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Charles Kingsley And The Book Of Nature

John C. Hawley S.J.

Stephen W. Sykes has written that theological “views are neither right nor wrong by being liberal in character. Only a church,” he argues, “which has despaired of the possibility of rational argument about theology altogether could adopt such a stance.”¹ Yet Paul Avis has gone so far as to suggest that “Anglicanism enshrines a principle of reverent agnosticism. It takes seriously the limitations of our knowledge and readily confesses that our grasp of the truth is circumscribed by mystery, a light shining in the darkness.”² From the Cambridge Platonists and Jeremy Taylor, to Bishop Joseph Butler’s *Analogy of Religion, Natural and Revealed* (1736), “the Anglican tradition [has accepted] that probability is the highest degree of certainty that we may hope to enjoy in this world. It regards the rule of faith (*regula fidei*) as a set of practical guidelines” (54). And, thus, the role of any human authority as a reliable determinant of truth must be always tentative—and, it would seem, any Anglican theology must today be seen as inevitably “liberal.”

I do not propose here to take Newman’s position and defend submission to authority in one’s profession of faith as a Christian, but to examine in some detail an important transitional figure in Anglicanism’s gradual identification with latitudinarian theology—a figure usually associated, in fact, with Newman. There is much to suggest that Charles Kingsley (1819-75) was plagued by the question of authority, and that he searched for a reliable guide or, arguably, father figure throughout his life. He was first fascinated by Newman, then by Maurice, and finally by, of all people, Darwin; rather than stake

¹ *The Integrity of Anglicanism* (London and Oxford: Mowbrays, 1978) 35.

² *Truth Beyond Words: Problems and Prospects for Anglican-Roman Catholic Unity* (Cambridge: Cowley Pub., 1985) 59.

his faith on any ecclesiastical council or even on Scripture, he seems to have sought for an even more traditional authority: that of nature.

From Butler to William Temple's Gifford lectures (*Nature, Man, and God*, 1934) a significant abandonment of natural theology has had a relativizing influence on the interpretation of "evidence" for God's design for the world and its inhabitants. This uncertainty is a given, but was not so obviously so in the nineteenth century. It was, in fact, the crucial and agonizing crisis for most reflective Victorian men and women. Frederick Denison Maurice, who is often regarded as Anglicanism's greatest theologian of the last century, struggled with this issue. Less known, however, was the more ominous role it played in the life of his most prominent disciple.

In 1848, while writing *Alton Locke*, Kingsley told his wife, Frances Grenfell, that he was considering writing no more novels and, instead, making "the symbolism of nature and the meaning of history" the subject of his studies.³ As things turned out, he did not give up fiction for philosophy; all of his novels, in fact, were published after this "decision." But his interest in finding nature's "meaning" did assume a growing importance in his life. He told his friend Thomas Cooper in 1854 that "those who fancy me a 'sentimentalist' and a 'fanatic' little know how thoroughly my own bent is for physical science; how I have been trained in it from earliest boyhood; how I am happier now in classifying a new polype, or solving a geognostic problem of strata, or any other bit of hard Baconian induction, than in writing all the novels in the world" (*LK*, 1: 380). Thus, the polemics of politics and religion that dominated his early writing gradually gave way to the polemics of teleology. His early fiction, according to G. A. Simcox, was an attempt to show how the Church of England could accommodate itself to democracy, but after the publication of *Hypatia* in 1853 "his primary object was to reconcile science and the creeds."⁴

Kingsley had been struck by the widening gap between the claims of religion and those of science, and, determining to attempt a recon-

³ *Charles Kingsley: His Letters and Memories of His Life*, 2 vols., ed. Frances Kingsley (London: Henry S. King, 1877), 1:180; cited hereafter as *LK* and incorporated into the text.

⁴ "Charles Kingsley," *Fortnightly Review* ns 21 (1877): 24.

ciliation before the breach became irreversible, told his religious mentor, Frederick Denison Maurice in 1863, "I am sure that science and the creeds will shake hands at last, if only people will leave them both alone, and I pray that by God's grace perchance I may help them to do so" (*LK*, 2: 181). Paradoxically, therefore, while opposing Darwin's refusal to accept Christian teleology, in the 1860s Kingsley became the best known Darwinian in Cambridge.⁵ This startling role for a Victorian cleric exemplifies his desire to find a middle position between the opposing camps.

But Kingsley's insistence that he found evidence in nature for Christian teleology masked doubts that he expressed only rarely and privately. In his public role he sided with Godwin (1756-1836) and Paley (1743-1805) against Bentham (1748-1832), Malthus (1766-1834), and Darwin (1809-82). The latter three, following David Hume, attempted to portray natural theology as objectively non-verifiable and, therefore, totally subjective.⁶ Privately, however, Kingsley seems largely to have agreed with this conclusion. A.J. Meadows has suggested that Kingsley resolved his doubts; what seems indisputable is that he tried to master them, and had greater success than many scientists in remaining open to a hopeful teleology. But the evidence suggests that this trust became, increasingly, a matter of faith.⁷ Accepting Christian revelation, he assumed that Christian scientists would eventually confirm his optimism in exploring the same world others considered to be "red in tooth and claw." Religious doubt has been frequently discussed in Victorian studies, but the extent of its role in the life of this most public of religious advocates has never been seriously examined.

