

RELIGIOUS STUDIES · Y4-Y6

Darwin Day

A humanist celebration

About this lesson

Darwin Day is celebrated on 12 February, the birthday of Charles Darwin (1809-1882). It is one of the few 'festivals' regularly marked by humanists and other non-religious people. This lesson tells the story of Darwin's life and discoveries, explains why humanists see his work as important, and shows how non-religious worldviews can have their own moments of celebration. Suitable for syllabuses that include humanism.

Who was Charles Darwin?

Charles Darwin was born in 1809 in Shrewsbury, England. As a young man, he was supposed to become a doctor, then a vicar, but he was much more interested in plants, animals and rocks. In 1831, when he was 22, he was offered a place on a ship called HMS Beagle, which was sailing around the world to make maps. He spent five years on the journey, collecting plants, animals and fossils everywhere they went. When he came home, he spent more than twenty years studying what he had collected — and thinking. In 1859, he published a book called 'On the Origin of Species' which explained his theory: that all living things have changed and developed over millions of years through a process called evolution by natural selection. Some animals have characteristics that help them survive. Those animals have more babies. Over many generations, those characteristics become more common. This is how species change. Over very long time periods, completely new species can develop.

Darwin's ideas mattered

And why people still discuss

- Before Darwin, most people in Europe believed every species was created separately by God.



- Darwin showed that all living things — including humans — share common ancestors millions of years ago.
- His theory has been confirmed by huge amounts of evidence: fossils, DNA, observations of animals changing over time.
- Today, evolution is the foundation of all biology, including medicine.
- When his book was published, it was deeply controversial — it challenged what most people believed.
- Some religious people accept evolution and say it's how God created life.
- Some religious people reject evolution because it disagrees with their reading of holy texts.
- Most scientists, religious or not, accept evolution as the best explanation we have.
- Humanists celebrate Darwin Day partly as a way of celebrating science, evidence and careful thinking.

Darwin Day is celebrated

Around the world, on 12 Feb

- Talks and lectures about evolution and Darwin's life
- Visits to natural history museums
- Reading books about science and Darwin
- School lessons on evolution and the history of biology
- Humanist groups holding small gatherings
- Some people share photos of dinosaur fossils, finches, and species named after Darwin
- Online communities discussing what Darwin discovered
- Birthday celebration of Darwin (born 12 February 1809) — same day as Abraham Lincoln's birthday
- Smaller and quieter than religious festivals — it is not a public holiday anywhere



Why a non-religious 'festival' matters in RE

Religious Education in UK schools increasingly includes non-religious worldviews like humanism. Studying Darwin Day alongside Diwali, Hanukkah and Easter helps children see that ALL human communities — religious and non-religious — mark important moments and remember important figures. The format is similar (a date, a story, a person to remember, ideas to reflect on). What differs is the source of the values and the absence (in humanism) of supernatural beliefs. Including non-religious traditions in RE is not about saying religion is wrong. It is about showing the full range of how thoughtful people make sense of life — and helping children from non-religious families feel that their family's worldview is also recognised at school.

Reflection

