History of Science and Religion in Victorian Britain

In the United States, the debate between Science and Religion remains, in some ways, as contentious as it was over 100 years ago. In order to place this conflict in a more global perspective, we have been asked to analyze the ways in which British Victorian Society, which arguably saw the birth of science as a discipline, managed the emergence of this new way of thinking and the internal strife which it caused. To that end, our hope is that they will provide invaluable lessons on how to manage the emergence of scientific developments which challenge societal norms; otherwise, the United States can learn from the failures of Victorian Britain and avoid the internal hostility which tore their society apart.

Historical background

- Religiousity in Victorian Britain led to a rise of groups, such as Methodists and Evangelicals, who had increasingly intense religious faith and conviction. Related to this, there were movements in Victorian Britain that were associated with the religious, such as the Moral Revolution, Missionary Enterprise, and Oxford Movement. Beginning in the 1830s, evolution began to emerge in society in order to support social reform and scientific education. In 1859, Charles Darwin published *On the Origin of Species* sending ripples through Victorian society and destabilizing the worldly principles that Mankind had developed since its inception. Although the groundwork for his concept has been laid down by scientists before, the completed theory of evolution quickly became controversial for its potential to undermine the pervasive ideology of intelligent design. For instance, one of the pivotal moments of opposition was the 1860 debate between Samuel Wilberforce and Thomas Huxley. Those who supported Darwin’s theory furthered it more with ideas of Britain’s “Dying Races,” eugenics, and individualism. After Darwin, scientific thought became more prominent in Victorian society, influencing education, the revival of mysticism and spiritualism, the transition from catastrophism to uniformitarianism, and morality.

What can the way the Victorians addressed these issues teach us?

- Religious factions began with considerably more influence and power, this process can be viewed as a prolonged, drawn out struggle where religious groups gradually lost influence relative to science.
  - Process could have been managed more smoothly
- Crucial for more powerful group (religious factions) to remain open to new ideas or concepts
  - Had the religious establishment been more accepting of Darwin and other scientists, they could have operated within the religious-scientific system already in place
  - Whole conflict and debate between science and religion simply the result of the religious establishment, fearing the effects of scientific advancement on their dominant societal position, initially establishing themselves as hostile to the burgeoning scientific community
    - Later sources of conflict stem from them reacting to developments as different agents, and from the standpoint of competing societal forces

Did the experiences of the Victorians provide any insights into the policy challenges we face today?

- Tension between religious and scientific groups
  - Abortion
  - Sexuality
  - Evolution
  - Geology
  - Cosmology
- Science vs. religion in the field of education
  - Epperson v. Arkansas 1968
  - Edwards v. Aguillard 1987

What can we learn from the past about the present?

- Science and religion play a role in how people view themselves and how they act
- Religion is an integral and prevalent part of society, but should remain separate from civil and educational affairs
- Science, dependent upon its interpretation, can be deconstructive (eugenics), but is also an integral driving force of modernization