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America's Evolving Problem

This country has long been divided—science versus religion, progressive versus traditionalist. Which is why even the best-supported theory about the origin of our species is going to be an unnatural selection for some.

by *Michael Ruse*

I have just returned from a conference in Paris. It was held on the left bank of the river Seine, at the Jardin des Plantes, in the Grande Gallerie of the Muséum national d'Histoire naturelle, one of the most beautiful buildings in a city of beautiful buildings. The inside is hollow, with balconies around the sides featuring one of the very best exhibitions on evolution and its mechanisms that I have ever seen. Always packed with visitors, many of whom are schoolchildren, the museum offers one interactive display after another teaching about genetics, classification, and natural selection.

Although the conference was on ecology, I rarely had a chance to speak to the subject. Every French scientist wanted to know what on earth was happening in America. In this day and age, can it really be that there is a major effort to combat the teaching of evolution in schools? Can it be that there are people who want to introduce miracle-based accounts of origins into biology classrooms? Do some people truly believe that the Earth was created a mere 10,000 years ago, in six days, and that Noah's flood is literally true? Does the president of the United States really think that evolution is an open question?

I had to answer that, indeed, it is all true. Everything they had heard, and more. A startling proportion of people in America do not believe in evolution; they really do think that dinosaurs and humans coexisted; and they are absolutely convinced that there was a time, not that long ago, when the plains of the Midwest were covered with water and some chap in an ark stuffed with animals came floating by.

More than this, I had to tell them that I think the situation is going to get worse before it gets better, if indeed it does get better. I see this biblically based version of origins—once known as fundamentalism, then creationism, and now in its latest user-friendly version as intelligent design, or ID— getting into the schools. In August, President George W. Bush endorsed the teaching of ID, telling a small group of reporters that “part of education is to expose people to different schools of thought.” According to Knight Ridder Newspapers, Bush said students learning about human origins should be exposed to ID alongside evolutionary theory, just as he, as governor of Texas, advocated exposing students to creationism. And if Bush successfully reshapes the Supreme Court—a process that has already begun—we shall see old-fashioned religion taught as part of the science curriculum. At the moment, the creationists are being stealthy: ID is purposefully distinguished from broad biblical literalism. But its supporters are candid about the fact that they have what they call a “wedge” strategy. One bit at a time. First a few miracles, then a few more, and

finally all of Genesis absolutely as it is written.

My French friends were baffled. America represents the greatest scientific force the world has ever seen. It gets as many Nobel Prizes each year as the rest of the other countries do combined. How can it be so blind, so stupid, so religious, when it comes to evolution? One might want to argue about the mechanisms of evolution, but to doubt one of the pillars of modern science, in this day and age? Those Americans really are crazy, they concluded, and someone like Michael Ruse, born and educated in England, a long-time philosophy professor in Canada, and now spending his declining years teaching in the American South, must be in his dotage—or a gross hypocrite—for condemning creationists, yet living among them.

Whatever my personal failings may be, my job as a scholar is to try to understand things. Why is creationism alive and well today? Why, in the Western world, is it a uniquely American phenomenon? Is there something about American Christianity that makes it especially susceptible to biblical literalism? A new Associated Press study tells us that only thirty-seven percent of French people claim that religion is important in their lives, whereas eighty-four percent of Americans claim this. Only two of every 100 Americans come right out and say they are atheists. America is a peculiar country, and its religiosity is part of the peculiarity.

America—the modern America that we know—was founded by people who were fleeing religious persecution in Europe, particularly the Pilgrims who wanted a stronger, more biblically based Calvinistic Protestant theology than they were allowed in England. This set the pattern. After the Revolution, evangelical Protestantism filled the new gaps in social structures, old-world habits, and beliefs with a heavy emphasis on the Bible. By the middle of the nineteenth century, twice as many Americans went to church as did people in the old country. Most incredibly, as new immigrants arrived—Catholics from Ireland and Italy and Poland, as well as Jews from Eastern Europe—many blended their own beliefs with the already-dominant Protestantism rather than staying fixed within their old ways.

