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I

Religion and Science

JOHN KENT

Introduction

The relationship between religious thought and science changed steadily in the second half of the nineteenth century. By about 1860 the accumulation of fresh information in such fields as archaeology, geology and biology was breaking down the widespread earlier nineteenth-century assumption that science and Christian orthodoxy confirmed one another on such matters as the age of the earth, the fixity of species and the special creation of man. The publication of Charles Darwin's *Origin of Species* (1859) crystallised this situation, but perhaps his later book, *The Descent of Man* (1871), mattered as much, because there Darwin showed in his usual impressive detail that one could give at least a plausible biological, strictly non-supernaturalistic account of man's moral as well as physical development. As time went on, theologians grappled with these problems, and writers as distant from one another as the American Presbyterian, Charles Hodge of Princeton (1797–1878), the Anglican bishop, Frederick Temple (1821–1902), and the Roman Catholic lay scientist, St George Mivart (1827–1900), all maintained that the historical growth of man as rational, moral and religious required supernatural intervention, however natural might have been the formation of his body. This was perhaps the last stand of one kind of orthodoxy, for at this stage the argument for special creation still depended on the acceptance of the Christian claim to the possession of a unique, final, divine self-revelation in the Bible. There was no simple pattern in what followed, but many scientists, philosophers of religion and theologians moved towards less absolute positions, and might have agreed with Harold Höffding, for example, when he wrote in 1914: 'there always remains the possibility that the great rational and causal web of interrelations which science is gradually exposing to view may be the framework or the foundation for the unfolding,

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in accordance with the very laws and forms discovered by scientific inquiry, of a content of Value. The axiom of the conservation of Value need assert nothing more and nothing other than this.¹

Ideas of development

It is sometimes said that the view that evolution and Christian doctrine were compatible had been generally accepted in British Protestantism by the mid-1880s.² The accuracy of the suggestion depends on definition. It remains doubtful, indeed, how far many Christian theologians have ever come to terms with Darwinism proper, a theory of biological evolution by means of natural selection, which accounted for local changes in organic populations by relating them to their adaptive advantages, and implied that history was neither uni-directional nor providentially directed.³ Vaguer, progressivist ideas of development, which could be traced back to Lamarck (1744–1829),⁴ and which were popularised in the United States and Britain by Herbert Spencer (1820–1903),⁵ proved more attractive to many religious writers, because they could more easily give this version of development a theistic interpretation. The concept of ‘advance’ from the simple to the more complex, which was central to Spencer’s essay on ‘Progress’ which appeared in the *Westminster Review* in 1857, came from Lamarck.⁶ This underlying confidence in the future, shown by both Lamarck and Spencer, did not conflict as much as might have been expected with the western religious tradition. This was partly because both men assumed that the final perfection of nature and society which they saw as the goal of biological and social development lay far in the future, and this was in line with the gradualism of the dominant western post-millennialism, which envisaged a steady improvement of human life without dramatic supernatural interventions until Christian history culminated in a literal millennium.⁷ On the whole, what was being accepted as ‘evolution’ in Britain in the 1880s was the combination of an optimistic, speculative interpretation of the role of the human race in history with the admission, inevitable given the steady accumulation of evidence of various kinds, that physiologically man belonged to the natural order.

Even in the 1880s, however, such acceptance might be qualified. Some theologians, for example, were not so much accepting evolution as evading the full consequences of such an acceptance. In 1885, for example, W. E. Gladstone criticised the French Liberal Protestant writer, Albert Réville (1826–1906), whose *Prologomènes de l’Histoire des Religions* (1881) had recently been translated into English under the auspices of Max Müller, for

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treating the creation narratives in Genesis as myth.⁸ Gladstone insisted on their essential veracity and claimed that natural science, by which he seemed to mean the work of Cuvier, who had died in 1832, had shown that fact ‘supported what we have fondly believed to be His word’; ‘evolution’, he said, was an idea which had long been familiar to history, philosophy and theology, and had even been present to the mind of Paul: there was no conflict between Scripture and evolution.

