

Effects of Darwinism

Adapted from the Writings of H.G. Wells

**STUDENT
HANDOUTS**

HISTORY WORKBOOK SERIES

How Darwinism Affected Religious and Political Ideas

The following text is adapted from H.G. Wells’ *Outline of World History* (1920). Although Wells’ career is overshadowed by his science fiction writing, he was also a notable historian. Wells wrote his *Outline* as a criticism of the more conservative historical writing being published at the time. The *Outline* was equally popular and controversial. Read the text and thoughtfully answer the questions.

The mechanical revolution, which the growth of physical science had brought about, was destroying the ancient social classification of the civilized state which had been evolved through thousands of years. It was producing new possibilities and new ideals of a righteous human community and a righteous world order, a change at least as great and novel was going on in the field of religious thought. That same growth of scientific knowledge from which sprang the mechanical revolution was the moving cause of these religious disturbances.

Before the end of the eighteenth century, the enormous prospect of the past as existing for billions of years, which fills a modern mind with humility and illimitable hope, was hidden from human knowledge. It was veiled by the curtain of legends. The heavens were no more than a stage background to a little drama of kings.

People learnt their true position in space long before they placed themselves in time. We know how Galileo was made to recant his assertion that the earth moved round the sun. He was made to do so by the church. The church was stirred to make him do so because any doubt that the world was the center of the universe seemed to strike fatally at the authority of Christianity.

Now, upon that matter the teller of modern history is obliged to be at

- 1. According to Wells, what was destroying the ancient social classes?

It is not the business of the historian to controvert or explain these matters. The question of their ultimate significance depends upon the theologian. The historian's concern is merely with the fact that official Christianity throughout the world adopted St. Paul's view so plainly expressed in his epistles and so untraceable in the gospels, that the meaning of religion lay not in the future, but in the past. This included the idea that Jesus was not so much a teacher of wonderful new things, but was a predestinate divine blood sacrifice of deep mystery and sacredness made in atonement of a particular historical act of disobedience to the Creator committed by our first parents, Adam and Eve, in response to the temptation of a serpent in the Garden of Eden. Upon the belief in that Fall from Grace as a fact, and not upon the personality of Jesus of Nazareth—upon the theories of Paul, and not upon the injunctions of Jesus—doctrinal Christianity built itself.

This story of the special creation of the world and of Adam and Eve and the serpent was also an ancient Babylonian story, and probably a still more ancient Sumerian story. The Jewish sacred books were the medium by which this very ancient and

primitive heliolithic serpent legend entered Christianity. Wherever official Christianity has gone, it has taken this story with it. It has tied itself up to that story.

4. What other ancient Near Eastern culture featured a creation story similar to that of the Bible?

Before the end of the 18th century, the whole Christianized world felt bound to believe and did believe, that the universe had been specially created in the course of six days by the word of God a few thousand years before, according to Bishop Ussher, 4004 B.C.E. (*The Universal History*, in forty-two volumes, published in 1779 by a group of London booksellers, discusses whether the precise date of the first day of Creation was March 21st or September 21st, 4004 B.C.E. and inclines to the view that the latter was the more probable season.)

5. According to Bishop Ussher, when was the world created?

We cannot trace here the contributions of such men as Hutton and Playfair and Sir Charles Lyell, and the Frenchmen Lamarck and Cuvier, in unfolding and developing the record of the rocks. It was only slowly that the general intelligence of the Western world was awakened to two disconcerting facts: firstly, that the succession of life in the geological record did not correspond to the acts of the six days of creation; and, secondly, that the record, in harmony with a mass of biological facts, pointed away from the Bible assertion of a separate creation of each species straight towards a genetic relation between all forms of life, in which even man was included! The importance of this last issue to the existing doctrinal system was manifest. If all the animals and man had been evolved in this ascendant manner, then there had been no first parents, no Eden, and no fall. And if there had been no fall, then the entire historical fabric of Christianity, the story of the first sin and the reason for an atonement, upon which the current teaching based Christian emotion and morality, collapsed like a house of cards.

It was with something like horror, therefore, that great numbers of honest and religious-spirited men followed the work of the English

naturalist, Charles Darwin (1809-82). In 1859, Charles Darwin published his *Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection*, a powerful and permanently valuable exposition of that conception of the change and development of species. In 1871, Darwin completed the outline of his work with the *Descent of Man*, which brought man definitely into the same scheme of development with the rest of life.

