

“Evolution and Our Faith”

Some people have amazing insights into the future, whereas others have little insight at all. The latter was the case back in 1882, when the *Christian Union*, a newspaper read by many New England Congregationalists, made the following statement. As that newspaper declared:

*the time when ministers scoffed and derided Darwin and his disciples has forever passed.*¹

That confident declaration was made 127 years ago. But, how wrong that statement turned out to be. For in 1882, the real battle over Darwin’s theory of evolution was just beginning.

As you know, here in America, there was the infamous Scopes trial in 1925. That year, the state of Tennessee passed a law forbidding the teaching of evolution in its public schools. And, John Scopes, a high school biology teacher was soon brought up on charges of breaking that law.

A prominent lawyer, Clarence Darrow, took on Scope’s defense, and William Jennings Bryan, a lawyer and three time Presidential candidate, was the prosecutor for the state. The public tended to see Darrow as a skeptic and rationalist and Bryan as a defender of traditional Christian faith.

Likely you’ve seen the famous movie *Inherit the Wind*, which was based on that trial. I’ve read that nearly 1,000 people were in the courtroom to see that trial begin, and 100 reporters were there to cover it.² The nation and the world were watching. As one modern scholar wrote,

*That the [Scopes] trial was a drama there is no doubt; the question is whether it was a tragedy, a comedy, or a farce.*³

At the trial’s end, the jury deliberated for 9 minutes and brought in a guilty verdict against Scopes. Scopes was fined \$100, which someone else likely paid, and he was freed. Later that verdict was appealed to the Supreme Court of Tennessee. That court considered the case “bizarre” and eventually reversed Scope’s guilty verdict on a legal technicality.

Scopes’ trial had a long-standing, damaging effect. In the decades following it, American school textbook publishers steered away from telling students about evolution, as they wanted their textbooks to be marketable in all the U.S. states.

It wasn’t until the late 1950’s, during the Cold War period, that that situation was dramatically turned around. At that time, evolutionary biologists began reasserting themselves publicly. And Communist Russia launched its Sputnik satellites, which spurred the U.S. to focus on making its own scientific advances. As part of that effort, the U.S. government began subsidizing school textbooks which highlighted science and discussed the theory of evolution fully.⁴ I remember those very science-oriented, post-Sputnik years, perhaps you do too?

For a moment, let’s turn back to the early years of the 20th century. In that period, the division in American Protestantism over evolution became clearer. Fundamentalist Protestants strongly rejected evolution. However, more liberal Protestants, sometimes called Modernists, accepted the basic compatibility

of the Christian faith with evolution.

Among such Modernists was the famous preacher, Harry Emerson Fosdick at Riverside Church in New York City. As you may know, our Falmouth church today, often sings Fosdick's noted hymn: *God of Grace and God of Glory*, which appears in our *Pilgrim Hymnal*.

Generally speaking, in the early 20th century, most American Congregationalists were on the liberal side of the evolution controversy, which became quite bitter at times. As a modern Congregational historian has noted, fundamentalism was never prominent in Congregationalism.⁵ Also, the *Kansas City Statement of Faith* which Congregationalists adopted at their national meeting in 1913, never mentions the theory of evolution directly. However, that statement's tone and optimism about the future, do reflect a general acceptance of evolution.⁶

You've seen that *1913 Kansas City Statement of Faith*. It's in our *Pilgrim Hymnal*. A version of it also appears in our church's bylaws, as the *Statement of Faith* of our Falmouth church.

Why were and are, fundamentalist Protestants so opposed to evolution? One reason, is that fundamentalists believe the Bible is entirely God's word. They believe that every part of it is to be interpreted literally. Thus, they reject the theory of evolution, because they see it as contradicting their literal interpretation of the Genesis description of our world's creation.

Here's another reason, not always recognized, why many fundamentalists oppose evolution.⁷ Many fundamentalists do not have an optimistic view of the future of humanity. Instead, based on their interpretation of the book of *Revelation*, they see our world as getting worse and worse, until finally:
 --faithful believers like themselves, are safely raptured to heaven,
 --Christ returns to earth, and
 --the great supernatural battle between good and evil, called Armageddon, is fought with massive destruction and a number of deaths on earth.

As they await that terrible Apocalypse, fundamentalists tend to stress spreading the gospel of Jesus Christ to others and focusing on the purity of their own and other people's souls. Many fundamentalists believe that only God can save people in this worsening world. Thus, they reject any ideas that we humans can draw closer to God and God's kingdom through any kind of human progress.