More professional theologians than Gladstone could be quite as unyielding. The publication of *Lux Mundi*, for example, in 1889, distressed Canon Liddon of St Paul’s, because the young Anglo-Catholic writer, Charles Gore, seemed to him to have abandoned the absolute belief in the divine inspiration of the Bible which Liddon thought was essential to Anglo-Catholicism in the tradition of John Keble.⁹ Gore had actually argued that only the biblical record from Abraham onward was substantially historical in the strict sense, a view which relegated a story like that of the Flood to the level of myth. The watchful Darwinian, Thomas Huxley, commented that if the Noachian Flood did not happen much as it was described, it should not be used to illustrate God’s way of dealing with sin. He continued:

Our age is a day of compromise. The present and the near future seem given to those happily, if curiously, constituted people, who see as little difficulty in throwing aside any amount of *post*-Abrahamic narrative, as the authors of *Lux Mundi* see in sacrificing the *pre*-Abrahamic stories; and having distilled away every inconvenient matter of fact in Christian history, continue to pay divine honours to the residue.¹⁰

Huxley meant that there might in practice be no point at which the apparent acceptance of evolution entailed any serious theological revision at all, because what was being accepted as the scientific account of the creation of man was not interpreted as providing a new, and possibly destructive, context for the biblical material; even Darwinism, supposing that to be the form of evolution which was involved, was not to be understood as affecting the *religious* status of any part of the Bible. Writers like Charles Gore were not primarily concerned about accepting evolution; they did not intend to be trapped in a position of simple opposition to natural science as such. What they were defending was a concept of revelation, whether or not they attached the idea specifically to Genesis as an account of the origins of the human race. Christianity required some theory of revelation if its characteristic tenets – divine creation; fall of man; the birth, death, resurrection and ascension of the God-Man; and the supernatural essence of the ecclesia – were to be preserved as knowledge. ‘Religion’ might make do with reasonable hypotheses; nineteenth-century orthodox Christianity, however, had to defend its claim to possession of *revealed* truth.

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This explains why Liddon in 1889 was still defending the view that the Old Testament had to be treated as a ‘Christian’ document which had the status of divine revelation in all its parts because Christ had given it his personal, divine authority. As Thomas Huxley foresaw, even if Liddon’s theological successors became more flexible, this meant only that they would concede that the Genesis narratives did not give a ‘scientific’ description of the creation; they would continue to treat them as a divinely warranted description of the state of human psychology. On the whole, scientific inquiry and Christianity’s traditional claim to the possession of the unique self-revelation of the divine simply parted company; it is significant that when a Catholic theologian like J. H. Newman (1801–90) used the idea of ‘development’, he was thinking of ‘development’ in the understanding of revelation.¹¹

Of course, the publication of *The Origin of Species* in 1859 was not the beginning of a conflict between nineteenth-century science and Christian theology. In the twenty years before this, attacks in the name of science on Christianity and on religion in general had increased steadily in Europe. Ludwig Büchner’s *Kraft und Stoff* (*Force and Matter*, English translation 1864) had appeared in 1855; Jakob Moleschott’s *Die Lehre der Nahrungsmittel* (*The Chemistry of Food and Diet*, English translation 1855) was published in 1850, and contained the famous phrase, ‘no thought without phosphorus’; Karl Vogt’s *Physiologische Briefe* were written between 1845 and 1847, and established his reputation as a polemical materialist; and Feuerbach, whose review of Moleschott’s book had contained another famous materialist epigram, ‘man is what he eats’, published *The Essence of Christianity* in 1841. Comte’s *Catechism of Popular Religion*, which was translated into English by his disciple, Richard Congreve, in 1858, straddled the two positions uneasily, because Comte wanted to derive a social religion from his ‘social physics’. The advent of Darwinism, therefore, reinforced the confidence of those for whom science was a liberating source of hope in the future of the human race and the future triumphs of the human reason. Büchner, Moleschott and Vogt all believed (like Herbert Spencer) that evolution must in the long run mean progressive improvement. Büchner, for example, wrote in his old age that

if, as was demonstrated, the essential task of humanism, or of the future development of humanity in opposition to the brutal state of nature, rests in the war against the cruel struggle for existence, or in the replacement of the power of nature by the power of reason, then it is clear that this goal must be attained above all through our seeking to bring about the greatest possible equalisation of the means and conditions under which and with which every individual has to fight in his struggle for existence or in his competition for his standard of living.¹²

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And as late as 1913 Leonard Hobhouse, first professor of sociology at the London School of Economics, said that the aim of comparative sociology was to measure the actual achievement of social progress. He concluded that (a) social development was steadily becoming less a matter of mechanical necessity and more a matter of control by purposive intelligence; (b) that the development of what he called a social mind was the condition of increasing social harmony; and (c) that control of this social mind had gone far enough to show that the possibility of a harmonious development of human life was not a dream to be dissolved by the cold touch of physical science, but a reality to which the entire story of evolution, physical, biological, mental and social led up. Religion might exist in Hobhouse's ideal community, but only as a self-consciously binding element which would serve the development of humanity.¹³

