
Darwin and religion



Activity 1: What does Darwin believe?

Subject: RE

2 x 45 minutes

Suggested preparation

Presentation:

[Darwin and religion](#)

What do I need?

[Letter 2814](#), Charles Darwin to Asa Gray, 22 May 1860

[Letter 5303](#), Mary Boole to Charles Darwin, 13 December 1866

[Letter 5307](#), Charles Darwin to Mary Boole, 14 December 1866

[Letters questions](#)

[Who's who?](#)

Darwin did not like to discuss his religious beliefs but his personal and sometimes difficult deliberations are occasionally expressed through his letters. Make a list of reasons why people today might or might not believe in religion. After reading his letters, what questions would you like to ask Darwin about his beliefs?

What do I do?

1. Read through the letters and Who's who? page and answer the letters questions.
2. In Letter 2814 to Asa Gray, Darwin states that it is hard to believe in God when there is so much misery in the world. Make a list of reasons why some people would support this view and why others would disagree. Share your arguments with the class.
3. Looking back to the letters, imagine you are able to interview Darwin. What would you ask him about his views on religion? How do you think he would reply?

Letter 2814, Charles Darwin to Asa Gray, 22 May 1860

22 May [1860]

My dear Gray,

...With respect to the theological view of the question; this is always painful to me.— I am bewildered.— I had no intention to write atheistically. But I own that I cannot see, as plainly as others do, & as I shd wish to do, evidence of design & beneficence on all sides of us. There seems to me too much misery in the world.



I cannot persuade myself that a beneficent & omnipotent God would have designedly created the *Ichneumonidae*; with the express intention of their feeding within the living bodies of caterpillars, or that a cat should play with mice. Not believing this, I see no necessity in the belief that the eye was expressly designed.

On the other hand I cannot anyhow be contented to view this wonderful universe & especially the nature of man, & to conclude that everything is the result of brute force. I am inclined to look at everything as resulting from designed laws, with the details, whether good or bad, left to the working out of what we may call chance. Not that this notion at all satisfies me. I feel most deeply that the whole subject is too profound for the human intellect. A dog might as well speculate on the mind of Newton.— Let each man hope & believe what he can.—

Certainly I agree with you that my views are not at all necessarily atheistical. The lightning kills a man, whether a good one or bad one, owing to the excessively complex action of natural laws,—a child (who may turn out an idiot) is born by action of even more complex laws,—and I can see no reason, why a man, or other animal, may not have been aboriginally produced by other laws; & that all these laws may have been expressly designed by an omniscient Creator, who foresaw every future event & consequence. But the more I think the more bewildered I become; as indeed I have probably shown by this letter.

Most deeply do I feel your generous kindness & interest.—

Yours sincerely & cordially

Charles Darwin

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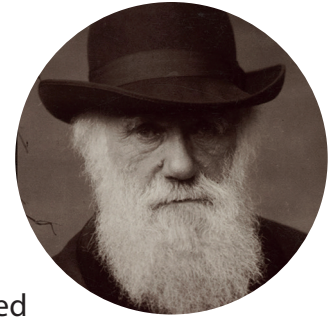
Letter 5303 Mary Boole to Charles Darwin, 13 December 1866

13 Dec 1866

Private:

Dear Sir

Will you excuse my venturing to ask you a question to which no one's answer but your own would be quite satisfactory to me. Do you consider the holding of your Theory of Natural Selection, in its fullest & most unreserved sense, to be inconsistent... with the following belief, viz:



That knowledge is given to man by the direct Inspiration of the Spirit of God.

That God is a personal and Infinitely good Being.

That the effect of the action of the Spirit of God on the brain of man is especially a moral effect.

And that each individual man has, within certain limits, a power of choice as to how far he will yield to his hereditary animal impulses, and how far he will rather follow the guidance of the Spirit Who is educating him into a power of resisting those impulses in obedience to moral motives.

