

# EVANGELICAL REVIEW OF THEOLOGY

VOLUME 22

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Volume 22 • Number 1 • January 1998

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## Evangelical Review of Theology

*Articles and book reviews original and selected from  
publications worldwide for an international  
readership for the purpose of discerning the  
obedience of faith*

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Published by  
PATERNOSTER PERIODICALS

# Lessons in Apologetics from The Debate at the Oxford Meeting in 1860

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This insight into the earlier debate on Creation and Evolution demonstrates the importance of thorough preparation and knowledge of the subject and an attitude of humility and grace in any such dispute. This lesson is valid in developing an apologetic in today's context. Editor

From the middle of the nineteenth century up to the present, *the theory of Evolution* has been one of the most influential theories that has made an impact on science, philosophy, sociology, pedagogy, history, psychology, religion, and so on.<sup>1</sup> *The theory of Evolution* seems to have gained undisputed sway over all theories and thoughts. To many, it is already a proved scientific fact, and revered as a form of belief. Has the long-time debate between *the theory of Evolution* and that of Creation already ended with that victory for the former through the proved facts? Indeed it was not long ago western society having guarded the Christian tradition, surrendered its predominance to *the Evolution theory* which is anti-Christian and anti-biblical. Now *the theory of Evolution* is widely accepted as the only way to explain the origin and process of the universe and life. Such a situational change (from Christian Creation to atheistic Evolution) reached its climax at *the Oxford Meeting of the British Association for the Advancement of Science* that caught the attention of so much of the world. While this tragic event was seen by many people as a clear cut victory for the Evolutionists, the theory of *Creation* seemed to be a belief stubbornly held on to in a desperate struggle by so-called fundamentalists. We, however, must not overlook the fact that this historical tragedy which brought about a victory for *Evolution* was not so much brought about as the result of a judgement based on facts and objective proofs as of many outside elements. Before the beginning of *the Debate at the Oxford Meeting*, the result was already fixed. There are a number of reasons for this.

*First*, the epochal situation of philosophy and ideology was of great advantage to the Evolutionists. Ever since the Renaissance, Europe have been filled with the fast development of science and the praise of human intelligence, while on the other hand, religious piety was weakened and biblical criticism was strengthened.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, the intensive studies on the metamorphosis and the succession of living organisms led by George de Buffon, Erasmus Darwin, Chevalier de Lamarck, E. Geoffrey Saint-Hilaire and so on had a general appeal. The only process left to the Evolutionists was how to dress it in a scientific fashion so as to prove the hypothesis in a scientific and logical way, which is the only alternative explanation of life to *Creation*.

Hence, when Darwin presented his theory to the world in an empirical and scientific way through his actual five year voyage, his theory was more than ready to be accepted. Then, the rough dispute at *the Oxford Meeting* played a role in the confirmation that *the Evolution theory* was a *fait accompli*.

*Second*, the apparent difference in the personal qualifications of the two debaters did not provide a fair ground for the debate. The result of the debate was not a reasonable

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<sup>1</sup> See the following study: Paul A. Zimmerman, gen. ed., *Darwin and Creation* (Saint Louis: Concordia Pub. Hse., 1963), *The Influence of Darwinism*, by Raymond F. Surburg, pp. 168–204.

<sup>2</sup> Colin Chaut and John Fauvel, ed., *Darwin to Einstein* (Essex: Open University Press, 1980), pp. 27–28.

and objective one which was won from a cool-headed and rational pursuit of the truth but a temporary victory is based on the abilities of two debaters. The Evolutionists of that time were brought up within the circle of the Christian culture and had a broad knowledge of *Creation*. The analysis of fundamentalism, especially, was much emphasized upon, and the Evolutionists knew thoroughly how to attack the creationists. They were experts on *the Evolution theory* who had long been preparing *the theory as a substitute for the Creation theory*. Huxley was one of the most prominent scholars at that time. A biologist well acquainted with *the Evolution theory*, he was qualified to play the role of 'Darwin's Bulldog'. On the other hand, Wilberforce not only lacked the ability for arguing with his opponent<sup>3</sup> but also was ignorant of *the Evolution theory* itself. He was merely a bishop, devoid of the scientific expertise. An oriental maxim suggests that 'if you know yourself and your enemy, you will never lose'. Accordingly, the awkward challenge of creationists against Evolutionists who were so well prepared deserved defeat. 'Pride goes before destruction, a haughty spirit before a fall'.<sup>4</sup>

Third, more professional, appropriate apologetic works, and aggressive countermeasures on the part of the followers of *the Creation theory* were not achieved even after *the Oxford Dispute*. Along with the continuous attention to and studies on *Evolution* after 1860 by such people as Gregor Mendel, Hugo de Vries, Neo-Darwinists, Neo-Lamarchianists, the entire flow of thought was influenced by the enormous premise of *the Evolution theory*.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, even in the United States which lagged a few steps behind in the areas of ideology and philosophy at that time a hard blow was given to the believers in *Creation* by the famous 'Monkey trial' in 1925. The believers of *Creation* had to oppose the evolutionists again through their professional researches however belatedly. However, this was not done. This was mainly due to lack of the self-confidence of the churches, which resulted from the decisive blow given by the Galileo Trial. In short, it was due to *the Church's fear of science*. In fact, however, the Galileo tragedy came from the churches' misunderstanding of the Bible and their enforcement of dogmas.

