

HBO filmmaker's loss of faith parallels his subject's: Darwin

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(RNS) A new film charting Charles Darwin's passage from Christian to nonbeliever propelled its maker on a similar journey.

"Questioning Darwin," a new, hourlong documentary airing on HBO throughout February, juxtaposes the story of the 19th-century British naturalist with looks into the lives of contemporary American Christians who believe the world was created in six days, as described in the Book of Genesis.

Antony Thomas, the 73-year-old British filmmaker behind the camera, said while his goal was to highlight the way his subjects answered big questions about the origins of life, a loving God and the purpose of suffering, he found his own answers to those questions changing.

"This is a personal feeling, but I do believe the two (a belief in God and in evolution) are not compatible," Thomas said by telephone from New York, where he is working on another documentary. "And that is what made this worthwhile for me."

Thomas, who describes himself — as Darwin did — as an agnostic, said 20 years ago he prayed every day. But during the two years he shot the film, his exploration of Darwin's diaries and personal correspondence, in which he spelled out his movement away from belief in a loving God, caused him to shift, too.

During his five years aboard HMS Beagle — a voyage that laid the groundwork for "On the Origin of Species," his masterpiece on his theory of evolution — Darwin confronted, for the first time, the problem of reconciling suffering and death with the Christian idea of a benevolent, all-powerful, all-knowing God.

“I cannot see as plainly as others do, and as I should wish to do, evidence of design and beneficence on all sides of us,” Darwin wrote in a letter. “There seems to me too much misery in the world. I cannot persuade myself that a beneficent and omnipotent God would have designedly created the Ichneumonidae (wasp) with the express intention of their feeding within the living bodies of caterpillars, or that a cat should play with mice.”

Thomas said he has come to the same conclusion. “How could this be possible if we also have the idea of a loving creator?” he said. “That is really how I feel about things.”

But Darwin was never an atheist — an epithet thrown at him by many creationists, including some in the film. It pained Darwin that his belief had moved so far from that of his wife, Emma, and he attended church till his death in 1882. He had many friendships with clergy and was eulogized by many and buried in Westminster Abbey.

Thomas has tackled religion and fundamentalism before, most notably in “The Quran,” a look at contemporary interpretations of Islam, and “For Neda,” about a young woman shot as she protested an Iranian election. He is now at work on a film for PBS about the Vatican, he said.

Yet in a twist, Thomas has come to identify with some of the creationists in his film. They, he said — like Darwin — realized they could not reconcile the randomness and cruelty of millions of years of evolution and survival of the fittest with the God of Genesis. But unlike Darwin and Thomas, they choose God over evolution.

“I would hope in a tiny way this film could contribute to a feeling from the creationist side that Darwin isn’t the devil,” he said. “Let us consider what he actually said. And from the other side, I would like to see recognition that these people are not idiots.”

The film has been well reviewed, in large part because of its fairness to creationists. Writing in The New York Times, Neil Genzlinger said: “Mr. Thomas gets an array of them to speak forthrightly by treating them respectfully. Even viewers who feel these people are living their lives with blinders on might admire their conviction.”

Darwin, it seems, did the same.

“I feel most deeply that the whole subject (of whether there is a God) is too profound for the human intellect,” he wrote in a letter in 1860 that is quoted in the film. “A

dog might as well speculate on the mind of Newton. Let each man hope and believe what he can.”