

Professor Emil Deere and Evolution

During the Pihlblad years there could have been an academic freedom struggle over evolution. These were the years when the conflict between science and religion came to a head in Tennessee. The year of the Scopes or Monkey Trial came about the midpoint of President Pihlblad's long administration. To trace the science-religion issue and teaching of evolution at Bethany, it is appropriate to begin with the first science teacher of the College. Rev. Carl A. Swensson, then pastor of the Bethany Lutheran Church, selected a young graduate from Augustana College to become the first faculty of Bethany Academy which became Bethany College. This was J. A. Udden, who was to become nationally known as a scientist and was instrumental in discovering the value of the Texas oil fields. A better science department, or entire faculty, except for the Christianity classes which Rev. Swensson taught, would have been hard to find.

Because Professor Udden became a celebrated scientist, this did not mean that he was on the side of science against religion. There were eminent scientists of Udden's generation, such as Agassiz, who were strictly against evolution as long as they lived. There are lesser figures today⁵⁸ who put the teaching of evolution and science strictly in the camp of the atheists. However, it must not be assumed that the

⁵⁸Examples are Alfred Rehwinkel, who attributes to Noah's Flood the work of glaciers and geological ages, The Flood in the Light of the Bible, Geology, and Archaeology (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1951) and Henry Morris, Virginia Polytechnic Institute, head of the Civil Engineering who, from the scientist's perspective, demolishes "evolution," reviewed in "Current Religious Thought," Christianity Today, VIII (Sept. 25, 1964), p. 62.

atmosphere at Bethany College was adverse to science. The longest-lived teacher of Bethany, Dr. Emil Deere, was a man of science who received his training under Professor Arvid Walin, a student of J. A. Udden. He was wholly in sympathy with the cause of evolution and science, though not uncritically or obnoxiously so. He would not alienate the minds of those innocents who did not think that a day necessarily meant a period of time and not only twenty-four hours as we know them on earth. His views were such that once a girl was pleasantly surprised to find that the expounder of science and evolution did not have long hair and a tail like his arboreal forbears.⁵⁹

The science teacher during the Pihlblad era, Dr. Emil Deere, was a scientist par excellence. To him, the scientist was not a blind follower of materialism. Instead of a "cold-hearted, fact-finding, materialistic being," the scientist was a "sensitive" person, "responsive to harmony and beauty." To Professor Deere, the scientist certainly had nothing against moral values; he was at worst neutral, for science was an objective method of seeking the truth. Neither was the world of science capricious, since "every result has a cause; every action has a reaction."⁶⁰

From the preceding address, it can be seen that the chief scientist during the Pihlblad years liked to label himself as a scientist.

⁵⁹Emil Deere, to the author, May 13, 1965, indicating not only his sympathy with evolution, but also his good sense of humor even during the last year (1965) of his life.

⁶⁰Emil Deere, "Crowding and Its Effect on Organisms" (President's Address to the Kansas Academy of Science), Kansas Academy of Science, Transactions, XLIV (1941), p. 29.

On an earlier occasion, at the Bethany Christian Brotherhood, Dr. Deere said that church and science do not conflict. He went on to elaborate liberal ideas and optimism that man could achieve universal brotherhood and peace, and he hoped for total eradication of stubborn opposition, intolerance, and prejudice.⁶¹

Dr. Deere also said that man has definite potentialities for improving his lot. Man is like a gardener; God put man in this world, and if he wishes to play the role of gardener to clean up and improve the place in which he lives, more power to him. He will in effect be lifting himself by his own bootstraps. Before man appeared on the scene it was God alone, but now with a flourishing garden instead of a jungle of weeds, it is God with my help.⁶²

President Pihlblad did not speak on evolution in a way which would reveal more of his views on the subject, and there was virtually no comment in the school paper on the great debate between science and religion. But there was a program of the Linnean Society, celebrating the 100 year anniversary of the birth of Darwin. This program indicated the beliefs of Professor Deere.

Mr. Deere, under "Darwinism of Today," endeavored to show that many of the theories so conclusively expounded by Darwin are being substantiated daily by discoveries and researches in biographical sciences. In this he was entirely successful. . . . Professor Deere showed that the great opposition to Darwin comes mostly from those who are not thoroughly familiar with his writings, but who attribute to Darwin many of the extreme principles expounded by his immediate followers.

⁶¹"Church and Science Do Not Conflict Says Professor Deere," Messenger, Oct. 26, 1923, p. 3.

⁶²Emil Deere, personal interview with the author, May 13, 1965.

Although there is the statement that Darwinism is a "dead issue"; and that Darwinism has been disproven by modern biologists, Mr. Deere proved that the majority of these statements are incorrect. Except in a few conclusions which Darwin himself repudiated, his works are now more generally accepted than ever before.⁶³

At the same meeting of the Linnean Society, Professor Walin showed that not only was biological science completely revised, but every other branch of science was also affected by this wonderful naturalist, Darwin, and Darwinism did not conflict with religion to the degree generally believed.⁶⁴ Thus we see that at least the science department was steeped in the true spirit of science and Darwinism. The Bethany teachers were exultant in the virtues and applications of Darwinism to all sciences.

The question could justly be asked, "Why, then, was it that there were students who graduated from Bethany during Dr. Deere's years at Bethany, and students who even belonged to the Linnean Society, but who nevertheless acted as though science should be equated with materialism and atheism, and that Darwin should be deported to the lowest level of Inferno along with the other infidels and underminers of the faith of young believers?" An answer may be that the church and family can be more influential in the forming of attitudes than the college in causing the student to reject old worn out ideas and to adopt new ones. As Wheeler put it, the College had trouble when the theory of evolution was brought up in classes. This problem of looking at education with

⁶³"Darwin Centennial Program," Messenger, Feb. 19, 1909, p. 1.

⁶⁴Ibid.

a jaundiced eye was inherent in the puritanism of Lindsborg.⁶⁵ Organizations and individuals antagonistic toward evolutionists, such as Dr. Deere, were more influential for some students than the professor and laboratory. A church conference, the Radiant Life Conference, held at Bethany in 1929, may have been more of an education than the science lectures. At this conference the most fundamentalistic position against science was expressed to the youth of the church by ministers of the Lutheran Church.⁶⁶ Such a conference may have retarded the dialogue between science and religion because "man is basically conservative," and once young supple minds are inculcated with doctrinaire beliefs, it may take an extremely open mind to be willing to accept a different view at a later date.

The conclusion can be drawn that the presidents of Bethany and the science department, especially Professor Deere, were not against the open pursuit of knowledge, but there were some students who followed a less learned approach, putting faith and the old-time religion over science and evolution.

Emory K. Lindquist

Dr. Emory K. Lindquist, historian, philosopher, educator, made it his profession to pursue the truth. He was not afraid to allow a free exchange on the open marketplace of ideas. As he described the dilemma of academic freedom at a church college:

⁶⁵Wheeler, "An Analysis of Social Change," p. 119.

⁶⁶E. g., Frank Carlson, in "Youth's Perplexities," Conference Echo, Carl Segerhammar, ed., p. 106, took the side of William Jennings Bryan in the science-religion dispute; and, p. 107, presented a literal interpretation of miracles.