



Of Apes and Ancestors: Evolution, Christianity, and the Oxford Debate

Ian Hesketh

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Tell me, sir, is it on your grandmother's or your grandfather's side that you are descended from an ape?

In June of 1860, some of Britain's most influential scientific and religious authorities gathered in Oxford to hear a heated debate on the merits of Charles Darwin's recently published *Origin of Species*. The Bishop of Oxford, "Soapy" Samuel Wilberforce, clashed swords with Darwin's most outspoken supporter, Thomas Henry Huxley. The latter's triumph, amid quips about apes and ancestry, has become a mythologized event, symbolizing the supposed war between science and Christianity. But did the debate really happen in this way?

Of Apes and Ancestors argues that this one-dimensional interpretation was constructed and disseminated by Darwin's supporters, becoming an imagined victory in the struggle to overcome Anglican dogmatism. By reconstructing the Oxford debate and carefully considering the individual perspectives of the main participants, Ian Hesketh argues that personal jealousies and professional agendas played a formative role in shaping the response to Darwin's hypothesis, with religious anxieties overlapping with a whole host of other cultural and scientific considerations. An absorbing study, *Of Apes and Ancestors* sheds light on the origins of a debate that continues, unresolved, to this day.

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