

Religion and beliefs during the industrial period: How typical was Charles Darwin's loss of faith?

Key dates:

1700s	The estimated beginning of the period known as 'the Enlightenment'.
1789	The beginning of the French Revolution. The French king was eventually executed in 1793.
1829	The Catholic Emancipation Act meant that Parliament no longer worked just with the Anglican (Protestant) Church: Catholics had new rights in Britain.
1836	The ending of the 'tithe' system, which had meant that everyone in the village had to give some of their money to their local church.
1859	Charles Darwin's <i>On the Origin of Species</i> was published.
1863	Charles Kingsley's children's book <i>The Water Babies</i> was published, and it explored new spiritualist ideas.

Key terms:

Atheism	A lack of belief in the existence of God.
Enlightenment	A European movement (beginning in the 1600s) which saw people prioritising reason and rational thought over traditional beliefs.
French Revolution	A period of significant political change in France, which saw the monarch overthrown and executed.
Evolution	Charles Darwin developed a theory of evolution, according to which organisms (including humans) have developed over time by a process of natural selection.
Dissenter	Someone who questions traditional religious beliefs.
Evangelicals	A new religious group of the nineteenth century. Followers believe in the importance of a very strong connection to God.
Spirituality	An alternative belief system, which focuses on the existence of spirits and the supernatural (although not necessarily of a traditional 'God').
Muscular Christianity	A Christian belief in the value of physical activity, which followers thought could bring them closer to God.

'I gradually came to disbelieve in Christianity. Many false religions have spread over large portions of the earth... [Although] I was very unwilling to give up my belief... disbelief crept over me at a slow rate, but was at last complete.'

Scientist Charles Darwin writing in his autobiography. Darwin came up with the theory of evolution by natural selection.

Evidence that there was a dramatic loss of faith:

The Enlightenment brought with it a new focus on reason and rational thought. Some people began to question traditional ideas about God and religion.

The French Revolution shook many old certainties about the way that society was ruled, and the way that religion had been used to justify the power of the monarchs.

Charles Darwin's scientific discoveries meant that it was harder to believe in the idea of Creation. Darwin showed that humans had actually evolved over a long period of time, rather than having been placed on earth fully formed.

Evidence that people remained religious:

New branches of Christianity were formed during the nineteenth century, including the Quakers, Methodists and evangelicals. These groups adapted and updated older beliefs.

Large numbers of missionaries travelled across the globe (especially to places in Africa) to try to spread the Christian message.

Many scientists continued to believe in the existence of God - or at least of some 'higher power'. Charles Kingsley, one of Darwin's closest friends, found a way of accepting new scientific discoveries, but remaining a committed Christian.