The reason why I ask you is this. My own impression has always been,—not only that your theory was quite compatible with the faith to which I have just tried to give expression,—but that your books afforded me a clue which would guide me in applying that faith to the solution of certain complicated psychological problems which it was of practical importance to me, as a mother, to solve. I felt that you had supplied one of the missing links,—not to say the missing link,—between the facts of Science & the promises of religion. Every year's experience tends to deepen in me that impression.

Letter 5303 Mary Boole to Charles Darwin, 13 December 1866

But I have lately read remarks, on the probable bearing of your theory on religious & moral questions, which have perplexed & pained me sorely. I know that the persons who make such remarks must be cleverer & wiser than myself. I cannot feel sure that they are mistaken unless you will tell me so...

At the same time I feel that you have a perfect right to refuse to answer such questions as I have asked you. Science must take her path & Theology hers, and they will meet when & where & how God pleases, & you are in no sense responsible for it, if the meeting-point should be still very far off. If I receive no answer to this letter, I shall infer nothing from your silence except that you felt I had no right to make such inquiries of a stranger.

I remain

Dear Sir

Yours truly

Mary Boole



Letter 5307 Charles Darwin to Mary Boole, 14 Dec 1866

Decr. 14. 1866.

Dear Madam.

It would have gratified me much if I could have sent satisfactory answers to yr. questions, or indeed answers of any kind. But I cannot see how the belief that all organic beings including man have been genetically derived from some simple being, instead of having been separately created bears on your difficulties.— These as it seems to me, can be answered only by widely different evidence from Science, or by the so called “inner consciousness”. My opinion is not worth more than that of any other man who has thought on such subjects, & it would be folly in me to give it; I may however remark that it has always appeared to me more satisfactory to look at the immense amount of pain & suffering in this world, as the inevitable result of the natural sequence of events, i.e. general laws, rather than from the direct intervention of God though I am aware this is not logical with reference to an omniscient Deity— Your last question seems to resolve itself into the problem of Free Will & Necessity which has been found by most persons insoluble.

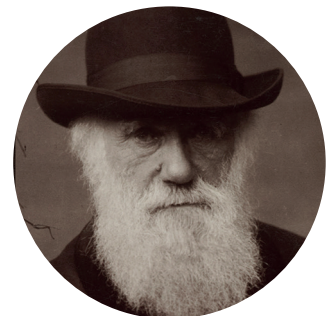


I sincerely wish that this note had not been as utterly valueless as it is; I would have sent full answers, though I have little time or strength to spare, had it been in my power.

I have the honor to remain dear Madam.

Yours very faithfully

Charles Darwin.



P.S. I am grieved that my views should incidentally have caused trouble to your mind but I thank you for your Judgment & honour you for it, that theology & science should each run its own course & that in the present case I am not responsible if their meeting point should still be far off.

Letter questions:

1. In letter 2814 to Asa Gray, what prevents Darwin believing in a 'beneficent God'? What, on the other hand, could he believe in?
2. In letter 5307 to Mary Boole, Darwin says that his opinion is not worth more than that of any other man and that his note is 'utterly valueless'. Why does he believe this?
3. Looking through the letters, summarise Darwin's state of mind concerning how he feels about religion. Why do you think he feels this way?

Darwin and religion

Who's who?

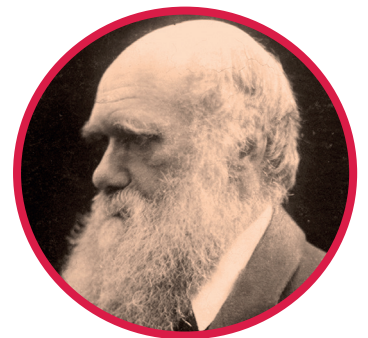
Mary Everest Boole

Mary Everest (1832–1916) was born in Wickwar, Gloucestershire. She was a self-taught mathematician and married fellow mathematician George Boole in 1855. They had 5 daughters but Mary was widowed when she was 32. She supported her children through teaching and writing about maths and science. A committed Christian, Boole wrote to Darwin seeking clarification that his theory might be compatible with her religious faith and was reassured by his response.



