

Darwin controversial in life and death

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Two hundred years after his birth on Feb. 12, 1809, British naturalist Charles Darwin remains controversial.

His theory of evolution became the linchpin of modern science, but [a majority of Americans believe](#) God created humans in their present form. And textbook battles rage over whether teaching about evolution ought to be balanced with alternative theories like Intelligent Design.

[The debate](#) began 150 years ago with publication in 1859 of [The Origin of Species](#). In it, Darwin argued that species were not distinct and direct creations of God but rather evolved from common ancestors.

Darwin didn't invent the idea of biological evolution. His preface cited 34 authors who believed in modification of species or at least disbelieved in separate acts of creation. His concept of natural selection—the idea that organisms that inherit favorable traits over long periods of time survive while those with unfavorable traits become extinct—created a firestorm, however, because it contradicted the popular belief in the literal biblical account of creation.

Some liberal theologians embraced natural selection as the instrument of God's design, but Bishop Samuel Wilberforce, one of the most prominent religious figures in England in the 19th century, [called it](#) “absolutely incompatible with the word of God.”

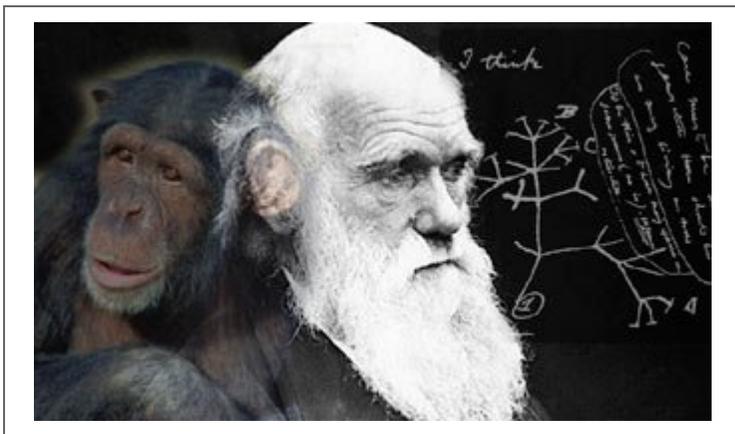
Darwin's book also divided the scientific community. Thomas Huxley, a London lecturer and naturalist who opposed church control over science, coined the term Darwinism and compared Darwin's achievement to

theories of planetary motion of Copernicus. Huxley's [ardent defense of evolution](#) earned him the nickname "Darwin's Bulldog." Scientist Richard Owen, meanwhile, inventor of the word "dinosaur," viewed ideas in *The Origin of Species* as [dangerous to society](#) . He thought Darwin's theory left too many questions unanswered and steered science away from its role of investigating God's creation.

Darwin's own views on the subject evolved during the first 50 years of his life. As a young man, he began studying for the clergy at Christ's College at the University of Cambridge. He embraced philosopher [William Paley's](#) famous metaphor of the watchmaker to argue that complexity of the universe implies an intelligent designer.

Introduced to botanist John Stevens Henslow, however, Darwin's interest shifted to natural science, and Henslow, an Anglican minister, became one of his closest friends. Darwin first began having doubts about Paley's argument from design with observations made during a five-year expedition journaled in his 1839 book [The Voyage of the Beagle](#) .

Darwin said in his autobiography he was "quite orthodox" while aboard the ship, and in fact was laughed at for quoting the Bible as an unanswerable authority on points of morality.



"I gradually came to disbelieve in Christianity as a divine revelation," Darwin said. His disbelief crept over him so gradually "that I felt no

distress, and have never since doubted even for a single second that my conclusion was correct," he explained.

Darwin's main objection was the belief that if Christianity is true, all who do not believe will be punished eternally. "And this is a damnable doctrine," he wrote.

"The mystery of the beginning of all things is insoluble to us," Darwin wrote, "and I for one must be content to remain an agnostic."

Darwin's book, however, was not overtly anti-religion. He used the word "Creator" several times, though scholars disagree about whether that was because by then he believed evolution was guided by a divine hand or simply to head off accusations that he was an atheist.

Darwin's argument was that religious dogma should not trump reason. Arguing contrary to scientific observation on religious grounds, he observed, "makes the works of God a mere mockery and deception."

"I would almost as soon believe with the old and ignorant cosmogonists, that fossil shells had never lived, but had been created in stone so as to mock the shells now living on the sea-shore," he wrote.

Darwin kept his theories about evolution to himself for a long time, because he knew they would be explosive. Seventeen years before publishing *The Origin of Species*, he made an outline of reasons not to publish that included concern that trouble-making atheists would use it for their agenda and the church would scorn him.

Darwin's health was too poor for him to spend much energy in the debate he launched, but his ideas grew into the mainstream so fast that by the time he published [*The Descent of Man*](#) in 1871, where he applied his concepts to human origins, there was little outcry.

Darwin died April 19, 1882, and was given a state funeral. He is buried in [Westminster Abbey](#) , a burial place reserved for kings, the famous and the great.