⁵ See Owen Chadwick, "Charles Kingsley at Cambridge," *The Historical Journal* 18 (1975): 313.

⁶ See A. Dwight Culler, "The Darwinian Revolution and Literary Form," in *The Art of Victorian Prose*, ed. George Levine and William Madden (New York: Oxford UP, 1968) 228-30.

⁷ See A.J. Meadows, "Kingsley's Attitude to Science," *Theology* 78 (1975): 15-22.

Kingsley the Natural Theologian

In a note to Thomas Cooper in 1854 Kingsley makes a surprising claim: "my theological creed has grown slowly and naturally out of my physical one."⁸ From his point of view, the ability to reach the same optimistic conclusions through the parallel paths of theology and science was a wonderful, if tenuous, blessing. It had taken a long time to cement "this blessed belief," he told Cooper, and he prayed not only that others might reach a similar conclusion, but that he himself might "hold it to the end" (*LK*, 1: 380).⁹

Such a determined but defensive stance betrays the anxiety that this proponent of reconciliation felt in his own scientific and religious convictions. In a letter to his friend Dr. A. P. Stanley in 1863 he notes that he had been "brought up, like all Cambridge men of the last generation, upon Paley's 'Evidences'" (*LK*, 2: 181). William Paley and other eighteenth-century "rational theologians" argued from the evidences of design in the universe that such order could not be random or accidental, and that it pointed toward a transcendent guiding force. Kingsley's theological training, therefore, assured him that the more fully one explored the world, the more likely one would be to discover divine intent. This was the argument he advanced in *Glaucus*. "Why speak of the God of nature and the God of grace as two antithetical terms?" he had asked. "The Bible never, in a single sentence, makes the distinction. . . and if (as we all confess) the universe bears the impress of His signet, we have no right, in the present infantile state of science, to put arbitrary limits of our own to the revelation which He may have thought good to make of Himself in nature" (*G*, 75).¹⁰

⁸ In assessing Kingsley's life in 1877, Edward Howse reaches the same conclusion: the faith of this novelist-priest-scientist, Howse writes, is founded on naturalism, "to which the theological system he confessed to was an accretion more by circumstance than by genuine growth." Although this "geological" description of Kingsley's faith seems negative, the liberal *Theological Review* apparently intended it as a compliment. At the heart of Kingsley's theology, Howse claims, there was "a materialism 'more spiritual than other men's spiritualism,'" and this was the source of the power and originality in his preaching; rev. of *LK*, 14 (1877): 247-48.

⁹ In what follows I disagree with Charles H. Muller, who concludes that Kingsley was successful in this struggle; see "Spiritual Evolution and Muscular Theology: Lessons from Kingsley's Natural Theology," in *University of Cape Town Studies in English* 15 (1986) 24-34.

Scientists, however, were beginning to question the notion of searching for “divine intent.” Kingsley had been a student of Adam Sedgwick, professor of geology at Cambridge from 1818 until his death in 1873. According to Sedgwick, the chief goal of science was to “teach us to see the finger of God in all things animate and inanimate.” But, after the middle of the nineteenth century, appeals to religion were becoming much less frequent and an increasing number of British intellectuals were failing to discover “the impress of His signet” in nature.¹¹

Theologians, also, were reconsidering the very notion of religious “evidence.” Strauss’s *Das Leben Jesu* (1835, translated in 1846 by George Eliot) proposed that the general value and “truth” of the “Christian myth” superseded the need for a historical Jesus. The application of a more scientific methodology to Biblical criticism led to the publication of *Essays and Reviews* in 1860, which asserted that revelation continued within each individual and did not depend upon the historicity of the Bible. But Kingsley countered that the “unique element” of the Bible “depends on the truth of the Bible story.” He did seem to concede that verification of that truth rested not on scientific dissection but upon faith (*LK*, 2: 183).¹²

The disturbing ideas expressed by such scientists and theologians made nineteenth-century believers fear that science and faith were becoming incompatible. Many concluded that Paley’s natural theology or “rational religion” was convincing only subsequent to faith; that is, one was no longer driven inescapably by nature’s design to conclude

¹⁰ In his review of *The Water Babies*, William Clark suggests that it, too, proposes that “Nature and Grace, and Law, and Conscience, and Providence [when rightly seen] are all harmonious.” *Canadian Magazine* 1 (1893): 377. Clark gave Kingsley an early version of this interpretation in 1870, and Kingsley assured him: “From beginning to end, I desire not one word more or less as regards my meaning.”

