
Darwin and religion



Activity 3: Controversy

Subject: RE

2 x 45 minutes

Suggested preparation

Presentation:

[Darwin and religion](#)

What do I need?

[Letter 2544](#) Thomas Huxley to Darwin,
23 November 1859

[Letter 2548](#) Adam Sedgwick to Darwin
24 November 1859

[Letter 2534](#) Charles Kingsley to Darwin
18 Nov 1859

[Letters questions](#)

[Who's who](#)

The publication of *On the Origin of Species* challenged and sometimes divided Darwin's colleagues and peers in relation to their religious belief. Letters show how reactions to Darwin's work were divided. In this activity we explore whether or not Darwin's work can be compatible with religious faith.

What do I do?

1. Read through the letters, Who's who? and answer the letter questions.
2. Discuss why Darwin's theory of evolution by natural selection might have been controversial at the time.
3. Divide into 3 groups:

Group 1: Make a case for why Darwin's theory might not be acceptable to a religious faith (of your choosing).

Group 2: Make a case for how Darwin's theory might be accommodated by a religious faith.

Group 3: Make a case for how Darwin's theory might reject a religious perspective.

4. Present your argument to the class, using evidence from Darwin's letters.

Letter 2544 Thomas Huxley to Charles Darwin, 23 November 1859

23 Nov 1859

My dear Darwin

...Since I read Von Bär's Essays nine years ago no work on Natural History Science I have met with has made so great an impression upon me & I do most heartily thank you for the great store of new views you have given me



Nothing I think can be better than the tone of the book—it impresses those who know nothing about the subject—

As for your doctrines I am prepared to go to the Stake if requisite in support of Chap. IX. & most part of Chaps. X, XI XII & Chap XIII. contains much that is most admirable, but on one or two points I enter a caveat until, I can see further into all sides of this question

As to the first four chapters I agree thoroughly & fully with all the principles laid down in them— I think you have demonstrated a true cause for the production of species & have thrown the onus probandi that species did not arise in the way you suppose on your adversaries—...

...The only objections that have occurred to me are 1st that you have loaded yourself with an unnecessary difficulty in adopting 'Natura non facit saltum' so unreservedly. I believe she does make small jumps—and 2nd. it is not clear to me why if external physical conditions are of so little moment as you suppose variation should occur at all—

However, I must read the book two or three times more before I presume to begin picking holes—

Letter 2544 Thomas Huxley to Charles Darwin, 23 November 1859

I trust you will not allow yourself to be in any way disgusted or annoyed by the considerable abuse & misrepresentation which unless I greatly mistake is in store for you— Depend upon it you have earned the lasting gratitude of all thoughtful men— And as to the curs which will bark & yelp—you must recollect that some of your friends at any rate are endowed with an amount of combativeness which (though you have often & justly rebuked it) may stand you in good stead—

I am sharpening up my claws & beak in readiness Looking back over my letter it really expresses so feebly all I think about you & your noble book that I am half ashamed of it—but you will understand that like the Parrot in the story 'I think the more'

Ever yours faithfully

T H Huxley



Letter 2548 Adam Sedgwick to Charles Darwin, 24 November 1859

24 Nov 1859

My dear Darwin

I write to thank you for your work on the origin of Species.



...If I did not think you a good tempered & truth loving man I should not tell you that, (spite of the great knowledge; store of facts; capital views of the corelations of the various parts of organic nature; admirable hints about the diffusions, thro' wide regions, of nearly related organic beings; &c &c) I have read your book with more pain than pleasure. Parts of it I admired greatly; parts I laughed at till my sides were almost sore; other parts I read with absolute sorrow; because I think them utterly false & grievously mischievous—You have deserted—after a start in that tram-road of all solid physical truth—the true method of induction—and started up a machinery as wild I think as Bishop Wilkin's locomotive that was to sail with us to the Moon...

...We all admit development as a fact of history; but how came it about? Here, in language, & still more in logic, we are point blank at issue— There is a moral or metaphysical part of nature as well as a physical A man who denies this is deep in the mire of folly...

...Were it possible (which thank God it is not) to break it, humanity in my mind, would suffer a damage that might brutalize it—and sink the human race into a lower grade of degradation than any into which it has fallen since its written records tell us of its history...

I have written in a hurry & in a spirit of brotherly love. Therefore forgive any sentence you happen to dislike; & believe me, spite of our disagreement in some points of the deepest moral interest, your true-hearted old friend



A. Sedgwick.

Letter 2534 Revd. Charles Kingsley to Charles Darwin, 18 Nov
1859

Eversley Rectory,
Winchfield.

Dear Sir

...I am so poorly (in brain) that I fear I cannot read your book just now as I ought. All I have seen of it awes me; both with the heap of facts, & the prestige of your name, & also with the clear intuition, that if you be right, I must give up much that I have believed & written.



In that I care little. 'Let God be true, & every man a liar'. Let us know what is, & as old Socrates has it [GREEK CHARACTERS]— follow up the villainous shifty fox of an argument, into what soever unexpected bogs & brakes he may lead us, if we do but run into him at last.

From two common superstitions, at least, I shall be free, while judging of your book. 1) I have long since, from watching the crossing of domesticated animals & plants, learnt to disbelieve the dogma of the permanence of species. 2). I have gradually learnt to see that it is just as noble a conception of Deity, to believe that he created primal forms capable of self development into all forms needful pro tempore & pro loco, as to believe that He required a fresh act of inter-vention to supply the lacunas wh. he himself had made. I question whether the former be not the loftier thought.

Be it as it may, I shall prize your book, both for itself, & as a proof that you are aware of the existence of such a person as

Your faithful servant

C Kingsley Eversley

Novr. 18/59



Letter questions:

1. In letter 2534, why does Kingsley feel that he must give up much that he believes in? Why is this surprising and what does this say about the influence of Darwin's work?
2. Using letter 2544, describe Huxley's views of Darwin's book and what this letter reveals about the relationship between Darwin and Huxley?
3. Why does Huxley think that Darwin will suffer 'considerable abuse and misrepresentation'? What does he propose to do in Darwin's defence?
4. Using letter 2548, summarise Sedgwick's view of Darwin's book. Why do parts of it fill Sedgwick with sorrow?
5. What does Sedgwick predict would happen to humanity if the moral part of nature were broken?
6. Describe the overall tone and language of the letters. What does it say about the time that they were written?

Darwin and religion

Who's who?

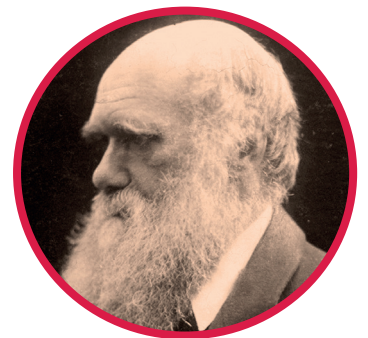
Mary Everest Boole

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