

## THE EFFECT OF CHARLES DARWIN ON THE ENGLISH VICTORIAN WRITER, THOMAS HENRY HUXLEY

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### Abstract

*The writing of Charles Darwin on evolution had a profound effect on the writings of some of the English Victorian writers, especially Thomas Henry Huxley. This article presents a brief summary of that effect.\*\**

### Introduction

The publication of Charles Darwin's *Origin of the Species* had a profound effect on several writers of the Victorian Period of English literature. Some of the Victorian writers were considered to have seldom been aware of their own limitations and would therefore attempt to deal with realms of thought, emotion, or behavior with which they were not fitted to deal. Examples of this would be Alfred, Lord Tennyson in poetry dealing with the slums or Matthew Arnold in his essays dealing with theology. The Victorian Age was one of floundering. The writers searched their hearts and wrote, but what they often faced was a confusion that their heads could not clarify. One point of confusion was that of Darwin's publication.

### Huxley

Thomas Henry Huxley (1825-1895) was one Victorian writer who was especially affected by Darwin's *Origin of the Species*. It was in 1859 when that work was published and the theories of science seemed for once to become comprehensible to the great mass of people. The idea of evolution, until then little known by the public, strongly reinforced the agnostic element of some writers of the age. Huxley was one of those writers who for the next decade or two made the literary and thoughtful world resound with fury. He stands for the Victorian agnostic mind.

A scientist of distinction, Huxley devoted himself largely to maintaining Darwin's doctrine and combating Christian dogma. He became a popular figure, standing for the new enlightenment. As a humanist, he did not accept such doctrines as those that deal with original sin and the fall of man. Darwin and Huxley together shocked the faithful. The designations "unbeliever" and "atheist" carried a stigma; and in Victorian society it was important not to have such designations if one expected to be accepted socially. The motivating force that drove Huxley was his feeling of animosity towards the clergy who at the time had much greater status than the scientist (Taylor, 1984, p. 365).

Huxley did not agree with all that Darwin said, but *Origin of the Species* gave him the opportunity he needed to do public battle with church authority. He made quotations that were actually deceptive arguments, assuming evolution to be proven. The publication of Darwin's book became a great event for Huxley who was to become the great champion of Darwinism.

Using excellent powers of thought and expression, Huxley explained and supported Darwin's views before various kinds of audiences. He wrote essays, he debated, he lectured. His clear and forceful presentations of Darwinism were declared by Darwin himself to be "simply perfect" (McComb, 1910, p. xii). Huxley did much to advance the cause of evolution, having become the expositor for the theory developed by his friend, Darwin. He earned himself the title of "Darwin's bulldog" (deBeer, 1974, p. xiii), and he spoiled all attempts of the Church of England to discredit evolution.

### Theism and Agnosticism

Darwin, well aware of the sharpness of his friend's power of analysis and the speed of his thought, suggested that Huxley put some of his lectures in essay form. Huxley's opinion of Darwin was one of great admiration and respect. The two men were alike in some respects; but one difference between the two was that Huxley, in spite of his uncompromising defense of evolution and his denial of divine design in nature, advocated the teaching of the Bible. Huxley was a deeply religious man but could not bear theology with its dogmatism and its clutter of "scientifically disproved assertions." Huxley took his own position when he wrote, "There is no evidence of such a being as the God of theologians," while he asserted that atheism is, on purely philosophical grounds, untenable (deBeer, 1974, p. xvii). In place of both views, he advanced the principle of agnosticism, by which he meant the subordination of belief to evidence and reason. Darwin also acknowledged himself as an agnostic. Darwin made the following statement about the Old Testament:

I had gradually come to see that the Old Testament from its manifestly false history of the world . . . was no more to be trusted than the sacred books of the Hindoos [sic], or the beliefs of any barbarian . . . I gradually came to disbelieve in Christianity as a divine revelation . . . disbelief crept over me at a very slow rate, but was at last complete. The rate was so slow that I felt no distress, and have never since doubted even for a single second that my conclusion was correct (Farrington, 1966, pp. 93-94).

He referred to such accounts as Noah's Ark as "old oriental tales" and "imaginative truth." He regarded the ennobling belief in an omnipotent God as a product of biological evolution. The effect of Darwin's work was supposed to have brought to an end the practice of using the Bible as an authority on physical and biological science.