¹¹ As early as 1834 Samuel C. Wilks, editor of the *Christian Observer*, wrote that “a large number of geologists are, we fear, infidels—or at least sceptics.” 34:207–8. Some scientists like Charles Lyell (1797–1875) determined to separate science from Biblical authority; see Dean, 114–15, and Jerome Hamilton Buckley, *The Triumph of Time: A Study of the Victorian Concepts of Time, History, Progress, and Decadence* (Cambridge: Belknap P of Harvard UP, 1966) 43–52.

¹² He tempered his advocacy of scientific observation with metaphysics, noting in *The Water Babies*, “the most wonderful and the strongest things in the world, you know, are just the things which no one can see” (*WB*, Ch. 2, 54).

that there was a God. Instead, having concluded that there was a designer, one looked for evidence of his plan in his handiwork.¹³

These controversies played a major role in Kingsley's decision to serve as a mediator between scientists and traditional believers. His opening volley was *Glaucus*, in which he confidently proclaimed that

there were a few. . . who labored on with a noble recklessness, determined to speak the thing which they had seen, and neither more nor less, sure that God could take better care than they of His own everlasting truth; and now they have conquered; the facts which were twenty years ago denounced as contrary to Revelation, are at last accepted not merely as consonant with, but as corroborative thereof; and sound practical geologists, like Hugh Miller, in his 'Footprints of the Creator,' and Professor Sedgwick, in the invaluable notes to his 'Discourse on the Studies of Cambridge,' are wielding in defense of Christianity the very science which was faithlessly and cowardly expected to subvert it. (*G*, 13)

It is important to note that the two geologists he refers to are "safe," strong proponents of natural theology.¹⁴ Sedgwick, who had the reputation of being a warm and happy minister and scientist, became fierce against anyone who implied that science would contradict scripture.¹⁵ He brutally dismissed Chambers's *Vestiges of Creation* as "ignorant, superficial and pernicious," and found Darwin's *Origin of Species* even more offensive, since it was "clever, and calmly written. . . . the system of the author of the *Vestiges* stripped of his ignorant absurdities."¹⁶

As both scientist and theologian, Kingsley offered advice that was strictly in line with traditional natural theology. "Every leaf," he wrote, is a fragment of "a once harmonious world" that God will eventually

¹³ Owen Chadwick, *The Secularization of the European Mind in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1975) 178–88.

¹⁴ In 1845 Sedgwick told Miller that he had been delighted by his *The Old Red Sandstone* (1841), a traditional reading of nature that Kingsley praised in both *Glaucus* and *Town Geology: Sedgwick*, 2:89.

¹⁵ *The Life and Letters of Adam Sedgwick*, ed. John Willis Clark and Thomas McKenny Hughs, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1890) 2: 411–12. In *Glaucus* Kingsley agreed with his former teacher's skeptical reaction to the development of species, and stressed the personal nature of the Creator (*G*, 70).

¹⁶ Nonetheless, he always maintained an honored place in the scientific community; David L. Hull, *Darwin and His Critics: The Reception of Darwin's Theory of Evolution by the Scientific Community* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1973) 166–70.

restore (*LK*, 1: 72). In 1856, he wrote to Thomas Cooper and twice advised him to “stick stoutly by old Paley” (*LK*, 1: 385). For a sermon Cooper was about to give, Kingsley encouraged him to present the “positive side,” since “to me the inductive argument from design (Paley’s watch), must carry conviction to every unprejudiced mind; as a fact, it has done so in every age and clime, to 999/1000 of the human race, an inductive proof in time, of its being a sound argument” (*LK*, 1: 389). Cooper had earlier advocated Strauss’s theories and had preached in favor of them to working men; he thus had a great deal of skepticism to overcome before he could bring himself to find God in nature. Faced with someone “on the fence,” Kingsley’s advice to Cooper reflects his decision that the inductive method was dangerous to one’s faith unless one were a trained scientist. Despite his explicit praise for Francis Bacon’s approach, Kingsley’s emotions taught him that deduction could be a safer guide in the spiritual life.¹⁷

During the mid-50’s, however, when he commenced his scientific writings, Kingsley began privately to question the findings of Paley and others. In 1856 he confided his doubts to Maurice, his spiritual guide. His words seem to make explicit reference to the difficulties Tennyson had described in *In Memoriam* (LV-LVI) six years before, and reveal that Kingsley, no less than many scientists of his acquaintance, had a difficult time learning much about God through the observation of nature:

My dear Master, I have long ago found out how little I can discover about God’s absolute love, or absolute righteousness, from a universe in which everything is eternally *eating* everything. . . .—unless interpreted by moral laws which are in oneself already, and in which one has often to trust against all appearances, and cry out of the lowest deep (as I have had to do)—Thou art not Siva the destroyer. . . . But beetles and zoophytes never whispered *that* to me. Any more than the study of nature did to * * * or to Cuvier