To explain *the Oxford match* through an analogy, the Evolutionist played the game with favourable conditions and sufficient preparation amidst ardent support. Meanwhile, his opponent, Wilberforce, was filled with arrogance, ignoring his opponent. The two representative fighters were of different weight categories. The winner was already decided even before the match had started.

What lessons does this debate give to the Christian Apologists?

First of all, Christian Apologists should not make a challenge without sufficient preparation. This does not mean a cowardly attitude in fear of defeat. Fighting is for winning. One should not take the initiative in the fight when one is uncertain of victory. When one goes to fight, one must consider the background, and the result of the fight thoroughly and must choose the appropriate time, place and other strategies for victory.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> David N. Livingstone, *Darwin's Forgotten Defenders* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1987), p. 34.

<sup>4</sup> [Proverbs 16:18](#)

<sup>5</sup> Of course, although these researches did show the opposing views and disharmonies in many parts of Darwin's Evolution theory, all their works accepted the hypothesis of Evolution.

<sup>6</sup> The detailed strategy for Christian demonstrators against the Evolutionists should not be dealt with lightly here. However, it is more effective when attacking the opponent's weakness rather than trying to prove *Creation*; it is important to reveal inconsistencies in the hypotheses used as cornerstones for *the Evolution theory*, and accordingly to demonstrate it as one of the hypotheses that only try to explain the generation and succession of the universe.

Remember the tragedy of *the Debate at the Oxford Meeting* and the '*Monkey Trial*'. Jesus taught as follows:

Suppose one of you wants to build a tower. Will he not first sit down and estimate the cost to see if he has enough money to complete it? For if he lays the foundation and is not able to finish it, everyone who sees it will ridicule him, saying, 'This fellow began to build and was not able to finish.' Or suppose a king is about to go to war against another king. Will he not first sit down and consider whether he is able with ten thousand men to oppose the one coming against him with twenty thousand? If he is not able, he will send a delegation while the other is still a long way off and will ask for terms of peace. ([Luke 14:28-32](#))

*Secondly*, the special countermeasure must be accomplished by the expert of that field. No matter how logical and powerful in arguing the Christian Apologist with abundant knowledge of philosophy or theology may be, he is unable to be an effective apologist in the special area such as physics, biochemistry, and so on,<sup>7</sup> because of his limited knowledge and understanding in that area. We should acknowledge that non-Christian professionals in such areas of expertise are very philosophical and logical at the same time. All men live according to their philosophy and logic. Non-Christian experts are also researching their studies, based on their philosophical backgrounds. In many cases, they use scientific results in their own logical way in order to support their ideology. Therefore, we need Christian Apologists who are physicists, biochemists, geologists, botanists, zoologists, and so on. We must acknowledge the fact that disputes that call for experts can determine the direction of the flow of the entire philosophical debate, though they are not easily understood by ordinary people. Apologetics, at the same time, should not be a matter of rhetoric or temporary persuasion of a certain group of people, but be an open discussion in which facts are earnestly pursued.

The situation at present is evidently different from that from the late nineteenth to the mid twentieth century. There are many Apologists who have researched *the Evolution theory* in connection with their field of expertise and have firmly believed in *Creation*. It is time for us to shake off *the obsessions of Galileo, the Oxford Meeting, and the Monkey Trial*. Let us argue with them with confidence and wisdom!

## Books Reviewed

[\*Interpreting God and the Postmodern Self: On Meaning, Manipulation and Promise\*](#)

Anthony C. Thistleton (Robert Forrest)

[\*The Fabric of Theology: A Prolegomenon to Evangelical Theology\*](#)

Richard Lints (Randall E. Otto)

[\*Remembering the Christian Past\*](#)

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<sup>7</sup> Although it is not easy to simply set boundaries of the themes or areas for this dispute, Christian Apologists must know that the number of themes which are impossible to debate based only on philosophical logic is on the increase. Until recently, time and psyche were metaphysical themes. Now significant advances in physics and biochemistry, etc. have been made related to time and psyche. Leaving aside acknowledging their results, for a dispute on an equal level at least, Christian Apologists who are experts in these fields, who can fully understand and converse in these terms, are needed.