8. What book did Charles Darwin publish in 1859?

The dismay and distress among ordinary intelligent people in the Western communities was great as the invincible case of the biologists and geologists against the orthodox Christian cosmogony unfolded itself. The minds of many resisted the new knowledge instinctively and irrationally. Their whole moral edifice was built upon false history, and they were too old and set to rebuild it. They felt the practical truth of their moral convictions, and this new truth seemed to them to be incompatible with that. They believed that to assent to it would be to prepare a moral collapse for the world. And so

they produced a moral collapse by not assenting to it.

The universities in England particularly, being primarily clerical in their constitution, resisted the new learning very bitterly. During the eighteen seventies and eighties a stormy controversy raged throughout the civilized world. The quality of the discussions and the fatal ignorance of the church may be gauged by a description in Hackett's *Commonplace Book* of a meeting of the British Association in 1860, at which Bishop Wilberforce assailed Thomas Huxley, the great champion of the Darwinian views, in this fashion.

9. Because Charles Darwin was British, the universities of Great Britain were much more receptive to his ideas regarding natural selection.

- a. True
- b. False

Facing Huxley with a smiling insolence, Wilberforce begged to know, was it through his grandfather or grandmother that he claimed his descent from a monkey? Huxley turned to his neighbor, and said, "The Lord hath delivered him into my hands." Then he stood before us and spoke these tremendous words, "He

was not ashamed to have a monkey for his ancestor; but he would be ashamed to be connected with a man who used great gifts to obscure the truth." (Another version has it: "I have certainly said that a man has no reason to be ashamed of having an ape for his grandfather. If there were an ancestor whom I should feel ashamed in recalling, it would rather be a man of restless and versatile intellect, who plunges into scientific questions with which he has no real acquaintance, only to obscure them by an aimless rhetoric and distract the attention of his audience from the real point at issue by eloquent digressions and skilled appeals to prejudice.") These words were certainly spoken with passion. The scene was one of great excitement. A lady fainted, says Hackett. Such was the temper of this controversy.

10. What famous religious figure challenged Thomas Huxley at a meeting of the British Association in 1860?

The Darwinian movement took formal Christianity unawares, suddenly. Formal Christianity was

confronted with a clearly demonstrable error in its theological statements. The Christian theologians were neither wise enough nor mentally nimble enough to accept the new truth, modify their formulae, and insist upon the living and undiminished vitality of the religious reality those formulae had hitherto sufficed to express. For the discovery of man's descent from sub-human forms does not even remotely touch the teaching of the Kingdom of Heaven.

Yet priests and bishops raged at Darwin. Foolish attempts were made to suppress Darwinian literature and to insult and discredit the exponents of the new views. There was much wild talk of the antagonism of religion and science. Now, in all ages, there have been skeptics in Christendom. The Emperor Frederick II was certainly a skeptic. In the eighteenth century, Gibbon and Voltaire were openly anti-Christian, and their writings influenced a number of scattered readers. But these were exceptional people. Now the whole of Christendom became as a whole skeptical. This new controversy touched everybody who read a book or heard intelligent conversation. A new generation of young people grew up, and they found the defenders of

Christianity in an evil temper, fighting their cause without dignity or fairness. It was the orthodox theology that the new scientific advances had compromised, but the angry theologians declared that it was religion.

In the end, men may discover that religion shines all the brighter for the loss of its doctrinal wrappings. But to the young, it seemed as if indeed there had been a conflict of science and religion, and that in that conflict science had won.

The immediate effect of this great dispute upon the ideas and methods of people in the prosperous and influential classes throughout the westernized world was very detrimental indeed. The new biological science was bringing nothing constructive as yet to replace the old moral stand-bys. A real demoralization ensued. The general level of social life in those classes was far higher in the early twentieth than in the early seventeenth century. But in respect to disinterestedness and conscientiousness in these classes, it is probable that the tone of the earlier age was better than the latter.

In the owning and active classes of the seventeenth century, in spite of a few definite infidels, there was probably a much higher percentage of

men and women who prayed sincerely, who searched their souls to find if they had done evil, and who were prepared to suffer and make great sacrifices for what they conceived to be right, than in the opening years of the twentieth century. There was a real loss of faith after 1859. The true gold of religion was in many cases thrown away with the worn-out purse that had contained it for so long, and it was not recovered.

