

# What were the Christian responses to Darwin?



## Misconceptions

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Many believe that before Darwin published *The Origin of Species* in 1859, Christians as a whole maintained an entirely literalist interpretation of [Genesis](#). While the majority of Christians accepted the idea of a young Earth around the turn of the 19th century, many examples reveal this was not a strict, unanimous consensus. In fact, the idea of an old Earth had already become increasingly popular among Christians throughout the half century leading up to *The Origin of Species*.

A second misconception is that Darwin's theory of natural selection was met with immediate hostility from the Christian church, because it was not compatible with a young Earth theory. While Darwin's explanation of human origins did inspire significant discussion, the bulk of the theological controversy was not centered on the age of the Earth. More of the discussion revolved around two separate issues: the concern that Genesis seemed to describe a creation in decline instead of progress; and the broader question of reconciling Darwin's mechanism of evolution with the character of God revealed through the scriptures. For example, because Darwin's theory provides an account for the diversity of life today, it appears as though God played less of a role in the act of creation. This is still a popular topic for discussion. But following Darwin's discovery, there was relatively little concern that Young Earth Creationism was the only proper interpretation of

Genesis.

Yet a third misconception is that the arrival of Darwin's theory polarized the scientific and theological communities as they took up positions opposing each other. The reality is that it would be decades before significant scientific objections to Darwin's theory began to dissipate. Many well-informed theologians at the dawn of the 20th century objected to evolution because they were familiar with the science of their generation and were simply echoing the objections of their colleagues in the sciences.

## Pre-Darwinian Interpretations

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Darwin did not invent the idea of evolution. By the time *The Origin of Species* was published, the idea of evolution in many natural processes was already popular, and the term "development" was used in its place for discussions of society's change or the history of the solar system.<sup>1</sup> What's more, it was widely accepted that the Earth was much older than previously thought. Most of the groundwork for this understanding resulted from geological work done earlier that century. By a study of the fossil record, naturalists encouraged the major shift from the view of a young Earth to an old one. Interestingly, most Christians at the time were happy to align their understanding of scripture with this discovery, which usually took one of two mainstream views.<sup>2</sup>

The first of those views is known as the day-age theory, which claims that each of the days in the Genesis creation account refers to a much longer span of time, perhaps a geological epoch. A second interpretation is known as the gap interpretation, which claims that although God was creatively active in increments of 24-hour days, the scriptures skip over a vast period of time between God's initial creation of heaven and Earth "in the beginning" and the later Edenic creation associated with Adam and Eve. This allows for a more literal reading of Genesis that was still compatible with the scientific age of the Earth.

## Initial Responses

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In light of the popularity of views like the day-age and gap theories, Darwin's theory of evolution could be reconciled with the origins accounts in Genesis. We must note, however, that there were two separable ideas contained in Darwin's work. The first was common ancestry, the idea that all life-forms had descended over time from a much smaller number of previous life-forms, perhaps just one. This idea was compatible with a variety of different mechanism for exactly how species changed over time, including the idea that God was steadily guiding the relevant changes. Many people accepted Darwin's argument for common ancestry but supplemented that with decidedly

“non-Darwinian” explanations for how the changes occurred through time.

The other part of Darwin’s theory was *natural selection*—his proposed mechanism for how species originated and developed over time. This part of Darwin’s theory was rejected by many people for a variety of reasons. In the first place, it seemed weak and incapable of generating all the remarkable novelty in nature—eyes, wings, poisons, fingers. In the second place, it seemed random and without purpose and thus incompatible with belief in God as creator. And finally, it did not assure the progress that many believed was so clearly apparent in nature.

Darwin’s theory thus raised controversial questions that spanned both theology and science. Is there room left for God’s creative activity? Could natural selection explain how traits were inherited in the evolutionary process or even determine the cause of variation in the first place? For many, the best answer was to accept common ancestry but to supplement natural selection with other, more purposeful, mechanisms, including help from God.<sup>3</sup>

To understand the difference between the immediate response to Darwin and the vigorous opposition that arose later, we have to understand two very important characteristics of the half century that followed the publication of *The Origin of Species*:

1. The scientific community was skeptical that blind, unaided natural selection could do all the work that Darwin assigned to it. Most scientists accepted that Darwin and others had established that evolution indeed occurred, but they were inclined to see the evolutionary process as purposeful in various ways. In one view, called orthogenesis, evolution was the unfolding of prescribed antecedent patterns, and thus could easily be seen as nothing more than the mechanics of God’s creative plan. The aspect of evolution that offends most Christians is not that species can evolve but that the process is undirected, purposeless and, by implication, without meaning.
2. American Christianity’s dramatic internal struggle with modernism was a tension that opened a divide between liberal, modernist expressions of the faith and more conservative, traditional expressions. The modernists emphasized the social gospel while downplaying — and even denying — the virgin birth, resurrection and divinity of Jesus. Because the modernists were typically enthralled with science, they tended to be evolutionists, which contributed to the conservatives’ discomfort with evolution. There was no attractive theistic evolution or BioLogos perspective at this time, no leading scientists like John Polkinghorne, Ken Miller or Dr. Francis Collins who accepted evolution along with traditional Christian beliefs.