In their view, human progress--for example, in medicine, social justice being, environmental stewardship, and other realms of human endeavor--are not part of God's all important end-time scenario and salvation plan.

Now let's consider evolution. Christians who have accepted evolution tend to have a positive view of the future. Accepting the idea that organic life on this planet has evolved to more "complex" forms, and making the judgment that such evolution has been "good," such Christians have tended to view human progress, including social and scientific progress, as important components in the lives of faithful Christians.

In short, instead of rejecting human progress, their sense of faith, has led them to strongly embrace such progress.

Let's go back again, to that 1913 *Statement of Faith* in our church's hymnal and bylaws. That statement says of us Christians, that we are:

laboring for the progress of knowledge, the promotion of justice, the reign of peace and the realization of human brotherhood.

Without a doubt, the “progress of knowledge” mentioned in that statement includes the advancement of scientific knowledge. And the “realization of human brotherhood” mentioned there, is exactly what Katharine Lee Bates was hoping would become a reality in our society, “from sea to shining sea,” in her hymn, *America, the Beautiful*, which is from this same general period.

That 1913 *Statement of Faith* ends with these words:

...we work and pray for the transformation of the world into the kingdom of God, and we look with faith for the triumph of righteousness, and the life everlasting.

Those are words of optimism and hope. They are words which essentially affirm that human society can evolve for the better, and that human progress really can lead to God’s Kingdom. Those words affirm the belief, that such progress, really is a part of God’s salvation plan, after all.

However, as I said earlier, fundamentalists have strongly rejected such optimistic ideas, and along with them, they’ve rejected Darwin’s evolutionary theory.

So what about science’s theory of evolution itself? Many people say that evolution is only a theory. But, in saying that, they misunderstand science. For, in science, calling something a “theory” does not necessarily imply that scientists aren’t confident in its truth. In fact, as the National Academy of Sciences said in a publication last year:

Evolutionary biology has been and continues to be a cornerstone of modern science...the evidence supporting descent with modification, as Charles Darwin termed it, is both overwhelming and compelling...Because of the immense body of evidence, scientists treat the occurrence of evolution as one of the most securely established of scientific facts. Biologists also are confident in their understanding of how evolution occurs.⁸

What practical difference does the theory of evolution make to our lives today? Well, it is helping our world progress to a better state of being in many ways.

For example, understanding evolution has been essential in the identification of current viruses and their ancestors which cause disease, and in the development of vaccines and other means to treat those diseases. As the National Academy of Science has stated:

Knowing the evolutionary origin of human pathogens will be critical in the future as existing infectious agents evolve into new and more dangerous forms.⁹

The understanding of evolution has also been important in agriculture, for it has helped us develop better food crops, such as varieties of wheat which “are increasingly resistant to droughts, heat, and pests.”¹⁰

The principles of evolution have also been applied to fields outside biology, for example, to create more effective chemicals, such as new enzymes which “can convert cornstalks and other agricultural wastes into ethanol with increased efficiency.”¹¹

I was raised in a family which had a high regard for science. My father helped developed sonar for submarines during the Cold War. I think I remember seeing the launching of our nation's first nuclear powered submarine, the *Nautilus*, just across the river from my home in New London, Connecticut. I was 5 years old then.

In my youth, I was taught by my family and by my Congregational Church in New London, that science is one of God's many gifts to us humans. I was taught that God gave us science, to help us improve our world, and that we Christians should strive to do that, as a way of loving God and loving our neighbor, as Jesus taught us to do.

In my youth, I was taught to appreciate human progress, to be optimistic about the future, and to look forward to the day, when finally God's kingdom would come, and God's will would be done on earth, as it is in heaven—as The Lord's Prayer says.

In my youth, I was taught, that religion and science, including science's theory of evolution, do not have to be at war with each other. For each looks at our world in a different way and each deals in a different kind of truth.

I was taught, and I continue to believe, that the two Creation stories in Genesis are not to be read literally as real historical accounts or as scientific descriptions of our world's creation.

Rather, those accounts are to be read and appreciated, as stories written in faith, to convey certain spiritual truths about God and about us humans. Here are some of those spiritual truths:

- that our God is a personal deity, not just some impersonal force;
- that our God cares for us humans;
- and that we humans are created in God's "image."

