

Church officials compared the apology to the late Pope John Paul II’s decision to say sorry for the Vatican’s 1633 trial of Galileo, the astronomer who appalled prelates by declaring that the earth revolved around the sun.

The officials said that senior bishops wanted to atone for the vilification their predecessors heaped on Darwin in the 1860s, when he put forward his theory that man was descended from apes.

The Church is also anxious to counter the view that its teaching is incompatible with science. It wants to distance itself from fundamentalist Christians, who believe in the Biblical account of the creation of the world in seven days.
An article to be posted on the Church’s website will say: ‘Charles Darwin, 200 years from your birth [in 1809], the Church of England owes you an apology for misunderstanding you and, by getting our first reaction wrong, encouraging others to misunderstand you still.

‘But the struggle for your reputation is not over yet, and the problem is not just your religious opponents but those who falsely claim you in support of their own interests.’

The article has been written by the Rev Dr Malcolm Brown, the director of mission and public affairs of the Archbishops’ Council, the Church’s managing body, which is headed by the Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr Rowan Williams.

Dr Brown writes: ‘People, and institutions, make mistakes and Christian people and Churches are no exception. When a big new idea emerges that changes the way people look at the world, it’s easy to feel that every old idea, every certainty, is under attack and then to do battle against the new insights.

‘The Church made that mistake with Galileo’s astronomy and has since realised its error. Some Church people did it again in the 1860s with Charles Darwin’s theory of natural selection.

‘So it is important to think again about Darwin’s impact on religious thinking, then and now.’

Dr Brown argues that there is nothing incompatible between the scientific theories adopted by Darwin and Christian teaching.

The English naturalist, geologist and collector, best known for his 1859 book On The Origin Of Species, scandalised Victorian society with his theory that all species of life evolved from common ancestors.

One of the most venomous clashes over his ideas took place in 1860 during a debate at Oxford University. The Bishop of Oxford, Samuel Wilberforce, asked the evolutionist and Darwin champion, Thomas Huxley, whether it was through his grandfather or his grandmother that he claimed to be descended from a monkey.
Huxley replied that he would not be ashamed to have an ape for his ancestor but he would be ashamed to be connected with a man who used his gifts to obscure the truth.

In his article, Dr Brown writes: ‘His [Darwin’s] theory caused offence because it challenged the view that God had created human beings as an entirely different kind of creation to the rest of the animal world.

‘But while it is not difficult to see why evolutionary thinking was offensive at the time, on reflection it is not such an earth-shattering idea.’

The Church’s move will reignite the debate over creationism. In the United States, Republican Vice-Presidential candidate Sarah Palin argues that it should be taught in schools.

In this country, the Rev Professor Michael Reiss, a biologist director of education at the Royal Society, provoked a furore last week when he called for creationism to be treated in school science lessons as a legitimate world view.

Ann Widdecombe: ‘We've already apologised for slavery and the Crusades. When is it all going to stop?’

Last night, the Church, which apologised for its role in the slave trade two years ago, came in for fierce criticism for its latest mea culpa.

Former Conservative Minister Ann Widdecombe, who left the Church of England to become a Roman Catholic, said: ‘It’s absolutely ludicrous. Why don’t we have the Italians apologising for Pontius Pilate?

‘We’ve already apologised for slavery and for the Crusades. When is it all going to stop? It’s insane and makes the Church of England look ridiculous.’
Andrew Darwin, a great-great grandson of the eminent scientist, said he was ‘bemused’ by the apology, which seemed ‘pointless’.

‘Why bother?’ he said. ‘When an apology is made after 200 years, it’s not so much to right a wrong, but to make the person or organisation making the apology feel better.’

Terry Sanderson, president of the National Secular Association, said: ‘It does seem rather crazy for an institution to address an apology to an individual so long after his death.

‘As well as being much too late, the message strikes me as insincere, as if there is an unspoken “but” behind the text.

'However, if it means that from now on the Church of England will say “No” to the teaching of creationism in school science lessons, then we would accept the apology on Darwin’s behalf.’

A less critical tone was struck by Horace Barlow, 87, from Cambridge, who is Darwin’s great-grandson.

He said he thought his ancestor would have been pleased to hear the Church’s apology.

‘They buried him in Westminster Abbey, which I suppose was an apology of sorts,’ said Mr Barlow.

‘Darwin was very concerned about offending other people as his wife Emma was a committed Christian. So I think this apology would have pleased him.’