

Eminent Victorians: Debaters with imagination

by [Carol Zaleski](#) in the [July 29, 2008](#) issue

The new atheist movement has reached its high-water mark, and there are signs that it is starting to recede. Wishful thinking, you say? Aren't there more and more antireligious tracts on the bestseller lists? Aren't these writers terribly clever? Perhaps so, yet somehow they fail to capture the imagination. There have been times—above all during the 19th century—when the debate between belief and unbelief was a more spirited adventure, engaging combatants of wonderful idiosyncrasy, moral energy, and curiosity about the natural world.

Consider the Victorian polymath William K. Clifford. Clifford was a mathematical prodigy (he created Clifford algebras), linguist (he mastered French, German, Spanish, Greek, Arabic, Sanskrit, Morse code and shorthand), classicist and gymnast (he thought nothing of scaling a church steeple and hanging upside down by his legs from the weathercock, or leaping up, grabbing a lamppost with both hands and twirling from top to bottom like a corkscrew). He was also an ardent High Churchman—until he read Darwin, converted to agnosticism, progressed to atheism, and thus passed through all the classic stages of the “Victorian crisis of belief.”

This crisis was at once scientific and moral. Geology and paleontology made the earth too old, biology made the life force too autonomous, and historical criticism made the record of revelation too fragile to carry the weight of tradition. Doubt began to look like a moral, even a religious, imperative, and Clifford took up the cause with a holy zeal, proclaiming that suppression of doubt is a sin against humankind's rational dignity: “it is wrong always, everywhere, and for everyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence.” He died at the young age of 34, and his tombstone is inscribed with the touching expression of a skeptic's creed: “I was not, and was conceived / I loved and did a little work. / I am not, and grieve not.” Question his premises, reject his conclusions, and still there remains much to admire in the earnest and disinterested way Clifford struggled to get out of the shadow lands and into the daylight of truth.

Among the 19th-century defenders of religion were characters of comparable idiosyncratic genius. Consider William Buckland, priest, geologist, and paleontologist, who in the 1820s first set forth and then, in the face of counterevidence, cheerfully demolished, without loss of religious conviction, the fossil evidence for the Great Flood. Buckland's wife and children entered into his investigations, sharing their living quarters with higgledy-piggledy displays of fossils and specimens and innumerable living creatures. Dinner at the Bucklands was a memorable experience, not only because a bear might amble past, but also because Buckland had resolved to eat his way through the animal kingdom, and would offer visitors the scientific pleasure of sampling mouse in batter, crocodile or bluebottle fly. In 1836 he contributed one of the Bridgewater Treatises, "On the Power, Wisdom, and Goodness of God as manifested in a Creation," focusing on the service that geology can render to orthodox Christian faith. Those were the glory days of the clergy naturalist.

One of Buckland's students, the ornithologist bishop of Oxford Samuel Wilberforce, took on T. H. Huxley in a celebrated 1860 debate that is supposed to be the defining moment of the Victorian crisis of belief. The debate is famous for a moment that may be apocryphal in which Wilberforce needled Huxley: "Is it on your grandfather's or your grandmother's side that you claim descent from an ape?" Huxley denies having replied that he would rather be an ape than a bishop. Was this the humiliating defeat for natural theology that it has often been taken to be? Revisionist histories of the period suggest not. The audience included scientists who had qualms about Darwin's theory, as well as theologians who, dissatisfied by all-too-tidy arguments from design, were happy to consider well-grounded alternatives. In those days there was also, as Timothy Larsen has shown, a "Victorian crisis of doubt."

Ironically, the Huxley-Wilberforce debate took place in the Oxford University Museum, brainchild of three anti-Darwinian lovers of science: Henry Acland (physician, educational reformer, student of Buckland), John Phillips (geologist, astronomer, meteorologist) and John Ruskin (artist, critic, geologist, Christian socialist). This cathedral-like Gothic building, whose carved columns depict allegories of God's handiwork in creation, was intended both to advance the cause of scientific education at Oxford and to reassure believers of the fundamental unity of revealed and natural knowledge. Could we retire our simplistic notions of the war between science and religion, could we recover some of the old passion for investigation and debate, we'd be in a better position to envision—perhaps even

construct—such grand edifices of the love of learning and desire for God.