¹⁷ In 1842 he had recommended that his wife, Frances Grenfell, study nature, but not scientifically: it would take too long to reap any moral benefit from such a study, he told her, and “superficial physical science is the devil’s spade.” Instead, he suggested that she use the things of nature “as allegories and examples from whence moral reflections may be drawn.” “Do not study matter for its own sake, but as the countenance of God”; in all her investigations he recommended that she think little and use the senses much: she would thereby learn that not all reality is perceptible by the senses alone (*LK*, 1: 88–90).

himself. It can teach no *moral theology*. It may unteach it, if the roots of moral theology be not already healthy and deep in the mind. (*LK*, 1:486)

He confessed that he had only hinted at these private concerns in his 1855 publication, *Glaucus*, because too many of his readers would have “interpreted it as an iteration of the old lie that science is dangerous to orthodoxy.”¹⁸

As intrigued as he was by science, therefore, he identified himself as a public advocate for Christianity, and clearly saw the dilemma the new scientific theories posed: “They find that now they have got rid of an interfering God—a master magician, as I call it—they have to choose between the absolute empire of accident, and a lively, immanent, ever-working God” (*LK*, 2: 171). Nonetheless, he continued to hope that science, like history, would ultimately “unmask” the physical world for theology, and suggested that theologians, in turn, needed to turn their attention to these “down-to-earth” issues.¹⁹ As he noted in 1871 at Sion College in a lecture entitled “The Theology of the Future,” “it is most important that natural theology should, in every age, keep pace with doctrinal or ecclesiastical theology” (*LK*, 2: 346). He recognized that it could not “keep pace” if clergymen remained ignorant of scientific questions.

With the publication of *The Water Babies* in 1863 Kingsley made his most attractive presentation of his argument that all scientific explanations of reality must be placed in the larger context of Christian revelation. The story of little Tom and his life as a waterbaby is clearly set in a world of controversial ideas, but its principal impact is meant to be moral rather than scientifically contentious. Kingsley told Maurice, almost defensively, that “if I have wrapped up my parable in seeming Tom-fooleries, it is because so only could I get the pill

¹⁸ The reliance upon natural theology in *Glaucus* is much less conspicuous in a late work, *Town Geology* (1872), which has greater pretensions to being a strict scientific study.

¹⁹ In this emphasis he was speaking as a true son of Cambridge. As Susan F. Cannon remarks of the “Cambridge Apostles,” “Intense Trinity undergraduates had their religious crises not over the Real Presence or the Apostolic Succession, but over the application of Niebuhr’s anti-mythical methods to the Bible and to Christian tradition generally. They worried not over early church councils but over natural science, natural theology, and Coleridge’s distrust of natural theology.” *Science in Culture: The Early Victorian Period* (New York: Dawson and Science History Publications, 1978) 48–49.

swallowed by a generation who are not believing with anything like their whole heart, in the Living God." The message he hoped the story would convey, one which he aimed at scientists and "laity" alike, was that "there is a quite miraculous and divine element underlying all physical nature" (*LK*, 2: 137). Without offering greater clarity than this mystical reading of nature, *The Water Babies* embodies the central tenet of natural theology.

Like many of his contemporaries, Kingsley did not see that the findings of science had yet justified such an untroubled belief that a "divine element" did, in fact, underlie physical nature. But, in an effort to keep the door open to that possibility, he became increasingly insistent that science and religion not overstep the legitimate boundaries of their disciplines in their claims for truth. In *The Water Babies*, for example, he pointedly reminds readers that the limitations of the human imagination can bias one's observations. "It is considered right in the new philosophy," he writes, "to give spiritual causes for physical phenomena—especially in parlour tables; and, of course, physical causes for spiritual ones, like thinking, and praying, and knowing right from wrong." But "wise men know that their business is to examine what is, and not to settle what is not." Since "the great fairy Science" is in the ascendant and "likely to be queen of all the fairies for many a year to come," it must be especially careful not to trample on the realms of imagination and religion (*WB*, Ch. 3, 76–77). The book was generally accepted for what it was: an imaginative endorsement of contemporary evolutionary theory which sought to leave its readers open to the possibility of divine intervention and revelation. "The publication of the above work," wrote the *Anthropological Review*, "marks the period of an epoch in our biological literature. . . . [and] will open a new vista of contemplation."²⁰ Written with less difficulty than any of his other novels, it demonstrates his deep-seated hope that human evolution did not end with everything "eternally eating everything," but led, in fact, to the Kingdom of God.

²⁰ Rev. of *WB*, 1 (1863) : 472–73.