These examples from Büchner and Hobhouse illustrate the kind of liberal/socialist use of a concept of evolution to reduce theology to a minor contributory factor in human growth and progress. Religion might either wither away, or become a technique, conscious and not inevitably supernaturalist, by which masses of men, knowing that they had only this life to live, nerved themselves for advance as well as survival. Here the war between science and religion¹⁴ had petered out because religion, understood as a sociological phenomenon, that is, as a method by which the community affirmed and perhaps attained socially desirable, secular but allegedly moral ends, was being firmly subordinated to human purposes, and subjected to new varieties of reductionist explanation.

Not all scientific writers in the period went so far. Thomas Huxley, for example, certainly thought that nineteenth-century scientific advances had shown that the claims of traditional Christianity were false, but he equally came to reject the view that a properly scientific description of evolution could be made the basis of either an ethical or a religious system. By the 1890s, for instance, he was criticising the way in which Herbert Spencer himself used the concept of evolution to suggest a single, unitary system whose direction was built in, first, through a struggle for survival which Spencer thought of as sorting out and refining the primary material at the human level; and second, through a shift to a more cooperative, adaptatory process from which civilisation had gradually emerged.

Huxley, on the other hand, considered that there was a break between a cosmic process which had produced man, and a social process which, although not altogether freed from its biological environment, depended for further advance on a positive human rejection of the kind of behaviour popularly associated with 'natural selection'. Huxley wanted to replace

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Spencer's phrase, 'the survival of the fittest', with 'the fitting of as many as possible to survive'.¹⁵ At the social level, of course, Huxley did not differ as much from Spencer as this might seem to imply; he was no collectivist, as the word was then used, and was capable of alarming himself with visions of William Booth, the founder of the Salvation Army, as a demagogic British dictator. Nevertheless, he believed that further development in civilisation depended on a moralised human will, not on a passive acceptance of a cosmic process.

Spencer, however, rejected the idea that men had now to struggle against or to correct the process which had evolved them. This, he said, was to assume 'that there is something in us which is not a product of the cosmic process, and is practically a going back to the old theological notions, which put Man and Nature in antithesis'.¹⁶ He took evolution as a sociological premise, and then argued that the cosmic process itself would somehow discipline the human mind and check the unqualified struggle for existence; his own debt, not only to the eighteenth-century Enlightenment but also to the theological past came out in this clinging to the belief that the cosmic process must, as a completed whole, turn out to have been benevolent.

Darwin and The Descent of Man

Darwin's mature views on the place of man in history, as he set them out in *The Descent of Man* (1871), rejected traditional theological positions more ruthlessly than this, and much more ruthlessly than might be supposed from the number of religious writers who claimed to have accepted evolution. He subscribed to the common nineteenth-century opinion that the moral sense or conscience was the most important difference between man and the lower animals, but he advanced the proposition that 'any animal whatever, endowed with well-marked social instincts, would inevitably acquire a moral sense or conscience, as soon as its intellectual powers had become as well developed, or nearly as well developed, as in man'.¹⁷ In other words, he tried to work out an empirical natural history of ethics, in which the most important creative elements were social feelings, which he regarded as instinctive or innate in the lower animals; mental growth, because this finally involved the individual's ability to compare past and future actions; habit, because this strengthened social feelings in the individual; and the formation of language, because this made possible common opinions about behaviour. He suggested the further hypothesis that 'moral views' had actually developed in terms of a 'general good' of the community, and he defined this as 'the means by which the greatest possible number of individuals can be reared in full vigour and health, with all their faculties perfect, under the

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conditions to which they are exposed'.¹⁸ Nevertheless, this natural discovery of 'good' had its limits. Darwin emphasised that 'conscience' related to the tribe, and that murder, robbery, treachery and so forth were not regarded as crimes if committed against members of other tribes. Going further, he said:

How so many absurd rules of conduct, as well as so many absurd religious beliefs, have originated we do not know, nor how it is that they have become, in all quarters of the world, so deeply impressed on the minds of men; but it is worthy of remark that a belief constantly inculcated in the early years of life, while the brain is impressible, appears to acquire almost the nature of an instinct.¹⁹

