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If We All Came from Apes

How Darwin Tiptoed Around the Religious Controversy

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The world may be constantly evolving, but religious objections to the theory of evolution apparently go on forever. The Kansas restrictions on teaching Darwin's theories are only the latest attempt to rid our minds of "Darwinism."

Objections to Darwin's *The Origin of Species* erupted the moment it was published. In fact, much of the shouting had begun before Darwin wrote a word. It was in response to the enormous scientific ferment in the mid nineteenth century, nowhere more pronounced than in Victorian Britain. Many people, clergy and lay persons, felt their beliefs threatened by the new thinking.

Charles Lyell's pathbreaking *Principles of Geology*, for example, demonstrated that strata in the earth evolved over huge spans of time. Furthermore, fossils found in the various levels made clear the great antiquity of life, beginning much earlier than many Christians assumed from reading Genesis.

Darwin, a close friend of Lyell, understood the opposition to the new science. Much of it, of course, came from critical, capable scientists, but much also from persons whose religious beliefs were offended. And in many cases, as with prominent geologist Adam Sedgwick at Cambridge, the two factors combined. Understanding these pitfalls, Darwin, who had once studied at Cambridge to become a clergyman, became very cautious.

Returning in 1836 from his five-year voyage on the *Beagle*, where the seeds of his theory of evolution took root, Darwin first sketched his ideas on the subject in 1842, and more elaborately in 1844, but did not publish them. Meanwhile, he witnessed a grand furor over *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation*, written by Scotsman Robert Chambers, which broached the idea of evolution of species. Although the public loved the book, it has always been considered to be shot full of errors. Scientists ridiculed it, and the Anglican Church despised it.

The savaging of *Vestiges* surely increased Darwin's caution. He kept his head down and studied barnacles in depth from 1846-54. But finally, in 1859, he brought forth the work that shook the world, *The Origin of Species*.

Cries of praise and outrage burst forth immediately. Interestingly, many of Darwin's clerical critics accused him of flawed scientific methodology and faulty reasoning rather than blasphemy, as do many American creationists today. Some scientists and clergymen scoffed that he had not even a theory, but only hypotheses, and nothing that could ever be proven.

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The most celebrated confrontation over Darwin's theory occurred at Oxford in 1860. Like the Scopes trial many years later, it included prominent persons on both sides, with Samuel Wilberforce, Anglican Bishop of Oxford, leading the charge against evolution.

At the time, Wilberforce was feeling under siege. Not only was Roman Catholicism making significant inroads among Oxford students and clergy, but a publication entitled *Essays and Reviews*, far more offensive to the Church than Darwin's book, appeared the same year, 1859. Written by a group of liberal Anglicans, including three clergymen, it pointed out biblical contradictions and inconsistencies and quickly sold 10,000 copies, compared to 2,500 of Darwin's first edition.

From Wilberforce's viewpoint, at least Darwin had not moved God out of the picture altogether; he only offered a new view of how the Lord worked. The *Essays and Reviews* authors struck at the very basis of Christian belief. Still, Wilberforce intended to smash Darwin, and to do so at the second meeting of the British Association for the Advancement of Science at Oxford in 1860.

Defending Darwin were Thomas H. Huxley, a renowned zoologist, and Joseph D. Hooker, a prominent botanist, both names to conjure with in Victorian Britain. But where was Darwin? Wilberforce hinted broadly that he was afraid to show his face, but in fact, chronically ill by then, he left it to others to defend his ideas.

According to Hooker, between 700 and 1,000 people jammed into the library of the new Oxford University Museum. "The battle waxed hot," he told Darwin. "Lady Brewster fainted, the excitement increased...my blood boiled..."

Wilberforce asked Huxley if he was descended from an ape on his grandfather's or his grandmother's side, and Huxley, who could scarcely be heard over the din, says he replied that he would prefer an ape for an ancestor to someone who ridicules "grave scientific discussion." Hooker then told Wilberforce that he could not have read Darwin's book and that he was ignorant of the rudiments of botanical science (although the heat of the discussion focused on Darwin's implications for humans).

Suddenly a passionate voice shouted out from the crowd, "This is the truth," and a man held up a large Bible for all to see. He was Admiral Robert Fitzroy, once a captain in command of the *Beagle* who had shared his cabin with Darwin many years earlier.

The evolution controversy raged long after the excitement ebbed at Oxford. Some clergy, informed about science, supported Darwin, including Baden Powell and Charles Kingsley, both prominent in British life. But in the heat of the discussion, Huxley gave them a black eye, saying clerical geologists "are like asses between bundles of hay." They had to choose science or theology, he thundered, portraying a morally vigorous science locked in battle with a decadent church.

In his second edition of *Origin*, Darwin gave a small bow to divine providence, implying that it breathed life into humanity. Perhaps he hoped to dampen the controversy, perhaps to please his very religious wife. But above all he hoped, then and later, to show that natural selection and theology need not be inconsistent. Darwin died in 1882, by then an agnostic. His theory had already become one of the greatest intellectual forces in the world. As the Kansas Board of Education has shown, however, the controversy he began has not gone away.

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