Taming the Enemy: Arnold, Huxley, and Darwin

Kingsley's guiding aim throughout these endeavors was the translation of science and religion into a vocabulary that both disciplines would find intelligible and supportive. His hope that such a vocabulary might eventually be found was, no doubt, helpful in the lives of many of his readers, but others, who sought to preserve Christianity's moral values while abandoning orthodox belief, were more resigned to a "nonteleological" universe. This presented a major problem for Kingsley, since his sometimes shaky faith in natural theology rested upon the "Cambridge Network"'s belief, expressed by A. P. Stanley, in "the grand and only character of Truth—its capability of coming unchanged out of every possible form of fair discussion."²¹

Matthew Arnold's search for meaning typified, for Kingsley, the anguished struggle of his generation. Sounding much like Arnold himself, Kingsley wrote that each of his contemporaries had various names for the goal he sought—"the ideal," "progress," "salvation," "a church," "a republic," "a kingdom of God," "a heaven," "an eternity,"—but if responsible leaders could not combine the Hebraic with the Hellenic, England would "go on in its fierce and confused search after That, which it has not seen, and cannot name, and knows not where to find; but is full sure that it exists, and that it must be found, and will be found at last."²²

In Kingsley's opinion, Thomas H. Huxley's life was as much a "confused search" as was Arnold's. The scientist met Kingsley in 1855 and they maintained a correspondence from that time. Huxley told Kingsley that *Sartor Resartus* had given him a sense of religion possible without theology; science had offered him "a resting-place independent of authority and tradition"; and love had taught him the sanctity of human nature and a sense of responsibility.²³ He seems,

²¹ From his 1871 funeral sermon for the astronomer, J. F. W. Herschel. Cited by Susan F. Cannon, *Science in Culture* (New York: Dawson and Science History Publications, 1978) 55. Cannon notes that, for this group of liberal Christian scholars, "the only danger was that science and religion might become divorced, and go their separate ways."

²² Charles Kingsley, "Poems of Matthew Arnold," *Fraser's* 49 (1854): 148–49.

²³ *Life and Letters of Thomas H. Huxley*, ed. Leonard Huxley, 2 vols. (New York: Appleton, 1900) 1: 237; hereafter abbreviated *LTHH*.

therefore, to have become something of a test case for Kingsley: he was a scientist who had honest doubts, but an openness to any evidence of teleology that Kingsley might present.

Kingsley approached one “doubter” with something close to awe. In Kingsley’s gallery of scientific heroes, Charles Darwin towered above all of his contemporaries, surpassed by Bacon alone. The naturalist became an especially important figure for Kingsley because he was a pure scientist, not a rhetorical one—one who gradually became associated in the public mind with certain truth.²⁴ Kingsley apparently wished to find the final scientific justification for Christian optimism in him, as he felt he had discovered the best religious justification for this same hope in Maurice.

In the mid-1850s and throughout the 1860s these three—Arnold, Huxley, and Darwin—symbolized for Kingsley the best hope and the worst fears he had for the future of England. Honest, intelligent, and eloquent, they embodied the rejection of the clerical cant and squabbles that Kingsley found embarrassing in the established Church. Their vigorous dedication to the pursuit of truth, wherever that might lead, appealed to Kingsley and to many younger men. But their unorthodox approaches to Christianity and their blunt refusal to bolster its teleological premises frightened him and threatened his longstanding commitment to the reconciliation of the “truths” of science with those of religion. More than he was ever able to admit, therefore, the three were his adversaries.

In his 1854 review of Arnold’s poems, Kingsley admits the beauty of the word-painting in “Sohrab and Rustum” and “Tristram and Iseult,” but criticizes it as a disturbing distraction from the human suffering that had been so skillfully portrayed early in each poem. In Kingsley’s view, such pointless description implies that nature is of more significance than individual lives. He sees in its classic calm a preference

²⁴ Darwin’s fellow scientists were, in fact, divided on this issue. Adam Sedgwick, the eminent geologist, and Richard Owen, the leading comparative anatomist, felt that Darwin had given up on Bacon’s inductive method. Many felt that he used pure conjecture with no real proof and that the argument proceeded by “the law of higgledy-piggledy.” Hull, 3–15. Reacting to F. W. Hutton’s 1860 review of *The Origin of Species* for *The Geologist* (3:464–72), Darwin mentioned that Hutton “is one of the very few who see that the change of species cannot be directly proved, and that the doctrine must sink or swim according as it groups and explains phenomena.”

for art over morality, and a stoic acceptance of a world in which humanity is alone.²⁵

Kingsley protested that natural theology still offered a key to life's meaning, and asserted that "there is poetry in nature still":

Ay, more [poetry] than our forefathers ever dreamed. If ghosts and fairies have vanished, the microscopist and the geognost are daily revealing wonders to which those of Ariosto and Spenser are bald and tawdry; and if, as yet, they are incapable of being sung, because they seem to connect themselves with no human interest, that is only because the mind of man, as yet stunned and giddy from the vastness of that which has been shown to it, is unable to interweave the new facts with that faith in a living God, which is, paradoxical as it may seem, the root of all truly human poetry.²⁶

The true poet, Kingsley wrote, discovers the future by really knowing the present, "as a morphologist predicts the plant from the cotyledon; or as Cuvier predicted, from the fragment of a jaw-bone, the yet undiscovered Palaeothere." This interesting combination of science and poetry was Kingsley's protest against those who no longer discerned a benevolence and meaning in the world that biology and geology were describing.

