

Darwin and Doubt and the Response of the Victorian Churches

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The Bible and Nineteenth Century Christians

Although the Victorian Era was seen as one of the high points in the practice of English Christianity, and although outwardly speaking Church attendance remained at a relatively high level, below the surface many people were beginning to express a variety of doubts about the inspiration of the Bible and about points of Christian doctrine which had been cherished for centuries. These doubts stemmed in the main from two sources: discoveries in Science and the development of Biblical Criticism. The former caused men to question the traditional explanation of world origins and the latter brought doubts regarding the traditional doctrine of the inspiration of scripture.

The main root of the problem lay in the Churches' view of the scriptures. The Church in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century held a view of the scriptures which had been taken over from Greek thought in the early Christian centuries and been further reinforced by the Reformation. They thought of God literally breathing the Scripture into the writers of the Biblical documents.

The result of this was that the Bible was held to speak authoritatively on all matters whether they related to man's relationship to God or to the scientific origins of the Universe. The ordinary Christian man and woman in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries regarded the Judaeo-Christian religion as an Historical religion. It concerned the story of God's historical acts in relation to his people. It was therefore understandable that the story of the Creation and the Fall should have been accepted as describing an 'historical event'. Thus James Ussher (1581-1656) Archbishop of Armagh, and the most learned Hebraist of his day, John Lightfoot, calculated on the basis of the biblical narrative and a bit of guess-work that the creation had taken place in 400BC, a date which began to be printed in the margin of the Authorised Version Bibles printed by University Presses from 1701 onwards. Even scientists did not question Ussher's contention until the beginning of the nineteenth century.

However, all this had begun to change by the time when Charles Darwin presented his findings to the British public in 1859 and

'higher criticism' started to cross the North Sea from the German universities. Each of these two sources of doubt therefore merits serious consideration in its own right.

The Impact of Discoveries in Science

The man who is generally credited with causing doubt in the minds of Victorian Christians is Charles Darwin whose researches and theory of evolution began to cause people to have serious questionings as to whether God had by special acts created the world and the creatures which populated it. To a large extent this may well be true but it needs to be realised that Darwin was only one in a long line of distinguished Scientists whose researches were raising crucial questions.

A number of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century Geologists were styled 'catastrophists' because they maintained that the geological record bore witness to a sequence of catastrophes each of which destroyed the animal world and each of which was followed by a new epoch which included forms of creatures at a higher level of organisation than before.

Erasmus Darwin (1731–1802), Charles Darwin's grandfather, held that 'the juvenility of the earth demonstrated that it had a beginning or birth, and was a strong natural argument evincing the existence of a cause of its production, that is of Deity'. Erasmus Darwin's great theory was 'the principle and force of improvement'. According to this the 'Great First Cause' endued the first common origin of all animals 'with the power of acquiring new parts . . . and thus possessing the faculty of continuing to improve by its own inherent activity, and delivering down those improvements by generation to its posterity, world without end.' In this quotation from *Zoonomia or the Laws of Organic Life* (1794) Erasmus Darwin clearly posited evolutionary theory well before his grandson, Charles.¹

Along with Erasmus Darwin another early influential scientist was Jean Baptiste Lamarck (1744–1829) who was best known for his theory of evolution in which he posited that an animal or plant could acquire a characteristic in its lifetime and pass it on to its offspring. Thus for example, a swamp plant might 'respond to the drying-up of its environment either by dying, or by altering its physiology in such a way as to require less water.'²

One of Charles Darwin's contemporaries was the influential geologist, Charles Lyell (1795–1875). Lyell showed that the relative ages of the various rock strata in the earth's surface could be determined by the proportion of living to extinct molluscan species³ which they contained. Lyell developed the doctrine of the gradual extinction of species and the continuous creation of new ones. Initially he did not assert that the new species simply evolved. Later however, following the publication of Charles Darwin's *The Origin of*

Species he did reach this position and in 1867 he revised his *Principles of Geology* to take account of Darwin's findings.

