

# Making Darwin UnComfortable

alex@scienceforums.net

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## Introduction

In 2009, minister Ray Comfort launched what he calls the Origin into Schools Project, a massive effort to distribute thousands of copies of Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* to students at 100 universities across the United States. At first glance, one might be surprised to see an evangelical minister distributing pro-evolution materials on college campuses – but as it turns out, it's not any regular edition of *On the Origin of Species*. Comfort has written a 50-page introduction highly critical of Darwin's work and Darwin himself, and is distributing his own edition of *Origin* with the introduction, though the rest of the book is otherwise mostly unaltered (Darwin and Comfort).<sup>1</sup>

Setting aside questions regarding the truth of Darwinism and of Comfort's logic, one major question remains: since the first publishing of *Origin*, what has changed to motivate someone to re-publish Darwin's own work with an introduction attacking it? (Besides the copyright status of the book, of course.)

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<sup>1</sup>At the University of Texas, 2,000 books were distributed by various Christian groups on November 18th, a day earlier than announced. This was apparently a trick to prevent any pro-evolution groups from mounting a response; however, Professor De Lozanne of the biology department had planned ahead and was able to get distribute counter-flyers to those receiving books. It was a very interesting event, with many arguments between pro- and anti-evolutionists and conflicts between those handing out flyers and those handing out books.

## The Comfort Edition

Before discussing Ray Comfort's edition of *On the Origin of Species*, it's worth noting that there are, in fact, two editions. Comfort made an initial printing run of 30,000 abridged books in a print run that did not have his name on the cover<sup>2</sup> and left out Darwin's chapters 10, 11, 12, and 13 (Darwin and Comfort 255). In the second printing run of 175,000 (Comfort), the chapters were included and the introduction was revised (Comfort and Darwin). For the purposes of this analysis, only the second printing run will be considered. A book from the second printing run was obtained as it was passed out at the University of Texas.

### Comfort's Special Introduction

Comfort's edition contains Ray Comfort's introduction as its primary feature. It's not actually titled an "Introduction" but rather a "Special Introduction," because of course Darwin's original text includes its own introduction section. Darwin's original introduction is printed behind Comfort's, after a second (duplicate) table of contents.

The full text of the Special Introduction, spanning the first fifty pages of the book, is best addressed elsewhere. In summary: its essential goal is to convince the reader to abandon the theory of evolution and convert to Comfort's version of Christianity: Comfort cites various 'scientific' facts to disprove evolution, explains how Hitler was a Darwinist, and then launches an extended analogy to prove that Christianity is the only viable religion. The truth of Comfort's arguments is unimportant here; what matters most is how his introduction is presented.

Interestingly, the Special Introduction is printed in a different font – a significantly larger font – than Darwin's text, leaving the Special Introduction in a large font while the rest of the book uses a small font with densely-spaced lines that make reading difficult.

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<sup>2</sup>Comfort promised on his website, Living Waters, that the book would have his name on the cover so as not to be called "deceptive." However, his name was not on the cover until the second printing run.

The Special Introduction includes numerous images and illustrations (many of which are caricatures of Darwin as a monkey, and so on), while the text of *Origin* is missing the original “tree of life,” an illustration of the divergence of species over many thousands of generations – originally printed as a large fold-out illustration in the 1859 edition (Darwin 177).

At first glance the reader can easily tell what Mr. Comfort would rather be read. By emphasizing his Special Introduction and printing Darwin’s text in a small and hard-to-read font, it is apparent that Mr. Comfort wishes to draw attention to his introduction – an effect emphasized by his introduction’s numerous illustrations and photographs. Flip through the book and all attention is grabbed by the large text and pretty pictures in the beginning, not the densely-packed and boring-looking text in the rest of the book.

## **The Origin of Species**

As mentioned above, the original 1859 edition of *On the Origin of Species* contains a fold-out diagram on page 177 depicting the “tree of life.” In the surrounding pages of text, Darwin uses this diagram to help explain his concept of how species can, over thousands of generations, evolve and diverge, forming new and different species, while other species may go extinct. Comfort’s 2009 edition conveniently omits this diagram entirely, but keeps the surrounding text, leaving any readers adventurous enough to try reading *Origin* to wonder what diagram Darwin is referring to.