Darwin could see no evidence that man had been aboriginally endowed with belief in an omnipotent god. In any case, 'the difference in mind between man and the higher animals, great as it is, is certainly one of degree and not of kind',²⁰ and 'a difference in degree, however great, does not justify us in placing man in a distinct kingdom'.²¹ Above all, he tried at great length to show that intelligence, speech and a sense of beauty were present in animals. 'If man had not been his own classifier, he would never have thought of founding a separate order for his own reception.'²²

When the Roman Catholic lay theologian, anatomist and zoologist, St George Mivart reviewed *The Descent of Man* in the *Westminster Review*,²³ he fiercely reasserted the orthodox position that man was separately created by God at least as far as his soul went, and said that the gulf between man and animals was no matter of degree but an abyss in kind. He argued, however, as though Darwin had supported his own thesis by saying that animals showed clear examples of rational behaviour and a moral sense which were comparable with human rationality and moral judgment, whereas Darwin only claimed that the social behaviour and inter-personal sympathy which seemed to occur among animals might be interpreted as an earlier stage of the social and moral capabilities of man. If what the animal kingdom lacked in general was intellectual development, by which Darwin meant above all the powers of reflection and speech, this did not mean that there were no traces of speech or reflection in the lower animals, and therefore (he said) one could not offer a decisive ground for making man into a separate order. Mivart replied that Darwin 'had set at nought the first principles of both philosophy and religion'. In fact, Darwin did not at all commit himself to atheism, but he did dismiss – by offering an alternative, more empirical account – the claim that man, thought of in terms of everything that was implied by 'conscience', was a special case in nature which required divine intervention. Neither logically nor emotionally was he persuaded by Mivart's statement that man differed far more from an elephant or a gorilla than these did from the dust of the earth on which they trod.

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Critics of religious orthodoxy: *Renan, Mill, Seeley, Arnold, Wallace, Haeckel*

A similar basic attitude to Darwin's to the relation of religion and science could be found in the work of such writers as Ernest Renan, Matthew Arnold, John Stuart Mill and John Seeley. For all of them science meant rational, free inquiry without recourse to the concept of the supernatural. They did not despise the imagination, but they feared a tendency in the aesthetic as well as the religious temperament to evade rational challenge, to avoid self-examination, and to appeal to the past as in itself a sufficient ground for what seemed otherwise unsupported assertions. These critics often attacked the concept of miracle. Renan and Mill were both well aware of the importance which the Roman Catholic Church attached to contemporary claims for the miraculous, such as the alleged appearances of the Virgin Mary at Lourdes in 1858; such claims mattered, because they could be substantiated, they offered evidence of supernatural intervention in historical time and space. They were also well aware that the cultural situation of Christianity had changed, that, as Renan said, 'the miracles and messianic prophecies which were formerly the basis of Christian apologetic, have become an embarrassment to it; people seek to discard them'.²⁴ Matthew Arnold echoed him: 'It is what we call the Time-Spirit which is sapping the proof from miracles – it is the *zeitgeist* itself. Whether we attack them or whether we defend them does not much matter. The human mind, as its experience widens, is turning away from them.'²⁵

Renan's use of the word 'science' always presupposed the existence of an *unscientific* ecclesiastical historian whose fundamental concern was bound to be with propaganda: 'science alone is pure . . . propaganda takes no notice of it'.²⁶ One rejected the concept of supernatural events, Renan wrote, for the same reason that one denied the existence of centaurs and unicorns: they had never been seen. Whereas the unscientific church historian accepted the idea of the supernatural as involved in the causation of historical events, for Renan it was axiomatic that 'one has only to admit the supernatural to have left science behind'.²⁷ (Similarly, J. R. Seeley, himself a historian, dismissed the historical writing of his day – *c.* 1880 – as a medley of facts, unclassified and unverified, such as excited the ridicule of the man of science.)²⁸ There was no question of an unexamined presupposition in Renan's mind; he considered that the historical evidence was not adequate to justify belief in supernatural intervention in any specific instance, such as the story of the resurrection of Jesus – 'for the historian the life of Jesus ends with his last breath'.²⁹ One finds John Stuart Mill taking the same view, even in the

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sympathetic *Three Essays on Religion* of 1874: ‘the supernatural character of the fact is always . . . matter of inference and speculation, and the mystery always admits the possibility of a solution not supernatural’.³⁰ Indeed, it was crucial to Renan’s position in *La Vie de Jésus* (1864) that a man as intelligent and spiritual as Jesus could not have believed that he had restored Lazarus to life. Renan regarded the *unscientific* church historian as incompetent in his assessment of evidence, as well as over-committed to the support of Christian conclusions.