When Thomas H. Huxley's son died in 1860, Kingsley wrote a letter of condolence, offering the hope of an afterlife. Huxley, in a lengthy and eloquent response, painfully reasserts his agnosticism and offers advice that Kingsley must have taken very much to heart:

Understand that all the younger men of science whom I know intimately are *essentially* of my way of thinking. (I know not a scoffer or an irreligious or an immoral man among them, but they all regard orthodoxy as you do Brahminism.) Understand that this new school of prophets is the only one that can work miracles, the only one that can constantly appeal to nature for evidence that is right, and you will comprehend that it is of no use to try to barricade us with shovel hats and aprons, or to talk about our doctrines being "shocking."

²⁵ Kingsley, "Poems by Matthew Arnold," 144–47.

²⁶ Kingsley, "Poems of Matthew Arnold," 141.

Despite the challenging tone, a level of familiarity is suggested in his rather startling admission that “I have spoken more openly and distinctly to you than I ever have to any human being except my wife.”²⁷ Alexander Macmillan encouraged their friendship by inviting them, along with Herbert Spencer, Thomas Hughes, and others, to a weekly discussion on the expanding role of science in the decade.

In October, 1862, Kingsley attended his first meeting of the British Association, which had gathered at Cambridge, and he heard the discussion between Owen and Huxley on “the Hippocampus question.” He subsequently published the “Speech of Lord Dundreary,” a free-associative parody of the debate in which Dundreary worries about the “hippopotamuses in our brains,” and mumbles on about the intricacies of evolution. Kingsley wonders, in the course of the humorous monologue, whether Huxley might explain “the bridge” that connects apes with human evolution (*LK*, 2: 140-43). The ingratiating good humor of his article suggests a level of comfort he must have felt in his role as clerical chaperone for the sciences; at the same time, his implication that all the bickering was, at heart, a bit silly also betrays his failure, or even refusal, to grasp the permanence and seriousness of the issues.

Arnold and Huxley were important to Kingsley because they were from his generation and he greatly respected their work. He hoped he could convince them that the material world was, as Francis Bacon had believed, “*vox Dei in rebus revelata*” (*TG*, xx), but he was ultimately unsuccessful. At Kingsley’s urging Huxley read F. D. Maurice, but confessed himself “utterly at a loss to comprehend [such a] point of view.” Undaunted, Kingsley asked Huxley to write an article on prayer for *Fraser’s* in 1863, but Huxley graciously declined. This seems an odd request, but it was in keeping with Kingsley’s desire to find some common language for science and religion. Huxley would tell him that

²⁷ “It is clear to me,” Huxley ominously predicted “that if that great and powerful instrument for good or evil, the Church of England, is to be saved from being shivered into fragments by the advancing tide of science—an event I should be very sorry to witness, but which will infallibly occur if men like Samuel [Wilberforce] of Oxford are to have the guidance of her destinies—it must be by the efforts of men who, like yourself, see your way to the combination of the practice of the Church with the spirit of science” (*LTHH*, 1:238).

year that he had the “greatest possible antipathy to all the atheistic and infidel school” (*LTHH*, 1:260), but then two weeks later dash any hopes this may have raised by asserting that “*materialism and spiritualism are opposite poles of the same absurdity*—the absurdity of imagining that we know anything about either spirit or matter.” He told Kingsley that questions regarding the historicity of the Gospels or the compatibility of Genesis with astronomy and geology were unimportant “in the face of the impassable gulf between the anthropomorphism (however refined) of theology and the passionless impersonality of the unknown and unknowable which science shows everywhere underlying the thin veil of phenomena” (*LTHH*, 1:262).

This was the critical question for Kingsley, as well. In his sermon at Chapel Royal in 1866 he noted that “the question is not whether there be a God, but whether there be a Living God, who is in any true and practical sense Master over the universe over which He presides; a King who is actually ruling His kingdom, or an epicurean deity who lets his kingdom rule itself” (*LK*, 2: 241). Kingsley’s faith, but not his science, gave him assurance of a personal and benevolent Creator. Huxley made it compellingly clear that he did not share that assurance. The two remained cordial correspondents, but by 1871 the confirmed agnostic was suggesting in print that one could be either a clergyman or a scientist, but not both.²⁸

If Kingsley addressed Arnold and Huxley as his peers, his letters to Charles Darwin reveal a reverence akin to that he showed to Maurice. It is clear that he wanted the scientist to accept him almost as a son—certainly as a minor researcher and clergyman who knew what science could and could not prove. Darwin’s importance increased for Kingsley since Maurice, who had offered guidance in so many other areas, was relatively uninformed in science and was happy to surrender the field to Kingsley. Maurice had told John Ludlow in 1852 that “I leave physics to dear Kingsley, who will in that region and in every other, carry out my hints in a way I could never dream of, and which I admire with

²⁸ Nonetheless, Huxley wrote a very gracious letter to Miss Kingsley on the occasion of her father’s death in 1875, praising the openness to scientific questions that Huxley considered unusual in a clergyman.

trembling, hope, and joy" (*ML*, 2: 137). Maurice's trembling may well have worsened a decade later when Kingsley told him: "I am very busy working out points of Natural Theology, by the strange light of Huxley, Darwin, and Lyell. . . . Darwin is conquering everywhere. . . . The one or two who hold out are forced to try all sorts of subterfuges as to fact, or else by evoking the *odium theologicum*" (*LK*, 2: 171).

