

Discuss and evaluate the paradigm shift of the late 19th century involving how knowledge is to be gathered, organized, and evaluated. How did the evolutionary model, comparative religion studies, Freudian theory, and biblical criticism influence this revolution?

During the late 19th century, a paradigm shift was taking place regarding how people gathered, viewed, and evaluated knowledge. After the age of Enlightenment in the 17th and 18th centuries, people tended to view things more rationally. The idea of freedom and democracy also caused people to be freer to think ‘outside the box’ and not fear to bring up new ideas.

Charles Darwin’s view of evolution by natural selection in the biological and scientific arena, along with his eventual book on “The Descent of Man,” was a direct blow against the Biblical view of creation. This caused some people to question the validity of the Bible and look for other ways to interpret it.

Sigmund Freud’s view that religion was a neurosis that developed out of human insecurities used this same theory of evolution, but now applied it to psychology. He espoused the view that religion developed within humans based on their own needs and insecurities, and thus further undermined the validity of Christianity and the Bible.

This evolutionary presupposition was greatly used by sociologists in the area of comparative religions. Rather than viewing Christianity and the Bible in isolation, they compared all the great religions of the world and spoke of the similarities. Again, their presupposition was that all religions evolved and develop as a natural process for humans. They used the idea of uniformitarianism to state that all things change based on uniform principles. They applied this in seeing how primitive religions developed into more modern religions over time. This also was another attack on orthodox Christianity.

Biblical scholars also picked up on this same idea that religion evolves. They started approaching the Bible in a more critical way, putting it through the same processes as other historical book. Based upon their belief in evolution, they came up with ideas to validate this and thus challenge the traditional way of understanding the Bible.

So what started out as a theory involving biology and science was then picked up by sociologists, psychologists, and even biblical scholars and applied to their own respective areas. They presupposed that there was no Creator or God as spoken of in the Bible, but instead tried to prove all physical and sociological change by using natural means. For many, their presupposition is that God does not exist and therefore they must find another way to interpret traditional and biblical ideas.

The reaction by Protestants to this new way of thinking was basically threefold. Since the Bible was so strongly attacked, some decided they would no longer take the Bible seriously as historical documents, but would just focus on a relationship with Christ, which can’t be “attacked.” This ‘new theology’ was developed by John Bushnell who came up with the theory of the ‘pious fraud’, which stated that the early Christians were sincere, but they exaggerated and misinterpreted Christ Jesus.

Another reaction to this criticism was to defend the Bible as being inerrant, as the fundamentalists did. They defended this view rationally, through people like J.G. Machen, and also used means to spread this truth to the popular society, such as with the publication, “The Fundamentals.”

Some chose to believe that what the biblical critics were saying was true and instead said that their new religion needed to be based on faith in science. They published the “Humanist Manifesto” based on the ideas of John Dewey, which stated that all things came about by natural laws, not from the existence of God. This is referred to as Scientific Humanism. They urged the Neo Liberals to continue another step and throw out their belief in God altogether.

All these views still exist with us today in many different forms in the 21st century.