Renan’s approach led naturally from ‘church history’ to ‘the history of religion’; in his life of Jesus he pressed the view, which was analogous to Darwin’s, that human history must be regarded as a secular whole; the history of religion ought not to be divided into Christian history, which had its own, unique supernatural truth, and the history of the non-Christian religions, which were to be thought of as having no supernatural content or authority. ‘The miracles of Mahomet have been written down as well as the miracles of Jesus . . . Do we therefore accept Mahomet’s miracles?’³¹ In fact, he said, the distinction between the two was arbitrary; and J. S. Mill agreed, instancing the way in which Protestants, who claimed that they believed in the miracles of the New Testament, refused to accept the accounts of nineteenth-century Roman Catholic miracles although (Mill said) the evidence for the truth of the nineteenth-century stories was better than that given in the New Testament.³² Mill added that scientific investigation had made it clear that if God existed he ruled the universe through secondary causes; a man who inquired into an event asked simply what was its cause, not, whether it had a natural cause. Science had left no general case for miracles, so that one had to fall back on the evidence available for any specific story. Mill dismissed the primitive Christian evidence for the biblical miracle stories as the uncross-examined evidence of extremely ignorant people, honourably credulous, but unaccustomed to draw the line between sense-perception and the imagination, and living in an age when it was commonly believed that miraculous events could be produced by both good and evil spirits. The New Testament stories, he concluded, had no standing as historical fact and were invalid as evidence for revelation.³³ It should be remembered, of course, that Mill was drawing a distinction between Christianity and religion. In the *Three Essays* he left himself the option that the evidence might fit the hypothesis that the universe was the product of a less than omnipotent creator; he also idealised the human Jesus in a fashion strange to Renan, whose portrait of Jesus was more subtle, but less noble.

One cause of the impact of science on the Victorian public as well as on the theological mind, was the constant discovery of fresh information about the

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human past, and not the least influential aspect of Darwin's writing and his ability to handle a mass of observations. Educated people, Arnold wrote, no longer took the Bible on trust, but wanted *verification*, 'and certainly the fairy-tale of the three supernatural persons no man can verify'.³⁴ Equally, of course, no verification could be offered, in Arnold's view, for the Christian attribution of personality to God; he poked fun at theologians who took for granted the existence of what he called the 'Great Personal First Cause', and who assumed that one could go straight on to discuss what such a being thought about church vestments or the use of the Athanasian Creed, both of them subjects of ecclesiastical controversy in the England of the 1870s.

Nevertheless, it was Arnold who made a positive attempt to reconcile Christianity with scientific criticism. Neither Renan nor Mill thought that anything further could be done with the Christian theological tradition, as distinct from the personality of Jesus. As for Seeley, he tried to redefine Christianity in non-supernaturalistic terms, but was baffled by the centrality traditionally given to the resurrection of Jesus, an event which he thought that those most penetrated by the modern (scientific) spirit must reject. Yet a scientific outlook as he understood it did not offer immortality, and Seeley commented sadly: 'Life becomes more intolerable the more we know and discover, so long as everything widens and deepens except our duration, and that remains as pitiful as ever.'³⁵

Arnold, however, claimed that he was giving 'a scientific account of God'.³⁶ He substituted for the concept of the Great Personal First Cause the proposition that the universe was subject to an enduring power, not ourselves, which made for righteousness. This statement could be verified (he thought) in personal and historical experience. At no point in Arnold's writings, however, did it become entirely clear why talk about 'an enduring power, not ourselves, which makes for righteousness', should be more verifiable, and therefore more scientific (Arnold's own word) than talk about 'a magnified and non-natural man', another of Arnold's summary descriptions of the Christian doctrine of a personal God.³⁷ The assertion that one's own personal moral history and that of the human race showed that the universe was on the side of righteousness was obviously more plausible to a nineteenth-century than to a twentieth-century European, but here Arnold was really exposing his own cautious version of the sense of a purposive creation which haunted so many of his contemporaries, whether they were theists or not. There were exceptions – Nietzsche, for example, who dismissed the idea of 'creation' as a survival from the ages of superstition: 'one can explain nothing with a mere word'.³⁸ Arnold thought that his own position was 'scientific' because he based his argument for religious truth on