In 1862 Kingsley offered to send Darwin a certain biological specimen, and told him that he had defended the evolutionist's theories before Samuel Wilberforce, the bishop Huxley dismissed as a bigot. He signed the letter, "At least believe me, differing now and now agreeing" (*LK*, 2: 135). In a letter of 1867 he finally addresses Darwin as "my dear and honoured Master" (*LK*, 2: 249), the honor hitherto reserved for Maurice. In a series of letters written that year his tone and strategy become clear. He is, first of all, intent on winning Darwin over as a friend, constantly confessing his own inadequacy before the naturalist's brilliance. He notes that more and more of the "best and strongest men are coming over" to "what the world calls Darwinism, and you and I and some others, fact and science." He praises Cambridge, dear to both of them, for its openminded appreciation of science, and describes the gratifying change over the past three years in "men who are in an honest, but 'funky,' stage of conversion" to Darwinism.

His use of religious imagery here is significant, since his enthusiasm for Darwin's theories was based finally upon theological convictions. "Science is on the march," he tells his various audiences. "Listen to her divine words, for what is she but the Voice of God, Deus revelatum? Mark her footsteps—and if you cannot keep pace with her, still follow her" (*LK*, 2: 373). Kingsley soon had to take his own advice: by 1872 he had to resign from reviewing books for the new journal, *Nature*, confessing that they had outstripped his scientific knowledge.²⁹ He extended his faith, therefore, not only to religion but ultimately to science, as well.

The praise he offers Darwin in his letters is coupled with a cajoling of the "Master" to "come over" to the religious implications of the theories he holds, especially in an observation of meaning beyond evolutionary

²⁹ A. J. Meadows, 21.

utility in the preponderance of beauty in nature. In the same series of letters, for example, Kingsley attempts to equate the theological and scientific expressions of the “same” truths. He informs Darwin that, while discussing humming birds and natural selection with the Duke of Argyle he had pointed out that the Duke had overlooked a very obvious fact: “Why on earth are the males only (to use his teleological view) ornamented, save for the amusement of the females first?” Kingsley thereby demonstrated to the Duke (and to Darwin) his understanding of sexual selection. But he then attempts to make the Duke’s point attractive to Darwin: “The point (which I think you have really overlooked too much), that beauty in animals and plants is intended for the aesthetic education and pleasure of man, and (as I believe in my old fashioned way) for the pleasure of a God who rejoices in His works as a painter in his picture.” Kingsley is as enthused about “this truth” as he had been earlier, with the Duke, about “the truths” of Darwin’s theories.

In a humorous and off-handed way he closes one of the letters with an oblique attack on the amorality of the “*vae victis*” evolutionists: “Excuse the bad writing. I have a pen which, if natural selection influenced pens, would have been cast into the fire long ago: but the disturbing moral element makes me too lazy to cast it thereinto, and to find a new one” (LK, 2: 247-50). The tone is lighthearted, but deceptively so, for once again Kingsley finds himself with one foot on either side of a widening crevasse, struggling to heal the breach rather than to leap over it.

Like Arnold and Huxley, however, Darwin was not won over to Kingsley’s rosy view. He was not particularly interested in metaphysical questions, and never became openly hostile to the concerns of religion.³⁰ At the age of seventy, for example, he writes, “It seems to me absurd to doubt that a man may be an ardent Theist and an evolutionist,” and he cites Kingsley and the Harvard botanist, Asa Gray, as prominent

³⁰ Compared to crusading polemicists like Haeckel, Buchner, and others on the Continent, British scientists in general were mild in their agnosticism. See David L. Hull, *Darwin and His Critics: The Reception of Darwin’s Theory of Evolution by the Scientific Community* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1973) 34, and Alvar Ellegard, *Darwin and the General Reader: The Reception of Darwin’s Theory of Evolution in the British Periodical Press, 1859–1872* (Gothenburg: Goteborgs Universitets Arsskrift, 1958).

examples to the contrary. Gradually, however, he allowed his skeptical views to emerge more clearly. "What my own views may be is a question of no consequence to anyone except myself. But as you ask I may state that my judgment often fluctuates."³¹ In any case, he did not find science helpful in solving questions of faith: "science," he said (though not in public) "has nothing to do with Christ, except in so far as the habit of scientific research makes a man cautious in admitting evidence."³²

It is not certain that Kingsley fully grasped Darwin's real lack of interest in religious questions, but Arnold, for one, saw this as an essential difference between the older man and Huxley. In correspondence with his sister in 1875 Arnold sent along some letters from Huxley, with the comment: ". . . when the absolutely hostile attitude to Christianity of many of [Huxley's] friends and allies, Bain of Aberdeen, Clifford, Herbert Spencer, etc., is considered, [his] adhesion, so far as it goes, is very remarkable, and was indeed much more than I expected Old Darwin, on the other hand, though actively fierce against nothing, says that he cannot conceive what need men have either of religion or of poetry; his own nature, he says, is amply satisfied by the domestic affections and by the natural sciences" (*LMA* 2:143).

