

# Evolution and Education in American Public High Schools

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## Introduction

Charles Darwin's theory of evolution through natural selection-Darwinism-has elicited controversy among Christians and other people of faith ever since Darwin published *On the Origin of Species* in 1859. Mainstream Protestant denominations-the Episcopal, Methodist, and Presbyterian churches and the United Church of Christ, for example-as well as millions of Catholics accept Darwinism as the humanly discernable means by which God has created life on earth [1-6].

But more theologically conservative Christians claim that Darwinism and the method of scientific inquiry it reflects deny any "involvement by any external supernatural Creator [7,8]". And indeed, the National Academy of Sciences says:

*Science is a way of knowing about the natural world. It is limited to explaining the natural world through natural causes. Science can say nothing about the supernatural. Whether God exists or not is a question about which science is neutral [9].*

This approach to science, say Darwinism's religious critics, undermines Biblical authority; lets Darwinism supply an intellectual rationale for fascism, communism, racism, eugenics, crime, genocide, and war; and thereby promotes these social pathologies and inflicts these evils on the world. For example, one of Darwinism's most articulate and prolific critic, Henry M. Morris, wrote:

*Everything has seemingly been turned upside-down, and the older standards of right and wrong have been almost completely interchanged. Observe the symptoms: [H]uge nuclear arsenals in the great nations, developing nuclear capabilities in many smaller nations, the imminent AIDS pandemic, chemical and biological*

*weapons ready to be unleashed, the unknown dangers of genetic engineering looming ahead, the terrors and conflicts generated by world communism (not to mention Nazism, racism, imperialism, and other evil systems), the wide resurgence of paganism and occultism, the inexorable spread of the cancerous drug culture, giant crime syndicates in the capitalist nations, pan-Arabic aggression in the Islamic nations, and a worldwide breakdown of personal and governmental morality [10].*

They want to challenge and discredit Darwinism, and replace it with more faith-base theories of human development which will undermine acceptance of Darwinism, and introduce these theories into America's public high school biology courses. [11].

The controversy began to roil public education as early as 1925, when William Jennings Bryan squared off against Clarence Darrow in the famous Scopes Monkey Trial in Dayton, Tennessee. At issue was the constitutionality of a Tennessee law, the Butler Act, which forbade the teaching in the public schools "of any theory that denies the story of the Divine Creation of man as taught in the Bible, and to teach instead that man has descended from a lower order of animals." John Thomas Scopes, a Dayton, Tennessee, "general science instructor and part-time football coach," agreed to admit he had taught evolution and thereby serve as the defendant in a case brought by the American Civil Liberties Union to test the Butler Act's constitutionality [12].

Prosecuted by Bryan and defended by Darrow, Scopes pleaded guilty, but his conviction was overturned by the Tennessee Supreme Court on a technicality. However, the Supreme Court did rule that the Butler Act was constitutional. It said that the banning of human evolution was not central to any religious doctrine and

therefore the state was not promoting religion in the classroom. Furthermore, the state had a perfect right to say what could, and could not, be taught in the public schools, and public-school teachers, as a condition of employment, had to obey state law. Moreover, Scopes had a perfect right to teach evolution anywhere and at any time other than in a public-school classroom. The Court concluded that since Scopes had already left the state, he should not be further prosecuted [13]. The Butler Act was repealed in 1967 [14].

Indeed, neither Scopes nor any other teacher in Tennessee or any other state banning the teaching of evolution was ever prosecuted for doing so. But then again, the teaching of evolution became less common, and the entire issue became dormant until the 1960s [15].

The Soviet Union's successful launching of Sputnik in 1957 stimulated intense public interest in American public school science instruction and revived the questions of whether and how Darwinism should be taught [16]. Moreover, in 1963 the U. S. Supreme Court ruled that mandatory Bible readings and recitations in American public schools were an unconstitutional promotion of religion, and that governments should practice "neutrality" concerning religion in the public schools [17]. Darwinism's religious critics proposed either that Darwinism be banned or that if Darwinism was to be taught, equal time should be given to the teaching of the creation stories in Genesis [18]. But the U. S. Supreme Court ruled that either banning Darwinism or giving Genesis equal time while teaching Darwinism was the unconstitutional promotion of religion in the public schools [19].