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\*\*Editors note: Creationist material which further explores the humanities in depth may be found in the Quarterly published by the Creation Social Science and Humanities Society, 1429 N. Holyoke, Wichita, KS 67208.

In abandoning Christianity Darwin did not become an atheist. At one point he says he reverted to the theism of his father and grandfather (Farrington, 1966, p. 96). The conclusion that he was a theist was strong in his mind when he wrote *Origin of the Species*, but gradually became weaker. He finally came to the conclusion that "agnostic" would be the more correct description of his state of mind. The clash between religion and science has left its mark on our history. Thomas Huxley stated that he would rather be descended from a humble monkey than from a man who employed his eloquence misrepresenting earnest men who were wearing out their lives in the search for truth (Farrington, 1966, p. 10).

### Conclusion

Huxley, regarding heresy rather than orthodoxy as the hallmark of truth, deliberately flaunted his views. He insisted that his zeal never reduced him to the role of a mere advocate or blind partisan. He did have some reservations about Darwin's theory, but these were more than made up for by his enthusiasm in other directions. He was considered Darwin's chief agent in England. There were many who agreed with Huxley that one of the great merits of the theory of evolution was its complete and irreconcilable antagonism to that vigorous and consistent enemy of the highest intellectual, moral, and social life of mankind—the Catholic church—and not Catholicism alone, but all religion (Himmelfarb, 1959, p. 388).

The basic religious quarrel provoked by the *Origin of the Species* was between the reconcilers and irrecon-

cilables—those who believed the Origin to be compatible with Christianity and those who thought it was not. Huxley stated,

There must be some position from which the reconcilers of science and Genesis will not retreat . . . Agnostics and believers alike objected that such a god who is the final reason of everything is the scientific explanation of nothing (Himmelfarb, 1959, p. 397).

He called the question of questions for the nineteenth century—"man's place in nature" (Tillotson, 1978, p. 58). Huxley lost his faith long before he discovered the theory of evolution and apparently out of a temperamental repugnance to the idea of the supernatural.

Charles Darwin, the man who supposedly shattered the creationist views taught by the Church on the basis of the first two chapters of Genesis, greatly affected writers of the Victorian Period of English literature, and one of the most greatly affected was Thomas Henry Huxley.

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## BOOK REVIEW

*God, The Big Bang and Stephen Hawking* by David Wilkerson. 1993. Monarch Publications. Kent, England. 156 pages. Paperback Price £ 7.99.

Reviewed by Don B. DeYoung\*

Dr. David Wilkerson is one of those few with solid training in both science and theology. His Ph.D. is in theoretical astrophysics; he is a Methodist minister and currently chaplain at Liverpool University.

For creationists, the book is rather frustrating to read. On one hand, Wilkerson rightly challenges the arrogant origin pronouncements of secular science. At the same time, he greatly diminishes the literal creation message of Genesis.

Wilkerson gives very clear presentations of black holes (p. 34), the anthropic principle (p. 108), chaos theory (p. 59), and Stephen Hawking's view of cosmology (p. 86). It is rightly said that Hawking's sought-after physical "theory of everything" does not answer every question—there is still room for God. Physicist Everetts' bizarre idea that new universes are constantly forming in abundance, like a runaway chain reaction,

is also discounted. The book illustrations are unique and helpful; the writing is technically accurate.

With this hopeful beginning, the book unfortunately turns out to compromise creation, like so many others. Author Wilkerson is too saturated by science to question its conclusions. Hence he accepts the big bang (p. 141), biological evolution (p. 18), and vast ages. Wilkerson also accepts the comfortable but false view that Genesis describes the "why" (p. 127) of creation but not the "how" (p. 136). This old "Double Revelation" view manages to *undervalue* Scripture while at the same time it *overvalues* the ability of science to explain first causes. Wilkerson achieves this feat, in his mind, by concluding that Genesis is not history at all, but instead some other kind of literary form (p. 152). He uses the term "complementary accounts" for Bible and science data.

The book is not without value in understanding modern science. Dr. Wilkerson even recognizes and respects the British organization Creation Resources Trust (p. 144). To appreciate the wonderfully detailed biblical account of Creation, however, the book needs to be supplemented by creationist material. The book contains just 32 references and no index.

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