That alone would be a minor inconvenience, but one figure is not the only thing missing. In the 1859 edition, the table of contents was excruciatingly detailed: for each chapter, a page number was listed, along with every subsection in that chapter. As one flipped through the pages, one could tell what section the pages belonged to by glancing at the top of the page – the section and chapter names were printed at the top of their pages.

Comfort, on the other hand, omits the convenient chapter headings and omits any page numbers from the table of contents.

That's right: not only does the table of contents not list subsections (to cram it all onto one page), it does not give page numbers, and the only way to find each chapter is to flip through every page in the book looking for the "CHAPTER IV" heading in the middle of a page. (Rather than starting chapters on a new page, they continue on the same page as the previous chapter, separated only by a chapter number and name in the same small font as the rest of the text.) This essentially renders *Origin* unreadable as a scientific text, as all the usual conveniences have been left out.

### **The small details**

Each book has a title page, listing Darwin's full title "On the origin of species by means of natural selection, or the preservation of favored races in the struggle for life." In the 1859 edition, this title is followed by Darwin's name and a listing of his credentials as a fellow of the Royal Society, the Linnean Society, etc.; naturally, in Comfort's edition, most of these credentials are left out, giving Darwin only the post-nominal letters "M.A."

The index, a 12-page-long and detailed affair in the original work, was also left out by Comfort.

Finally, some numbers about font size: two pages of Darwin's introduction fit into one page in Comfort's edition, though both books use similar-size paper. The 1859 edition fits in 35 lines of text per page to Comfort's 48 per page – though his Special Introduction, of course, has less than 40 lines per page, with numerous breaks for new sections and images.

## Contemporary response

### Ray Comfort's edition

After Comfort's Special Introduction and just before Darwin's own Introduction is a "Special Note" from Ray Comfort:

Someone once graciously said, "I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it." However, it seems that some contemporary atheists don't share such honorable convictions. When they learned about this publication they threatened lawsuits, book burnings, and even censorship in vowing to tear the Introduction out of the book. If the Special Introduction has indeed been removed from this publication, you may view it freely on [www.livingwaters.com](http://www.livingwaters.com) to learn what some don't want you to know.

One would thus expect to see throughout the Internet various threats of book-burnings and so on. Comfort's website quotes atheists as saying "Perhaps we should just call for a book burning!", among other things (Comfort). Of course, a Google search of that particular phrase, and the other phrases he quotes on his website, reveals that the only uses of those phrases on the Internet are in pages quoting the Special Note.

So what do Mr. Comfort's enemies, all these atheists, really say about his book? (Never mind that one doesn't need to be an atheist to believe the theory of evolution.) On the discussion forums of [RichardDawkins.net](http://RichardDawkins.net), official website of famed atheist and evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins, a member who goes by the username of "Calilasseia" reviews Comfort's work like this:

This utterly dishonest piece of intellectual vandalism, perpetrated against the work of a seminal contributor to human knowledge, simply because that contribution to human knowledge happens not to genuflect before asinine mythological blind assertion and doctrinal presupposition, merely demonstrates yet

again the depths to which creationists will stoop to propagandise for their tacky, sleazy little ideological masturbation fantasy. Comfort seems to be striving to compete for the title of "most dishonest creationist" with this latest example of malfeasance, by turning one of the major landmarks of science into a bastardised, derivative pastiche of its former self, accompanied by a turgid and intellectually anencephalic "foreword" written by someone who manifestly never paid attention in a basic biology class in his entire life.<sup>3</sup>

While one must admit that this review is clearly not fond of Comfort's work, it hardly supports book burnings. One member does, however, advocate simply tearing out the pages:

I will then, without any hesitation, stand before this individual, rip out the first 50 pages in one sharp tear without uttering a word, and then simply say: "Thanks!," while handing back the forward [sic] before walking away.

And one does suggest a bonfire:

I believe that everyone should take their free copy, then have a nice get together and make a good fire out of them while sipping a beer.

The level of antagonism and hatred claimed by Mr. Comfort, however, does not fully materialize. There are no threats of lawsuits, and there's always a sense of humor apparent in their words – the worst Mr. Comfort has to endure is the review of his book, which was an admirable assault but not an attempt at censorship. These evil atheists are far more amused than threatened by Comfort's work:

No problem to it for me, because if the reader is considerate enough to actually... you know... read past the introduction and actually consider the rest of

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<sup>3</sup>This, and the other quotations below it, is quoted from a section of RichardDawkins.net that requires a free registration to view.

the book, then the introduction will be nothing more than comical and pathetic to them when they are done.