Also unconstitutional, said the Supreme Court, was the teaching of Creation Science or Scientific Creation, developed and advocated by Henry Morris and his Institute for Creation Research. The ICR says that according to the doctrine of Creation Science, "The phenomenon of biological life did not develop by natural process from inanimate systems but was specially and supernaturally created by the Creator," and "Each of the major kinds of plants and animals was created functionally complete from the beginning and did not evolve from some other kind of organism [20]." But although Morris maintained that "Scientific Creationism is not based on Genesis or any other religious teaching [21]," the ICR also says that all its research is based on the premise "that the biblical record of primeval history in Genesis 1-11 is factual, historical, and clearly understandable and, therefore, that all things were created and made in six literal days [22]." The U. S. Supreme Court therefore ruled as unconstitutional laws mandating equal time for both Darwinism and Creation Science [23].

The latest theory offered to challenge Darwinism is the theory of Intelligent Design (ID), developed by the Discovery Institute, a conservative think tank headquartered in Seattle, Washington.

On its website the Discovery Institute defines ID as "simply an effort to empirically detect whether the 'apparent design' in nature acknowledged by virtually all biologists is genuine design (the product of an intelligent cause) or is simply the product of an undirected process such as natural selection acting on random variations." The Discovery Institute claims that ID "is agnostic regarding the source of design and has no commitment to defending Genesis, the Bible, or any other sacred text [24]."

But the Discovery Institute has also said that "The proposition that human beings are created in the image of God is one of the bedrock principles on which Western civilization has built." But that by "debunking the traditional concepts of both God and man," Darwin, along with Marx and Freud, undermined this principle and helped encourage the growing social pathologies that Darwinism's religious critics, such as Henry Morris, have attributed to Darwinism and so desperately want to fight. It therefore wants to "defeat scientific materialism and its destructive moral, cultural, and political legacies," and promote "the theistic understanding that nature and human beings are created by God [25]."

In 2005 a federal district court judge in southeastern Pennsylvania ruled that to teach ID in the public schools was no less an unconstitutional promotion of religion than teaching Creation Science. He reached that conclusion after noting that a biology text based on ID was an almost-word-for-word copy of a discredited Creation Science text [26].

The U. S. Supreme Court has yet to rule on whether teaching ID is unconstitutional, so additional attempts to introduce it are not inconceivable and should be considered permissible unless or until the Supreme Court rules otherwise. But the Discovery Institute now says:

*Instead of mandating intelligent design...[it] urges public school teachers and districts to teach objectively about both the scientific strengths and weaknesses of modern evolutionary theory. Adopted by states and local school districts around the nation, this common-sense approach represents good pedagogy and good science education, and it is clearly constitutional [27].*

But while the Discovery Institute explicitly rejects "mandating intelligent design," one cannot help but wonder whether a discussion of evolution's alleged scientific weaknesses may be a more subtle way of undermining confidence in Darwinism and paving the way for a more formal introduction of ID as an alternative.

All scientific theories should be subject to questioning and critical analysis, and Darwinism should by no means be exempt. Science can advance only if current "truths" are investigated and supported—or replaced—by new findings produced by new investigations. But true science must be conducted as defined by the National Academy of Sciences.

Therefore, challenges to Darwinism in a public science classroom may be perfectly proper, but only if the questions and critiques are based on hypotheses and data generated by “the search for better natural causes shaping the natural world,” and without reference to God. To bring God back into the classroom will almost certainly generate more court challenges and Supreme Court rulings that once again find that to challenge the teaching of Darwinism on religious grounds is unconstitutional.

This does not mean that it is illegal to advocate for Creation Science and ID—indeed, as the footnotes indicate, both the Institute for Creation Research and the Discovery Institute continue to advance their respective doctrines, as is their constitutional right, so long as they do not try to have these doctrines taught in a public school classroom. It is unfortunate, however, that advocates for faith-based alternatives to Darwinism either do not know of, or do not understand, or do not believe what the National Academy of Sciences also says about science and religion. Acknowledging the widespread support for Darwinism among mainstream people of faith, the Academy says:

*At the route of the apparent conflict between some religions and evolution is a misunderstanding of the critical difference between religious and scientific ways of knowing. Religions and science answer different questions about the world. Whether there is a purpose to the universe or a purpose for human existence are not questions for science. Religious and scientific ways of knowing have played, and will continue to play, significant roles in human history.*

*No one way of knowing can provide all of the answers that humans ask. Consequently, many people, including many scientists, hold strong religious beliefs and simultaneously accept the occurrence of evolution [28].*

Given the weight of judicial precedent, it is probable that continued efforts to challenge the teaching of Darwinism from a religious perspective will remain futile. Yet if those who advocate Genesis, Creation Science, or ID choose to put their energies to thinking more about “whether there is a purpose to the universe or a purpose for human existence” they may yet make significant, even profound, contributions to our efforts to address these particular questions, and thereby transcend the rejection and futility their efforts to challenge the teaching of Darwinism have brought to date.

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