Charles Darwin (1809–1882) is generally acclaimed as the first person to have devised a complete and scientifically respectable theory of evolution. He was not an infidel and when Karl Marx wrote and asked if the English edition of *Das Capital* might be dedicated to him Darwin politely declined stating that he had no wish to be associated with attacks on Christianity and Theism. At the end of *The Origin of Species* Darwin maintained that he had written nothing which could shake the faith of a sincere Christian believer.⁴

Darwin spent several years of study in South America during which he observed that in a time of drought ordinary cattle survived whilst the much-prized short-jawed breed starved. He concluded that when there was competition for the food supply favourable variations permitted survival. Darwin maintained that all variations were random and that both favourable and unfavourable variations were equally as likely to occur. He used the term 'Natural Selection' to describe the way in which these variations were perpetuated.

The Challenge of Science to Christian Belief

The discoveries of Darwin and his nineteenth century scientific contemporaries posed a number of difficulties for thinking Christians. Perhaps the most immediate challenge was to the traditional doctrine of creation.

Victorian Christians were very reluctant to deny the Genesis account a literal interpretation because they felt that to do so was to lay open the possibility of similarly treating the New Testament narratives and thus denying doctrines such as the resurrection. The problem however was that a literalistic view of Genesis required the following: a timescale of just four days for the whole of the organic creation; a specific order of events of land, vegetation, marine life, land animals and man; the creation of man from the dust; the special creation of woman and finally no hint of any relationship between species, descent, modification and natural selection.

The work of Darwin and other scientists clearly posed a challenge to such literalism. It seemed immediately clear that the earth's crust had evolved over a very long period of time. Research showed that marine life was likely to have preceded land vegetation and Darwin's theory of 'natural selection' showed that there was a close relationship between species and that modification occurred and could be transmitted to succeeding generations.

These developments in Science also brought a challenge to the status of Man. The only comment Darwin made about man in *The Origin of Species* was one sentence on the penultimate page that in the light of these researches 'Much light will be thrown on the origin of man and his history.'⁵ In 1859 Darwin was somewhat reticent in

speculating on these origins. However in his later volume *The Descent of Man* published in 1871 Darwin gave explicit argument to support the evolution of man. For example, having discussed in detail the marked similarities of the human embryo to those of other animals and of the monkey in particular, Darwin wrote:

Consequently we ought frankly to admit their community of descent; to take any other view, is to admit that our own structure and that of all animals around us, is a mere snare laid to entrap our judgment.⁶

Darwin continued with an assertion that it was only 'natural prejudice' and 'arrogance' which made our forefathers declare that they were descended from demi-gods which leads us to reject this conclusion.⁷ In effect Darwin raised questions about the uniqueness of man and tended to minimise the extent of man's predicament as adumbrated in the doctrine of the Fall. Darwin's theory of 'natural selection' seemed to suggest a close relationship between species and genera and although gaps in the fossil record defied proof, many people felt there was a case to be made that man evolved rather than originated as the result of an act of special creation. Darwin's theory appeared to suggest that species were improving through the process of natural selection. In many a person's mind this seemed to imply that the human race was improving morally as well as physically; a notion which ran counter to the doctrines of Original Sin and the Fall.

Darwin's theory also brought to the fore in a new light the problem of suffering. Part of Darwin's theory of 'natural selection' was based on the notion that the fittest species survive. In *The Origin of Species* Darwin included a section entitled the 'Struggle for Existence' in which he reflected on this issue.

All that we can do, is to keep steadily in mind that each organic being . . . has to struggle for life and to suffer great destruction. When we reflect on this struggle, we may console ourselves with full belief, that the war of nature is not incessant, that no fear is felt, that death is generally prompt, and that the vigorous the healthy and the happy survive and multiply.⁸

Darwin's highlighting of this issue posed the ancient problem of evil in a new form; namely how could a God of love have created a world in which there was so much cruelty and bloodshed?

