

Gray, for example, saw no logical reason why Natural Selection should be blind rather than guided by God. The Revd Professor Charles Kingsley (author of *The Water Babies*) saw compatibility between theism and Natural Selection, while the Oxford clergyman-don Aubrey Moore saw Darwinism as revealing God's true greatness, in so far as He had not simply made a once-and-for-all Creation, but, like a kindly landlord, was constantly improving it. And let us not forget that when Darwin died, in 1883, he was not only buried in Westminster Abbey, but Harvey Goodwin, Bishop of Carlisle, along with other senior Churchmen and the Church Times, praised Darwin as a generous 'honorary' Christian gentleman, as well as exploring the theological ramifications of evolution.

Sadly, Darwin's positive legacy has been overshadowed by the rise of Biblical fundamentalism in the United States after c. 1910, with the 1926 'Monkey Trial' at Dayton, Tennessee, accorded iconic status. We would be wise to remember that historical mainstream Christianity has never been fundamentalist. Jewish Rabbis, St Augustine, St Thomas Aquinas, Martin Luther, and numerous others have all explored the complexities of God's Word in Scripture, and have long realised that the Bible should never be read as a science textbook. For as Cardinal Cesare Boronius put it around 1598, the purpose of Holy Scripture is to teach us how to go to Heaven: it is not to teach us 'how

the heavens go'. And just as we should not read Scripture as an astronomy textbook, so we should not read it for biology. For God, in His Glorious Majesty and Love, gave us inventive brains so that, by Grace, we might find that out for ourselves.



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### Further information

[www.cis.org.uk](http://www.cis.org.uk) – Christians in Science

### Suggested reading

Ronald L. Numbers (ed.), *Galileo goes to Jail, and other Myths about Science and Religion* (Harvard U.P., 2009): see essays on Darwinism.

John Hedley Brooke, *Science and Religion: Some Historical Perspectives* (C.U.P., 1991).

Allan Chapman, *Slaying the Dragons. Destroying Myths in the History of Science and Faith* (Lion Hudson, 2013).



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thinking about...

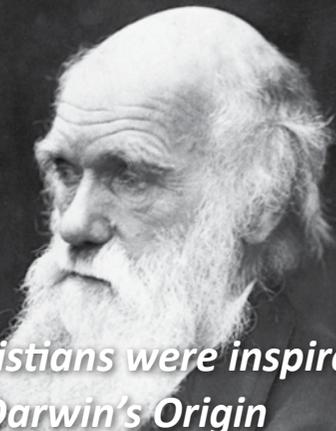
addressing questions of science and faith

# The Historical Reception of Evolution

How was evolution initially received?



Many Christians were inspired by Darwin's Origin



## Thinking about...

# The Historical Reception of Evolution

Dr Allan Chapman

It is often assumed by Christians that Charles Darwin's theory of evolution by natural selection caught the church off guard and ill-prepared to deal with its implications. But this was not the case. When he published *The Origin of Species* (1859) he already had almost a century of 'species' thinking behind him. There was Robert Chambers' broadly theistic bestseller *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation* (1844), Jean-Baptiste Lamarck's 'French atheistical' *Philosophie Zoologique* (1809), and Charles's grandfather Dr Erasmus Darwin's *The Botanic Garden* (1791). Indeed, comparative anatomists had long been fascinated by the parallels between humans and animals. In addition, geologists talked confidently about the vast antiquity of both the earth and the universe. Were fossils in the geological strata the remains of creatures living between the Creation *ex*

**Did the church initially oppose evolution?**

*nihilo* and the divine clearing away of the 'Old Chaos' that prepared our planet for Adam, Eve, and the Genesis story: a view advocated by the Oxford clerical geologist Canon William Buckland? Was the Flood of Noah even caused by the earth passing through the vapour-tail of a comet, as the astronomers Edmond Halley and William Whiston had speculated in the 1690s? Moreover, none of this geological or biological thinking was suppressed; rather, it was widely discussed in books and magazines.

Charles Darwin's unique contribution, however – in addition to the vast body of scientific data which he presented – was his mechanism for evolution: Natural Selection. Just as farmers bred from artificially-selected animals for economic purposes, did Nature select advantages to fit a species better for survival?

Yet what alarmed some people was Darwin's insistence on sheer randomness and chance in Natural Selection. For he argued that animal species did not flourish, or become extinct, under the guidance of God's hand, but through nature's luck of the draw. And although he scarcely mentioned humans in the *Origin*, he did address human primate descent face-on in *The Descent of Man* (1871) and subsequent works. It was, therefore, both this randomness and a possible monkey ancestry that caused concern amongst many Christians.

Yet the Charles Darwin of historical reality was

not the anti-religion crusader of legend. He was never an atheist, but rather a worried agnostic, married to a devoutly Christian wife, Emma. In himself, Darwin was a kindly, wealthy county gentleman of independent means, who gave liberally to charity and the local poor, and even supported certain overseas Christian missions.

And let us be clear about one very important historical fact: Darwinian evolution subsequently came to be exploited for their own ends by a spectrum of late-nineteenth and twentieth-century secularists and militant atheist campaigners – a phenomenon that embarrassed Darwin himself. Moreover, Darwinian anti-Christian myths still abound. Take, for example, the supposed 'debate' between Thomas Henry Huxley ('Darwin's Bulldog') and Bishop Samuel Wilberforce in Oxford in June 1860, that, legend has it, drove the Victorian Church into embarrassed retreat and made Man proudly Monkey!

Yes, a brief exchange (not a debate) did take place, but it was an encounter between two Fellows of the Royal Society – for Bishop Wilberforce was an FRS, as were a significant number of clergymen at that time. Yet the 'debate' made no impact on the media of the day, and was virtually invisible in the newspapers. As

**Was Darwin trying to disprove God?**

far as we can gather, the mathematically-trained Wilberforce was not defending fundamentalist Christianity, but pointing out the stark fact that Darwin had supplied no observed or experimental evidence for species change. But by the time the legend was crafted after 1896, both Darwin and the brilliant and intellectually-agile Wilberforce were long dead, and unable to put the record straight.

On the other hand, many Christians were inspired by Darwin's *Origin*. Darwin's correspondent, the devout Harvard College zoologist, Professor Asa



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