The United Kingdom provides examples of Darwin-friendly Christians, including a member of the Royal Society, William Henry Dallinger, who was a Wesleyan pastor from 1861-1880 and later was

president of Wesley College. In a presentation to the British Methodist Conference in 1887, Dallinger admitted an “unreserved acceptance of evolution.” Regarding the random variations and adaptations of the evolutionary process, Dallinger explained:

"Every instance of what such writers as Darwin are obliged to write of as ‘contrivance’, or ‘adaptation’ throughout the universe [are] but factors of related harmony in a stupendously vast interlocked ‘mosaic’ of design, which in its entirety has a ‘final purpose’ too great for man to see." <sup>4</sup>

Another British advocate of theistic evolution was Sir George Stokes. Stokes was the Lucasian Professor of Mathematics at Cambridge University from 1849 to 1903, a position Sir Isaac Newton held and professor Stephen Hawking currently holds. Although he hesitated to apply evolution to the human species, he made considerable effort to clarify that “even an extreme adoption of evolution is not inconsistent with theism” and there was no need to assume that each species arose by individual creative acts.<sup>5</sup>

Leading American biologists responded in a variety of ways, in part because there was widespread skepticism about the efficacy of natural selection. Although his religious beliefs compelled him to argue in favor of certain modifications to Darwin’s theory, Asa Gray, for example, worked to ensure that evolution by natural selection was well received in the United States.<sup>6</sup>

In response, American theologians began to ponder the compatibility of Darwin’s theory and Christian doctrine. As in the United Kingdom, American theologians were already comfortable with views like day-age or gap theories. However, their initial responses to Darwin were varied. Some viewed evolution as God’s method of creation. Others argued that since Darwin explained away the apparent design in nature, it was compatible only with atheism.<sup>7</sup> With time, even some of the more conservative theologians became comfortable with some aspects of Darwin’s theory.

As Darwin’s theory of evolution became more readily accepted by scientists at the end of the century, theologians came under pressure to take a stance. Many of them resisted evolution specifically for the human species. Some of their hesitancy was due to concerns that evolution could undermine morality, or that evolution could conflict with Christian claims that human beings are created in the image of God.<sup>8</sup>

Aside from the concerns with Darwin’s theory of evolution, by the end of the 19th century there was almost no work being done to argue directly in favor of a younger Earth. Enthusiasm for this view was largely confined to the Seventh-day Adventists, who followed the writings of their founder Ellen G. White. White, considered a prophet by the Adventists. In one passage, White claims to have seen the creation of the Earth in a vision from God. In another vision, God revealed to her

that Noah's flood produced the fossil record.<sup>9</sup> Early Adventists could thus explain the geological data found in the early 19th century with a literal reading of the flood story of Genesis 6-8. White's vision was destined to grow dramatically in its influence.

## Today's Controversy

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Between 1910 and 1915, a group of conservative Christians wrote a series of papers titled "The Fundamentals." These papers clarified the beliefs of conservative Christians' to preserve the faith from the threats of the time.<sup>10</sup> "The Fundamentals" included a commentary on evolution written by George Frederick Wright, a proponent of the day-age theory and who occasionally collaborated with Asa Gray. In his commentary, Wright put no emphasis on Noah's flood as an explanation of the geological data. "The Fundamentals" also supported the view of an old Earth. The same was even true of William Jennings Bryan, a conservative Christian who crusaded against the teaching of evolution in public schools. His involvement in the infamous 1925 Scopes Trial of Dayton, Tenn. is unfortunately remembered by the mischaracterization of Stanley Kramer's 1960 film *Inherit the Wind*. Kramer portrays Bryan as a literal six-day Young Earth Creationist, which he was not.

The modern Creationist campaign then gained traction as an anti-evolution movement, which was essentially the reemergence of the previously unpopular flood geology. By the early 1960s, the flood geology promoted by Seventh-day Adventists was becoming the mainstream belief of anti-evolutionists.