On the question of God's existence, therefore, Darwin remained purposely vague, but he was quite direct in his dismissal of natural theology. In 1859 he had told John Lubbock: "I do not think I hardly ever admired a book more than Paley's 'Natural Theology.' I could almost formerly have said it by heart" (*LCD*, 2:15). But in his autobiography, written in 1876, he notes a progressive disillusionment: "I gradually came to disbelieve in Christianity as a divine revelation. . . . The old argument from design in Nature, as given by Paley, which

³¹ His diplomatic evasion continues: "Moreover whether a man deserves to be called a theist depends on the definition of the term, which is too large a subject for a note. In my most extreme fluctuations, I have never been an atheist in the sense of denying the existence of a God. I think that generally (and more and more so as I grow older) but not always that an agnostic would be the most correct description of my state of mind"; May 7, 1879; recently re-discovered, and cited by the *Sunday New York Times*, Dec. 27, 1981: A1.

³² *The Life and Letters of Charles Darwin*, ed. Francis Darwin, 2 vols. (New York: Appleton, 1888) 1:307; hereafter abbreviated *LCD*. Huxley came to the same conclusion: "The doctrine of Evolution is neither Anti-theistic nor Theistic. It simply has no more to do with theism than the first book of Euclid has" (*LCD*, 1:556).

formerly seemed to me so conclusive, fails, now that the law of natural selection has been discovered. . . . There seems to be no more design in the variability of organic beings, and in the action of natural selection, than in the course which the wind blows" (*LCD*, 1:278-79).

Huxley agreed that the doctrine of Evolution was the most formidable opponent of the "commoner and coarser forms of Teleology," but he allows the possibility of something like Arnold's "stream of tendency."³³ Ironically citing Paley in support of his position, he argues that "the more purely a mechanist the speculator is, the more firmly does he assume a primordial molecular arrangement of which all the phenomena of the universe are the consequence, and the more completely is he thereby at the mercy of the teleologist."³⁴ But Huxley's "compromise," like Arnold's, was not much help to a traditional theist like Kingsley: the god that simply set biology in motion and then stepped back was as impersonal as natural law, leaving men and women very much alone.

Kingsley was not willing to accept a depersonalized notion of the deity, nor a pointless world of raw aggression. In fact, because of his belief in the Incarnation he felt that he could use the evolutionary paradigm as a model for the spiritual evolution of individuals. More skeptical minds, however, like his former student C. Kegan Paul, would suggest that his unwillingness to embrace the agnosticism of a Huxley or the fundamentalism of a Gosse made him "a very singular phenomenon," in fact an endangered species: a clergyman who was also interested in the alienating world of science.³⁵ Struggling to offer this next generation of leaders in Britain a reason to trust in the future while embracing the traditional values of the past, he cast himself as a deductive clergyman who popularized Darwin, and a Hebraic advocate of Hellenism. This tension, as we have seen, was only one of many in

³³ Or Wordsworth's. See apRoberts, 198.

³⁴ Francis Darwin agreed with Huxley: "One of the greatest services rendered by my father to the study of Natural History is the revival of Teleology. The evolutionist studies the purpose or meaning of organs with the zeal of the older Teleology, but with far wider and more coherent purpose. He has the invigorating knowledge that he is gaining not isolated conceptions of the economy of the present, but a coherent view of both past and present" (1:430).

³⁵ Rev. of *LK*, *Westminster Review*, ns 51 (1877) : 190.

his life, and his approach here was less intellectually rigorous than rhetorically acute. His aim was to circumvent fears and cynicism, and to move his readers into a world of scientific endeavor and Christian cooperation. In choosing the commitment of faith over strict empiricism he became for many, in an age of increasing dichotomy between the realms of science and religion, a model of a Christian who hoped that the truths of both would ultimately coalesce. In his public lectures, he enthusiastically expressed a belief that a personal Creator was involved in human history and biology, and, as Andrew Sanders has noted, taught that “ignorant armies clash not by night but under the sunny smile of the Almighty.”³⁶ But this was a decision he had reached in faith. Beneath the public rhetoric he shared the uncertainties of his less religiously-committed contemporaries and increasingly turned to the “book” of nature as one might view a Rohrshach blot: as a suggestive invitation to discern meaning.

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³⁶ Andrew Sanders, *The Victorian Historical Novel, 1840–1880* (London: Macmillan, 1978) 157.