Charles Darwin

Charles Darwin (1809–1882) was a naturalist who established natural selection as the mechanism for the process of evolution. He joined the voyage of HMS *Beagle* when he was 22, a journey he described as the 'most fortunate circumstance in my life'. He wrote to around 2000 correspondents all over the world as a means to inform his research. Most famously he published *On the Origin of Species* in 1859, but he researched and wrote extensively on natural history throughout his life.



Emma Darwin

Emma Darwin (born Wedgwood, 1808–96) was born at the family estate of Maer Hall, Maer, Staffordshire. She was the youngest of seven children and was Charles Darwin's first cousin. She came from a family of Unitarians and freethinkers, and Emma's faith remained important to her. It was something that she explored and discussed with Darwin at length before they married, and on occasion during their married life.



Darwin and religion: Who's who?

James Fegan

James Fegan (1852–1925) was a nonconformist evangelist who opened a number of orphanages for boys. Darwin wrote to him about handing over the village reading room at Downe for his mission work and to thank him for his services to the village.

William Darwin Fox

William Darwin Fox (1805–80) was a clergyman and Charles Darwin's second cousin. He was a good friend of Darwin's at Cambridge and shared his enthusiasm for studying insects. He maintained an active interest in natural history throughout his life and provided Darwin with much information. He was the Rector of Delamere, Cheshire (1838–73) but spent the last years of his life at Sandown, Isle of Wight.



Image: Darwin Correspondence Project / Cambridge University Library CC-BY-ND 2.00

Asa Gray

Asa Gray (1810–88) was an American botanist. He wrote numerous botanical textbooks and works on North American flora. Gray was appointed Professor of Natural History at Harvard University in 1842, a post he held until his death in 1888. He was president of both the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and the American Association for the Advancement of Science. Darwin began to correspond with him in 1855, exchanging around 300 letters until Darwin's death. Gray was one of Darwin's leading supporters in America. He was also a devout Presbyterian. The longest running and most significant exchange of correspondence for Darwin dealing with the subjects of design in nature and religious belief was with Asa Gray.



Darwin and religion: Who's who?

Thomas Huxley

Thomas Henry Huxley (1825–95) was a zoologist and professor in natural history. He was appointed naturalist to the Geological Survey of Great Britain in 1855 and was president of the Royal Society of London (1883–5). He was a friend and staunch supporter of Darwin who became known as 'Darwin's bulldog' for his defence of Darwin's ideas.



John Brodie Innes

John Brodie Innes (1817–94) was a clergyman and the perpetual curate of Downe (1846–68). He was born John Innes but was required to change his name in 1861 when he inherited an estate at Milton Brodie in Scotland. He was a friend of Darwin's and they exchanged many letters about community affairs and subsequent vicars at Down. Innes supported Darwin's work, despite not agreeing with everything he wrote.

Leonard Jenyns

Leonard Jenyns (1800–93) was a naturalist and clergyman. Jenyns was vicar of Swaffham Bulbeck, Cambridgeshire (1828–49). He settled near Bath in 1850 and was founder and first president of the Bath Natural History and Antiquarian Field Club in 1855. He was a member of many scientific societies. He was brother-in-law of John Stevens Henslow (Darwin's botany professor and long-standing friend).



Darwin and religion: Who's who?

Charles Kingsley

Charles Kingsley (1819–75) was an author and clergyman. He was Professor of modern history at Cambridge University from 1860 to 1869. He was Rector of Eversley, Hampshire (1844–75) and Chaplain to the Queen from 1859-75. Kingsley took an active interest in natural history and was a supporter of Darwin's work. He believed that natural selection and natural theology could co-exist if natural selection was seen to operate with a divine purpose.



Adam Sedgwick

Adam Sedgwick (1785–1873) was a geologist and clergyman. He was Woodwardian Professor of geology at Cambridge University for 55 years. He became President of the Geological Society of London and president of the British Association for the Advancement of Science. He was a mentor to Darwin and remained in contact for many years.



Image of Charles Kingsley ©National Portrait Gallery, London. NPG 2525. CC BY-NC-ND 3.0