The 100th anniversary of Darwin's publication in 1959 brought with it a cry from academics to make the public more aware of Darwin's theory. Around the same time, the Soviet Union had launched sputnik, which threatened the United States' leadership in science. As a result, the government funded the Biological Sciences Curriculum Study (BSCS), which produced a series of textbooks that taught evolution without reservation.<sup>11</sup> Many conservative Christians at the time saw this as an attempt to "ram evolution down the throats of children."<sup>12</sup>

As if in response to this outcry, John Whitcomb and Henry Morris updated Adventist flood geology in their 1961 book *The Genesis Flood: The Biblical Record and its Scientific Implications*.<sup>13</sup> Whitcomb and Morris explained in detail how Noah's flood could account for the geological evidence for an older Earth. Soon after, small groups of conservative Christian scientists began to form in support of this research. They came to be known as Young Earth Creationists, and referred to their flood geology as scientific creationism. To gain acceptance in public school science curricula, they sometimes prepared editions of their books in which all references to the Bible were dropped. The movement continued to grow, and by the 1970s the term Creationism had been reduced and redefined to encompass only the beliefs that were once reserved for a minority

that consisted largely of Seventh-day Adventists.<sup>14</sup>

## Conclusion

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Although Young Earth Creationism is today's primary anti-evolution campaign alongside Intelligent Design, it has only been a popular Christian belief for the last 50 years. Just before and for 100 years following Darwin's discovery, most Christians in the United States were comfortable with the idea of an older earth, and many found harmony with the scriptures through either the day-age or gap theories. The question of the origin of human beings, especially their spiritual and moral natures, remains a hot topic.

### **Consulted Experts:**

The BioLogos Foundation is grateful for the assistance of [Ron Numbers](#) in drafting this response.

## Notes

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1. David N. Livingstone, *Darwin's Forgotten Defenders: The Encounter between Evangelical Theology and Evolutionary Thought* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans; Edinburgh, 1987), xi. See also Ronald L. Numbers, *Creation by Natural Law: Laplace's Nebular Hypothesis in American Thought* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1977).
2. Ronald L. Numbers, *Why Is Creationism So Popular in the USA?*, (Course, September 15, 2007); from The Faraday Institute of Science and Religion, Multimedia, MP3, Download Video, <http://www.st-edmunds.cam.ac.uk/faraday/Multimedia.php> (accessed 1/5/08).
3. Livingstone, *Darwin's Forgotten Defenders*,
4. *Ibid.*, 97.
5. *Ibid.*, 98.
6. *Ibid.*, xi. See also Livingstone, *Darwin's Forgotten Defenders*, chapter 3.
7. James McCosh of Princeton University is an example of the former, while Princeton Theological Seminary's Charles Hodge is an example of the latter. See Ronald L. Numbers, "Creationism History: Darwin Comes to America," Counterbalance Interactive Library, <http://www.counterbalance.net/history/history-print.html> (accessed 1/5/09). See also Numbers, *Darwinism Comes to America* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998).
8. Numbers, *Darwinism Comes to America*, 2.
9. Ronald L. Numbers, *Why Is Creationism So Popular in the USA?*, (Course, September 15,

- 2007); from The Faraday Institute of Science and Religion, *Multimedia*, MP3, Download Video, <http://www.st-edmunds.cam.ac.uk/faraday/Multimedia.php> (accessed 1/5/08).
10. Complements of Two Christian Laymen, *The Fundamentals: A Testimony to the Truth* (Chicago: Ill., 1910).
  11. Numbers, *Darwinism Comes to America*, 4.
  12. Ronald L. Numbers, *The Creationists*, 1st ed. (New York: A. A. Knopf: Distributed by Random House, 1992). As quoted by Numbers, *Darwinism Comes to America*, 4.
  13. John C. Whitcomb, *The Genesis Flood: The Biblical Record and Its Scientific Implications* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Pub. Co., 1961).
  14. Numbers, "Why Is Creationism So Popular in the USA?" See also Numbers, *Darwinism Comes to America*, 6-7.

## Further Reading

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### Lectures

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- Numbers, Ronald L. [Why Is Creationism So Popular in the USA?](#) Course, September 15, 2007. From The Faraday Institute of Science and Religion, *Multimedia*, MP3, Download Video. (accessed 1/5/08).
- — — —. ["Creationism History: Darwin Comes to America."](#) Counterbalance Interactive Library. (accessed 1/5/09).

### Books

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- Giberson, Karl W. *Saving Darwin: How to Be a Christian and Believe in Evolution*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2008.
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  - Whitcomb, John Clement. *The Genesis Flood; the Biblical Record and Its Scientific Implications*. Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Pub. Co., 1961.
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