The Civil War was the crucial turning point. Victorious, the North began to dynamically grow and to industrially develop, building huge factories, expanding the railroads, and embracing the philosophy of progress. The theology reflected this: The Social Gospel was light on biblical readings and heavy on obligations to make a better world here on earth. In defeat, the South resented the North and increasingly turned inward, looking to the Bible for support for the afflicted and concentrating on personal behavior and purity to prepare for the Lord's coming. As the West opened up, this kind of thinking was exported. What did it mean to be a homesteader fighting drought and disease and Indians when you were told that the Bible is merely metaphorical? Homesteaders wanted comfort and a belief that America is God's chosen land. Suffering and hardship here will be rewarded in the hereafter.

Theologically, these two perspectives—North for progress and interpretation, South and West for the old ways and literalism and personal purity—are known as manifestations of “millennialism,” referring to the claim in the book of Revelation that there will be a thousand-year period before the end of time when peace will reign and happiness will prevail. A “post-millennialist” thinks that Jesus will come only after the millennium is over. For this person, who tends to interpret things metaphorically, our task here on earth is to forge peace and happiness for ourselves. The Battle Hymn of the Republic is a perfect exemplar of this philosophy:

*Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord;
He is trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored;*

*He hath loosed the fateful lightning of His terrible swift sword;
His truth is marching on.*

These are the people from the North, who believe we must do our bit: “As He died to make men holy, let us die to make men free.”

In the South, and increasingly in the West (the vast hinterland of America from Illinois to Utah and Nevada), we find “pre-millennialists,” who believe that Jesus is coming before the millennium and that there is nothing we, unaided, can do to strive for peace and happiness. Our best bet, then, is to serve Jesus and concentrate on personal purity. How often did such people sing that beautiful hymn *Rock of Ages*?

*Not the labor of my hands
Can fulfill Thy law's demands;
Could my zeal no respite know,
Could my tears forever flow,
All for sin could not atone;
Thou must save, and Thou alone.*

These two very different perspectives on proper conduct and our relationship to God led to two very different perspectives on science generally and evolution in particular. The postmillennialist welcomes science because it, along with its technological applications, represents knowledge and power and hope for the future. Medicine, engineering, and architecture—all are the end result of science. Evolution is particularly favored because it is universally taken to be progressive—monad to man, worm to woman, amoeba to American—reflecting the progress that post-millennialists strive to achieve on earth.

Pre-millennialists, on the other hand, are suspicious of science. Instead of wasting time with intellectual pursuits, they advocate for the promotion of faith and the open heart. Evolution is particularly vile and taken to be representative of all that is wrong; it conflicts with Genesis taken literally, and it is progressive. The true believer knows there can be no real progress. Humans are sunk in sin. Without God's redeeming grace, we are nothing and can do nothing.

Without belittling the evolution-creation controversy itself, I would say that it is truly a litmus test for deeper concerns. The fact is that creationists do not lie awake at night worrying about gaps in the fossil record. Paradoxically, they allow for more evolution, in some respects, than do evolutionists. Old-fashioned creationists—the kind who push Noah's flood—argue that after the animals left the ark, there was a huge amount of evolution to the forms that we see about us today. This included human evolution. George McCready Price, a leading creationist in the first half of the twentieth century, had a racist little ditty that told all about the origins of blacks:

*The poor little fellow who went to the south
Got lost in the forests dank;
His skin grew black, as the fierce sun beat
And scorched his hair with its tropic heat
And his mind became a blank.*

ID theorists also admit that they are happy with evolution, so long as they can have the occasional miracle. They think that life's history was probably much as conventional evolutionists think it was, except that every now and then the designer intervened to create a particularly sophisticated or complex piece of organic machinery.

