

We Are Amphibians: Julian and Aldous Huxley on the Future of Our Species

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by R. S. Deese

This guest post is part of a series leading up to the upcoming joint meeting of the [American Academy of Religion](#) and the [Society for Biblical Literature](#) in San Diego. Eight of our authors with recent and forthcoming titles on a range of topics will share the motivations and stories behind their research. We hope these personal glimpses into their scholarship will inspire a broad community of readers. Come back for a new post every few days between now and November 21st.



I was drawn to study the works of Julian and Aldous Huxley because of their common interest in the religious implications of evolutionary biology. The idea that evolution is antithetical to religious feeling has never made sense to me, and I have always wondered why so many people have contested the theory of evolution with such passionate intensity. I can remember friends in elementary school who were told by their parents that the devil had planted fossils to fool human beings into thinking that “we came from monkeys.” Decades later, we can see that this fearful reaction to the scientific evidence regarding evolution is still commonplace, fueling school board fights about biology curricula across the country and even spawning new institutions (such as the Creation Museum in Kentucky) dedicated to promoting the view that the book of Genesis is not to be taken as a brilliant allegory about the human condition, but rather as a literal record of our material origin. In seeking to understand why so many people fear and reject evolutionary biology, I have come to the conclusion that the anxieties unearthed by Darwin have less to do with the origin of our species than with its future. As it has unfolded over the past century and a half, the Darwinian revolution has done more than challenge religious assumptions about how we came to be. More significantly, it has thrown open the question of what we may become.

My interest in the history of this question drew me to explore many works of speculative fiction published in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Looking through the archives of *Amazing Stories* at Syracuse University, I found Julian Huxley’s 1926 story “The Tissue Culture King” to be particularly intriguing. Julian Huxley’s early depiction of biotechnology wedded to the mass production principles of Henry Ford clearly anticipated some key elements in *Brave New World*, even if it lacked the wit and cinematic style of Aldous Huxley’s 1932 novel. As I began to read the correspondence of Julian and Aldous Huxley, I found that, although they often disagreed about many of the most important political and social issues of their time, they were united by a common fascination with the future of our species, and a desire to reconcile the science of evolution with their own religious feelings. As the grandchildren of “Darwin’s Bulldog,” Thomas Henry Huxley, both brothers were possessed by an abiding interest, not only in evolutionary biology, but also in its philosophical and spiritual implications. The fact that they disagreed as often as they did made the research for this book both lively and engaging, but the fact that they cared as intensely as they did (not only about the future of our species but about the web of life on which our lives depend) made this expedition more inspiring than I could ever have expected it to be.

R. S. Deese teaches history at Boston University. His work has been published in *AGNI*, *Endeavour*, *Aldous Huxley Annual*, *MungBeing*, and *Berkeley Poetry Review*.

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