By the same token Darwin's theories began to pose a challenge to the argument from design. During the previous rationalistic eighteenth century a number of arguments for the existence of God had been developed, among them the so-called argument from design; the teleological argument. This third of the three traditional proofs of the existence of God had been set out in classic form by Archdeacon William Paley (1743–1805) who had reasoned 'There

cannot be a design without a designer'. The question which Darwin's work began to pinpoint was 'Is there evidence of design in nature?' The butterfly's wing or the human eye do not require us to presuppose a designer, according to one interpretation of Darwin, they simply developed from rudimentary beginnings in the process of evolution. Darwin in fact asserted that many of the refinements and beauty of the individual insects and animals simply happened as a result of natural selection. It was not a matter of a great designer having planned an amazing design long ago. Darwin expressed it as follows:

The old argument from design in nature, as given by Paley, which formerly seemed to me so conclusive, fails, now that the law of Natural Selection has been discovered. We can no longer argue that, for instance, the beautiful hinge of a bivalve shell must have been made by an intelligent being, like the hinge of a door by man. There seems to be no more design in the variability of organic beings, and in the action of Natural Selection, than in the course which the wind blows.⁹

Part of Darwin's theory of evolution involved the extinction of some species and the survival of others. If species were designed in such a way that they had either become extinct or been considerably modified from their original prototype, this did not appear to demonstrate strong evidence for a perfect original design or of a perfect and all-knowing, all-wise designer. Indeed a further issue arose in the minds of some over the argument from design. The existence of the world might have been thought to argue for the existence of a designer or creator long ago but it did not necessarily prove he continued to exist and was in the business of sustaining the Universe which it was asserted he had created.

The Challenge of Biblical Criticism

At the same time as scientific discovery was presenting these challenges to the Christian faith, assaults on traditional beliefs were also coming not from unbelievers but from the theologians themselves in the form of the newly emerging science of Biblical Criticism. The great heartland of this criticism was Germany whose Universities contained more chairs of divinity than the English Universities. One of the most prominent centres was Tübingen with its leading scholar Ferdinand Christian Baur (1792–1860).

In 1820 Baur published *A Hebrew Mythology of the Old and New Testaments*. In it he argued that since the earliest records of all nations were mythical why should the writings of the Hebrews form an exception? According to Baur a myth came from an age in which no written records existed and presented a seemingly historical account of events which were totally beyond the reach of verification. Such myths which dealt with the marvellous were couched in

symbolic language. The fact of mythical language, Baur asserted, was not however necessarily indicative of pre-meditated fiction or wilful falsehood. Among the more radical German Old Testament scholars was De Wette who went so far as to suggest that when the Israelites became strong and populous in their land, they had invented the covenant between God and Abraham in order to render their ancestor illustrious. In other words there was no objective substance of event in the covenant although De Wette conceded that there might have been some form of subjective reality in Abraham's mind in a dream or waking vision.

Albert Eichorn employed a similar approach to the New Testament documents. He believed that only a slender thread of that Primitive Gospel believed by the Apostles ran through the first Gospels. In Matthew he asserted that this thread was entangled in a mass of unhistorical legends. Amongst these he included the birth and infancy narratives, the details of the temptation, several of the miracles of Jesus, and the rising of the saints from their graves at the time of his crucifixion.

Perhaps the publication which caused most doubts about the reliability of the New Testament was David Frederick Strauss's *Life of Jesus* which was published in 1835. George Eliot translated the volume into English in 1848. Even though she had by this time parted from her evangelical beliefs she found much of it objectionable, especially Strauss's dissection of the crucifixion story.

In essence, Strauss (1808–74) who was clearly influenced by Baur asserted that much of the New Testament was couched in a variety of myths. The task therefore of distilling fact from fiction and of producing an accurate historical biography of Jesus was beyond the bounds of possibility. The miracles of the Virgin Birth, Resurrection and Ascension of Christ were in his view of little historical significance. In Section 144 entitled 'Concluding Dissertation' Strauss pinpointed the conclusions of his study:

The results of the inquiry which we have now brought to a close, have apparently annihilated the greatest and most valuable part of that which the Christian has been wont to believe concerning his Saviour Jesus, have uprooted all the animating motives which he has gathered from his faith and withered all his consolations. The boundless store of truth and life which for eighteen centuries has been the aliment of humanity, seems irretrievably dissipated; the most sublime levelled with the dust, God divested of his grace, man of his dignity, and the tie between heaven and earth broken . . . Thus at the conclusion of the criticism of the history of Jesus, there presents itself this problem: to re-establish dogmatically that which has been destroyed critically.¹⁰