On the other hand, one would expect various Christian and theological Internet forums to be abuzz with support for Comfort and his goals. A survey of the forums of the Christian Apologetics and Research Ministry (CARM) forums, which have more than 36,000 members and 1.2 million posts, turns up a surprise:

Get a copy. Rip out the 50 pages of propaganda. Give it the proper use to pick up after your dog and send it back to Cameron. Better I get a copy than someone that could possibly be infected by these ideas.<sup>4</sup>

In the several discussions about the subject, perhaps one or two members are willing to come to Comfort's defense – and this on a website dedicated to Christian *apologetics*. One would expect the forums to show an outpouring of support for Comfort's attack on evolution, but instead they readily defend Darwin's dangerous idea – one member saying "I'm going to go over at least part of [the Special Introduction] to pick out some of the lies."

On another popular Christian website, TheologyOnline.com,<sup>5</sup> with more than 1.4 million posts, there is scarcely a mention of Comfort at all. Despite his massive public relations campaign, giving away 30,000 copies of his book on his website, posting YouTube videos, and getting media attention, the world of online Christianity offered little notice and no support.

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<sup>4</sup>Again, this quote and those that follow were taken from forums.carm.org, which require a free registration to view.

<sup>5</sup>The name "TheologyOnline" would have one believe the site discusses theology in general, but it freely admits being primarily focused on Christianity. Its motto, "Open rebuke is better than love carefully concealed," should reveal its generally unwelcoming attitude toward atheists and evolutionists.

## 1859 first edition

Darwin had worse luck when he published *On the Origin of Species*. The very first review was not only negative but called his book outright dangerous:

The anonymous reviewer (John Leifchild) scorched through his advance copy, highlighting its dreadful implications: “If a monkey has become a man—what may not a man become?” The reviewer declared that Darwin’s book was almost too dangerous to read. It should be put in the safe hands of theologians and left “to the mercies of the Divinity Hall, the College, the Lecture Room and the Museum.” (Browne 87)

In the months following publication of his work, Darwin received hundreds of letters and dozens of reviews, some from his own professors and colleagues. Adam Sedgwick, Darwin’s old professor of geology and a friend, send him a letter declaring that Darwin’s position would “sink the human race into a lower grade of degradation than any into which it has fallen since its written records tell us of its history.” Captain FitzRoy, who led the voyage to the Galapagos that sparked Darwin’s ideas, wrote to the *Times* to call Darwin’s work “a mixture of conceit & folly” (Browne 94) – and, most interestingly, John Herschel, an astronomer, called Darwin’s theory “the law of higgledy-piggledy,” which Darwin thought was “evidently very contemptuous” (Browne 107).

There were, of course, many scientists who thought Darwin was on the right track, and there were many positive reviews of his book. But along with praise came tremendous public backlash.

In 1861, the African explorer Paul Du Chaillu returned to England with wild (and often fictional) stories about gorillas – a species previously almost unknown to the public of England. The specimens and tales he brought painted a picture of gorillas as ferocious, loud, and aggressive; to Darwin’s dismay, word soon spread that Darwin believed humans to have descended from such vile beasts (Browne 156-162).

The resulting uproar, and the very public debate that ensued in the academic community, finally hammered into the public the true implications of Darwin's theory. These sophisticated Victorian-era individuals were being told they were descended from the hairy beasts they saw pickled in museums. It was not a pleasant thought, and it was one impossible to swallow for the Victorian public. (This controversy was perhaps the root of the popular illustration of Darwin as a monkey-man, gleefully inserted by Comfort into page 30 of his Special Introduction.) Darwin's later book *The Descent of Man*, published more than a decade after *Origin*, merely cemented this view in the eyes of the public. Darwin was that man who said they descended from monkeys. He would have to get used to being famous.

Years later, in 1871, St. George Mivart published a complete book, *On the Genesis of Species*, assaulting evolutionary theory (Mivart; Vorzimmer 225). In Mivart's eyes, simple natural selection as Darwin proposed it was incapable of producing many of the adaptations and variations evident in species known at the time, while also attacking its ethical and other implications. In all, he spent 307 well-referenced and well-researched pages criticizing Darwin's work in natural selection. Mivart, a devout Catholic, was no dummy either – he was a relatively well-known biologist and zoologist who published regular articles on natural selection and who had regular correspondence with Darwin (Browne 329). Darwin, who felt Mivart was distorting his words and ignoring any unsuitable evidence, wrote to Alfred Wallace that Mivart was “so bigoted that he cannot act fairly” (Browne 331).