As an adult, I believe that God is the source of all truth, and that there are still many mysteries in our world. Thus, even though I am not always sure how to reconcile the empirical truths discovered by science with the spiritual truths taught by my faith, I am content, that ultimately, all real truths lead to God.

Thus, as I see it, I cannot be wrong, ultimately, if I go through this life, with the search for truth through religion in one hand, and the search for truth through science in my other hand. For, as I believe both ways of seeking and understanding, are truly gifts to us from God.

Sadly, from my point of view, the effort of more conservative Christians to undermine the teaching of evolution in American science classrooms has occurred again recently, but U.S. courts have responded appropriately.

As you may know, Creationism is a view of the world's creation, which is based on literal readings of Genesis. Intelligent Design is another, more recent view of the world's creation, which is related to Creationism. Both were recently reviewed by U.S. courts.

In 1987, in the case of *Edwards vs. Aguillard*, the U.S. Supreme Court struck down a law in Louisiana, which mandated the teaching of "creation science" along with evolution in public schools.¹²

In 2005, in the case of *Kitzmiller v. Dover Area School District*, a Federal District Court, ruled against the teaching of "Intelligent Design" along with evolution in public school classes.

Both rulings maintained that “Creationism” and its various forms, like “Intelligent Design,” are religion, not science. Therefore, they don’t belong in a public school science course. As the federal court in 2005 stated:

“[W]e find that ID [intelligent design] is not science and cannot be adjudged a valid, accepted scientific theory, as it has failed to publish in peer-reviewed journals, engage in research and testing, and gain acceptance in the scientific community.”

As that court further said:

“The goal of the IDM [intelligent design movement] is not to encourage critical thought, but to foment a revolution which would supplant evolutionary theory with ID [intelligent design].”¹³

I might add, given U.S. law, Creationism and Intelligent Design, can be studied in public school classrooms, but only as forms of religion, and only in an academic, not devotional, way, as in a class on comparative religion.

Recently in the media, statements have come forth, claiming that there is great controversy among scientists today, over the theory of evolution, and that a number of those scientists do not accept evolution themselves.

In my understanding, such a claim is completely false. In fact, as the National Academy of Sciences has stated quite bluntly:

There is no controversy in the scientific community about whether evolution has occurred. On the contrary, the evidence supporting descent with modification, as Charles Darwin termed it, is both overwhelming and compelling.¹⁴

Today is Evolution Sunday in our church. We are joining more than 800 churches and synagogues this month, in affirming the view that our faith and science, and science’s theory of evolution, are compatible.

Looking optimistically to the future of humankind, let us be true to our church’s long-standing *Statement of Faith*, which calls us

--to labor “*for the progress of knowledge,*” and

--to “*work and pray for the transformation of our world into the kingdom of God.*”

I thank Charles Darwin, who was born 200 years ago this month, for his role, in helping us with those important goals.

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ENDNOTES

1. *Christian Union*, XXVI (Sept. 21, 1882), 230-231 as quoted in Ira A Brown’s book, *Lyman Abbott, Christian Evolutionist, a Study in Religious Liberalism*. (Harvard University Press, 1953), 141.

2. Douglas O. Linder, State vs. John Skopes (“The Monkey Trial”), University of Kansas-Missouri City School of Law web site, 4 February 2009
<<http://www.law.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/scopes/evolut.htm>>
3. Ferenc Morton Szasz, *The Divided Mind of Protestant America, 1880-1930*. (The University of Alabama Press, 1982), 119, citing Delnay, “History of the Baptist Bible Union, “ 52, 53.
4. Michael Ruse. *The Evolution-Creation Struggle*. (Harvard University Press, 2005), 240-241.
5. John von Rohr, *The Shaping of American Congregationalism*. (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 1992), 417.
6. von Rohr, 351-356.
7. Ruse, *The Evolution-Creation Struggle*. This book discusses at length the idea that fundamentalists and others who have rejected the theory of evolution have done so, at least in part, because they have seen it linked to an emphasis on human progress, which does not fit their own view of the end-time and belief that salvation comes only providentially from God and not in connection with any human effort.
8. National Academy of Sciences and the Institute of Medicine, *Science, Evolution, and Creationism*, (Washington, D. C.: The National Academies Press, 2008), xi, xiii.
9. National Academy of Science, *Science*, 5.
10. National Academy of Science, *Science*, 6.
11. National Academy of Science, *Science*, 9.
12. National Academy of Science, *Science*, 44.
13. National Academy of Science, *Science*, 43.
14. National Academy of Science, *Science*, xiii.