One of those who was influenced by the first edition of Strauss's *Life of Jesus* was Ernest Renan (1823–92), a young French oriental

scholar. He had left the Church of Rome in 1845 because his studies were leading him to doubt basic tenets of the faith. Renan's starting point was that the supernatural was unreal and that miracles did not happen. So what he presented was a purely human picture of Jesus, albeit a rather sentimental one. For example, in Gethsemane Renan asked of Jesus: 'Did he remember the clear brooks of Galilee at which he might have slaked his thirst—the vine and the fig tree beneath which he might have rested—the maidens who would perhaps have been willing to love him. Did he regret his too exalted nature? Did he, a martyr to his own greatness, weep that he had not remained the simple carpenter of Nazareth? We do not know.'¹¹ One can readily see why the book has been described as a 'Gospel in Dresden China'. When Renan's book first began to penetrate the English shores many orthodox churchmen were scandalised.

Two years after Renan's book John Robert Seeley (1834–95), Professor of Latin at University College, London, produced his *Ecce Homo* (Behold the Man). There was no intention by the writer to attack orthodox Christian faith but the book's emphasis on Jesus' humanity was regarded by some as potentially dangerous. For example Seeley wrote of Jesus:

... his biography may be summed up in the words, 'he went about doing good', his wise words were secondary to his beneficial deeds ... He set the first and greatest example of a life wholly governed and guided by the passion of humanity.¹²

The Churches' Response

How then did the Victorian Churches and some of the more prominent individuals within them react to these problems and questions which had been thrown up by the newly emerging scientific discoveries and the advent of Biblical Criticism? It is probably true to say that no church totally rejected the new ideas out of hand although some of the smaller off-shoots of the Free Churches in particular remained extremely critical and reactionary. Surveying the scene on a broad canvas and in general terms it was among the Anglicans and Congregationalists whose churches were weakly and loosely governed that the initial expressions of cautious, and in some cases, open approval were heard. In contrast, the Roman Catholic Church and the Wesleyan Methodists who could control their teachers absolutely and expel them if they vacillated from official lines, showed a much more resistant attitude.

In very broad and general terms it can be said that the Churches and some of their individual adherents exhibited three kinds of response.

First, at one end of the spectrum there was a reaction of **immediate, enthusiastic acceptance**.

By and large those who reacted with immediate enthusiasm were Liberal Churchmen who felt no need to defend the literal inspiration of the Bible. Some like Charles Kingsley (1819–75) embraced Darwin's views because they simply demonstrated the precision and intricacy of the creation and 'the special providences of Him . . . whose greatness and perpetual care I never understood as I have since I became a convert of Darwin's views.'¹³ Others such as Frederick Denison Maurice (1805–72) were prepared to welcome what was an evident search for truth in which nothing appeared incompatible with God's goodness.¹⁴ Still others were happy with the new biblico-critical methods of study because they doubted the validity of the miraculous on philosophical grounds. Such was Charles Voysey, Vicar of Healaugh in Yorkshire. From 1865 to 1868 Voysey issued a series of sermons entitled *The Sling and the Stone*. In them he maintained that the whole system of Pauline theology rested on the supposed fall from perfection of Adam and Eve and that once this myth had been exploded, the system fell to the ground. Apart from the miracles he doubted the doctrine of the atonement, and even the incarnation and the trinity. After a hue and cry on the part of evangelicals and ritualists his views were eventually condemned by the Judicial Committee of the Privy Seal.¹⁵

One of the first groups to make known their general acceptance of these new ideas to the British public were a group of scholars who contributed to a volume entitled *Essays and Reviews* which was published in 1860. The seven essayists, six of whom were clergymen of the established church, were identified with the Liberal Anglican group who had been active in the Universities since the 1820s. Their individual contributions were varied but two of them were more offensive to traditional Christian views than the others.