## **On the origin of the editions**

It is evident that the intellectual atmosphere surrounding *On the Origin of Species* changed drastically in the 150 years since 1859. In 1859, Darwin's ideas were accepted mostly by a group of biologists and naturalists, while the public, and many reviewers, were simply

shocked at the implications. As Ray Comfort loves to show in his Special Introduction, caricatures of Darwin as an ape became very popular, and religious people like St. George Mivart vehemently objected to Darwin's ideas on biological and theological grounds.

150 years later, the atmosphere has changed. The vast majority of scientists now readily accept evolution; 74% of those with postgraduate degrees accept the theory (Newport), and the National Center for Science Education, as part of Project Steve, has compiled a list of 1,120 scientists with the first name Steve who all accept evolution to make fun of similar projects compiling lists of "scientists" who doubt evolution (NCSE). Using their estimate of 1% of people being named Steve, that extrapolates to over 100,000 scientists readily accepting the modern version of Darwin's theory – and not every Steve is on the list yet. Online forums, as shown above, were abuzz not with support for Comfort's cause but with disdain for what he has done to such a landmark work of science.

Facing the unwelcoming atmosphere of his day, Darwin was quite reluctant to publish *On the Origin of Species*. It took botanist Joseph Hooker numerous persistent letters to convince the reluctant Darwin<sup>6</sup> that his ideas needed to be written down and presented (Browne 47), and publisher John Murray only printed 1,250 copies of the book on its first run – hardly comparison to the more popular books of the day, which could sell 60,000 copies in a year (Browne 88).

Contrast this with Ray Comfort: On his first print run, 30,000 copies were printed and sold for merely \$5 – less than most other paperback books – on Comfort's website (Comfort). After that run sold out, 175,000 more books were printed and handed out for free on college campuses across the United States. Comfort is not reluctant, and he's not aiming at a scientific audience: he's an atheist-basher who has written many other books, such as *God Doesn't Believe in Atheists* and the cleverly-titled *You Can Lead an Atheist to Evidence But You Can't Make Him Think* (Comfort and Darwin 54).

But atheist-bashing is not Comfort's sole goal in creating his own edition of a famous

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<sup>6</sup>Coincidentally, a book titled *The Reluctant Mr. Darwin*, by David Quammen, has been written about this subject.

book. In the first printing of the book, he makes the following admission:

It's that God offers eternal life to every dying person, and most refuse His "unspeakable gift." That's the *real* human tragedy. (Darwin and Comfort 40)

To Ray Comfort, *On the Origin of Species* is a tragedy because it drives people to atheism and to rejecting God's saving grace (Comfort and Darwin 39). So many people accept evolution, as evidenced by the huge negative response of scientific *and* religious online forums to Comfort's book, and in Comfort's eyes this is unspeakably tragic. But at the time of original publishing, back in 1859, there was no unspeakable tragedy – the book had not yet been accepted by anyone. In 1859, *Origin* was not a tragedy but a potential threat. The primary uproar was about not just its theological implications but at the idea that men were descended from hairy apes.

By looking through the changes Comfort has made to *Origin*, and by reading the religious messages in his introduction, it is clear that Comfort has not changed Darwin's book simply because he thinks it is wrong. Comfort added his own introduction because he believes Darwinism is the source of a tremendous spiritual tragedy, and in his desperation to stop this tragedy he had to do something – anything – to change people's views about evolution. Comfort is not doing this for the money or scientific recognition; he adds no new scientific ideas to the book and he handed out thousands of copies for free.

Comfort's edition of *On the Origin of Species* is not the product of a society that has rejected Darwinism. It is the product of a society that accepts Darwinism more than ever,<sup>7</sup> whose acceptance has driven Ray Comfort to the conclusion that society is rejecting God. To a deeply religious minister, that is cause for action. Thus, a new *Origin* was produced, one designed to bring people back to God by emphasizing a religious message and discouraging anyone from even reading Darwin's words. In his view, after all, Darwin is the man who drove them away from God in the first place.

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<sup>7</sup>Gallup polls show that acceptance of evolution is significantly higher among younger people, age 18 to 34, than among those over 55. (Newport)

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