If the evolution-creation debate is a test of America's concerns rather than the cause, then there must be some other basis for the nation's divide. In the last presidential election, we heard a lot about "moral values," and this, I think, is the key. Having moral values, we all learned, means being against a woman's right to choose; in favor of capital punishment; and against homosexuality, particularly gay marriage. These morals are based on a literalist reading of the Bible, particularly the Old Testament, and many of the moral values enthusiasts—mainly in the South and the West, those who voted for George W. Bush—are strong evangelical Christians. They are against evolution, not because of what it is, but because of what it represents: fancy professors, modern ideas, being soft on crime and homosexuality and abortion, a world beyond the narrow but secure world of the Bible as they interpret it.

On the other hand, there are the public representatives of evolutionists who get into the media and represent the other extreme. Above all, there is Richard Dawkins, a prominent scientist and ardent atheist, contemptuous of all who do not share his views. In the leading British newspaper, *The Times*, he recently made his latest contribution to the debate. "The creationists' fondness for 'gaps' in the fossil record is a metaphor for their love of gaps in knowledge generally," Dawkins wrote. "Gaps, by default, are filled by God. You don't know how the nerve impulse works? Good! You don't understand how memories are laid down in the brain? Excellent! Is photosynthesis a bafflingly complex process? Wonderful! Please don't go to work on the problem, just give up, and appeal to God. Dear scientist, don't work on your mysteries. Bring us your mysteries for we can use them. Don't squander precious ignorance by researching it away. Ignorance is God's gift to Kansas."

Dawkins explicitly links evolution to atheism; natural origins means no God. He shows absolutely no understanding of the fears that people have about the ill effects of science and its supporters, yet he manages to reinforce their worries. As far as he's concerned, if you disagree with him then you are stupid or wicked or (most probably) both. It is no wonder that a lot of Americans are not very keen on evolution.

There are certainly some who try to take the middleground, combining a commitment to Darwinism and a commitment to God. In fact, historically speaking, the most important evolutionist in twentieth-century America was the Russian-born population geneticist Theodosius Dobzhansky, who was a practicing member of the Russian Orthodox Church. A modern-day equivalent would be the philosopher-ecologist Holmes Rolston III, a recent winner of the Templeton Prize, or philosopher of science Ernan McMullin (see "In the Name of the Father," page 58). But such people are a minority, and their reasonableness is too often drowned out in the clamor from the extremes.

When I finished explaining all of this to my French hosts, there was silence. We all were thinking the same thing: Does any of this really matter? If Americans want to go this odd way, why should any of us care? Really, what else can one expect of a nation that thinks Diet Pepsi is an appropriate accompaniment to a meal? If Americans insist on turning back the clock several hundred years, then on their own heads be it.

Fair enough, I suppose, if you live within the sound of the bells of Notre Dame. But as one who now lives in America—as one who has children in American schools—I am deeply saddened. I hate to see this dark side of the nation, the side that burned witches in New England, that persecuted its own citizens during the Cold War, and that is now doing dreadful things to Muslims in too many parts of the world. I see the move against evolution to be part and parcel of the religious and chauvinistic bigotry that stains a country in which too many people believe they are living in God's chosen land.

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I have been fighting creationists for more than thirty years now. I have written many books about the evolution wars. I have testified in court, appeared on television, and written countless pieces like the one you are now finishing. The evolution-creation issue is a matter that should concern all people, particularly those who love and admire America. I have shed light only on the country's dark side, but let me remind you of its bright side. There are the founding fathers who wrote the Bill of Rights, guaranteeing justice to all; the men and women who conquered slavery; the government that in the nineteenth century opened its borders to the poor and afflicted from Europe; those who fought for freedom against the Kaiser and against Hitler. There are the great universities and the vigorous press; the open hands of the sponsors and philanthropists of the great foundations; the Marshall Plan that built Europe after World War II. And so much more.

I am not sure we are going to win this battle, but that is no excuse for not trying. I beg you to learn about the evolutioncreation dispute and to do what you can to serve the cause of truth and morality. Do what you can to serve the cause of all Americans, especially those who disagree with you.

[Evolution by the Numbers](#)

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Site and magazine supported by a generous grant from the John Templeton Foundation.
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