Rowland Williams (1817–70) who was Professor of Hebrew and Vice Principal of St. David's, Lampeter, contributed 'A Review of Bunsen's Biblical Researches'. Williams wrote with approval of Bunsen's assertions that the Pentateuch was a compilation of 'gradual growth'; that Isaiah 40–56 was not written by Isaiah of Jerusalem but much later; that the Book of Daniel was not authentic history and belonged to the second not the sixth century B.C.; that the servant described in Isaiah Chapter 53 did not refer to Christ but was in all probability Jeremiah or possibly Baruch; and that the Epistle to the Hebrews was not written by Paul. These conclusions led Williams to state at one point: '. . . the Bible is, before all things, the written Voice of the Congregation' and again 'The sacred writers acknowledge themselves men of like passions with ourselves . . .'¹⁶

Henry B. Wilson (1803–88) wrote on 'The National Church' in which he gave his own views as to the purpose of the National Church. He contended for a Church with a far less dogmatic basis capable of embracing much wider sections of the nation. Wilson's

views on inspiration were particularly offensive to orthodox Christians. He pointed out that the Sixth of the Thirty-nine Articles in no way indicated that the Biblical books were 'miraculously inspired'.¹⁷ Nor, he stated, did any of the scriptural authors ever apply the term 'word of God' to any books of the Old and New Testaments.

The significance of *Essay and Reviews* was that it was a challenge to the orthodox views of nineteenth century churchmen. It represented an open acceptance of some of the findings of science and a willingness to move away from the traditionally held view of the inspiration of scripture.

The most celebrated of those who were little troubled by the new approach to the Bible was John Williams Colenso (1814–83). In 1853 he became Bishop of Natal after a period as a Fellow of St. John's College, Cambridge, followed by a Norfolk Country Parish. Whilst at Cambridge he was influenced by Maurice's Universalism. In 1861 the Bishop created great stir by his questioning the doctrine of eternal punishment in his *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* but this was nothing compared to positive uproar which resulted when he began to publish his *The Pentateuch and Book of Joshua Critically Examined* in parts between 1862 and 1879. In this volume Colenso occupied himself with the minutiae of Old Testament detail such as the great ages of the heroes of the patriarchal era and the logistical and mathematical problems associated with the temple ritual and the wilderness wanderings. In one chapter based on Joshua chapter 8 verses 34 and 35, he considered how Moses could have read all the book of the Law before all the congregation of Israel, a company he calculated on the basis of Exodus chapter 12 to be 'not much less than two millions.'¹⁸ 'Surely', he commented 'no human voice, unless strengthened by a miracle of which the scripture tells us nothing, could have reached the ears of a crowded mass of people, as large as the whole population of London.' In another discussion related to the Tabernacle Colenso considered the sacrificial duties of the priests of whom there were only three, Aaron till his death and his two sons, Eleazar and Ithamar. Just attending to the childbirth offerings of approximately 250 births a day each priest would have daily had 'to eat 88 pigeons for his own portion, "in the most holy place"'!¹⁹ Colenso summarised his conclusion on the Pentateuch by stating that 'the narrative, whatever may be its value and meaning, cannot be regarded as historically true.'²⁰

For his painstaking research Colenso's metropolitan Bishop Gray of Capetown, a tractarian conservative, deposed him in 1863.²¹ Colenso however appealed to the Judicial Committee of the Privy Seal who gave sentence in his favour in 1865. The controversy dragged on even after his death and the schism in the South African Church was not healed until 1910.²² Colenso's liberal views were

offensive to Victorians in general. He used the Zulu word for 'high God' in his translation of Jehovah and permitted polygamists to retain their several wives even after baptism.²³

The second response was one of **open hostility** on the part of the Churches towards the developments in science and biblical criticism. This opposite reaction found one or two champions célèbres, most notably Bishop Samuel Wilberforce and Charles Haddon Spurgeon. In general terms those who reacted most strongly against the new ideas were from either the tractarian or evangelical wings of Christendom.

