Science and Religion

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, William Paley published *Natural Theology* (1802),the text in which he expounded the theory that natural objects such as humans and animals show evidence of design. Paley presented nature as God's creation, and thus the study of the natural world as comparable to the study of the Bible, because both provided evidence for the existence of God.

Natural Theology situated nature as an important and reliable source of proof in support of the Biblical theory of creation described in Genesis. It was not until Charles Darwin's publication of *On the Origin of Species* in 1859 that the use of nature as evidence shifted from supporting Genesis to supporting evolutionary theory. The publication of Darwin's *Origin* acted as the catalyst which ignited the simmering debate between science and natural theology that was to rage across the Victorian period. However, whilst Darwin's radical text did have a profound effect on religious and scientific thought, many simply responded to his evolutionary theory by adapting Darwin's findings to fit within a Christian framework. Many people failed to understand how natural selection could work without a divine creator.

[1]1881 Caricature of Darwin's theory in *Punch*.[Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons Charles Darwin was not the only scientist to study natural history or to use natural history in support of his theory. Several years earlier, Charles Lyell had used geological findings as evidence of God's design. His most famous work *Principles of Geology*, published in three volumes from 1830-1833, suggested that the earth was shaped by slow-moving forces that were still in operation - a theory that would later become known as uniformitarianism. Lyell's explanation of a steady accumulation of change over long periods of time, evident in the present geological structure of the earth, heavily influenced the young Darwin, who had consulted Lyell's text during his scientific voyage on-board HMS *Beagle*.

The Popularisation of Science

Thomas Henry Huxley (1825-1895) was one of the first professional scientists of the Victorian era. Darwin's greatest advocate - he was known as 'Darwin's Bulldog' due to his support for the theory of evolution - Huxley coined the term 'Agnostic' to describe his own views on theology. As a professional scientist, he insisted upon reason and empirical evidence as the only means of properly knowing this world. Faith meant belief in the speculative and the unobserved, and thus was impossible for a scientist. God and the essential being of things were therefore unknown and unknowable.

Huxley presented an alternative view of science that drew upon evolutionary modes of thought. His famous 1860 debate with The Bishop of Oxford, Samuel Wilberforce, was a key moment that aided the wider acceptance of evolutionary theory.

Exhibiting Knowledge

The Victorians were fascinated by the strange new worlds that science opened up to them. Exotic flora and fauna from across the Empire poured into London on a daily basis. Specimens were collected and exhibited

in class-fronted cases, and there were spectacular displays in museums across London (including the Great Exhibition in 1851).

[2] Painting showing the interior of the Great Exhibition'The Transept from the South Gallery' by John Absolon[Public Domain], via Wikimedia CommonsNatural history, popularised by Darwin's work, was visible in the cliff faces of Dorset and the butterflies fluttering in a country garden. It was therefore far more accessible than abstract scientific theory confined to a laboratory. During the Victorian era, science had a material focus and was open to all members of the public.

Victorian science and culture was inextricably linked in the eyes of Victorians themselves. Through the study of the natural world, every individual had the potential to interact with science to some degree, and the abundance of characters that do so in Victorian fiction demonstrates the dissemination of scientific thought and procedure throughout society.

Science was central to Victorian culture, sometimes sensational, always political. The Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli declared himself 'on the side of the Angels' after Darwin's evolutionary theory positioned humans alongside apes. Satirical cartoons appeared regularly in magazines such as *Punch*, the illustrator's seizing on the theory of animal ancestry to depict Darwin's head on a monkey's body.

Visit the library section to find:

- *On the Origin of Species* [3]
- The works of Thomas Hardy, George Eliot, and Robert Louis Stevenson were all heavily influenced by scientific thought. Visit their different sections to find out more.
- The Victorian Gothic was developed alongisde scientific theories. Read the introductory essay to the topic here. [4]

Links
[1] https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File%3AMan_is_But_a_Worm.jpg
[2] https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File%3AJohn_Absolon%2C_The_Transept_from_the_South_Gallery%2C_The
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