11. Why did demoralization follow the spread of Darwin’s ideas?

Towards the close of the nineteenth century, a crude misunderstanding of Darwinism had become the fundamental mind-stuff of great masses of the educated everywhere. The seventeenth-century kings, owners, rulers, and leaders had had the idea at the back of their minds that they prevailed by the will of God. They really feared God, and they got priests to put things right for them with him. When they were wicked, they tried not to think of him. But the old faith of the kings, owners, and

rulers of the opening twentieth century had faded under the actinic light of scientific criticism.

Prevalent peoples at the close of the nineteenth century believed that they prevailed by virtue of the Struggle for Existence, in which the strong and cunning get the better of the weak and confiding. And they believed further that they had to be strong, energetic, ruthless, practical, and egotistical, because God was dead, and had always, it seemed, been dead, which was going altogether further than the new knowledge justified.

They soon got beyond the first crude popular misconception of Darwinism, the idea that every man is for himself alone. But they stuck at the next level. Man, they decided, is a social animal like the Indian hunting dog. He is much more than a dog, but this they did not see. And just as in a pack, it is necessary to bully and subdue the younger and weaker for the general good, so it seemed right to them that the big dogs of the human pack should bully and subdue. Hence, a new scorn for the ideas of democracy that had ruled the earlier nineteenth century found a revived admiration for the overbearing and the cruel. It was quite characteristic of the times that Rudyard Kipling should lead the children of the middle and upper-class

British public back to the *Jungle*, to learn the law, and that in his book *Stalky and Co.*, he should give an appreciative description of the torture of two boys by three others, who have, by a subterfuge, tied up their victims helplessly before revealing their hostile intentions.

12. What famous British writer employed the themes of imperialism and social Darwinism?

It is worthwhile to give a little attention to this incident in *Stalky and Co.*, because it lights up the political psychology of the British Empire at the close of the nineteenth century very vividly. The history of the last half of the 19th century is not to be understood without an understanding of the mental twist which this story exemplifies. The two boys who are tortured are bullies, and that is the excuse of their tormentors. These latter have further been incited to the orgy by a clergyman. Nothing can restrain the gusto with which they and Mr. Kipling set about the job. Before resorting to torture, the teaching seems to be, see that you pump up a little justifiable moral

indignation, and all will be well. If you have the authorities on your side, then you cannot be to blame. Such, apparently, is the simple doctrine of this typical imperialist. But every bully has to the best of his ability followed that doctrine since the human animal developed sufficient intelligence to be consciously cruel.

Another point in the story is very significant indeed. The head master and his clerical assistant are both represented as being privy to the affair. They want this bullying to occur. Instead of exercising their own authority, they use these boys, who are Mr. Kipling's heroes, to punish the two victims. Head master and clergyman turn a deaf ear to the complaints of an indignant mother. All this Mr. Kipling represents as a most desirable state of affairs. In this we have the key to the ugliest, most retrogressive, and finally fatal idea of modern imperialism—the idea of a tacit conspiracy between the law and illegal violence.

Just as the Russian monarchy wrecked itself at last by a furtive encouragement of the ruffians of the Black Hundreds, who massacred Jews and other people supposed to be inimical to the tsar, so the good name of the British Imperial Government has been tainted—and is still

tainted—by an illegal raid made by Doctor Jameson into the Transvaal before the Boer War, by the adventures of Sir Edward Carson and Mr. F. E. Smith (now Lord Birkenhead), in Ireland, and by the tacit connivance of the British government in Ireland, with the reprisals undertaken by the loyalists against the perpetrators of Sinn Fein outrages. By such treasons against their subjects, empires destroy themselves.

The true strength of rulers and empires lies not in armies and navies, but in the belief of men that they are inflexibly open and truthful and legal. So soon as a government departs from that standard, it ceases to be anything more than the gang in possession, and its days are numbered.

13. Why, according to Wells, does the work of Darwin and others discredit organized religion rather than Christianity altogether?

Answer Key

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|---|---|
| 1. Mechanical revolution | 8. <i>Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection</i> |
| 2. Answers will vary | 9. B – False |
| 3. Saint Paul | 10. Bishop Wilberforce |
| 4. Babylonians (and possibly Sumerians) | 11. People stopped believing strongly in religion, and no new moral doctrine came along to replace it |
| 5. 4004 BCE | 12. Rudyard Kipling |
| 6. Steno | 13. Answers will vary |
| 7. They argued that the days of creation were figurative, and really ages | 14. Answers will vary |

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