Samuel Wilberforce (1805–73) was an outspoken and vociferous personality who had already done battle over Renn Hampden's liberal views in 1848.²⁴ He had a ready wit and was seldom happier than when debating or speaking in the public view. Samuel who developed distinctly tractarian leanings was the third son of the respected William Wilberforce of Hull whose dedication and commitment had seen the abolition of the slave trade in the British Empire. He was Bishop of Oxford from 1845–69 and was in many ways a forward thinker and reformer. However, in an article in the *Quarterly Review* Wilberforce asserted that Darwin was guilty of a 'tendency to limit God's glory in creation'; that 'the principle of natural selection is absolutely incompatible with the word of God'; that it 'contradicts the revealed relations of creation to its creator'; and that 'it is a dishonouring view of nature'.²⁵

Wilberforce appeared at a meeting of the British Association for the Advancement of Science held in Oxford one Saturday morning in June 1860. He spoke with eloquence and charm and wit in 'a stream of half-digested Science'. As had happened on previous occasions one of his jokes was unfortunate. Attempting to appeal to the Victorian sense of gallantry to the ladies Wilberforce retorted that surely it could not have been on his grandmother's side that the evolutionist claimed descent from the apes. Typically his remark evoked much laughter and loud cheers. However in the audience was the scientist Thomas Huxley (1825–95), the man who coined the word 'agnostic'. He whispered quietly into his neighbour's ear: 'The Lord hath delivered him into my hands'. Somewhat reluctantly he destroyed the Bishop stating that he would rather be descended from an ape than from 'a man highly endowed by nature and possessed of great means of influence and yet who employs these faculties and that influence for the mere purpose of introducing ridicule into a grave discussion'.²⁶ Those who had put it about before the meeting that the Bishop of Oxford would 'smash Darwin' must have regretted their over-enthusiasm.

Baptist Union opinion of Darwin's theory was reflected in an article on *The Origin of Species* printed by *The Freeman*, the main Baptist Union publication. It was urged that there was too big a gap

between classes of animals to allow the supposition of evolution by the processes of natural selection.²⁷

Church of England clergy from both tractarian and evangelical parties weighed in against *Essays and Reviews*. Legal action was taken against two of the essayists, Rowland Williams and Henry Wilson. They were both accused of denying this inspiration of scripture and Wilson was further charged with denying the doctrine of eternal punishment. The cases were long and drawn out and the end result a disappointment to conservative Churchmen. The Judicial Committee's final ruling was that the teaching of the contributors to *Essays and Reviews* was not inconsistent with the formularies of the Church of England.

Having failed at law the Church of England authorities continued their action by condemning the book in Convocation. In June 1864 Bishop Wilberforce secured a synodical condemnation in both upper and lower houses. Meanwhile Edward Pusey (1828–82), the leader of the Oxford Movement, had entered 'an unholy alliance' with Lord Shaftesbury (1801–85) and through the *Record* newspaper 11,000 Clergy and 137,000 laymen were prevailed upon to sign an address in which they affirmed their belief in the verbal inspiration of scripture and the doctrine of eternal punishment.²⁸

The Freeman was outspoken in its criticism of *Essays and Reviews*. As the paper's reviewer put it, 'The ultimate issue to which they (the essays) would lead us is very clear, viz., a rejection of all that the word of God contains, which we may happen to deem irreconcilable with the dictates of reason.'²⁹ The article concluded '... this is one of the most fascinating, and at the same time, dangerous books it has been our lot to review.'³⁰

Many other conservative clergy both evangelical and high Churchmen inveighed against the new liberalism wherever they detected it. Henry Liddon (1829–90) in his Bampton Lectures of 1866 made a sustained attack on the works of Renan, Baur and Strauss. He went on to attempt to argue that since Jesus believed Moses to be the author of the Pentateuch, David to have written Psalm 110 and Jonah to have lived in the fish anyone who did not believe these three facts would convict his Lord of error and therefore could not be a loyal Christian.³¹

Walter Hook (1798–1875) of Leeds wrote in a letter concerning *Essays and Reviews*:

If the writers had resigned their preferments they would at least have proved their sincerity, but what we object to is their obtaining an extensive hearing for their opinions from the circumstance of their being English clergymen . . .³²

