

Reconciling Science and Religion, by Peter J. Bowler

reviewed by [Kathleen L. Housley](#) in the [June 19, 2002](#) issue

In an 1893 essay on Darwin's *The Origin of Species* T. H. Huxley wrote, "Extinguished theologians lie about the cradle of every science as the strangled snakes beside that of Hercules." Yet with the dawn of the 20th century attempts were made to breath life back into those "extinguished theologians," and to reconcile science and religion. Because there are major parallels between that time and what is occurring now, even to the use of such terms as "intelligent design" and "emergence," Peter Bowler's book is groundbreaking.

Bowler is a respected scholar known for his books on evolution, including *Charles Darwin: The Man and His Influence* and *The Eclipse of Darwinism*. Professor of the history of science at Queen's University, Belfast, Bowler can be dry, but that weakness is more than balanced by his dauntless thoroughness and evenhandedness. He is capable of cutting through arcane theological and scientific ideas with finesse and sensitivity. Because he can explain convoluted arguments while avoiding the danger of oversimplification, he is a trustworthy guide.

Spurred by their uneasiness with the materialism and determinism found in biology and Freudian psychology, many early 20th-century clerics and scholars set out to reconcile science and religion. Their efforts were predicated on the misconception that Darwinism, if not dead, was at least seriously flawed because there appeared to be no mechanism by which natural selection could occur--genetics was still only a nascent branch of biology. This allowed room for some thinkers to posit that evolution followed a divine plan culminating in the ascent of morally aware beings. Yet the work of reconciliation was done in a climate of increasing indifference to institutionalized religion, a phenomenon that continued throughout the century in Britain.

The protagonists were liberal theologians, particularly the Anglican modernists, and intellectually conservative scientists. The antagonists were conservative theologians,

rationalists and Marxists, all of whom opposed reconciliation, but for different reasons. The debate was far broader than the creationist debate in the United States. Neither inerrancy nor "young earth" ideas were issues, since many British clerics accepted a symbolic interpretation of Genesis. Instead what concerned them was the havoc that materialism and determinism seemed to play with the ideas of original sin, salvation and everlasting life.

However, every effort at reconciliation eventually failed, in part because of the rise of neo-orthodoxy in the 1930s, fueled by a deep disillusionment with the idea of progress. The spread of fascism and the intractable economic depression crushed any lingering hope that humankind was ascending in accordance with a divine plan.

Bowler analyzes not only the works of well-known religious leaders, scientists and writers, such as Julian Huxley and J. S. Haldane, but also the sermons of lesser known clerics, radio broadcasts and newspaper columns. By so doing, he balances the perceptions of the inner circle at Oxford with those of middle-class citizens, and then relates those perceptions to social movements such as eugenics.

What occurred in Britain has relevance for the current encounters between science and religion, as well as for the persistence of creationism. In fact, Bowler presents his book as a case study that can lead to understanding. He writes, "We can ask which areas of science were most amenable to becoming the basis for a new, nonmaterialistic worldview, and which were the most difficult to incorporate into the synthesis. On the opposite side, we can ask which theological positions gave the greatest leeway to those seeking a reconciliation."

Reconciling Science and Religion deserves a permanent place on the bookshelf of anyone interested in 20th-century theology. One can only hope that it will not be long before Bowler undertakes a study of the rest of the century.