William Thomson (1819–90), the evangelical Archbishop of York,

wrote of Ernest Renan's *Life of Jesus* as 'one of the greatest outrages that has ever been offered to that Name which stands upon the title page . . . the 'Away with him!' is a sentimental rhapsody of 460 pages, endurable but for the insolence of its praise, in which the supposed decadence of a moral nature is described.'³³ When J.R. Seeley's *Ecce Homo* first appeared anonymously in 1866 Lord Shaftesbury described it as 'the most pestilential book that has ever been vomited forth from the jaws of hell.'³⁴ The Roman Catholic Ultramontanes had no time for Biblical criticism and thought the Church of England's permitting it was further evidence of apostasy. Archbishop Henry Manning (1808–92), soon to be Cardinal, described the new view of nature as 'a brutal philosophy—to wit, there is no God, and the Ape is our Adam.'³⁵

Among the Free Churches, the most prominent defender of traditional orthodoxy was Charles Haddon Spurgeon (1834–92) the prince of Victorian preachers. On 1st October 1861 Spurgeon gave a lecture in his Tabernacle entitled 'The Gorilla and the Land he Inhabits'. It attracted more people than any other he had given. During his discourse in which he had a stuffed gorilla on stage Spurgeon said:

there is Mr. Darwin, who at once is prepared to prove that our great-grandfather's grandfather's father—keep on for about a millennium or two—was a guinea-pig, and that we ourselves originally descended from oysters, or seaweeds, or starfishes . . . but I, for my own part, believe there is a great gulf fixed between us, so that they who would pass from us to you (again turning to the gorilla) cannot; neither can they come to us who would pass from thence. At the same time, I do not wish to hold an argument with the philosopher who thinks himself related to a gorilla; I do not care to claim the honour myself, but anyone else is perfectly welcome to it.³⁶

Spurgeon's reason for declining to admit to a link between the gorilla and the human race was his understanding of Genesis. He continued:

Seriously let us see to what depths men will descend in order to cast a slur upon the Book of God. It is too hard a thing to believe that God made man in his own image . . .³⁷

The lecture was criticised for its popular approach but Spurgeon defended it on the ground of the people who were present: 'With an audience of 150 young men, and a considerable company of men and women of the working-class, what would be the use of dull, drowsy formality?'³⁸

Of far more lasting significance was Spurgeon's full frontal attack on his own Baptist union which resulted in what became known as the 'Down Grade Controversy'. The term 'Down Grade' was Spurgeon's

own and referred to those who were 'down grading' traditional orthodox Christianity.

On 28th October 1887 Spurgeon finally withdrew from the Union.³⁹ He gave his reasons for doing so in the November issue of *The Sword and the Trowel*. Members of his own Baptist Union were 'making light of the atonement, denying the plenary inspiration of scripture, calling the fall a fable, denying the personality of the Holy Spirit.' He concluded: 'It is our solemn conviction that where there can be no real spiritual communion there should be no pretence of fellowship. Fellowship with known and vital error is participation in sin.'

Only a handful of other Baptist Union pastors withdrew along with Spurgeon, including his own son Thomas. According to *The Freeman* only 'a fraction of the members of the Baptist Union' held the views which Spurgeon condemned.⁴⁰ At a meeting of more than a hundred ministers who had been associated with Spurgeon's own training College, two resolutions were passed, one giving support to Spurgeon's stand and the other expressing their willingness to continue to stand by the Baptist Union.⁴¹ Later, on Tuesday 13th December 1887, a Special Meeting of the Council of the Baptist Union was held and received 'with deepest regret the letter of their beloved friend Mr. Spurgeon announcing his withdrawal from the Baptist Union.'⁴²

Although the majority of Baptist Union ministers were happy to stand alongside Spurgeon in 1887, by this time a third response was beginning to emerge in most denominations.

This third response was **a cautious but general willingness to accede to some of the findings of Science and Biblical Criticism.**

In the middle and early years of the nineteenth century there were few Christians who were willing to entertain any of the findings of the new Science or of Biblical Criticism. In contrast by the end of the century there were few Christians, who were not prepared in some measure at least to appreciate aspects of these new ideas.

This steadily growing cautious willingness to accede to some of the findings of Biblical scholarship which emerged in the last quarter of the century was marked by the publication in 1889 of a significant volume of Essays under the title *Lux Mundi*. In the preface the editor, Charles Gore, wrote:

The real development of theology is rather the process in which the Church, standing firm in her old truths, enters into the apprehension of the new social and intellectual movements of each age: and because 'the truth makes her free' is able to assimilate all new material, to welcome and give its place to all new knowledge . . .⁴³

The writers of the essays were men who were convinced of the

historic Christian faith but who at the same time tried openly to grapple with the issues raised by science and criticism. They saw God's revelation of himself as progressive and regarded Genesis as poetry and parable rather than as a textbook of science. The volume was not without its critics and a number of scholars focussed their opposition on Gore's kenotic theory.⁴⁴ Nevertheless, a contemporary writer, Francis Warre Cornish remarked that the general mood had changed to a point where many of the clergy were prepared 'to make a foundation for a scientific treatment of historical and religious problems on a large scale.'⁴⁵ A.M. Ramsey's assessment was that the 'Lux Mundi School' had made it possible for many to rest in the belief that critical study and orthodox faith can go hand in hand.⁴⁶

There were other evidences of this changing attitude on the part of Churchmen. For example when Sir Charles Lyell was interred in Westminster Abbey in 1875, A.P. Stanley reflected on the growing reconciliation between science and religion in his funeral address. He said: 'The tranquil triumph of Geology once thought so dangerous, now so quietly accepted by the Church, no less than by the world, is one more proof of the groundlessness of theological panics in the face of the advances of scientific thought.'⁴⁷ A decade later Frederick Temple (1821–1902) in his Bampton Lectures on *The Relations between Religion and Science* addressed himself to the apparent collision between religion and the doctrine of evolution. He concluded: '. . . we cannot find that Science, in teaching Evolution, has yet asserted anything that is inconsistent with Revelation.'⁴⁸ On the 4th September 1887 Bishop Walsham How (1823–97) preached the sermon before the British Association in Manchester Cathedral. The Bishop asserted his personal view that 'it seems quite possible to reconcile the theory of physical evolution in the case of man's outward organism with the dignity which the fiat of the creator's will has bestowed upon the being whom He made to be a new creature in the splendid dowry of his spiritual and intellectual powers.'⁴⁹

The same widening tolerance and willingness to come to terms with the new thought was also visible among free churchmen in the closing decades of the Victorian era. The Congregationalist, R.F. Horton (1855–1934), wrote *Inspiration and the Bible* (1888) in an effort to help many non-conformists to free themselves of dictation-style theories of inspiration. Equally Robert William Dale (1829–95) wrote *The Living Christ and the Four Gospels* (1890) to try to allay the fears of many who were beginning to doubt the ground of their Christian faith. In his volume Dale asserted that controversies about the date and the authorship of the Gospels do not make faith impossible; they do not even shake it. The basis of Dale's contention was that faith in Christ is trust in a person, not belief in a Book. We believe in Christ, he asserted, not because we believe the Bible to be super-naturally

inspired, but we believe in the inspiration of scripture because we believe in Him. Dale's argument was accepted by many who read his volume but others attacked it for its subjectivity.⁵⁰

Towards the turn of the century the first signs of a shift from traditional evangelical religion were discernible within the branches of Methodism. Among the Primitive Methodists Arthur Samuel Peake (d.1929) emerged as the leading scholar in the late Victorian years. Although much respected by his connexion he eventually rejected traditionally held beliefs including the historicity of the fall, and the virgin birth of Jesus as well as the substitutionary atonement.⁵¹ Peake's Wesleyan contemporary Hugh Price Hughes who died in 1902 had no fear of Higher Criticism. For him it led to 'greater understanding of the Book of books, to deeper reverence and love for it'. In contrast William Moulton (1835-98) who was President of the Wesleyan Conference in 1891 expressed his anxiety over the effect that Biblical criticism might well have on the members of the Connexion.

I have had many an anxious thought . . . on the Old Testament critical theories. I am not anxious for myself . . . I can wait for more light and clearer vision. But I fear many will to their great loss, feel the unsettling influence of the period of suspense.⁵³

It is clear therefore that by the last quarter of the nineteenth century there was a changed attitude. It was not only individuals who were responding to the issues raised by Science and Biblical Scholarship but denominational Conferences were discussing them. All theological and ministerial Colleges were at the very least considering them and in many instances beginning to incorporate some of their findings into their preaching and teaching.

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NOTES

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- 20 *ibid.*, p.xx.
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